Chronicling the War, Re-imagining French-ness:

Memoirs of the French external Resistance

**14 June 2019, University of Manchester.**

**Co-organised by Dr Charlotte Faucher, Dr Laure Humbert and Dr Frances Houghton**

Conference report:

The workshop brought together 8 speakers from France and the United Kingdom and two panel chairs at various stages of their career, from MPhil to professors. In addition, around 15 people attended the day, including independent researchers, staff, MA and PhD students from the University of Manchester, colleagues from Manchester Metropolitan and MA students from universities across the North. The key aim of this workshop was to showcase and discuss the new approaches that historians are adopting towards the life-writing of members of the French external Resistance and Allied personnel and combatants who encountered Free French Resistance fighters during the war.

After a warm welcome offered by Dr Laure Humbert (University of Manchester), Dr Frances Houghton (University of Manchester) delivered the introduction to the workshop. Dr Houghton, who has published *The Veterans’ Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War*(2019), explained that the workshop aimed at opening a dialogue between historians of narratives and written memories of experience and selfhood in Britain and in France. Her presentation was conceptually and methodologically sophisticated and outlined some of the challenges and issues facing historians interested in the personal narratives of war, notably encouraging participants to move past simple attempts to gain access to the ‘truth’ and engage with the question of how power and agency are bound up in these texts.

Professor Hanna Diamond (University of Cardiff) chaired the morning ASMCF panel and introduced the Resistance Network (RESNET) designed to create a network which will bring together academics, museum practitioners, archivists and librarians with an interest in disseminating knowledge and understanding of the European Resistance movement in the Second World War. Professor Diamond has also been involved in a major project with the Museum of the Liberation of Paris which will open in new premises *Place Denfert-Rochereau (Paris) and whose inauguration will take place in August 2019.*

*The first panellist was*Diane de Vignemont (University of Oxford) who delivered a paper on ‘“Rochambelle j’étais, Rochambelle je suis demeurée”:The Memoirs of the Rochambelles as Historical Sources.’ Her study of a group that is often left out of scholarship served as an entry point to think about questions of gender, exile, military hierarchy but also pertaining to the embodiment of Frenchness in wartime North America. It also raises interesting questions about the broader problem of the over-representation of male memoirs. Dr Iain Stewart (UCL) spoke about the French press in London from 1940 until the end of the war. While newspapers represented spaces of personal narratives, Dr Stewart approached them through an intellectual and political history of ideas about France and the Resistance. These discussions that developed in newspapers were shaped not only by Free French and resistant fighters such as Raymond Aron, but also by civil servants working for the Ministry of Information who kept a close eye on all publications, even sponsoring some of them. Dr Nina Wardleworth (University of Leeds) presented her ongoing research project on women of colour in the Resistance and focused more specifically on Raymonde Jore and the publication of her bibliography in post-war France. Jore was a woman born in New Caledonia who suffered diverse forms of racism during her wartime exile but also subscribed to contemporary colonial theories of racial hierarchies, placing Black Africans squarely at the bottom of the racial order. Dr Wardleworth outlined the shifting identities of Jore during and after the war, noting Jore’s strong attachment to New Caledonia where she chose to deposit her personal archives.

The afternoon panel was chaired by Dr Alexia Yates, historian of Modern Europe at the University of Manchester. Dr Raphaele Balu (University of Caen) started off with a talk entitled ‘Escaping exile to come back to occupied France: a twofold uprooting?’ that outlined feelings of brotherhood among internal and external resistance fighters and how these were transcribed in post-war memoirs. She also explored the disillusion and disappointment expressed by members of the external Resistance when they joined clandestine fights in mainland France towards the end of the war. Dr Brian Sudlow (Aston University) presented his research on the intellectual exiled in Brazil Georges Bernanos. Through a careful analysis of his war writing and building upon Paul Ricoeur’s conceptualisation of memory, Dr Sudlow examined Bernanos’ relation to the past (especially the First World War) and to the complex idea of the French nation during the Occupation.  Eva Réthoré (University of Lille) reached a fine balanced between literary analysis and political history of Victor Serge’s war writing. Expulsed from the Russian communist party because of his struggle against Stalin, Serge considered that the act of writing was a way to fight and built networks with French intellectuals both in mainland France during the Fall of France and during his years in exile in Mexico.

Prof Penny Summerfield (University of Manchester) gave the concluding remarks where she summarised many of the key elements of the papers delivered at the workshop and drew wider methodological connections with her own recent research, published in her latest book *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice*(2018).

Thanks to the generous funding of the ASMCF, we were able to invite Professor Guillaume Piketty (Sciences Po Paris) to deliver the keynote lecture entitled “The madonnas of exile: reflections on the emotional life of French external resisters”. This talk was an opportunity for the audience to hear about Professor Piketty’s book project to be published with Harvard University Press on the day-to-day experience of the Free French during the Second World War. In his paper, Professor Piketty explored the shifting feelings of Free French, from the moment when they decided to rally around Charles de Gaulle (which for many meant leaving metropolitan or imperial French territory) through to wartime events and to their return, which often proved more complex than many had expected. In his talk Professor Piketty addressed methodological questions about using personal documents through the lens of history of emotion and the question of exile.

One hour was allocated for questions in each panel and Professor Piketty’s stimulating keynote lecture was followed by a 30-minute Q&A, which prompted a rigorous debate about methodology and history of the emotions. Informal feedback received from speakers and attendees strongly indicates that the workshop was both enjoyable and productive for all who participated. Overall, the day was rich with debate and challenging discussion, opening up productive new directions in the study of personal testimonies of the members of the French external Resistance.