

On Earth (Not) As in Heaven

by André Loez

In her study of the fate of the 100,000 or so airmen who fell during the Second World War, Claire Andrieu challenges the separation between civilians and soldiers, regular and irregular combatants, wait-and-see attitudes and active resistance, frontline and rear, through an empirical investigation that is destined to become a landmark work.

Reviewed: Claire Andrieu, *Tombés du ciel. Le sort des pilotes abattus en Europe, 1939-1945*, Paris, Tallandier / Ministère des Armées, 2021, 512 pp., €23.90. English translation: *When Men Fell from the Sky, Civilians and Downed Airmen in Second World War Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

History is not an experimental discipline. Unlike chemists, historians cannot isolate components of the past, measure variables, or repeat procedures in order to observe and note differences in results¹. This is partly why Claire Andrieu's latest book – the culmination of an investigation spanning nearly two decades – is so extraordinary. Its starting point is a surprisingly simple historical question that lends itself to comparison: what did civilians do to airmen shot down over their territory during the Second World War? The book handles its sources rigorously and creatively, observing, in the manner of a meticulously controlled experiment, the similarities and

¹ At most, it is possible to practice, by hypothesis, econometric calculations that resemble such , but not without encountering methodological problems. Cf. Sacha Bourgeois-Gironde and Éric Monnet, "Expériences naturelles et causalité en histoire économique. Quels rapports à la théorie et à la temporalité ?", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 72/4, 2017, pp. 1087-1116.

differences between contexts and countries. German airmen were ill-treated upon their arrival on the ground in occupied France in 1940, whereas, in contrast, they were well received by the English civilians they were trying to bomb. Allied airmen were protected and hidden by civilians in occupied France, but were often lynched in Nazi Germany during the final years of the conflict. By examining the population's diverse attitudes to the eruption of war in their daily lives, in the form of paratroopers appearing in a field or crews making a crash landing, Claire Andrieu helps to redefine the established separation used in world war history between civilians and soldiers, regular and irregular combatants, wait-and-see attitudes and active resistance, frontline and rear. By highlighting the differences between national contexts and the stages of the conflict, she provides keys to understanding individual and collective behavior, violence and solidarity. And she does so through an empirical investigation that is certain to become a milestone in Second World War historiography.

Aerial warfare was first seen during the Italian invasion of Ottoman Cyrenaica in 1911; it was perfected during the First World War and became widespread in the Second World War. In Europe, tens of thousands of aircraft carried out missions involving bombing, reconnaissance, fighting, transport or airborne troop drops. Their losses were huge: around 100,000 airmen were shot down or injured over Europe during the Second World War, half of whom managed to survive by parachuting or making an emergency landing. Most often unarmed fighters, sometimes wounded, theoretically protected by international law, their fate depended on the civilians they met, mostly in the countryside, and on whether or not those people alerted the authorities. These attitudes and choices were dependent on contexts that the book examines in succession.

French and British treatment of German airmen

The author begins by examining the context of occupied France in the spring of 1940, which she fully reinterprets in the tradition of the works of Julian Jackson and Philip Nord; she also more broadly re-evaluates French fighting spirit during the "defeat"². In a departure from clichés of a French population that wished only to flee,

² Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France. The Nazi Invasion of 1940*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003; Philip Nord, *France 1940 : défendre la République*, Paris, Perrin, 2017; Stefan Martens and Steffen Prauser (eds.), *La Guerre de 40 : se battre, subir, se souvenir*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du septentrion, 2014.

or felt grateful for the end of the fighting and the reassuring figure of Pétain, the author makes use of the archives of the German army's legal services, which kept a record of sentences given to civilians for attacks on downed airmen. These may have been spontaneous acts – as in the case of Jean-Marie Kérandel, a farmer from Finistère, who was shot on June 28, 1940 for having joined around 50 other villagers in surrounding and attacking the crew of a German plane forced to land in a field 10 days earlier. But the author also reveals the institutional and organized side of people's resistance to the occupiers, for example by forming "territorial guards" at the commune level to protect the territory, particularly in the event of parachute drops behind the lines. Several thousand volunteers joined the guards and helped to bring about the arrest of downed German airmen. In total, of 400-700 airmen captured during the period, at least 25 were mistreated by civilians, including seven killed. Claire Andrieu reminds us of the historical and memorial foundations of these acts: the mass exodus of civilians in 1940 was not a sign of the irrational panic of a country adrift, but a population "voting with its feet" (p. 53), based on their very real memories of the German occupation of France during the First World War, and the atrocities committed at the start. The civilians who attacked German airmen or helped to secure their arrest were a manifestation of the public's continued rejection of the occupation despite the speed of their defeat. Furthermore, as in 1914, the occupying forces' severe repression of any acts of war attributed to civilians was a reminder of the German military commanders' relentless hostility towards the figure of the franc-tireur (an irregular civilian combatant), which served as a prelude to their pursuit of resistance fighters. In sum, in the first part of the book, the author already shows the benefits of meticulously studying these sudden, sometimes brutal, encounters – always marked by a language barrier and deep uncertainty – between civilians and downed airmen. The sudden arrival of these soldiers outside the combat zones reveals the individual and social dispositions, and their alteration by the war situation.

This was also the case in Great Britain. Even before the Battle of Britain began, Churchill had outlined its contours in his famous speech of June 4, 1940: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills...". In practice, however, the tone of the British civilians' reception of the German airmen was less belligerent, despite the human and material losses resulting from heavy bombardments between July 1940 and May 1941 (more than 44,000 Britons were killed in those two years), and showed more of a quiet resolve. To illustrate this, Claire Andrieu compares different types of sources. For nothing in the German or British military archives attests to the fate of the 1,800 or so airmen involved, let alone to any mistreatment of them – a silence that is

significant given the readiness of the Third Reich and its propagandists to seize upon any real or alleged misdeeds by the enemy. In the absence of any official records, the author scoured local newspapers, which provide humorous descriptions of the scenes of arrest: "Cup of tea for the Nazi pilot in the presbytery", was the *Kent Messenger's* headline in September 1940 (p. 144). She shows the performative function of this type of article, which played on a shared political and humorous culture: by describing well-received German airmen, kept at bay by a farmer's pitchfork but consoled with a glass of brandy, the British government and journalists could exalt the public's serenity, downplay the risk of invasion, and help to reinforce the spirit of collective determination that formed the backbone of the People's war – the picture of the patriotic and social consensus of wartime Britain, to which recent historiography has made some alterations but has not refuted it altogether³. To interpret these journalistic snippets, however, the author also uses German sources, such as the unpublished autobiography of a Luftwaffe "ace", Franz von Werra, who was shot down over England in September 1940 and captured, but subsequently escaped and managed to return to Germany. The account highlights the fact that the pilot was warmly received by the British, such as the RAF officers who "cheered, as though at a football match" (p. 155). Finally, Claire Andrieu looks at less reliable documents that abound online in discussion forums where local scholars and descendants of witnesses discuss the fate of pilots shot down and arrested in their villages 80 years ago. On the whole, while there is no denying the occasional show of hostility, what dominates is the relatively warm welcome given to these unarmed servicemen, illustrating how "everyday civility" and "democratic norms" were maintained in wartime Britain (p. 167).

Allied airmen, French helpers

In the third part of her book, the author invites us to fully decompartmentalize the history of the Resistance, of civilians at war and of public opinion in occupied France. This part is devoted to the Allied airmen helped by the French population, which occurred on a vast scale documented by extensive archives: more than 4,000 downed American, British and Commonwealth airmen managed to escape from France with the help of progressively organized networks that led them into neutral

³ John Ramsden, "Myths and Realities of the 'People's War' in Britain", in Jörg Echternkamp, Stefan Martens (eds), *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe*, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2010, pp. 89-104; Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

territory (primarily Spain), from where they hoped to reach England. These successful escapes have already been explored in studies focusing on the long journeys of individuals taken in charge by British services such as MI9⁴. As in the rest of her book, however, Claire Andrieu focuses primarily on the first moments of their journey and their initial contact with civilians, and provides profound new insights.

Indeed, the book helps to establish the French Resistance as a "mass local dynamic," clearly in line with the historiographical movement led primarily by Pierre Laborie, François Marcot, and Laurent Douzou, as opposed to a vision that limits it to an "isolated minority unrepresentative of the larger population" (pp. 172-173), where we can recognize the positions of Olivier Wieviorka⁵. The civilian reception of Allied airmen leads the author to make a convincing choice between these two competing definitions of the Resistance as either extensive or limited: it is proof of a broad social adherence to the Resistance phenomenon. Indeed, she lays bare the scope of the solidarity required to take in, house, hide, feed, clothe and accompany thousands of men.

The British and American intelligence services used the term "helpers" to refer to the civilians who, during these various stages, assisted their airmen, thus safeguarding not only their lives and freedom, but also their war value, given the high expense and specialization involved in training a pilot. While their archives list about 34,000 French "helpers" identified by name, which is already a substantial number, Andrieu's book reveals an even broader social embedding. In reality, almost all French civilians who came into contact with downed airmen came to their aid, even at the height of the deadly 1944 bombing raids over Normandy and the Paris region. The extent of their contribution can be better measured by the length of time these men lived underground in France before managing to escape: they spent an average of 87 days in hiding in the country. Almost three months, therefore, during which they were at the mercy of a betrayal, a blunder or an indiscretion, and during which the families who took them in had to provide a considerable amount of extra food in a country that was experiencing increasingly dire shortages due to the occupation and the pillage of resources by Germany. Such efforts were only possible through chains of solidarity involving men and women, adults and children.

⁴ Derek Richardson, *Detachment W: Allied Soldiers and Airmen Detained in Vichy France Between 1940 and 1942*, London, Paul Mould, 2004; Jean Quellien, "L'aide aux soldats britanniques," in Jean-Luc Leleu et al. (ed.), *Atlas historique de la France pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Paris, Fayard, 2010, pp. 184-185.

⁵ For example, this opposition is presented by François Marcot in "Comment écrire l'histoire de la Résistance," *Le Débat*, 177, 2013/5, pp. 173-185.

Keeping as close as possible to these sources and interactions, and drawing on numerous examples, the author reconstructs the high-risk mechanisms of mutual assistance, thereby enriching our understanding of phenomena that have until now been classified under the term "civil resistance", and redrawing the contours of the Resistance itself. Whether it be movements or networks, the Resistance is often considered through organizational charts which, even when rewritten or disrupted by arrests, suggest a vertical structure, from the leaders in contact with London to the groups acting locally, with or without a false identity. What the book contributes to these institutional reconstructions is its portrayal of a more nebulous human network of families or individuals who did not belong to the resistance organizations as such, but provided them with sporadic, often anonymous, but decisive help in concealing and smuggling out these airmen. Their acts were not only "civil", according to the typology formerly proposed by Jacques Semelin, to refer in particular to the help given to persecuted Jews⁶, but also "military" on account of the identity of the combatants they helped, and the scale of the risks incurred, as any help given to airmen was punishable by death. Rather than "civic" or "unarmed" resistance, the author therefore advocates using the term "*civilian warfare*" (p. 242) to integrate the behaviors she studies into a continuum of engagements. By suggesting that acts of assistance were also acts of war, perceived and punished as such by the occupying forces, the book invites us to make a complete re-evaluation of the strict division between the civilian and military worlds.

Violence against Allied airmen and Nazification of the German population

The last part of the book offers a dreadful contrast to the situations described so far, in a radically different context: Nazi Germany in the final years of the war. The questions posed by the author – what was the fate of the fallen Allied pilots? – are in line with long-standing historiographical questions about the degree of Nazification of the German population and the explanations given for war violence⁷. Here again,

⁶ Jacques Semelin, *Sans armes face à Hitler. La résistance civile en Europe, 1939-1943*, Paris, Payot, 1989.

⁷ Among the works that have specifically studied violence against airmen are Barbara Grimm, "Lynchmorde an alliierten Fliegern im Zweiten Weltkrieg," in Dietmar Süß (ed.), *Deutschland im Luftkrieg: Geschichte und Erinnerung* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 71-84, and Kevin T. Hall, "Luftgangster over Germany: The Lynching of American Airmen in the Shadow of the Air War," *Historical Social Research*, 43 (2018) 2, pp. 277-312.

solid quantified support can be found in German police reports; but above all, Allied archives detailing post-war trials of civilians who had murdered fallen airmen in their local area show the scale of the phenomenon: there were more than 1000 separate incidents involving airmen being lynched, during which at least 2,500 were killed or mistreated.

Behind these data, the book demonstrates a radicalization over time: while as late as 1942, downed RAF pilots could still be buried with military honors in a village in Schleswig-Holstein, and the surviving crew were simply taken prisoner, violence toward them increased between 1943 and 1945. In the meantime, of course, the Allied bombings had intensified. Even so, a detailed examination of their chronology and geography belies any automatic link with the atrocious lynchings of which aircrews became victim. These can be explained primarily by a new ideological hardening of the Nazi regime, after the surrender at Stalingrad (February 1943) and the bombing of Hamburg (July 1943) in particular, which incited the population to murder in speeches with openly racist connotations, aiming to remobilize the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or Nazi racial community, for all-out combat, including on German soil. Jewish or African American pilots and crews were denounced as such by Nazi propaganda, and targeted by civilians. As in occupied France, but on the opposite side of the spectrum, community solidarity came into its own. While an entire French village would tacitly keep silent about the fate of hidden allies, in Germany, the entire local population would play a role in the violence: "it was thus average Germans, smallholders and good workers, who made up the lynch mobs of whatever size" (p. 301). A concise description of one such lynching that took place on August 26, 1944, in Rüsselheim, not far from Frankfurt, shows how the racist and violent logics conveyed by the authorities were internalized and implemented by individuals, who ended up killing six airmen, with shouts of "They're the terrorist flyers!", "Beat them to death!", "Jew! Jew!" (pp. 336-337). Attentive to nuances, Claire Andrieu nevertheless draws attention to the 'spanners in the works' – civilians or German soldiers who tried to limit the violence – to avoid falling into too broad a culturalist explanation. Not all Germans took part in these murderous dynamics. But they were the majority at local level, showing that "the Nazi political culture was widely established in people's minds and was constantly progressing" (p. 380).

Repoliticizing the civilians' war

Overall, the book's strength lies in its ability to continually link the precise study of "the myriad and most often fleeting microsocial encounters" (p. 383) that it carefully describes and documents, with questions of great conceptual scope. The Resistance is reconceived, beyond its organizations, to include the social fabric in which they operated, and whose unequivocal attitude in favor of the Allied airmen indicated their commitment to fighting in the war. After so many studies on "opinion" based on speeches and texts that are often ambiguous and difficult to interpret or contextualize, the author's analysis of actions, and the chains of social interaction in which they were embedded, successfully provides a fresh understanding of the era. She demonstrates her awareness of memory dynamics, explaining why the helpers' memories were hazier than those of the maquis, and how German memories of the Allied bombings could serve as an apologetic counterpoint to Nazi crimes. All these contributions are supported by a perfect scientific apparatus – in particular with regard to the tables and unpublished historical maps, which are properly integrated into her account with probative value – but also by the historian's judicious use of sources: she shows she can vary the levels of certainty of her statements and weigh the numerical scale of the phenomena under study.

The author's most important contributions are undoubtedly her systematic and reasoned use of comparison to denaturalize the phenomena studied: when faced with downed airmen, neither rescue nor violence are obvious or natural social responses. To denaturalize them is to repoliticize them. In contrast to universalizing interpretations of war, which assign homogeneous positions to its actors through generalization, the author defends an analysis in terms of political cultures that were built up over the medium term and put to the test by the war event. She thus shows the inadequacy of "victim-centered approaches" (p. 11) and the vocabulary of "brutalization", which she specifically refutes (pp. 149 and 283 in particular). French, British and German civilians did not uniformly become "victims" or "brutalized". They did not adopt the same behaviors, because the values and norms sustaining them in each of the social spaces in which they had evolved were dissimilar, and because their dispositions encountered diverse wartime contexts: an individual does not act in the same way in a democratic state, an occupied country, or a racist dictatorship; or during an invasion, a period of bombing, or an imminent defeat. Focusing on the context of people's behavior may seem obvious, but it is overlooked in so many works on the history of wars that it makes a welcome change to find such an exemplary display

here. Other areas, starting with Eastern Europe, could surely be evaluated in the same way, or undergo similar comparisons. However, this book already makes a decisive contribution to our understanding of collective behavior during the Second World War.

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