

Philippe Nivet, La France occupée. 1914–1918, Paris (Armand Colin) 2011, 480 p., ISBN 978-2-200-35094-9, EUR 23,90.

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Philippe Nivet's latest book in some sense expands upon his first, excellent study, which examined the experience of those Frenchmen and women who fled or were evacuated from the areas of military operations in the First World War¹. This new book focuses on ideas and events mentioned but not developed fully in the previous work, namely France's first experience of military occupation in the twentieth century. As a subject of historical study, this topic has seen a resurgence since the late 1990s, notably in the work of Annette Becker². Nivet acknowledges this, and aims to provide a synthesis of the developments of the last ten years, as well as drawing heavily on archival documentation and inter-war literature, providing a general history of this topic. His other goal is to recount the experience of the entire occupied area – ten French departments in all – and not just that of the department of the Nord, which features heavily in other accounts, though some would argue for good reason (and it receives much attention here).

The book is split into four parts. The first deals with »La France occupée, un territoire germanisé«, outlining the isolation of the occupied area, the beginning of the occupation, the German administrative structures, and various German policies. These chapters are solid and highlight well the specificities of this occupation – the way in which the occupied population was cut off from the outside world but also from each other, with correspondence and circulation between communes strictly regulated, and the French press censored; but also the close proximity to the front leading to a large military presence, even in the houses of the occupied population. Two further chapters expand upon the notion of »Germanisation«, not to be confused with the Third Reich's »Aryanisation«, examining cultural and economic manifestations of this phenomenon, such as the publication of a German-approved but French-language newspaper »La Gazette des Ardennes«, which was sold across the occupied territory. Nivet's analysis of the content and reach of this publication is particularly compelling. There are also good accounts of German policy regarding teaching, pillage, requisitions, dismantling factories, and war contributions to finance the German war effort. However, the notion of »Germanisation« is never wholly persuasive, requiring further explanation of precisely what is meant by this: it is certain that the Germans desired to create a sense of »home« in occupied France for their soldiers, for instance renaming buildings and streets in German, or raising the German flag in public, but it is less clear that this was a concerted attempt to »germanise« the French. Nevertheless, Nivet's examples – including quotations of occupied people mentioning »Germanisation« explicitly – do hint at a theme worth pursuing in greater detail.

¹ Philippe Nivet, *Les réfugiés français de la Grande Guerre. »Les Boches du Nord«*, Paris 2004.

² Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre 1914–1918*, Paris 1998; id., *Les cicatrices rouges 14–18. France et Belgique occupées*, Paris 2010.

Part two, entitled »Vivre sous l'occupation allemande«, examines the harshness of occupied life. The occupied population had practically all freedom removed, requiring passes to circulate, having to perform »le salut« to German officers, and risked being taken hostage at any moment. Further, many were engaged in forced labour, and some were forcibly evacuated – deported – such as the infamous deportations of Easter 1916 in Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing which involved c.20 000 persons removed to the Ardennes to engage in agricultural labour. The presence of young women among the deportees was regarded as particularly scandalous. (This important sub-section could do with clarification that most deportees were in fact male.) Beyond this, penury and hunger were widespread, with the intervention of neutral relief organisations such as the Commission for Relief in Belgium and its French subsidiary the Comité d'alimentation du Nord de la France saving thousands from certain starvation. The proximity to the front also meant that many occupied people faced bombardment or displacement as the front shifted. The difficulties of occupied life were therefore numerous, and are well documented here, especially in chapter 8 (»Endurer les pénuries«).

The third part of the book is the most interesting, studying »L'attitude des occupés: résistance, rapprochement, collaboration«. Nivet notes that resistance took numerous forms, from passive, daily resistance such as indifference to the Germans or refusing to give up goods for requisition, to the creation of espionage networks or networks aiding Allied servicemen, caught behind the lines, to escape via Belgium and Holland. Sabotage, the clandestine press, and the protests of civilian and religious authorities are also documented in great detail. Unfortunately, fewer pages are devoted to potentially more complex attitudes and actions designated as »rapprochement«, such as romantic/sexual relations with Germans, or the »accommodement« whereby the occupied population eventually got used to the German presence, striking up friendships, perceiving the humanity of certain soldiers, and even receiving aid from or giving aid to Germans. »Collaboration« is categorised into three forms. Economic collaboration comprised actions such as working voluntarily for the Germans. Intellectual collaboration meant writing for the »Gazette des Ardennes«, and political collaboration saw mayors using the Germans to reinforce their power and position. Denunciations are also studied, but the overall balance of this section is weighted towards resistance. What Nivet has written on the »darker« aspects of occupation is fascinating and compelling, thus the reader is left wanting more – both regarding examples and analysis. Yet this is an impressive and suggestive examination of topics often neglected in the historiography although Jean-Yves Le Naour has similarly done much to overcome this³.

The end of the occupation and its consequences are examined in the final part of this work (»Sortir de l'Occupation«). As well as explaining the repatriation of some 500 000 French people during the occupation itself – a summary of his previous work – Nivet chronicles the departure of the Germans, which was accompanied by a policy of scorched earth. Sites of strategic importance such as bridges and roads were destroyed, buildings and factories were pillaged, and many localities were left covered by booby-traps or with poisoned water supplies. Many occupied people were forcibly evacuated to

³ Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Misères et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre. Les mœurs sexuelles des Français*, 1914–1918, Paris 2002.

Belgium as the Allies approached. With the liberation came joy, freedom, but soon disappointment at the continual economic and provisioning problems of the formerly occupied area. The occupied area had to be reconstructed morally and materially. The former was achieved by the valorisation of resisters, who received citations, medals, or had monuments built in their name. The flip-side was the stigmatisation of »femmes à Boches«, women who had had relations with Germans – they faced head-shaving, some physical attacks, and mostly failed attempts to punish them judicially. The law was also used against those who had engaged in »intelligence avec l'ennemi«, some facing execution, others imprisonment, all made examples of in an attempt to cleanse the stain from the experience of occupied France. Nivet's use of archival material from the women's prison in Rennes is particularly enlightening in this regard. The book concludes with a demonstration of the extent of destruction and the way in which the French government attempted (eventually largely successfully) to rebuild the occupied area economically.

This work contains some minor problems. Not everyone will be persuaded by arguments concerning Germanisation. The overall balance regarding resistance and other forms of behaviour could be greater, and in some places further analysis or explanation would be favourable. Yet, overall, Nivet has done an admirable job. He achieves his goals with aplomb, drawing on an eclectic and rich source base to create an excellent history of all of occupied France in this period, one which ties together the latest developments in the field. In doing so, he has written a book that should become a new point of reference for scholars of this field and those interested in occupied France in the First World War.