The Red Tape Option: Bureaucratic Collaboration and Resistance in Vichy France

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Marc Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'Etat français: L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944*, preface by Jean-Pierre Azéma (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 737 pp., FF 180, ISBN 2–213–59930–0.

François Bloch-Lainé and Claude Gruson, *Hauts Fonctionnaires sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1996), 283 pp., FF 130, ISBN 2–738–10419–3.

Claude Singer, *L'Université libérée, l'université épurée (1943–1947)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997), 430 pp., FF 185, ISBN 2–251–38037–x.

Bureaucracies are so famously capable of destroying the best-laid plans of reformers that historians often take their power to resist or collaborate for granted. In the burgeoning field of Vichy France, for example, we have studies of the ideologies of the well-known collaborators and of Vichy's 'National Revolution' as well as studies of the havoc those ideologies wreaked on the country and the growing opposition to both the ideas and the consequences. What we do not have is a very clear picture of how those ideas became consequences. The question is important because, unlike eastern European countries where Nazi occupation was naked and brutal, the French ended up amply serving the German cause almost despite themselves and at remarkably low cost to the Germans in terms of personnel. The French were not terrorised into turning over their Jews, their young people, or their crops at gunpoint in the way that, say, the Poles were. And yet they turned them over. Were the French, then, Nazis willing to give their all for the cause? Certainly not: far too many heroic men and women preferred to die as resistants rather than help the Germans.

Any answer to the troubling question of how a nation can be persuaded to collaborate with evil must necessarily be complex, involving discussions of propaganda, the use of the police, public opinion, daily economics, and *mentalités*. It must also include the bureaucracy, asking the question of how and why the bureaucrats, with their infamous red tape option, did or did not assist the regime to control or exploit the people by implementing its policies. Fortunately, three recent works have begun to explore the activities and attitudes of the civil service under Vichy, bringing us closer to an answer.

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All three study that self-contained intermediary between the regime and the people, the administration, but they take different approaches to the bureaucratic beast. François Bloch-Lainé and Claude Gruson offer us the reflective memories of participants in *Hauts fonctionnaires sous l'Occupation*, while Marc Olivier Baruch eschews memories altogether in favour of the solidity of documents in *Servir l'Etat français: L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944*. Claude Singer, on the other hand, gives us a case study not of collaboration per se but of an institution in the grip of reacting to it in *L'Université libérée, l'université épurée (1943–1947)*. If Bloch-Lainé, Gruson and Baruch are primarily concerned with the ethical dimensions of collaboration, Singer is interested in its social context and ramifications.

In 1940 both François Bloch-Lainé and Claude Gruson were young *fonctionnaires* with brilliant prospects in the Ministry of Finances, and in 1943 they both joined the Gaullist Resistance organisation for the civil service, the *Noyautage de l'Administration Publique* (NAP). Half a century later, they are less interested in the question of why they and a few others resisted – the NAP could claim only 0.2 per cent of *fonctionnaires* (Baruch, *Servir*, p. 498) – than of why others collaborated. Indeed, the question of why these two men resisted is, at least in their own presentation, not that complicated. Both were, in a sense, disqualified from collaborating by their personal situations. Bloch-Lainé was half Jewish, although he benefited from some loopholes in Vichy's racist exclusionary laws. Gruson was both Protestant, and therefore shielded from Vichy's Catholic rhetoric, and removed from temptation by tuberculosis to an Alpine sanitarium from 1941 to 1943.

In their book-length conversation, Bloch-Lainé and Gruson are searching for an explanation of why the civil service collaborated and for a more realistic, more complicated understanding of collaboration/accommodation than that provided by the Gaullist myth of a nation of resistants. Inevitably, their conversation takes them to the people and circumstances they knew, almost wholly in the Ministry of Finances. In the end, they blame their fellow *fonctionnaires* for putting career above honour, for serving the State without reflecting whom their service benefited or to what end. But they also offer them two excuses: the economic difficulties of the time, which distracted people's attention and made keeping one's job imperative, and a faulty education. Indeed, they fear that today's civil servants receive the same type of narrow technical education devoid of broader 'political culture' or ethical questions as they did before the Second World War, thus making the country susceptible to the same poor leadership that caused so much trouble in the 1940s.

The worst of that trouble, in their view, was the easy acceptance of complicity in the Holocaust. The only explanation they can offer for the ease with which a minority promulgated the Statut des Juifs is that Vichy associated the Jews with communism and that people were 'inattentive' (Bloch-Lainé and Gruson, *Hauts Fonctionnaires*, pp. 217–24). Gruson himself admits that he had no idea of the extent of persecution until the 1970s. The book evokes powerful questions about the responsibility of the civil service and, indeed, of the citizen, although the long digressions into the internal politics of the Ministry of Finances regarding the economic theories of men like Hjalmar Schacht and Jean Monnet will be of interest

only to specialists. Historians in general will find it of interest as an evocation by elite participants of the psychological dimensions of the times.

Marc Olivier Baruch shares the concern with the ethical responsibilities of the civil service, but takes both a broader and a more detailed approach to the question by re-creating the mechanisms of administrative collaboration. Indeed, as the published version of a *thèse*, this long monograph reaches encyclopaedic proportions. Anyone interested in the attempt at civil service reform or the more ephemeral bureaucracies created by Vichy will find the details here. He or she will also find a valuable appendix of documents ranging from proclamations by Philippe Pétain to a Vichy personnel form with space for a rating on 'loyalty to the Maréchal', to the full text of the Statut des Juifs. It also includes Resistance documents regarding the civil service. Discussions of Pétain, Pierre Laval and other top policy makers, however, do not appear. Baruch explores the lower level and career civil servants, although the middle to upper levels receive more attention, if only because they generated more documents.

From out of all these details emerges a fascinating study of how the infamous ability of bureaucracies to oppose, even defeat, change actually works. In other words, the book tells the story of Vichy's failed attempt to impose the ideology of the National Revolution on the French bureaucracy. That story begins immediately in 1940 when the new government tried to bring its civil servants into line with its ideals of 'Travail, Famille, Autorité [sic]' (Baruch, *Servir*, p. 98), most notably through a series of exclusionary laws intended to purge the civil service of such designated undesirables as Jews, women, freemasons and anyone at all not born of a French father. Although Baruch notes that the traditional services were hostile to Vichy's new administrative creations, such as the Commissariat général aux questions juives (CGQJ), they did grudgingly work with them. Indeed, the exclusionary laws succeeded perfectly because of the administrative virtue of obedience that led highly placed civil servants to become anti-Semitic in a respectable fashion simply because their jobs required it of them.

Purges, however, could not extirpate sabotage by inertia, which Vichy combated through repression and persuasion. The carrot appeared as reforms meant to modernise the civil service, most of which failed due to circumstances. It was not a propitious time, for instance, to raise salaries. The stick grew both bigger and more obvious after Laval returned to power in 1942. At that point, the policy makers who had been trying to introduce the National Revolution into the bureaucracy left, and the regime moved closer to dictatorship. It was not so much that Laval did not care about the attitudes and ideology of the civil service as that he cared more about the practical goal of keeping the bureaucracy and the country running.

Laval's return to power as 'head of the government' in 1942 marked a turning point for bureaucrats. The new, open association of the French civil service, most notably the police, with repression, police raids (*rafles*), and the forced labour draft meant that civil servants had to choose between collaboration and resistance unless they could find a sandy pit of endless paperwork in which to hide their heads. Baruch identifies five principal explanations for administrative collaboration:

fascination with the Nazi model, the influence of domestic political intrigues, concern with national sovereignty, professional ambition and personal interest. For instance, concern over national sovereignty combined with 'the blindness born of the technical pride of the expert' (p. 275) led Chief of Police René Bousquet and his superiors to modernise the French police. By defining sovereignty narrowly as controlling force, they not only allowed but insisted that Frenchmen do the Germans' dirty work. Equally shortsightedly, the Ministry of Finances obligingly assisted them with generous allocations of funds for anything bearing on the maintenance of order. The increasing police repression led to two things: resistance and the police state of the 'Etat Milicien'.

Baruch is as careful to define the forms of administrative resistance as of administrative collaboration. He does not, for instance, consider simply doing one's job to be resistance, even if one's job description involved defending French sovereignty. He nevertheless gives due honour to the minority of civil servants who did engage in formal, dangerous Resistance, especially the forty-two prefects, sub-prefects and *secretaires généraux* who were deported to Nazi concentration camps. More interestingly, Baruch traces the shift of support within the administration from Vichy to the Resistance that created a 'grève du zèle' that turned the principle of administrative obedience against the regime by privileging to an absurd degree the letter of the law above its spirit (p. 492). This wave of inertia, Baruch explains, began with the increased police repression of 1942. Several Resistance proclamations regarding the postwar civil service issued in 1943, however, persuaded *fonctionnaires* to switch their loyalties by convincing them that the Resistance offered an alternative to Vichy that demonstrated 'all the forms of legality' (p. 449).

By 1944, the Vichy regime remained, but its relations with the bureaucracy had changed drastically. As head of the CGQJ, Louis Darquier de Pellepoix was even reduced to complaining to the Germans about the administration's lack of enthusiasm. The government, relying increasingly on police repression, created the *Etat Milicien*. In this final section, rather than discussing the well-known atrocities committed by the infamous paramilitary anti-Resistance unit, Baruch explains how the Milice infiltrated a hostile civil service. It will come as a surprise to some that Milice officers held high administrative offices, and Baruch provides a welcome addition to the history of Vichy and the Liberation, giving us a fuller picture of the pressures under which the Resistance worked and of the pervasive tensions and fears within France at the end of the war.

But the heroism of the men in the NAP and the bravery of municipal policemen who sheltered the Milice's potential victims does not, Baruch concludes, qualify the administration as a whole for the Resistance status accorded it by the Gaullist Resistencialist myth. He blames the rank and file bureaucrats for continuing to serve a regime even while sharing the majority opinion that hoped for a Resistance victory after 1943, for making the typically bureaucratic error of perspective that privileged the form over the content. Their mistake, however, cannot be excused as blind obedience because they showed themselves too eager to destroy the republican values which they had been obliged to uphold until 1940. In his final judgment

Baruch condemns 'the complicity of the civil service in the wrongdoings of the regime. In putting, *par transitivité*, their competence and their respectability at the service of the enemy's goals, the *fonctionnaires* betrayed the ''duties of their office''' (p. 582). And he ends, like Bloch-Lainé and Gruson, with a warning that today's civil servants may well be susceptible to the same mistakes as their predecessors of half a century ago.

Claude Singer gives us an entirely different perspective on the mechanisms of administrative collaboration, by studying the ways in which one institution – the university – and its members put themselves back together in the immediate aftermath of the war. What makes *L'Université libérée, l'université épurée* such an unusual and valuable contribution to the field is less its careful re-creation of one branch of the administrative purge as its evocation of the social and economic context of the Liberation, in which the purge quite rightly belongs.

Singer explores the universities and the most prominent lycées to make three points. First, the Liberation and the purge belong together, which they surely do; second, the Liberation was not a profound and utter break with Vichy; and third, the Liberation was not a moment of profound national union. The second and third points will seem like red herrings to specialists in the field, but there are so few specialists in this woefully under-researched period that they probably bear repeating. To prove the second, Singer cites the lack of any but marginal reforms in the university, especially in pedagogy, at the time. To demonstrate the third, he cites the arguments within the Resistance during the *après-libération*, particularly between the Gaullists and the Communists. Both paid significant attention to the universities, contending for student loyalties in the creation of official memories of the war, in the interpretation of the purge, and in economic policies. Indeed, it was only in 1947, when Communist influence made it a matter of high politics, that the government finally did something to improve the miserable offerings of the student cafeterias. Singer's concrete examples of Gaullist/Communist ideological skirmishing provide welcome examples of politics in action in everyday life.

Even more welcome is Singer's evocation of the chaos and hardship of the Liberation period and his careful case study of the purge of collaborators in action. Singer's rendition of the Liberation will surprise many readers, who tend to think of it as a limited, military event. Instead, the use of the university allows Singer to highlight the fragmented, progressive nature of the Liberation as it happened in one place in one year and in another the next, to one group on one day and to another group the next. His location of a university's liberation on the day it began an academic year free of Vichy or the Germans means that the university of Algiers was liberated in October 1943 but the university of Strasbourg was not liberated until October 1945 (months after the liberation of the city of Strasbourg and even the end of the war). Almost everything changed between 1943 and 1945, including the prevailing definition of collaboration.

The field of higher education also allows Singer to explore the disruptions and confusion in France caused by the Occupation and the Liberation. Because the university, like the larger community, experienced demographic upheaval, Singer

discusses the attempts to replicate the university in the POW camps and the problems caused by the mobilisation of professors and students. The university also suffered from the general penury. In 1945, for example, paper was in such short supply that the Ministry of National Education ordered that many archival documents be recycled and that students bring a kilogramme of used paper to school in exchange for new supplies. The general food shortage hit students so hard that in 1945 the government ordered examiners to be 'indulgent' (Singer, *L'Université*, p. 100), and in 1947 and 1948 candidates for the big examinations received special rations of extra bread and sugar beginning six weeks before the examination. Examiners were also asked to give special consideration to students who counted as war victims, especially resistants. In 1945 the Legion of Honour was worth an extra twenty points on the entrance examination to the Ecole Polytechnique and war wounds were worth an extra five points.

The university, of course, also experienced the purge, although it was kept quiet because the Resistance had invested heavily in the purity of French intellectuals and in their support. Unlike the criminal purge held in courtrooms, the university purge was an administrative matter held in closed sessions that involved only members of the institution. Indeed, counting both those investigated and those sitting on the investigating committees, 21.5 per cent of professors were involved in purging the universities. As in all other aspects of the purge, the details differed over time and place. Antisemitism, for instance, did not figure very largely in the early purge of the University of Algiers. And open statements in favour of collaboration counted more heavily against the accused than quieter, less obvious but perhaps more effective, means of collaboration. As in all other branches of the purge, in the university the purge was less a means of vengeance than a means of purifying society, and even oneself, by drawing a clear line between good and bad (p. 209).

The book provides a lively and readable window into the Liberation and all the social, economic, political, and moral troubles that accompanied it, making it a case study of interest to anyone concerned with the end of the Second World War, or, indeed, with the social effects of civil war. It is also, following François Rouquet,[1] a rare example of a case study of the administrative purge. Because archival laws have severely hampered attempts to study the French purge, the information that we have about it remains sketchy. It also tends to favour the more spectacular and public criminal purge prosecuted through the special purge courts. Although it seems unlikely today and is not anything that Singer himself would argue, it is possible that given more studies of the forgotten or hidden administrative purge like Singer's, historians will have to come to a new consensus about the French purge. Rather than judging it as the softest purge in western Europe, we may end up describing it as the most discreet, relying on administrative rather than legal penalties.

From the perspective of the civil service, the answer to the question of how a nation can be persuaded to collaborate without the use of blatant and pervasive

[1] *L'épuration dans l'administration française* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1993).

terror turns out to be chillingly simple. The Nazis and their ideological collaborators were able to impose their designs on France for wholly mundane reasons: because bureaucrats were interested in advancing their careers, because they were 'inattentive' to the implications of what was going on around them, because they were distracted by economic hardship. And, perhaps most importantly, because the French bureaucracy did not exercise its red tape option to its full extent. Heroic individuals may have refused their orders and a general atmosphere of foot-dragging may have developed towards the end, but the administration kept doing its job, despite what the job turned out to be. Evil, once again, turns out to be banal, and in the French case, not even particularly costly, given the discretion, many would say indulgence, of the purge.