

Pétain's Jewish Children: French Jewish Youth and the Vichy Regime, 1940-1942 (Oxford Historical Monographs)

Daniel Lee

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Pétain's Jewish Children examines the nature of the relationship between the Vichy regime and its Jewish citizens in the period 1940 to 1942. Previous studies have generally viewed the experiences of French Jewry during the Second World War through the lenses of persecution, resistance, or rescue; an approach which has had the unintended effect of stripping Jewish actors of their agency.

This volume, however, draws attention to the specific category of French Jewish youth which reveals significant exceptions to Vichy's antisemitic policies, wherein the regime's desire for a reinvigorated youth and the rebirth of the nation took precedence over its racial laws. While Jews were becoming marginalised from the civil service and liberal professions, the New Order did not seek to exclude young French Jews from participating in a series of youth projects that aimed to rebuild France in the aftermath of its defeat to Germany. For example, the Jewish scouts' emphasis on manual work and a return to the land ensured that it was looked upon favourably by Vichy, who rewarded the scouts financially. Similarly, young French Jews were called up to take part in the Chantiers de la Jeunesse, Vichy's alternative to compulsory military service. In considering the roles of some of Vichy's lesser known ministers with responsibilities for youth, for whom antisemitism was not a priority, Pétain's Jewish Children illuminates the tensions between Vichy's ambition for national regeneration and its racial policies, rendering any simple account of its antisemitism misleading.

While hindsight may point to the contrary, this volume shows that the emergence of the new regime did not signal the beginning of the end for French Jewry. In Vichy's first two years, while ambiguity reigned, possibilities to integrate and participate with the New Order endured and Jews were constantly presented with new avenues to probe and explore. After this point, the drastic policy changes fuelled by Prime Minister Pierre Laval and the head of Vichy Police, René Bousquet, coupled with the total occupation of France by German forces in November 1942, reduced the possibilities for coexistence almost to nothing.



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