

Renée Poznanski, *Propagandes et persécutions. La Résistance et le “problème juif” 1940-1944*, (Paris: Fayard, 2008), pp.785

by *Michele Sarfatti*

Renée Poznanski investigates how French Resistance dealt with the issue of the so-called “Jewish Problem” and she presents the results of her research in an essay, almost 800 page long. The length of the book is, on the one hand, exaggerated, making it a very demanding reading; on the other hand, however, it makes easier to understand events and the author’s narrative, as the reader comes in touch with long quotes from newspapers and documents of those times. Since the research goes into the details of one among the main certitudes of post-war Europe (Resistants’ “anti-anti-Semitism”), this immersion in contemporary texts enables ready and willing readers to set aside preconceived ideas and examine the event in its own development. This structure of the book reminds me of Theodore S. Hamerow’s study, *Why we watched. Europe, America and the Holocaust*, published in the same year (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), even if he made a more limited use of quotations. Both set out to understand and make us understand what used to be thought and written about Jews, on their conditions and the acceptance they received in the society as a whole or in a specific part of it.

During the Thirties, in France, anti-Semitism had seen some increase, in partial connection with the growth of xenophobia. Between the anti-Semitic and the non-anti-Semitic fields, there was a section of people who shared stereotypes and prejudices about the Jews, or at least about foreign Jews (at times, anyway, using the expression “Jewish Problem”). At the end of the decade, as the war approached, in some sections of pacifism and even in some socialist circles, words were written and spoken against “*la guerre juive*” (i.e. the war that, according to them, was supported by French and immigrant Jews in order to protect their coreligionists in Germany).

In the long years between 1940 and 1944 – as the French defeat was followed by German occupation and the partition of the country (with the establishment of the Vichy government), further German and Italian occupation and, finally, gradual liberation – “Free France” and “Resistant France” expressed themselves on the radio (from London), on newspapers secretly printed in the Hexagon, in internal documents of the various organizations, in pages of private diaries and in other places and forms. All of these sources are considered carefully by the author. In general terms (and without taking into account here the peculiar case of press, either in Yiddish or in French, produced by Communist-oriented foreign Jews), Poznanski emphasises that public condemnation of anti-Jewish persecution had been discontinuous, that this was more often criticized as being “alien and adverse to Catholicism” rather than wrongful *tout court*, that references to the destiny of the persecuted (inequality, then impoverishment, then assassination) were sometimes present

and sometimes absent. A noteworthy instance of the latter is the lack of a mention of the Jews in a list of the main victims of Nazi occupation, of Vichy and of the war, made by De Gaulle in November 1941.

In general the author highlights a disproportion between intensity of persecution and intensity of attention from anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy forces. On several occasions, the scholar describes this with the word “*discretion*”, leaving undefined the exact meaning with which the term is used and the real motivations and purposes of the key players. The background against which this term is used, i.e. the whole of the narrative, warns the reader that, for her, it has quite a grave meaning. Some statements made by Poznanski challenge a certain Resistance myth; the sources presented by the scholar show how within the ranks of the various anti-fascist forces the positions concerning the “Jewish problem” were sometimes ambiguous. For instance a flyer distributed in Marseille in March 1942 by a group of Jews (both French and recently immigrated) addressed the whole of the population saying that: “your silence is no more enough for us” (p. 213). The text seems to testify to condition of solitude or marginalization, the absence (at least in that moment) of a counter-propaganda and defence from persecution. In the following months, the growing number of arrests and the obligation to wear the yellow star provoked widespread protests. After a short time, however, the word “*déportation*” started being used mostly with reference to the destiny of many arrested workers, while the press and the radio news reduced in general their references to anti-Jewish persecution on French soil. In February 1944 the combative newspaper “*Droit et Liberté*” reminded the Committee of National Liberation that Jews demanded to be taken under its protection as all the Resistants and all the victims (p.544) – a request highlighting a problem. At another level, it is possible to recapitulate that people hit by anti-Jewish persecution were more often described as victims to be rescued rather than “citizens” for whom to fight; even if this didn’t have a significance as far as solidarity was concerned, it was important as to the civic foundations of the fight.

According to the author, in the first years of war this was due to bias or anti-Semitism in several sectors of society, including some of those who opposed the Vichy regime and the occupation and, in particular, many of those that De Gaulle and the *maquis* wanted to attract. Since Germans and the men of Vichy accused the Resistance to be subject to Jewish interests, the latter used the instrument of partial silence in order to counter this image. From the end of the year 1942, another complex motivation arose (and Poznanski is right in highlighting it): the slow approaching of liberation put more and more to the fore the issues of future reintegration of Jews in their jobs and the restitution of their properties that had been allotted to non-Jewish Frenchmen. Thus for some the re-establishment of equality could bring negative consequences.

In conclusion, besides many important specific features that the volume reconstructs, I wish to emphasise a remark made by the author in the Introduction: even within the Resistance ambiguities were present; the opposite would be unusual: Resistants were human beings inheriting ways of

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thinking and cultures. Therefore it is not unjust or offensive towards those who sacrificed their life to study the Resistance with its imperfections (p.19).

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(Text translated from Italian by Rita Paolini)*