

Island of Refuge

Eric T. Jennings, *Escape from Vichy: The Refugee Exodus to the French Caribbean*, Harvard University Press

By Daniel Lee

During the first years of World War II, an escape route allowed political refugees to travel from France to Martinique. On the island, the interactions between exiles and the local population resulted in a rich intellectual cross-fertilization. E.T. Jennings' book is the first account of this exodus.

The story of how Maurice des Etages became involved in Free France, resembles the personal trajectories of thousands of others who fled French territory during the Occupation. After arriving on British soil, the former Socialist municipal councillor liaised immediately with British military personnel with a view to establishing a safe route of passage for fellow dissidents seeking to join De Gaulle. While des Etages' route to the Free French reminds us of the paths of Raymond Aron, Maurice Schumann and René Cassin, who found themselves on board boats to wartime Britain, one important difference remains. Unlike these men, Des Etages did not escape onboard a British liner, and nor was he assisted by Breton fishermen. In fact, his route out of Vichy France did not take place anywhere near the English Channel. Instead, des Etages' efforts to join De Gaulle occurred thousands of miles away in the Caribbean, where he was a key figure in organising the escape route from Vichy-controlled Martinique to the neighbouring British island of Saint Lucia.

The Escape Route

In his eagerly awaited and thoroughly impressive new book, historian Eric T. Jennings charts in intimate detail the escape onboard dozens of ships in 1940 and 1941 of thousands of Jews, Spanish Republicans, anti-Nazi intellectuals and Surrealist artists, from Marseille to Martinique. As Maurice des Etages' story illustrates, Jennings' intention is not to focus our attention on what occurred onboard the month-long crossing across the Atlantic. Rather, the power and originality of Jennings' approach lies in his ability to make us rethink assumptions on Vichy France and the position of the allies that we previously took for granted.

Among so many startling revelations, it is perhaps the new light Jennings sheds on Marcel Peyrouton, during the time he occupied the position of Minister of the Interior, that adds to our learning. Until now, Peyrouton is remembered as a staunch antisemite, responsible for cracking down on Serge Moati and other Jewish socialists in the mid-1930s, while Resident General of Tunisia. Within months of his appointment in the summer of 1940 as Vichy's Minister of the Interior, Peyrouton signed Vichy's first anti-Jewish decrees and abrogated the Crémieux decree that stripped Algeria's Jews of their French citizenship. Peyrouton's key role in the creation of the Martinique escape route might, at first, come as a surprise, but it should not. Just as he does throughout the book, Jennings acts as the eager guide as he situates Peyrouton within a "plural Vichy" in its earliest phase. It was a time in which senior officials pitted ideas against one another as they vied for power. Building on the works of Vicki Caron and others, Jennings shows that in the autumn of 1940, encouraging Jewish emigration abroad rather than persecuting them in France was Peyrouton's preferred method of dealing with the so-called "Jewish Question".¹ Of course, Peyrouton's desire to ship Jews to the French Caribbean was not borne out of a desire to protect them. Rather, it was a means of solving a refugee crisis that was enveloping Metropolitan France. As Jennings skilfully shows, Peyrouton's battles with officials at the Ministry of the Colonies who objected to his plan, occurred long before Jewish deportations to the east replaced emigration as Vichy's preferred method of purging foreign Jews.

Crossing the Atlantic

In the first part of the book, Jennings weaves together personal and administrative primary sources to shed new light on the refugee exodus from France. He introduces readers to a lively cast of characters who stumbled on, or were directed to, the Martinique corridor thanks to formal and informal networks. In these pages, he considers the hurdles refugees faced when seeking to reach the Caribbean during the "Golden Window" of late 1940.

¹ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Stanford, 1999).

² See for example, Marion A. Kaplan, *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940–1945*,

Almost without exception, those being assisted by US aid organisations were eminent activists, intellectuals, or figures from the arts, or they possessed the financial means to pay the extortionate fees needed for the multiple visas and the crossing. “What are you doing here? You are not famous”, asked one refugee outside the US consulate in Marseille to the daughter of the Communist paediatrician, Dr Minna Flake. Jennings vividly charts the methods to secure passage, demonstrating that very little separated the cases of refugees who made it to safety compared to those who did not. In their desperation, some were more persistent than others, a factor which sometimes infuriated aid workers. In January 1941, Varian Fry, representative in France of the American aid organization the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), wrote to New York about the case of Elena Frank, wife of the expressionist and pacifist Leonhard Frank. “I wish you would break your necks to get Mme Frank some kind of visa”, wrote Frank, “before we break hers. She is the worst pest yet”. Jennings peppers his narrative with similar anecdotes that give importance to the everyday experiences refugees encountered when formulating their escape. Lacking sufficient space, Fry’s secretary at the Hotel Splendide in Marseille, we learn, balanced a typewriter on her lap while seated on the bidet.

In the absence of definitive figures, Jennings posits that five thousand refugees escaped from France to Martinique. American concerns surrounding the number of passengers with German-sounding last-names, who might have been spies masquerading as refugees, led to the closure of the route at the end of May 1941. As a group, the refugees were neither unified nor homogenous. Rather, they made up a community of exiles. Among their number was the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, in 1997, shared his memories of the crossing in a correspondence with Jennings. According to Jennings, the crossing was not comfortable. Food was scarce and there was a lack of sanitary facilities. There was also a lack of privacy. Dissident writer Victor Serge recalled that couples went into the lifeboats to have sex. To pass the time on the month-long crossing, some passengers took part in surrealist games and theatrical skits. Attention to the crossing reveals more unexpected surprises about the priorities of the Vichy regime. In an effort to drum up support for the National Revolution, ships set sail for the French Caribbean full of Pétainist propaganda. One January 1941 crossing contained fifteen thousand portraits of the Maréchal. As soon as the passengers and freight were unloaded, they were replaced with pineapples, sugar, bananas and rum, which were dispatched to France to nourish a population suffering from shortages due to German requisitioning.

Intellectual Cross-Fertilization

Eric T. Jennings understands the intricacies of the French Empire during the Second World War better than any other contemporary historian. In *Escape from Vichy*, he builds on his earlier mastery of other French colonial territories, by offering a formidable glimpse of the

tensions and contradictions of Martinican society living under extreme circumstances. For example, Jennings exposes how some Vichy officials held off from implementing their desire of a racist colonial society for fear of a backlash. While there was certainly a whitening of the political class under Vichy, officials made sure not to remove all people of colour from positions of power. The arrival of thousands of refugees added another complication to local Vichy administrators, who suddenly needed to find resources to oversee their stay. While French nationals were to be discretely watched, foreigners, just as in metropolitan France, were deemed suspect and were interned in two distinct camps outside Fort-de-France, Balata and Lazaret, a former leper colony. Conditions in the camps were dreadful. Thanks to the ingenuity of avant-garde photographer Germaine Krull, who managed to sneak in her camera, we see signs of despondency, such as one image of internees queuing for water. Among Jennings' most interesting observations is the attention he pays to the camps' Martinican guards. Even though some of the internees conversed with guards and discussed the outcome of the war, these same persecuted refugees also showed signs of racist thought. Incarceration was not the same as in France. Refugees were allowed to leave the camps on day release to visit Fort-de-France and elsewhere. It was during these spells away from the camps that interactions occurred between the refugees and the local Martinican population. In some instances, these cultural encounters were so profound that lives and intellectual and artistic work were forever altered. We see this most clearly in the meeting of Surrealism with Negritude. Jennings colorfully charts the synergies which occurred in cafés and on hiking trips, between André Breton, André Masson, Wifredo Lam and Jacqueline Lamba, and a group of Martinican intellectuals that coalesced around the journal *Tropiques*. Influence and correspondence between individuals continued long after the Surrealists left Martinique. Indeed, it was thanks to Surrealist networks that Aimé Césaire was propelled into the limelight after the war.

A Long-Awaited Account

Jennings' book arrives at an important juncture, expertly engaging with recent historiographical interest in the refugee experience of the Caribbean during the Second World War.² It also taps in to broader discussions of Jewish rescue, epitomized by the long-held intrigue of scholars towards American aid workers, especially Varian Fry.³ By revealing that one hundred and fifty dissidents who reached British-ruled Dominica hoping to join the Free French were minors, Jennings builds on the recent findings of Claire Andrieu who has argued that the links between children and the Resistance in Metropolitan France merits

² See for example, Marion A. Kaplan, *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940–1945*, New York, 2008.

³ For a recent example see Christopher R. Browning, 'From Humanitarian Relief to Holocaust Rescue: Tracy Strong Jr., Vichy Internment Camps, and the Maison des Roches in Le Chambon', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, August 2016, pp. 211–246.

further scrutiny.⁴ Indeed, we learn that the most famous dissident, Frantz Fanon, might himself have been underage when he arrived in Dominica.

That the escape from Vichy to Martinique should so long have awaited its historian is due in part to the of the source base. One can only admire the patient skill with which Jennings assembled hitherto unsynthesised material from public and private collections across Europe, North America and the Caribbean to reconstruct his narrative. Eye-opening, urgent and insightful, *Escape from Vichy* is a major contribution to recent scholarship on Vichy France, the French Empire and the history of refugees. At a time in which Europeans are coming to terms with the harrowing humanitarian impact of the Mediterranean migrant crisis, Jennings' book serves as a frightening reminder of the lengths people go to when seeking refuge.

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⁴ Claire Andrieu, presentation at the Vichy Revisited Conference, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, December 2018.