

Fabrice Virgili, *Naître ennemi : les enfants de couples franco-allemands nés pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Paris, Payot, 2009, 376 p.

Sarah Fishman

This remarkable book represents social history at its very best. Fabrice Virgili's meticulous research in an impressive variety of local and national archives in both France and Germany, along with interviews of nearly 80 people allowed him to delve into private experiences that people at the time and for many years afterward had every reason to hide. From a bi-national perspective, Virgili investigates the topic of babies born during and just after World War II in both France and Germany whose parents were "enemies". Hundreds of thousands of German troops were stationed in France during the war. In Germany, 1,5 million French POWs, joined eventually by 700,000 volunteer and forced laborers, often worked side-by-side with German civilians¹. Virgili picks up where his book on shorn women left off, examining one critical human consequence of intimate French-German relationships: children who felt tainted for decades by their own personal "original sin". He tackles this sensitive topic with admirable attention to detail, full recognition of the complexities and competing points of view, and constant attention to issues of race, national identity and especially gender. Virgili's model micro history uses the study of private life to expand our understanding of the broadest of issues, war, defeat and foreign occupation.

Part 1 considers intimate contacts between men and women in France and Germany during and just after the war, international relations through the lens of ordinary people's intimate interactions. Virgili first explores how French and German people viewed one another over time and in the immediate context of the war. Complicated and contradictory, French responses to German soldiers before 1940 rested mostly on exaggerated stories about World War I German atrocities in occupied northern France. Partly to counter French stereotypes of the barbaric Huns, German military leaders in 1940 instituted strict policies on the treatment of French civilians. Thus early in the Occupation, many French civilians described the German soldiers they encountered as surprisingly "correct". Despite Nazi racial denigration of the "mongrel" French, German occupation soldiers eroticized and sexualized French women. In Germany, Virgili argues that the vision of humiliated, defeated French POWs gave way to older stereotypes of French men as irresistibly seductive, Latin lovers.

Virgili next contrasts France and Germany's handling of intimate contact between the two populations. In occupied France, Germany focused on preventing the spread of venereal diseases amongst its troops. Rather than prohibiting sexual contact, Germany issued its soldiers 12 condoms a month and designated certain houses of prostitution for Germans only, inspecting prostitutes for venereal diseases. Inside

¹ After 1945, France held 900,000 German POWs in captivity until 1948 and French troops occupied a zone in Germany, continuing the possibility of intimate contacts that resulted in births.

Germany however, the Nazis, obsessed with preventing “racial” mixing of Aryan women with any foreign nationals, strictly prohibited sex with POWs or foreign laborers, sanctioning both parties with public humiliation, prison and even hard labor. In contrast, the collaborationist Vichy regime never attempted to restrict sex with German soldiers. However, the French public, while muted until the Liberation, strongly disapproved of such relations. Virgili contrasts Nazi and Vichy attempts to control women’s sexuality to prevent adultery that could damage German soldier/French POW morale².

In Part 2, Virgili focuses on the resulting pregnancies and births, first exploring, given legal constraints, how couples in France and Germany attempted to avoid them. Contraception and abortion policies highlighted each regime’s particular preoccupations. Nazi policy, obsessed with race, disregarded “traditional” moral values, promoting the procreation of Aryan babies but, for “inferior” races, encouraging contraception and even compelling abortions. In Germany, Virgili notes French POWs and laborers’ surprise at discovering public condom distributors, called, ironically, “Parisians”.

Meanwhile in France, Vichy’s conservative and pro-natalist stances reigned. Virgili highlights French women’s difficulty in avoiding pregnancy since contraceptives and abortions were illegal. Because Vichy intensified the repression of abortion, attempting to terminate a pregnancy became even riskier and most pregnancies resulted in births. Even willing German fathers could not recognize their paternity without violating Nazi racial laws, leaving pregnant French women to face this crisis alone, as they would eventually face parenting.

With most pregnancies carried to term, Virgili explores French women’s options. In the 1940s, French society condemned single mothers as immoral, an attitude rendered even harsher for babies resulting from relations with a German. Given the shame of such pregnancies, women struggled to find prenatal care and a place for labor and delivery. While only a few, truly desperate women committed infanticide, the motivation for abandonment was strong.

Thus Virgili analyzes French statistics on abandoned infants, a number that increased considerably during the war. He argues the difference between the number of infants abandoned before and during the Occupation provides a clue to the number of French-German babies born during the war. While not every French-German baby was abandoned, and not every abandoned baby was German-fathered, Virgili reasonably estimates the number of German-fathered babies born during the Occupation in the tens of thousands, with a possible upper limit of 200,000 babies³. Most abandoned babies were adopted and not told about their origins, although some adoptees surely suspected. Worse off, Virgili found, were “partly abandoned” babies left in institutions by mothers unwilling to either keep or relinquish them. In an extremely precarious situation, partly abandoned children who survived infancy could not be adopted and thus languished in group homes or foster care.

² German law forbid sexual relations between its civilians and foreign nationals. Vichy passed an adultery law but was torn by contradictory goals, preventing adultery and reducing divorce. Here Virgili at times echoes sources that assumed that POW wives’ adultery involved German soldiers. Yet most prisoners’ wives who committed adultery probably did so with French men.

³ According to an INSEE table (www.insee.fr subject Naissances et natalité Table 1.1a), between 1941 and 44, some 2,34 millions babies were born in France. Virgili’s estimates suggest anywhere from less than 5% to about 10% of those babies had German fathers.

Virgili, investigating German policy regarding French-German babies, found the Nazis torn between populationist and racial goals, reduced mostly to trying to count the number of “mixed” babies. However, because the Nazis examined and deemed some French women racially acceptable, Virgili surprisingly reveals that in February 1944 the Nazis opened one *Lebensborn*, a Nazi maternity home to facilitate the procreation of “racially superior” unwed mothers, in France.

Part 3 moves to the Liberation and post-war era, following the children from birth to adulthood. However Virgili first revisits French women “collaborators” who, often with official complicity, were shorn and paraded in front of crowds of angry people. While most shorn women faced accusations not just of having slept with German soldiers, but also of denunciation, Virgili points out only women so accused faced this shaming ordeal in addition to official legal procedures. He focuses on Mlle A of Chartres, accused of both sexual relations and denunciation and the subject of one of the most infamous photos of shorn women in Liberation France, by famed photographer Robert Capa. Virgili’s sensitive analysis of this case and its photograph, the only one of a shorn woman with her baby, emphasizes its emblematic yet unique quality. Virgili exposes the messy, inconclusive, unpleasant details about Mlle A and her family, their wartime contacts with Germans, tense relations with neighbours, the possibility that the denouncer was a different neighbour. Without condoning this family’s wartime behavior, Virgili personalizes and humanizes Mlle A, who clearly loved her child and mourned the loss of the baby’s father.

Virgili then moves to the post war era. Most “enemy” fathers had no intention of maintaining their wartime relationships. Furthermore, France’s insistence that all its nationals in Germany return immediately to France made it extremely difficult for them to maintain relationships across the Rhine. Eventually France instituted a process whereby its citizens, mostly men, could marry an intimate partner in Germany. Virgili found the reverse situation for French women and former German occupiers very different. Even if the German father could be found and wanted to re-establish the relationship, and even after it became an entirely private matter in 1948, French anti-German sentiments, fed by the renunciation of Collaboration, by horrifying revelations about Nazi death camps, and the drive to control French women’s sexuality made it nearly impossible for a French woman to marry a former German occupier.

However, while it discouraged marriages, France’s post-war government located and brought back as many “French” babies as it could from Germany. Undertaking this effort, given France’s limited resources, Germany’s post-war chaos, and the difficulty of determining parentage, makes clear just how much France wanted these babies.

In his last two chapters Virgili, finally, turns to the unwanted babies-German-fathered babies born in France. Virgili served as historical advisor for a 2003 French television documentary about these children, *Les Enfants de Boches*, a broadcast that generated Virgili’s interview contacts. Since those contacts were all French, Virgili drops the bi-national approach of the book’s first two parts to delve into these compelling individual life stories. Whether adopted, placed in orphanages or foster care, or raised by their despised, dishonored, often single mothers, most of his contacts described difficult childhoods. Loving or aloof, mothers, who decided whether, when and how much to tell, held the key to their child’s identity. Thus most children had fraught relationships with their mothers and either no fathers or step-fathers in their lives. While they quickly learned to avoid the subject of their

biological fathers, most lived in communities aware of their German parentage, creating a gauntlet many had to run: schoolmates taunted them; adults called them “*enfants de boche*” or “*têtes de boche*”; one girl’s own grandfather called her “the Gretchen”. Isolated, alienated, hoping to hide their “alien” roots, the children lived surrounded by heavy silences and secrets. In a strange parallel, albeit minus the threat of death, Virgili’s account of these French-German children resembles accounts written about being a Jewish child in Europe during the war – the need for secrecy, the vague sense of shame about their identity, the taunts and bullying of school mates.

Virgili found a wide range of responses to these shared experiences. Some children were curious about their German ancestry, some rejected it. Confusingly, French standards of beauty celebrated the very physical traits that often set them apart, blond hair, fair skin, blue eyes. Learning about Nazi atrocities at school added a new anxiety; perhaps their fathers had not just been ordinary soldiers but war criminals. Many considered searching for their German fathers; few did so as young adults.

Finally, in their 60s, many of these “enemy babies” were ready to search for the biological fathers they had so long only imagined, concerned that if they waited much longer it might be too late. Many searchers who couldn’t find fathers found German half siblings who often welcomed them with open arms, true Franco-German reconciliation.

Virgili astutely analyzes his role in their personal odysseys. A neutral, non-therapeutic expert, his interest in them signified that their personal stories were “*dignes d’être racontées*”. Many experienced a huge sense of relief, after a lifetime of secrecy and isolation, discovering that they were not alone, sharing their experiences, even creating mutual support and pressure groups. As this book makes abundantly clear, the personal is historical. I am exceedingly grateful to Virgili for telling these stories and enriching our understanding of this epic historical era.