

Telling the story of the heroic women of occupied Paris

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Anne Sebba

LES PARISIENNES
How the women of Paris lived,
loved and died in the 1940s
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One of the distinctive features of Anne Sebba's richly intelligent history is her evocation of sound. Sebba has deliberately eschewed a focus on well-known primary documentation for her history of Parisian women during the Second World War, choosing instead to alert her readers to a "quieter and frequently less well-known" set of voices. Those voices, belonging to women of all classes, ages and educational backgrounds, weep and sing through this extraordinary book, and through them we also hear the soundtrack to the city's occupation, the "clackety-clack" of improvised wooden-soled shoes, the sinister clang of iron shutters banging closed on abandoned businesses, the squeak of a bicycle carrying hidden messages after curfew. Sebba's story is also a negotiation with silence, the silence of the dispossessed, the vanished and the unacknowledged, many of whose stories, through the author's indefatigable use of letters, diaries, objects and interviews, are heard here for the first time.

From the moment the French government retreated to Bordeaux on June 10, 1940, Paris became a "significantly feminized city". It was women, Sebba argues, who represented the front line as the Wehrmacht poured in, who had to confront their country's defeat both practically and ethically. The patriarchal nature of pre-war French society was the first obstacle: women without chequebooks or bank accounts of their own were financially marooned, attempting to provide for their children without access to cash. For many, the obligation to resist became as urgent as finding food, but as Sebba delicately and compassionately demonstrates, this was, at least initially, no simple matter in the unprecedented atmosphere of moral ambiguity that pertained. Yet even as Paris emptied, life was just beginning for many disaffected women, and while resistance demanded both courage and sacrifice, the years of occupation were to prove fulfilling.

"Résistancialisme", the term coined in 1987 by Henry Rousso in reference to the myth created post-war by both Gaullists and Communists, and according to which the French unanimously and naturally resisted the Occupation, remains a vexed issue. As Margaret Atack observes, this myth was not in "monolithic domination", and discordant voices of collaboration and complicity have found their place in a continuing examination of the legacy of French fascism and anti-Semitism. Yet Sebba's work demonstrates the extent to which, in contrast with Jewish experience, that of women who resisted, who were deported, tortured and killed has remained relatively unexplored. Sebba delineates Vichy's appall-



Day of Elegance on Bicycles, June 1942; from *Les Parisiennes*

ing treatment of French Jews – from the expropriation of their property to the deportation of Jewish children on the initiative of Pierre Laval, the head of the council of Vichy ministers. The youngest child sent to Auschwitz under Laval's direct orders was eighteen months old. Of the 76,000 Jews deported, it is estimated that just 3 per cent, 2,500, returned to France. In contrast, 50 per cent of resisters returned, designated as patriotic combatants, rather than victims by the provisional post-war government.

Within this disparity, Sebba detects another, that of the women, Jewish or not, whose bravery and suffering were largely discounted as de Gaulle welcomed home his nation's returning sons. The General's own niece, Geneviève, was deported to Ravensbrück, "where God", she wrote, "had remained outside", yet few accounts of women's lives there were given any public attention. The activities of the forty women who served actively in the F Division of the SOE have also been neglected – since their very presence in France was in defiance of the Geneva Convention, much of their work has been written out of history. Yet they fare better than the many prostitutes who were deported, victims of Vichy's obsession with moral recovery, women who had perhaps hidden escaping airmen in brothels, but whose many acts of kindness and courage went undocumented. It was women who did penance for the emasculation of their nation – as Sebba describes, during the *épuration sauvage* in the immediate aftermath of the war, 20,000 *tondues* displayed their shaven heads as exculpation for the men who had failed to protect them. Economic collaboration – the practice of a predominantly male commercial elite – was not so severely punished as sexual submission

to the enemy. And what constituted collaboration? As Colette discovered when she sought the assistance of Suzanne Abetz, wife of the German ambassador, to secure the release of her Jewish husband Maurice Goudekot, when family members began to vanish, no one was above using highly placed contacts to help them.

Resistance is evoked here in two uniquely "Parisian" forms – art and fashion. Lucien Lelong, president of the *Chambre Syndicale*, pleaded the case for French couture so successfully in Berlin that 25,000 female workers were saved from deportation. As a German visitor to Paris remarked, the resourcefulness of the women in remaining fashionable brought colour to otherwise grey everyday life, while the re-establishment of the fashion industry after the war was an essential component of France's economic recovery. Sebba's definition of a "true" *Parisienne* is captured in the spirit of one woman, who, though nearly starving, preferred to use her daily allowance of an ounce of fat as hand cream. Aesthetic defiance was also the stance of Jeanne Bucher, a gallerist who staged at least twenty shows of "decadent" Cubists and Surrealists during the Occupation, and whose premises served as a safe house – one man hiding from the Gestapo was amused to find himself sharing a hidden bed with a stack of Braques and Picassos.

Sebba is adept at explaining the changing political climate of Paris as the war progressed, but she never allows politics to overshadow her subjects' voices. This book does not judge – instead, in the breadth of its humanity, it achieves some of the recognition that the *Parisiennes'* own heroic modesty often denied them.