

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: no more “behind the lines”

### *Total War, Endangered Civilians, and the French Exodus of 1940*

---

For a thousand years man has been taught that women and children are to be shielded from war. War is a matter for men only. The village mayors are full of this law of society; their clerks know it; the school teachers know it. Assume that suddenly they receive orders to stop the evacuations, which is to say, force women and children to remain in the zone of bombardment. It will take them a month to adjust their conscience to this sign of a new age.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to Arras*, 1942<sup>1</sup>

The deliberate attack and maiming of unarmed civilians is terrorism pure and simple, whatever the cause.

Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General, July 13, 2006<sup>2</sup>

On May 10, 1940, flying at a low altitude and shadowing an impressive constellation of ground forces, German Heinkel and Dornier bombers ripped through northern European skies. In seven key attacks, the Luftwaffe unleashed its hailstorm of bombs. From Delfzijl and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, to Brussels and Antwerp in Belgium, to Luxembourg, the attacks shattered the deceptive tranquility that cloaked France and the Benelux countries. Along the River Moselle, the French returned “a hurricane of defensive fire from small arms and anti-aircraft guns.”<sup>3</sup> British pilots joined the fight over Belgium, skipping over a “swarm of refugees who preceded the German line” and loosing “small bombs and sprays of machine gun bullets” onto the German divisions. Reaching Paris on May 11, German bombers

<sup>1</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to Arras*, trans. Lewis Galantière, illustrated by Bernard Lamotte (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), 129. The author thanks Karl Larew, Professor Emeritus of Towson University, for Saint-Exupéry’s memoir.

<sup>2</sup> Kofi Annan, Secretary-General’s press encounter following working luncheon with Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, Rome, Italy, July 12, 2006, see <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/?nid=903>.

<sup>3</sup> “British Airmen Hit Nazi Columns; Raid is Reported at Essen in Ruhr: The Mark of the Bomber Left on Paris and Nancy by Raiding Reich Warplanes,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1940, 1.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 France under fire

hit French airfields and rail stations, as well as crushing civilian residences in Méry-sur-Oise on the outskirts of the capital. In one night, 148 French civilians died.<sup>4</sup>

The ensuing six weeks brought murderous fighting deep within French borders. On the ground, gritty combat consumed troops in the Ardennes forest, at the Moselle, the Meuse, and the Somme, places that still bore the scars from the ravages of World War I. The British Expeditionary Force was evacuated from Dunkerque on May 28, leaving French troops to fight on alone. By June 22, the German Wehrmacht had captured nearly two million French soldiers and killed an estimated 100,000.<sup>5</sup> The “swarm” of refugees that first amassed in the Benelux countries marched along with the German troops into France. Terrified, residents of France’s north-eastern departments joined their ranks. By the time the “exodus” of refugees cleared Paris on June 14, their numbers had swollen to between 8 and 11 million.<sup>6</sup> During the rout, the Germans captured the husbands of 790,000 French women, leaving them as the sole providers for their families.<sup>7</sup> Millions of refugee women retreated with children, grandparents, and the few household possessions they managed to hastily pack. German bombers and fighter planes trailed the mass of humanity and retreating French troops, who co-mingled with civilians on the way to Orléans, Tours, Rennes, and Bordeaux. Unwilling, or unable, to distinguish combatant from non-combatant, German pilots fired upon the civilian innocents, claiming another 100,000 victims before the battle’s end. British expatriate, W. Fortune, living in France wondered, “Had any army up to that date suffered so many casualties in so short a time?”<sup>8</sup>

The government collapsed as quickly as the military front. On June 16, the Cabinet of Ministers voted fourteen to six against Prime Minister Paul Reynaud and for inquiring about German terms of an armistice. Reynaud chose to resign rather than end the fight, but he recommended to President Albert Lebrun that he name Marshal

<sup>4</sup> “British Airmen Hit Nazi Columns,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1940, 1.

<sup>5</sup> G. and W. Fortune, *Hitler Divided Europe: A Factual Account of Conditions in Occupied France from the Armistice of June 1940 up to the Total Occupation in November 1942* (London: Macmillan, 1943), 16–17. Fishman reports that the Red Cross estimated 1,605,000, while the Germans claimed 1,929,000 captive soldiers. Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), xv.

<sup>6</sup> Fortune, *Hitler Divided Europe*, 1. The larger number was reported at the time. The accepted number is the lower.

<sup>7</sup> Fishman, *We Will Wait*, xv. <sup>8</sup> Fortune, *Hitler Divided France*, 16.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: no more “behind the lines”

3

Philippe Pétain, hero of the battle of Verdun, as his successor. Pétain favored an armistice. On June 17, Pétain declared via radio: “Stop the fighting.” Historians have amply documented these events. The armistice that took effect on June 25 dealt France its most stinging blow since Waterloo. It stipulated that the country would be governed by a German Military Administration in the “Occupied Zone,” and by a French state in a “Free Zone.” The agreement made no mention of a formal partition of the nation by a “Line of Demarcation.”<sup>9</sup> But within the week, the German Army began laying barbed wire and establishing checkpoints: France would be divided.

The defeat produced several immediate crises. Militarily, much of the French Army had been captured and soldiers, detached from their units, had deserted. Politically, the government had collapsed and was moving from German-occupied Bordeaux, to a spa town in the “Free Zone,” Vichy, where Pétain would win the case for assuming full governing powers on July 10. The greater crisis unfolded on the roads and in towns along the Atlantic coast, and in the Massif Central and southwestern departments of France. The millions of residents who had fled the invading German forces, now found themselves homeless, without food, transportation, or news of lost family members. Universally called “refugees,” these populations created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis spanning both administrative zones.

The principal problem challenging the new government at Vichy was to “repatriate” French, Benelux, German, and Jewish refugees to their homes.<sup>10</sup> The task of repatriation was immediately complicated by the German sealing of the Line of Demarcation and by the destruction to rails and roadways. Communication between the two zones was prohibited. Refugees crowded into town halls, schools, churches, train stations, and barns for shelter. Food shortages arose as municipalities tried to feed the surplus populations. The inadequacy of sanitary facilities threatened public health. In their desperate attempt to escape German bombing and contact with enemy combatants, civilian refugees found themselves engaged in a struggle for survival.

How had France come to this point in her history, where her population stood scattered across the country intermingled with her broken army? How would a newly formed government, heir to a partitioned,

<sup>9</sup> Eric Alary, *La ligne de démarcation: 1940–1944* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), 33.

<sup>10</sup> The original argument regarding repatriation and the core of the research in this volume are drawn from the author’s dissertation, Nicole Ann Dombrowski, “Beyond the Battlefield: The French Civilian Exodus of May–June 1940,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1995.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 France under fire

defeated nation, address the needs of millions of internally displaced civilians and foreign refugees? What challenges did women in particular face as displaced heads of households, forced to provide for children whose fathers were captured or wandering about somewhere in northern France?

Several postwar studies have investigated the causes of France's defeat in 1940.<sup>11</sup> We know much about the weaknesses of interwar military planning and production.<sup>12</sup> Philippe Burrin and Robert Paxton helped to forge a body of scholarship that details forms of political, economic, and cultural collaboration between the Vichy regime and the Germans.<sup>13</sup> This broad spectrum has defined activities that ranged from the ideological embrace of German fascism and criminal enforcement of its politically repressive and racist policies, through daily accommodation with the military administration, to active armed resistance anchored in anti-fascist and communist ideals. The historiography of Gaullist resistance and liberation remains the standard lens to view and commemorate the war's end.<sup>14</sup> Within the last two decades, historians have mined the rich terrain of daily life under the Occupation, casting light

<sup>11</sup> See Jean-Pierre Azéma, *1940 l'année terrible* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); Martin Alexander, "The Fall of France, 1940," in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The World War II Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7–40; Marc Bloch, *The Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: Norton, [1948] 1968); Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *L'Abîme 1939–1945* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1982); Henry Dutailly, *Les Problèmes de l'armée de terre française (1935–1939)* (Paris: Imprime nationale, 1980); André Géraud, *The Gravediggers of France: Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, Petain, and Laval* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1944); Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General*, ed. Martin Blumenson (Munich: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, [1955] 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France 1938–1940* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Roxanne Panchasi, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France between the Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: The New Press, 1993); Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Julian Jackson, *France, The Dark Years, 1940–44* (Oxford University Press, 2002); Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France during the German Occupation* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); Bertram M. Gordon, *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2005); Robert Zaretsky, *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938–1944* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> For a synopsis of Gaullist scholarship, see Fondation nationale des sciences politiques et la Fondation Charles de Gaulle, *Le rétablissement de la légalité républicaine* (1944) (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1996).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: no more “behind the lines”

5

on women’s experiences.<sup>15</sup> The research that weaves France’s wartime history most directly into the broader European experience of German Occupation is the shameful treatment of European Jews through policies of discrimination, round-up, detention, deportation, forced labor, and extermination. In this field, Holocaust history in France has intersected with the study of postwar memory of the Occupation.<sup>16</sup>

Imbedded within these subdivisions of France’s wartime history is the topic of civilian survival during and in the aftermath of combat exposure. This subject falls in line with new approaches linking civilian and military experience under total war.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, civilian evacuations and the problems associated with mass flight and internal displacement of domestic and foreign refugees offers historians a vast panorama for exploring the relationship between state military planning, civilian

<sup>15</sup> Clare Gorrara (ed.), *Modern and Contemporary France*, Special Issue, “Gendering the Occupation,” February 1997; Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime, and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Hannah Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1938–1948: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999); Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940–1945* (New York: John Wiley, 1995); Nicole Chatel, *Des femmes dans la résistance* (Paris: Juilliard, 1972); Ania Francis, *Il était des femmes dans la résistance* (Paris: Stock, 1978); Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, trans. John Flower (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Dominique Veillon, *La mode sous l’Occupation* (Paris: Payot, 1990); Paula Schwartz, “Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France,” in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The World War II Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 296–316.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Peschanski, *La France des camps: l’internement, 1938–1946* (Paris: Gaillmard, 2002) and *Vichy 1940–44: contrôle et exclusion* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1997); Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001); Adam Rayski, *Le choix des juifs sous Vichy entre soumission et résistance* (Paris: la Découverte, 1992); Rita Thalmann, *La mise au pas. Idéologie et stratégie sécuritaire dans la France occupée* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide: Entre la mémoire et l’oublié* (Paris: Plon, 1992); Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, The French, and The Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Paul Webster, *Pétain’s Crime: The Full Story of French Collaboration in the Holocaust* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Yves Sourniac, *Les camps d’internement en Limousin, 1939–1945* (Saint-Paul: Soullignac, 1995); Dan Michman, *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998); Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy–Auschwitz. Le rôle de Vichy dans la solution finale de la question juive en France, 1942* (Paris: Fayard, 1983); Claude Singer, *Vichy, l’université et les juifs. Les silences et la mémoire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1992); Bernard Delaunay, *Mémorial de la Résistance et de la déportation en Corrèze 1940–1945* (Édité par le Comité de la Corrèze de l’Association nationale des anciens combattants de la Résistance et ses amis. Brive: ANACR, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918* (New York: University Press, 2010); Nicholas Atkin (ed.), *Daily Lives of Civilians in Wartime Twentieth-Century Europe*, “Daily Life through History” Series (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2008); John N. Horne and Alain Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 France under fire

security provisioning, and humanitarian crisis management. These areas of modern state activity have received much attention from government planners, scholars of international law, and human rights activists, but have only recently attracted attention from historians.<sup>18</sup>

The origins of France's refugee crisis stem from French interwar approaches to national defense and civilian security, which national officials developed in response to the breakdown of the international order crafted at Versailles. Until May 1940, planning streamed from the national to the local level, but civilians lived the consequences of the successes and failures of national programs in their towns and villages. The French Ministry of Interior and National Defense crafted interwar civilian protection strategies: bomb shelters, evacuation plans, relocation schemes, population transfers, and civil defense. Most civilians learned about the state's security plans as well as the war's progress in their local newspapers. The Bureau of Civil Defense (*Défense passive*), attached to National Defense and the Ministry of the Interior, imagined zones of civilian vulnerability and attempted to generate sets of uniform policies; however, implementation of policies differed from one region to another. While Paris concentrated its greatest efforts on the border departments within Alsace and Lorraine, it prepared other north-eastern departments for secondary evacuations. By 1936, the *Défense passive* had planned for the transfer of large populations to interior departments in the Massif Central and south-western regions, whose prefects planned for the reception of potentially large evacuee populations.

Selecting the department of the Marne for close examination of the erosion of civilian confidence and a site of mass departures, and Corrèze as a host department designated to receive evacuees; this study highlights the interaction between threatened civilians and their local government officials. The Marne sits just outside Alsace and Lorraine and was designated in 1936 to host future Alsatian and Lorrainer evacuees. However, the Marne also developed a plan to evacuate its own residents in the case of deeper German military encroachment. The Marne was thus more similar to the vast majority of northern French departments, also designated to host potential evacuees, but aware of their own population's eventual vulnerability. During World War I, the

<sup>18</sup> Eric Alary, *L'exode: Un drame oublié* (Paris: Perrin, 2010); Hanna Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Julia S. Torrie, "For Their Own Good": *Civilian Evacuations in Germany and France, 1939–1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Laura Lee Downs, "A Very British Revolution? L'évacuation des enfants citadins vers les campagnes anglaises 1939–1945," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire*, 89, January–March 2006, 47–60.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: no more “behind the lines”

7

Marne witnessed some of the heaviest fighting, and its civilian population carried the memory of the devastation caused by German land invasion and aerial bombardment; a memory which played a role in civilians’ decisions to flee.<sup>19</sup>

Corrèze forms the south-eastern tip of the Limousin region, located in France’s Massif Central. A gateway to France’s south-western departments and Spain, isolated, rural, and lightly populated, Corrèze was chosen by civil defense planners as an ideal retreat for northern evacuees. Already in 1936, Corrèze and the surrounding departments of the Limousin and Aquitaine received directives to prepare evacuee reception centers. Corrèze, with a major train hub at Brive-la-Gaillarde, thus emerged as a final destination for evacuees, and a major transfer point for evacuees traveling further south. Corrèze also emerged as a magnet for refugee relocation after repatriation, due in part to a political heritage which favored communalism, shared public responsibility, and a predisposition against right-wing politics.<sup>20</sup>

The earliest questions posed by French historians about the exodus, written in the immediate aftermath of the war, focused on the impact that the dispersal of civilians had upon French military maneuvers.<sup>21</sup> Jean Vidalenc’s classic study, *L’exode de mai–juin 1940* (1957), asked whether the exodus evolved as a deliberate plot of German agents implanted within France to stir up public anxiety and trigger a mass civilian flight that would encumber French troops.<sup>22</sup> Vidalenc provisionally concluded that: “It is still not possible to confirm whether the initial exodus ... was the work of local enemy agents (sleepers) already in place, ready to act without direct orders from superiors.”<sup>23</sup> The sleeper thesis received widespread support in popular fiction written during and after the German Occupation. Lion Feuchtwanger’s 1944 resistance novel, *Simone*, first distilled the sleeper thesis as a collaborator named Prosper opined that: “the alleged French official orders to evacuate additional territory really came from the Boches [Germans]

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Husson, *La Marne et les Marnais à l’épreuve de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, vols. 1 and 2 (Reims: Presses universitaires de Reims, 1995), 87.

<sup>20</sup> Laird Boswell, *Rural Communism in France 1920–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 221. Boswell states that Communists controlled thirty-three rural villages in Corrèze by the mid-1930s.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Louis Crémieux-Birlhac, *Les français de l’an 40: ouvriers et soldats*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Pierre Miquel, *L’exode de 10 mai–20 juin 1940* (Paris: Plon, 2002); Paul-André Lesort, *Quelques jours de mai–juin 40: Mémoire, témoignage, histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Jean Vidalenc, *L’exode de mai–juin 1940* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), 67–8.

<sup>23</sup> Vidalenc, *L’exode de mai–juin 1940*. Translated from the French by the author.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 France under fire

for the purpose of increasing the confusion. At any rate, the panic was contagious, half of France was now in flight, all roads were jammed, preventing military movements.”<sup>24</sup>

Vidalenc and the historian Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac took as a starting point the description of civilians’ new reality as military targets. But Vidalenc puzzled that, “One is at a loss to explain certain bombings and machine guns ‘randomly fired’ far from any military target ... Such a tactic sought to create panic on back roads and alleyways, which cannot be explained except by an orientation toward a psychological form of war.”<sup>25</sup> Many scholars in the 1950s had trouble integrating civilians’ experiences into the traditional historical paradigms of military and political history. Still, Vidalenc’s work presented one of the first attempts at a social and cultural history of France’s defeat. Historian Marc Bloch, who did not survive the war, identified bombing of civilians as an end in and of itself. Bloch outwitted the Gestapo long enough to pen these conclusions: “the fact is that this dropping of bombs from the sky has a unique power of spreading terror. They are dropped from a great height, and seem, though quite erroneously, to be falling straight on top of one’s head.”<sup>26</sup> Accepting the spreading of terror as one of the intentions of bombing, and examining its other consequences – civilian death, social demoralization, mass displacement, economic paralysis, humanitarian crisis, political and social destabilization, infrastructure collapse – deepens our understanding of what “total war” means for the destruction of civilian life. American historian John Dower was among the first to reconfigure the historian’s approach to the civilian experience of bombing. Histories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Dower writes, “leave out the fate of nuclear victims.”<sup>27</sup> Dower insists that the paucity of information about the effects of atomic bombing resulted from an intentional suppression of eye-witness accounts and a reluctance to make documentation of civilian experience available to the public in the aftermath of the war. Retrieving, comparing, and legitimizing eye-witness accounts of embattled civilians, must, as Dower argues, serve as the keystone for historical analysis of civilian experience of World War II and of modern warfare in general. Within this revised approach to the history of bombing, *France under Fire* seeks to offer a more detailed account of the daily impact of bombing’s violence

<sup>24</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Simone*, trans. G. A. Hermann (New York: Viking Press, 1944), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Simone*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Bloch, *The Strange Defeat*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> John Dower, “The Bombed,” in Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction: no more “behind the lines”

9

upon women and children and refugees most frequently discursively gendered as female. Such an approach may help contemporary readers to appreciate what Tony Judt has described as: “the trauma that lay behind the images of desolation and hopelessness that caught the attention of observers in 1945,” helping to launch postwar reforms to the laws of war and human rights.<sup>28</sup>

To understand non-combatants’ wartime experience, historians must excavate the sources of fear and realize that civilians caught up in combat lack the training of soldiers prepared to encounter military violence. Civilian fears grew in the context of growing frustration with French government civil defense planning, poor military communication, misleading journalism, and unexpected aerial attack. Focusing on the sources of fear contributes to the revision of earlier accusations that refugees were traitors, cowards, or victims of foreign agents, and allows us to pinpoint many of the structural sources of civilian flight.

Recent studies have acknowledged the consequences of civilian fear and allowed for a larger role of the civilian upheaval in France’s defeat. Julian Jackson’s *The Fall of France*, Robert Gildea’s *Marianne in Chains*, and Richard Vinen’s *The Unfree French* discuss the refugee crisis as an episode in France’s defeat and connect it to French support of the armistice. Yet the deep impact on family survival and relief institutions begs further exploration. Hanna Diamond’s *Fleeing Hitler*, has recently tapped oral histories and literary women’s recollections to paint a picture of refugees’ fear, and also gives women’s voices a more prominent role in narrating the exodus. Anchored in archival research, *France under Fire* mines ordinary women’s letters, written during the crisis to all levels of French officials, in attempts to explain the sources of their fear and to influence policy to improve their security. By examining women’s experience through their letters and postwar testimonies, we see that mass flight was both an expression of fear and frustration with women’s failed efforts to lobby local officials and national civil defense planners during France’s march toward war. Throughout the crisis we find women appropriating the political language of social entitlements and collective rights that was used by pronatalists to win family allowances as a universal benefit during the Popular Front era (1936–1938).<sup>29</sup> The model of state subsidies paid to families helped French women to imagine structures that would limit war’s devastating impact upon families.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State, Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 358, 387, 410.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02532-5 - France under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II

Nicole Dombrowski Risser

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 France under fire

Since civilian women engaged the state during all three phases of the displacement crisis – the Phoney War’s period of selective evacuations, the moment of invasion and exodus, and the period of repatriation and resettlement – we find them active as citizens, motivated as war’s victims, struggling as refugees, and advocating for access to social, economic, and human rights guarantees. As such, the exodus and its aftermath represent a notable episode not only in France’s history, but in the history of French women’s emergence into modern citizens.

Swept up into the war, civilian women were “called to action” in the arenas within French society where they had participated since 1914. As emerging citizens, they lobbied local and national politicians, circulated petitions, volunteered for relief services, supported national defense when given the opportunity, and tried to preserve the rights they had gained in the interwar period.<sup>30</sup> Miranda Pollard has shown how Vichy capitalized on the defeat to enact a systematic reversal of women’s interwar political and economic achievements. Pollard shows that some women resisted and rejected policies that limited their gains in the face of authoritarianism and occupation. This study complements Pollard’s work, identifying how Vichy’s policies extended to the refugee population, and shows that civilian refugees engaged the state throughout the dictatorship, actively defying the narrowing scope for female participation in public life.

As shapers and beneficiaries of the interwar welfare state, civilian women pressed for the enhancement and extension of entitlements under the new conditions of war. Capitalizing upon their status as war workers, many civilian women tried to relocate to industries operating out of harm’s way and find jobs that would contribute to national defense. Contiguous with interwar efforts to establish economic independence, female civilian workers attempted to use their employment status to improve their wartime physical security.<sup>31</sup> As heads of families, French women mobilized in the context of economic collapse for the basics: food, clothing and shelter, as well as the return of their captive husbands.<sup>32</sup> The refugee crisis forced women to engage with the state for subsistence needs prior to the full imposition of the Occupation.

<sup>30</sup> Pollard, *Reign of Virtue*; Rita Thalmann (ed.), *Femmes et fascisme* (Paris: Éditions Tierce, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> For women’s interwar workplace activity see Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metal-working Industries, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Lynne Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France, 1940–1944* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).