

Book Reviews

Helen McPhail. *The Long Silence: The Tragedy of Occupied France in World War I*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014 (edn. of 1999 original). ISBN 978-17-84-53053-2. Pp. x, 256. Paperback. £11.99/ \$19.99.

The First World War's centenaries have led to a publishing frenzy. Histories old and new, good and bad are being produced to satisfy what it is hoped will be sustained public interest in a war that even one hundred years later still fascinates, provokes controversy and invites fuller investigation of its underexplored byways. One such, the experience of German occupation under martial law, is little known or understood. Inevitably studies that do address the phenomenon do so through the prism of later and more notorious events; the brutal occupation and armed resistance that characterised Nazi-dominated Europe between 1939 and 1944. This one is no exception. Vejas Liulevicius's *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), for example, portends later German policy and practice in occupied Eastern Europe. An equivalent study of the experience of occupation in the west, in Belgium and northern France, has yet to be made. Perhaps the traumas of France's next occupation (and the third within one lifespan) occluded Great War experience. Helen McPhail's republished volume is a creditable first engagement with this forgotten occupation, although the subject still awaits full scholarly treatment.

The German occupation of 1914–1918 remains just on the edge of living memory, and when McPhail was undertaking her research there would have been many 'veterans' of the occupation still living, although most would

have been young children at the time. The author makes no use of or comment upon such oral testimony: perhaps she chose not to engage with witnesses whose memories and opinions after so many years might be sketchy and unreliable, but the opportunity was missed to finally break the silence. The sources that she relies upon, unpublished contemporary diary accounts and the published post-war recollections of the occupied, have their own biases and limitations. French witnesses provide only one side of the story, a highly charged and resentful one; but like any occupation, its true history is that of the interaction between occupiers and occupied. In McPhail's account the Germans are one-dimensional figures, living up to the 'Hunnish' caricatures of the time as oppressive and rapacious bullies. The occupation story is a catalogue of food shortages, requisitions, petty restrictions of personal freedoms, forced labour and migration, and arbitrary imprisonment. The official interrelationship of governors and governed, as well as the personal relationships that inevitably sprung up between occupiers and occupied, remain shadowy. For example, personal and sexual relations between German men and French women, forced or consensual, which would have run throughout the occupation, go almost unmentioned.

This presents too one-sided a perspective of the occupation, but, accepting this limitation, the book is informative and lively in its description of the day-to-day experience of

Frenchmen and women under military occupation. Essentially the occupied faced three problems: how to feed themselves when reliant upon foreign goodwill; how to deal with an alien and demanding authority, both personally and communally, and how to maintain links with the rest of France. The phenomenon of resistance is touched upon, but this did not take the organised form familiar from its Second World War manifestation. There was some underground press activity, localised intelligence gathering for the allies, and organised or spontaneous attempts to help allied soldiers isolated after 1914's bloody battles evade capture. But organised armed resistance was not forthcoming. Germany's bloody reprisals against suspected *francs-tireurs* in the early weeks of the war proved effective in keeping the civilian population bowed thereafter. Yet perhaps more effective in curbing active resistance were the gruelling economic and social conditions that French civilians endured as the allied blockade of the continent tightened, food prices rose while gainful employment collapsed. This is the recurrent theme of McPhail's account. Ultimately the experience of occupation came down to keeping oneself fed and busy (ideally not at the behest of the Germans) in increasingly straitened economic circumstances. Central to survival under such conditions was the work of the US-led International Relief Commission directed by the forceful and dynamic businessman (and future President) Herbert Hoover. Nominally set up to feed the civilian population in occupied Belgium in what was perceived to be a short-term subsistence crisis, the commission soon extended its activities into northern France. It provided civilians with a basic and monotonous diet, but one just sufficient to avert humanitarian disaster. This fascinating story within a story highlights a forgotten but vital element of the economic and social history of the world war.

McPhail makes no claim to be an academic historian, and her approach is narrative more than analytical. Her exposition is limited by her sources, which leads to a focus on certain towns, Lille and St Quentin in particular, rather than the whole occupied region and its rural hinterland. The book lacks detailed references

with page numbers, a serious omission given the nature of the source material. Too often the reader would like to follow up the interesting and varied examples presented. This is an informative and readable account, an entry point into another dimension of the social history of the First World War. But there is more to be said and done, and it is a pity now that the voices of those who lived through the occupation are lost, suggesting that the silence will continue.

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