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Richard Vinen. *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 496p.

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Richard Vinen, specialist in history of twentieth century, teaches in the Department of History at King's College in London. His book, *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation*, portrays the life of the "non-free" French in opposition, no doubt, to "free" French who had chosen to leave France in order to free it later. Vinen describes the relationships between the French who stayed in France with their new government that had the goal of creating a national revolution, and their enemies, who lived with them and among them, while imposing new laws.

Those French who stayed in France were mainly women. They were forced to rub elbows with their "enemies" if they wanted to work and to feed their families. Others were French women subscribing to a racist ideology and to the official propaganda. Those women who had to work and did not have any experience, as some of them had never worked before, took any job that was offered to them. Often, they were shamelessly exploited by their employers, but they accepted their lot because they had to survive. They had become the heads of their households and had to supply their families with food that had become scarce and expensive. They also retained the hope of finding their husbands, fathers, or brothers, who were either prisoners, deported, or working outside France.

The great merit of the book *The Unfree French* is its return to that long period and its raising of the questions that seem extremely delicate for many French people. The originality of the book is that it does not offer an answer to any of these questions, but instead proposes several alternatives, leaving it to the reader the task of coming to his own conclusion.

Having been born and having spent all my youth in France, I can attest that the matter of the French Resistance to the German occupation is in many respects a taboo subject. The French politicians who have dared to bring into question the severity of the German occupation have been loudly opposed. The films and books that created glorious images of that time have been widely acclaimed. However, after the armistice of 1945, France officially decreed a great national reconciliation, thus casting a veil of modesty over the five years of life of the "non-free" French.

One of the subjects that Vinen develops in his research is the exodus of the French in 1940. We learn that the roads were full of AWOL soldiers and civilian families. In fact, Vinen affirms that "many French soldiers had proved unable to fight while many French civilians had shown themselves to be born warriors." He makes us, likewise, part of the government plans to evacuate the people, but also shows the

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effects of surprise at seeing the arrival of refugees on the roads, of the snowball effect causing people to leave without thinking, and of the political contradictions, both praising and gainsaying the exodus. On this subject, he notes that the most privileged “were young men who travelled on bicycles.” Vinen also includes the thoughts of the citizens who fled from France as well as the reactions of the country people. He points out the family dramas of lost children and abandoned grandparents. He tells about the lack of food due to the massive exodus of French. He denounces the opportunists who took advantage of the exodus to loot apartments and houses. Finally, he finds that, while some had been obliged to come back, others never had the chance of doing so.

Vinen also dwells the relationships of the women with the occupants. In this regard, he underlines that the French population was “predominantly female,” and that the attitude of the young ones was different from that of the older women, as they were forced to fraternize with German soldiers since the young men were absent. Consequently, these young women even became a “legitimate sexual target.”

Furthermore, the author mentions the difficulty for France in recording the birth of children during the war. According to him, between 50,000 and 200,000 children had been born from German fathers. Since, these women had been victims, Vinen focuses on the social background of the mothers, on the rejection in public opinion of the children born from German parents, and on the prostitution that had developed during this period. After the liberation, many of these women were publicly humiliated. Resistance members and village people took their revenge by shaving their heads in public places. In his book, Vinen explores this practice and gives us many details that describe the ambiguity of “shorn women.” In effect, they were accused of having collaborated with the Germans or with Vichy. It is interesting to note that they were often condemned by last-minute Resistance members and by jealous and frustrated women.

The French Resistance did not stop at the shearing of French women collaborators. It also indulged in the violent “purification.” Vinen tells us that people physically eliminated by the French Resistance at the liberation were mainly those who had supported the Vichy regime. The author underlines that “the division between an *épuration sauvage* around the liberation and restoration of legality is false.” He even suggests that the racially-based attacks were often a “continuation of some aspect of Vichy rhetoric.” All these matters and others are meticulously explored, both in original and objective ways. Let’s take, for example, one of the many subjects explained in this work: the status of the Jews vis-à-vis that of the Germans and the French. In tracing this question, Vinen shows us that he is a great historiographer because he precisely follows the different stages of the question, that is to say, the

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definition of the “status of the Jews.” It is interesting to note that the Third Republic “did not distinguish between its citizen on the basis of race or religion” and that many French did not know that they would be classified as Jews. He also refers to the withdrawal of French citizenship from the Jews. He emphasizes that the administration of the internment camps was in the hands of the French police, as were also the deportations. On this subject, Vinen confirms that “until 1943 French Jews were primarily arrested by French policemen,” and placed “in internment camps run by the French.”

Richard Vinen is not only a good historiographer but also a great storyteller. He gives to his book an enormous interest through the anecdotes taken from magazines, police reports, personal testimonies, gossip, radio transcriptions, and various speeches. He points out, for example, that Jean Paul Sartre took the professor position left vacant by the forced departure of Henri Dreyfus-Le Foyer, nephew of Alfred Dreyfus. Additionally, Vinen mentions the rumours, the propaganda, and the misinformation that circulated. He tells that it “was widely, and wrongly, believed that Pétain would protect Jews, especially those who fought in the French army.” All this information gives us an image and a taste of what happened in France at that time, and we feel, as probably do many French, torn by contradictory feelings, tenuous certainties and a great anxiety towards the future. An anxiety due more to the lack of work, the high cost and the scarcity of food, than the feeling of injustice provoked by the suffering of people deported, exterminated, or imprisoned.

The great merit of this book is that its reading is enjoyable, and that it demystifies many matters, serving as an unbiased chronicler of the “non-free” French people, showing that they sensed that the exercise of their freedom could have grievous consequences. After reading this book, one has a second view vis-à-vis the French culture related to the occupation and the liberation; one does not read anymore “La bicyclette bleue” or “Au bon beurre” in the same way, and one looks with different interest at “Monsieur Klein” or the version of the “Misérables” of Claude Lelouch. ✱