

Fabrice Grenard, *Les Scandales du ravitaillement. Détournements, corruption, affaires étouffées en France, de l'Occupation à la guerre froide*, Paris, Payot, 2012, 294 p.

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The 1940s were a decade of penury. From the first days of Vichy through the Liberation era and on into the Cold War, food shortages and food rationing were permanent features of daily life in France. The State mobilized to deal with the situation. Already before the Occupation, in March 1940, plans had been laid to create a system of managed food distribution, although it awaited the coming of the Vichy regime before a version of this scheme was enacted. An *Administration du Ravitaillement général* was set up in September 1940 and a *Service du Contrôle des prix* the month following. The Liberation did not bring an immediate return to plenty, and so the state machinery dealing with shortages continued in existence, until the great postwar economic take-off got under way, making it all superfluous. No one mourned its passing.

This is the subject of Fabrice Grenard's new book. Grenard, a well-known specialist in the history of the black market, has covered this terrain before, and so the question arises: what does this study have to add to Grenard's previous findings? The answer is not made simpler by the episodic construction of the book which consists of thirteen chapters, each dealing with a "scandal" involving the food administration. Food administrators were not immune to corruption, proving themselves willing time and again to enrich themselves through shady dealings in scarce commodities, and such dealings, revealed to the public by a watchful and opportunistic press, generated repeated bursts of public outrage. As the incidents of abuse pile up, however, a number of common themes begin to emerge, and it is these themes – three in particular – that make Grenard's book of interest.

The first has to do with how poorly the state's food management apparatus worked. When the war got started, Daladier made sure that the army had the food supplies it needed – French soldiers ate far better than their German counterparts – but left the civilian sector to its own devices. Later, when Vichy set to work creating a rationing system, to whom but to soldiers did it have to turn for administrative support? These were the men with the most experience in food procurement, and Vichy had a weakness for soldier-administrators anyhow. The soldiers in turn looked to food suppliers to help out running the system. Now, soldiers were not always the most in touch with civilian needs, and suppliers were not always the most disinterested parties, and the combination, working together, created as many problems as it solved. Accumulating dysfunctions provoked a series of protests from hard-pressed shopkeepers in 1941. The crisis was sufficiently serious that Pétain himself had to address the public on the matter. The food administration director, Jean Achard, got

the sack, and the food administration itself underwent a shake-up. Nor did the situation much improve in the post-Vichy era. There was not a substantial purge of the *Administration du Ravitaillement* at the Liberation, but enough of one to create openings that administrators, often former Résistants, filled with comrades from the Resistance struggle. These were estimable men, but they were not always equipped with the necessary administrative skills. The food administration in any event was something of a poor relation, a holdover from times of shortage, in an era when all thoughts were turned toward reconstruction and a modernizing future. The public couldn't wait to be rid of it, and a premature effort was in fact made to scale back its powers. Christian Pineau was named to run the administration in May 1945. He abolished bread rationing, counting on imports from re-opened markets abroad to help satisfy demand. The calculation proved mistaken, and amidst public outcry over skyrocketing prices, the bread ration card was restored, and Pineau himself had to resign.

As the foregoing attests, there were considerable continuities — in administrative structures, personnel, and even problems encountered — from the Vichy era into the postwar years. This is Grenard's second theme, and it is one he has dealt with in previous publications. Here, the discussion is nuanced. Yes, there were continuities between Vichy and the early Fourth Republic, but there were discontinuities as well. Vichy was repressive in a way that the Fourth Republic never was. Punishment for black market activities grew ever more severe across the brief life of the Pétain regime. Fines were levied, of course, but the worst offenders were sentenced to jail time and even to deportation to Reich territory. Vichy was repressive in a second sense as well. It had its food scandals, no doubt, just like the Fourth Republic. The ultra-right Parisian press was all too delighted to embarrass a Vichy administration it viewed as lacking in political zeal with exposés of incompetence and fraud. Achard might not have resigned after all, had it not been for the hounding of Déat, Doriot, and company. Yet, Vichy could also silence its critics when it had a mind to. From early on, the regime's ministries did not scruple to resort to the black market to provision staff canteens. In the spring of 1943, members of Laval's entourage were involved in a lucrative but illegal scheme to export sugar to Denmark. Vichy was able to keep all such affairs hushed up, censoring troublemaking journalists and using plea-bargains and amnesties to keep courtroom proceedings from generating too much attention-getting noise. It is an obvious point but one that bears making: the Fourth Republic no doubt borrowed from Vichy, but it was never, in the way its predecessor was, an authoritarian regime.

There is last of all the question of politics, which plays a central role in Grenard's story. It is tempting to think of food scandals as apolitical affairs, a much put-upon public complaining when it learns it has been taken advantage of, a public administration answering back with reforms or repression. That, of course, is not all there is to it. Scandals may not arise for political reasons, but political forces often find ways to profit from them. Persistent shortages fueled food demonstrations in 1942, which the Communist resistance abetted, positioning itself in the process as the standard bearer of housewife-consumers. As already noted, the Paris right-wing press knew all too well how to leverage food questions into a self-serving critique of Vichy policy. Such patterns, moreover, continued after the Liberation. In the early postwar years, a Right, for the moment reduced to shame-faced silence, exploited the issue of food shortages to make its voice heard once again. With the onset of the Cold

War and the break-up of Tripartism in 1947, the Communists got into the mix, seizing on rising food prices as a weapon against their political rivals still in power. For the Fourth Republic, as for Vichy, food provision was a point of vulnerability, and both Left and Right oppositions found ways to make political capital out of the situation. It's hard to imagine anyone who knows the ins and outs of 1940s food provisioning as Grenard does. It is sometimes frustrating, though, that he sticks so closely to his area of expertise. The wider world, beyond France, is not evoked. Even within the French context, he does not attempt comparisons. Is the food question *sui generis*, or does it bear comparison to other policy domains, the reintegration of returning POWs, for example, or housing supply (another area of perennial shortage)? That said, Grenard has rendered a signal service. The black market and the food scandal are notoriously murky subjects. They are no longer so, though it is not a pretty spectacle that Grenard presents, as traffickers, spivs, and shady dealers of all kinds are caused to scatter in the bright light of his analysis.