

BOOK REVIEWS

Les collaborateurs: 1940-1945. By Pascal Ory. Éditions du Seuil. 1976. 320 pp.

Les collaborateurs, Pascal Ory insists, is not another work on collaboration. Despite what the title suggests, the book isn't about them as individuals either. Ory shifts the discourse on collaboration from an approach about morality to one about ideology. A more fitting title might have been "les collaborationists," since what is at stake is not biographical but ideological. The work deals with collaborators as thinkers within the networks of collaborationism. Ory's research is a great resource about French politics, parties, debates, unions—not so much about why certain men do what they do. With this caveat in mind, this work is worth adding to one's World War II collection. The Sorbonne professor of History is a specialist of contemporary French cultural anthropology and twentieth century political movements. His method is socio-analytical; the tableaux of French society he paints are full of colors and layers with a close attention to detail. Reading his historical accounts enables us to see the bigger picture and better understand polarizing debates—past and present. The main thesis in Ory's book is that collaborationism was a diverse movement (261) manifesting itself horizontally and vertically, à gauche *and* à droite (234), in every strata of society from the intelligentsia to the middle and lower classes (273).

As good scholarly research should do, Ory dedicates most of his work to complicating the *doxa*, nuancing the dominant narratives, and synthesizing complex multilayered histories. Portraying the men and going back to the source of what they wrote allows Ory to move beyond the simplistic account that collaborationism was nothing more than betrayal. He is himself quite the contrarian: he claims these collaborateurs were not marginal, they were in fact the intellectual vanguard of a new generation (269). Their collaboration was typically "de raison" or "de calcul" (74), not from blind hate. Ory also reminds the reader on several occasions that most collaborationists were in fact pacifists, that they accepted war only as a means for long-term European peace and prosperity (136). He paints the picture of a collaboration that was intellectual (224), cultural, and deeply anchored in "French" values. Without condoning the collaborateurs, Ory explains that their so-called "realism" (271) was still misguided since it was

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predicated on a fantasized and misunderstood notion of what German national-socialism stood for (271). The author does not focus on the figure of the Jew as the main enemy of these men; he instead analyzes the political spectrum and ideas of the collaborationists in the propaganda they disseminated through different media outlets.

The framework of racism against different ethnic groups appears insufficient to understand the politics of Vichy. Instead, Ory explains that a deep-rooted Germanophobia, Anglophobia, or fear of communism were the actual centers of gravity in the debates during those years over who the “natural enemy” of France was (151). Anglo-American liberal plutocracy and Russian bolshevism were pegged as the main enemies of the collaborateurs. Marxism, ultimately, was seen as a “juiverie” (152)—the worst of all enemies. Meanwhile, the ruling pan-German army constructed hope of a European Union based on a French-German identity (172) with shared values of a so-called Enlightenment leaning towards pagan Gothic grandeur rather than meridional Europe, with Hitler as the savior of the West in a new Crusade (161, 225).

Often in the book, Ory’s style could be criticized for paraphrasing heinous thoughts without always providing clear context and direct quotations. This is both a strength and a weakness: Ory voices the opinions and ideologies of certain men directly, which makes his work both immersive and troubling. The question of morality is not raised once, and the atrocities said and perpetuated by these men are not the focus of this research at all. The stories Ory tells certainly paint a vivid picture of the political landscape of the time, but more distance vis-à-vis those sensitive topics would have been more prudent. At times, it feels like quotes and passages aren’t criticized enough. Denouncing and rhetorically deconstructing arguments would have been appreciated. It is important to understand that most of these “intellectuals” weren’t simply blind with hate against Jews and that they instead attacked several systems and parties, but some of the ideas expressed are dangerous and still resonate with contemporary politics—hence the need for precaution. Ory re-contextualizes terms like “national-socialism” in their original climate, but historians need to be careful not to remove the layer of moral bankruptcy that rightfully accompanied those terms later on. This raises an open question: Is it legitimate to give some credibility and legitimacy to collaborationists who, for most of them, are portrayed as intellectuals and political actors who made an educated bet on

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which empire to follow (213) and were proven wrong by history? I do think that Ory should have put more distance between his narrative voice and the voices of these 1940s French “socialists” by presenting more counter-arguments from the French communists or capitalists of the time.

The structure of the book is often confusing: the progression is neither chronological nor clearly based on ideologies, movements, or individuals. It is loosely thematic, and the twelve chapters weave a maze-like narrative and jump back and forth between parties and years. The index of people at the end is very helpful, as is the annexed chronology. A glossary of political parties would also been tremendously useful, since the sheer number of acronyms in the story quickly gets confusing. Furthermore, not every aspect of the book is directly about the *collaborateurs* themselves. For instance, Ory goes into detail about separatism and the cases of Alsace (178), Bretagne (190) and the North and West African colonies where Hitler’s message was promoted as independence-friendly (177). Another aspect that Ory develops is the role of publishing, periodicals (216-7) and class struggle. Some striking facts and anecdotes are shared, like Peugeot executives joining the fascist *Parti populaire français* not out of antisemitism per se, but to push back against communist factory workers who joined the *Résistance* (114). This emphasis on social class and fear of communism is the main motif of the book.

Ory’s historical monograph is clearly intended for an audience of specialists, not for the general public. I would not recommend this book to an American undergraduate group of students, either. It is very dense, sometimes opaque, and not easily dissectible. For scholars who want to immerse themselves in the dark years of the early 1940s in France, this book remains a valuable resource—providing a critical eye the historian seemed to be lacking at the time of publication (1976). Do not read *Les collaborateurs* to know more about the individuals who chose socialism and fascism, but do read it to revisit and better understand a socio-cultural landscape that shaped French politics and continues to determine it to this day.

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