Gender, Women and the Occupation of France, 1940–1944

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Abstract

Perhaps the only acquaintance that a popular audience is likely to have with the women of wartime France is provided by Charlotte Gray, the eponymous fictional creation of novelist Sebastian Faulks, who, in the service of British intelligence, is parachuted into Occupied France during the Second World War to aid local resisters. Describing the film version of the novel as both ‘cinéma-sucré’ and a ‘preposterous fable’ for its romantic and simplified view of the lives of such agents, one critic has been keen to emphasise that the reality of wartime resistance for women, and indeed for men, was very different, demanding highly developed skills of communication and evasion deployed in a state of constant fear.¹ Historians now know much more about the role of women in the resistance and about their lives under the Occupation in general than was the case two decades ago, when histories of Occupied France were, for the most part, gender blind.

Today, historians within and without France have not only done much empirically to uncover the traces of women’s wartime experience, but have endeavoured to conceptualise the significance of gender within the context of historical study. Geneviève Fraisse, for example, has called out for the exploration of what she terms ‘discursive situations’ in the past, contexts in which ideas about male and female ‘nature’, usually based on an implicit notion of the inferiority of the female sex, have functioned as instruments of women’s exclusion from civil society.² Following in her conceptual footsteps, Francine Muel-Dreyfus focuses on the authoritarian Vichy regime of 1940 to 1944, which, reeling from the military defeat of 1940, clung to a belief in the ‘eternal feminine’, associating women, paradoxically, both with the forces of disorder which had led to the fall of France and with the sort of sacrificial and nurturing qualities that would function as a bulwark against further social chaos. This conservative construction of femininity not only found expression in the speeches of Maréchal Pétain and the propaganda of the Vichy regime, but informed legislation that restricted the lives of real women, especially in the realms of divorce and abortion (the latter activity was punishable by death under the Occupation and one woman lost her head at the guillotine in 1943 as a result of it).³ In this view, Vichy’s very conception of politics was gendered.

Muel-Dreyfus' work must be seen in relation to the contributions of other scholars who have explored the nature of Vichy policy and its effects on women. Writers such as Hanna Diamond and Miranda Pollard have added much to our knowledge about how women experienced the reality of Vichy rule, especially in the worlds of work and family, and have pointed to the discrepancy between Vichy's social vision concerning gender and the limited, indeed sometimes unintended, effects of Vichy policy.⁴ For example, in an effort to return women to the home as dutiful mothers and to bolster the family as the fundamental cell of society, Vichy introduced legislation in October 1940 to remove married women workers from the public sector, but these measures were reversed two years later when economic pressures and the demands of the German occupiers made them unsustainable. Women, in reality, were often driven out to work by the absence of a (perhaps prisoner-of-war) husband and by the inadequacy of social welfare benefits eroded by inflation. A few historians have also explored this gender order in relation to the male sex. Limore Yagil has shown how men, too, were 'imagined' by the Vichy regime, especially in a youth and education policy that attempted to create a 'new man' as a force for French regeneration, and Luc Capdevila has explored how the motivations of young French men in joining the Waffen-SS in 1944 appear to have been bound up with a troubled sense of their perceived masculine failings.⁵ These writers all insist that ideas about gender identity and gender roles lay at the heart of Vichy's so-called 'National Revolution' and that, furthermore, experience of the Occupation was to a very real extent determined by one's sex.

Moreover, recent social histories of the Occupation of France have begun to integrate the experiences of women into their accounts. *Marianne in chains*, Robert Gildea's impressive contribution to our understanding of wartime social relations in the Loire valley, attempts to chart the 'associative life' of the French under Occupation showing that, despite material privation and moral compromise, the French managed to have fun during the war. Perhaps, he wonders, the so-called 'dark years' of Occupation were not so dark after all.⁶ This renewed emphasis on the social aspects of life under Occupation might be expected to render more visible the experiences of French women as distinct from men. After all, gender historians such as Hanna Diamond and Paula Schwartz have effectively shown that women were the dominant force in family life and in some social welfare activities, and they were disproportionately involved in the most pressing issue pertaining to daily life – the procurement of food.⁷ Indeed, Gildea's narrative features women in abundance: the troublesome wife whose former POW husband was so frustrated by her behaviour that he volunteered to return to Germany; the farmer's daughter who used her good relations with local Germans to have some peasants exempted from the requisition of horses. Yet what is missing is a systematic sense of how gender matters to a general understanding of the

period, and, indeed, it seems to me that women are often presented in these anecdotes as the frivolous, flirtatious and self-interested beings many thought them to be during the conflict itself.

It would be churlish, however, to demand a focus on gender from every social historian of Occupied France. More puzzling is that histories of this period that *do* focus on women often lack an awareness of gender. For example, Isabelle Soulard's recent study of women in western France during the Occupation, largely based on oral sources, provides illuminating examples of women's resourcefulness (some made their blouses out of parachutes to supplement the clothing ration) and underlines how the part that many women played in resistance activities was an extension of their daily lives (Madame Thooris used her *crêperie* as a safe house for the *marquis*).⁸ In this way, the book fleshes out for western France some of the general trends identified and elaborated by other scholars: women were more likely than men to work for the Germans due to their overrepresentation in the groups of clerical and cleaning staff of most use to them; women often denounced acquaintances and were frequently punished by the courts for it at the Liberation; women, despite Vichy restrictive legislation, found that the Occupation economy opened up opportunities for work in new areas. Yet Soulard herself is clearly more interested in celebrating the lives of individual women, often seen as courageous heroines, than in exploring how their lives illuminate general trends. In that sense, she hits a commemorative note in her work rather than a historically critical one.

Marcus Binney's recent work on the history of the women agents of the Special Operations Executive is even more celebratory and uncritical in tone. More alarmingly, the first sentence of his book suggests a distinctly sexist way of seeing things: 'The girls who served as secret agents in Churchill's Special Operations Executive were young, beautiful and brave.'⁹ Although Binney tells us that these women 'trained and served alongside men', his book is peppered with references to the decorativeness of the agents' physical appearance, which makes something of a fetish of their sexual difference. Indeed, women in the SOE were disproportionately used as wireless operators, couriers and liaisons, suggesting something of the sexual division of labour that was mirrored in civil society. But in Binney's account there is no desire to draw attention to such social patterns, and the sexism encountered by Pearl Witherington when she assumed the leadership of a resistance network is glossed over: women's resistance work is viewed only in terms of their bravery for undertaking it in the first place, and not as a historical problem to be explored. Binney may claim that 'among SOE's women agents there were no Charlotte Grays, ducking out of service to pursue the calls of the heart'¹⁰, but his discussion of them only serves to reinforce a romantic notion of women's wartime experience that owes much more to the commemoration of women worthies than to historical critique.

Notes

- ¹ P. Marnham, 'Charlotte Gray does heroism no justice', *The Evening Standard*, 22 February 2002, p. 13.
- ² G. Fraisse, *Les Femmes et leur histoire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1998), p. 24.
- ³ F. Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy et l'éternel féminin: contribution à une sociologie politique de l'ordre des corps* (Paris, Seuil, 1996), p. 10.
- ⁴ H. Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-1948* (London, Longman, 1999) and M. Pollard, *Reign of virtue: mobilizing gender in Vichy France* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ⁵ L. Capdevila, 'The Quest for masculinity in a defeated France, 1940-1945', *Contemporary European History*, 10 (3), 2001, pp. 423-445 and L. Yagil, '*L'Homme nouveau*' et la *Révolution Nationale de Vichy (1940-1944)* (Paris, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1997).
- ⁶ R. Gildea, *Marianne in chains: in search of the German Occupation, 1940-1945* (London, Macmillan, 2002), p. 8. See also J. Jackson, *France: the dark years, 1940-1944* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001) which has several sub-sections devoted to gender issues.
- ⁷ See Diamond, pp. 49-70 and P. Schwartz, 'The politics of food and gender in Occupied Paris', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 7 (1), 1999, pp. 35-45.
- ⁸ I. Soulard, *Les Femmes de l'ouest sous l'Occupation* (La Crèche, Geste editions, 2002), p. 232.
- ⁹ M. Binney, *The Women who lived for danger: the women agents of SOE in the Second World War* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Binney, p. 325.

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