

Occupations of the Occupation

ROBERT O. PAXTON

Annie Lacroix-Riz

INDUSTRIELS ET BANQUIERS
FRANÇAIS SOUS L'OCCUPATION
La collaboration économique avec le Reich et Vichy
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been reviewed in France only by the sympathetic *Le Monde diplomatique*. She is *la passionaria* of French economic collaboration.

Mme Lacroix-Riz's positions are easily summarized. In 1940, French big businessmen – liberated from parliament and unions – sought with alacrity to sell stocks or produce goods for Germany. Looking further ahead, they eagerly negotiated long-term contracts with German firms alongside whom they hoped to expand their presence in “the new Europe”, building on the groundwork of cartel arrangements set up in the 1920s and 30s. Further enticements were the spoils of British expulsion from the Continent, and (after 1941) the exploitation of “liberated” Russia. Along the way, the larger firms happily used the shortages of raw material and the expropriation of their Jewish rivals to enhance their competitive positions by concentration and cartelization.

On the one hand, big businessmen were eager, she continues, for Vichy government support, for investment capital, for example, or for guarantees against war-damage claims, or for fictitious “instructions” that freed them from legal responsibility for their German deals. On the other, they easily brushed aside the Vichy government's attempts to centralize under state auspices all economic contacts with the Germans, in an effort to negotiate a general relaxation of the harsh constraints imposed by the Armistice terms. Instead, French firms dealt directly with individual German firms, in short-term self-interest, as international capitalists rather than as patriotic Frenchmen. When Allied victory began to seem plausible, she adds, they switched effortlessly to collaboration with their next occupiers, the Americans. That transition was all the easier since American international capitalists, too, had secretly worked with German firms all along, through subsidiaries in neutral countries.

It must be said at once that Lacroix-Riz is right on certain points. Scepticism about post-war testimony is entirely justified. I and others found a quarter of a century ago that French businessmen attempted within weeks of the Armistice to contact German firms. The widespread enthusiasm until at least 1942 among

man documents in support of these judgments. It remains to be seen whether she has been as selective in quoting from them as she is in citing other historians of this subject in her attacks on them for pro-business leniency.

Her whole approach poses problems. Since she claims to demolish less accusatory historians by sheer command of the archives, we need to note which archives she has not seen. She has studied no firm's own papers. She deduces industrial strategies from what executives said to German and Vichy officials, without internal evidence about their decisions. On the German side, although she knows well the local archives of the German occupation agencies in France, she shows little interest in Germany's general intentions towards the French economy, torn as they were between revenge and pragmatism. As a consequence, the reader cannot evaluate the fit (or lack thereof) between French business strategies and Nazi exploitation projects.

Where the aid of American firms to the Nazis is concerned, Lacroix-Riz makes no claim to archival knowledge. Instead, she depends heavily on Charles Higham's *Trading with the Enemy* (1983), the thinly substantiated work of a journalist otherwise known for some two dozen exposés of the private lives of Hollywood stars, notable for a “willingness to entertain the most sordid possibilities” (James Wolcott, the *New York Review of Books*, May 15, 1980). Her insistence on documentary proof seems to stop short at the water's edge.

Mme Lacroix-Riz makes unproven assumptions that serve her argument. One is that the occupation years were good times for French big businessmen, when they shared “with a light heart” in the “feast” of German war profiteering, in contrast to most people's misery. While she cannot ignore the shortages of raw materials and forced shutdowns, they play little role in her general conclusions. She shows no interest in such entrepreneurial preoccupations as wear, under-investment and loss of market share. She wants us to believe that the whole French economy was a “ruche”, a beehive of pro-German activity. She supports this with a cascade of statistics showing that Firm A sent 90 per cent of its production to German buyers or their subcontractors. But she rarely asks what proportion of Firm A's capacity was idle. Sending 90 per cent of current production to Germany does not necessarily mean operating at 90 per cent of capacity, or even operating profitably.

A few sectors – notably aluminium, where the French had a precocious advantage (bauxite was discovered in France, near Les Baux) – produced more in 1943 than in 1939. Many other French businesses, however, never regained pre-war production levels because of war damage and shortages of raw material, equipment and manpower. Some closed altogether. Lacroix-

mentioned historians, for whose qualifications and distinctions among different economic sectors she has voluble contempt, remain more persuasive.

Sometimes her accusatory zeal runs away with her. She has strong evidence that the French chemical firm Ugine produced the insecticide cyanhydric acid, later notorious under the brand name Zyklon-B for its use in the Nazi murder of the insane, Soviet prisoners of war, and finally Jews. Indeed, a subsidiary of Ugine had been producing it for insect control under licence from Degesch (an IG Farben subsidiary) since 1931. But did Ugine send it knowingly to Auschwitz? Detecting an output spike in spring 1944, she suggests it did. Correctly, she asks for more information, but her own conviction is manifest.

Mme Lacroix-Riz also accuses Allied bombing of sparing strategic factories for post-war use. Her evidence for this is post-war testimony by traumatized French neighbours, who formed a jaundiced opinion of Allied crews' accuracy. Her insistence on archival evidence deserts her again (as it does in her willingness to accept scraps of Gaullist intelligence from wartime London and post-war union testimony as long as they discredit the bosses). She has a taste for conspiracies. Eager to demonstrate the unity and influence of big business, she dusts off the Synarchie, an alleged cabal of technocrats and bankers, complete with secret rituals, which most historians attribute to fevered wartime imaginations. Surely entrepreneurial solidarity is explicable without the Synarchie, and, anyway, conflicts occurred within French business that her approach obscures.

Did no French executives resist the temptations of the “new Europe”? Lacroix-Riz credits only those the Germans knew about. The Michelin tyre firm rejected German pressures for joint production (though even Michelin profited from Jewish assets), and the banker Jean Davillier of the *Crédit Commercial de France* tried to protect a major Jewish client. A few Vichy officials, such as the later Gaullist minister Maurice Couve de Murville, displayed some sense of national interest. Otherwise, she considers sabotage the main obstacle to economic collaboration, and she credits it solely to Communist Party members.

The challenge facing a historian of French economic collaboration is to reconstitute, in all their fresh uncertainty, the options businessmen faced in that awful summer of 1940, and the values and perspectives that governed their choices. Peter Hayes entered masterfully into the minds of the executives of the German chemical giant IG Farben in *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi era* (1987), a book that Lacroix-Riz admires but cannot emulate. She is so consumed by righteous indignation at generic big business (including what seems to be her own family's cigarette-paper firm) and so reductionist in limiting entrepreneurial motives to short-term profit that she is unable to visualize the options available to French businessmen after 1940, and the full range of their strategic responses to harsh conditions that they

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It must be said at once that Lacroix-Riz is right on certain points. Scepticism about post-war testimony is entirely justified. I and others found a quarter of a century ago that French businessmen attempted within weeks of the Armistice to contact German firms. The widespread enthusiasm until at least 1942 among many French executives for German contracts, joint projects, and even mergers, is abundantly detailed in the archives. Only four years after the factory occupations of summer 1936, many French businessmen rejoiced at weakened unions. "Aryanization" of French Jewish firms (voluntarily extended to the Unoccupied Zone by Vichy in July 1941) surely benefited competitors in textiles, furs, real estate, banking and commerce. That the contributions of French enterprises to the Resistance were limited is generally agreed. Lacroix-Riz heaps up copious citations from contemporary French and Ger-

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How a French firm dovetailed with German needs made the difference between boom or bust. One needs to discriminate between strategic firms and others with less opportunity to collaborate. Such considerations undermine Lacroix-Riz's assumption of homogeneous prosperity for French big business. Here the

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It is sad to see so much archival energy confined within so cramped an intellectual framework. When the awaited authoritative synthesis of French economic collaboration with the Nazi occupation finally appears, it will owe more to the other historians of these matters than to Annie Lacroix-Riz.

Robert O. Paxton's most recent book, French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères' Greenshirts and the crisis of French agriculture, 1929–1939, was published in 1998.