

## Gritou and Annie Vallotton: Refugees, Reality and Radicalisation

### *Diary Entries from June 1940 France*

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In June 1940 the phony war ended both in France and in England, yet the implications of the Fall of France were experienced very differently in Le Havre in Northern France as Rebecca Shtasel's article demonstrates in her analysis of the chaos and confusion of bombing raids and the high civilian casualty figures,<sup>2</sup> in contrast to the impact on civilians in the South of France. The pitfalls of considering the defeat of France as one entity are avoided in this journal with the regional specificity of the impact of the defeat of France emphasised in the consideration both of the exodus from Le Havre and of the exodus from the context of the rural South of France where this article examines the diary of two sisters whose work with the hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees on the exodus in June 1940 acted as a radicalising factor, and triggered their subsequent decision to become involved in resistance activity in Lyon.

Gritou and Annie Vallotton were two sisters who kept a diary between 1939 and 1944. They have been considered an example of first class eye witness accounts of the exodus by the distinguished Occupation historian Dominique Veillon, whom I had the opportunity to meet in Paris in 2014. Veillon considers that the quality of the diarists' observations of this period are some of the clearest and best at reflecting the constantly changing mood of the time.<sup>3</sup> The two main strengths of the diary are firstly, that the eye witness narratives are by those who were on the exodus, and secondly, that the text foregrounds women's testimony. Since the majority of able bodied men not in reserved occupations had been called up in 1939, it was predominantly women and children and the elderly who took part in the exodus. The significance of this diary is that it contests the gender bias of the dominant narrative of the exodus in the historiography of the Fall of France where the sources used are accounts given predominantly by men, as in the French historian Vidalenc's seminal

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2 Rebecca Shtasel. This volume.

3 In Vallotton, Annie et Gritou., *C'était au jour le jour* (Paris: Payot, 1995) Veillon, D., *Preface*, p. 9; see also Veillon, D., *Vivre et Survivre en France* (Paris: Payot, 1995).

1957 text on the exodus.<sup>4</sup> Almost all sources on the exodus are memoirs from men who were observers of the exodus and this is equally true for British historians. In his 2003 work, *The Fall of France*, Jackson devotes four out of two hundred and fifty pages to the exodus and the sources are all male observers with the exception of the following:

Simone de Beauvoir came across terrified refugees in western France with stories of having encountered children whose hands had been severed — one of the most famous atrocity scares of 1914.<sup>5</sup>

No reference is given but de Beauvoir's account of her *exode* provides a fascinating description of the motorised flight of the affluent Parisian bourgeoisie.<sup>6</sup> This over reliance on sources predominantly by male observers continues in Vinen's work.<sup>7</sup> The historiography of the exodus has suffered from the absence of archival evidence, as the collapse of the administration across France resulted in the lack of the regular reports from each regional Prefect and sous Prefect, with the result that historians often tend to provide a brief acknowledgement but avoid an analysis of the exodus altogether, despite the fact that it involved 8–10 million civilians taking to the road. Nord's 2015 *France 1940, Defending the Republic* is a recent case in point.<sup>8</sup>

Sources for British historiography of the exodus have therefore primarily relied on published memoirs from male observers, such as the insightful male eye witness memoirs provided by Werth, entitled "33 Jours" chronicling his own *exode* and St Exupéry who also offers a compelling eye witness narrative from his plane above the lines of fleeing refugees,<sup>9</sup> while other sources include journals by fleeing soldiers caught up in the *exode*<sup>10</sup> and this is equally true of French historiography.<sup>11</sup> However, this has meant that the representation of the voice of women on the exodus has until recently been largely ignored. Memoirs were written by women on the exodus but they were not well known or in a position to have their recollections published until rediscovered in recent years.

4 Vidalenc, J., *L'Exode de mai-juin 1940* (Paris: PUF, 1957).

5 Jackson, J., *The Fall of France* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p. 177.

6 De Beauvoir, S., *La Force de l'âge, ii* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

7 Vinen, R., *The Unfree French* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 29–38.

8 Nord, P., *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 134, 135.

9 St Exupéry, Antoine de., *Pilote de Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) (Folio no. 824), pp. 98–123.

10 Folcher, G., *Marching to Captivity; the War Diaries of a French Peasant, 1939–1945* (1996).

11 French historiography includes Ollier, N., *L'Exode* (Paris: Laffont, 1969) and Crémieux-Brilhac, J-L., *Les Français de l'an 1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990, 2 volumes).

A notable exception to this gender bias of the exodus is Diamond's work and interactive website<sup>12</sup> where she uses journals, memoirs, diaries and, critically, oral history since this is now a time limited option, with those who were on the exodus. Dombrowski Risser's recent work also privileges the experience of women on the exodus, again using oral history, as well as a wide range of sources such as an American female journalist's reports, regional newspaper reports, papers from Vidalenc, as well as fictionalised memoirs, and novels.<sup>13</sup> More recent French historiography of the exodus is increasingly using as sources, contemporaneous women's journals such as Berthe Auroy's *Jours de Guerre*.<sup>14</sup>

The diary which is the subject of this article is entitled '*C'était au jour le jour*', best translated as '*It was a time of living from day to day*'.<sup>15</sup> The style is relaxed and informal and often brief and in telegramsese reflecting the pressures under which the diarists were writing. The content provides the reader with a regular news bulletin foregrounding local comments and views of the events of the day and reactions from different sources. The originality of this diary is that it is a two hander, each sister intercutting their entry with the other.<sup>16</sup> The significance of this source, in relation to existing historiography, is that it privileges and recovers women's testimony about the reality of the experience of the exodus, both of those women and children leaving their homes and of those women working in a professional capacity to offer help and support.

It is useful to offer detailed contextualisation of the two authors, sisters, Annie and Gritou, who lived in Sanary sur Mer, near Toulon along the coast from Marseille. Their mother had been born in Alsace and their Swiss father, Benjamin Vallotton was a writer, teacher and journalist. He was the son of a Swiss Protestant Pastor and studied theology in Munich and Paris.<sup>17</sup> Their Uncle was a doctor, in charge of the local government arrangements for public health for the reception of refugees such as the evacuation of Strasbourg in December 1939. Both sisters had received an academic lycée education and had been brought up in an atmosphere at home which valued French history, philosophy, culture and thought and the importance of defending the oppressed. They benefitted from the

12 Diamond, H., *Fleeing Hitler* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); see also [www.fleeinghitler.org](http://www.fleeinghitler.org)

13 Dombrowski Risser, N., *France Under Fire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), p. 117.

14 Alary, E., *L'Exode* (Paris: Perrin, 2010), p. 485.

15 Vallotton, Annie and Gritou. *C'était au Jour le Jour* (Paris: Payot, 1995), pp. 79–96 (all translations my own, throughout).

16 Groualt, Benoite et Flora., *Journal a Quatre Mains* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1962, 2002) is similar in style but has a greater focus on affairs of the heart and is uncompromising in its depiction of post Liberation sexual promiscuity.

17 Fonds Vallotton. Bibliothèque de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent.

analysis and information coming from their father's links with other intellectual networks and specifically with his contacts within the Protestant faith in Switzerland which provided them with a clearer understanding of the emerging political realities. The diary thus offers a counterpoint to other contemporary women diarists writing from a Catholic viewpoint such as Domenach-Lallich.<sup>18</sup> By the end of September 1939, equipped only with First Aid certificates and driving licences, the sisters began work with their Uncle in the welfare service for refugees arriving from Eastern France, Annie in Limoges in central France and Gritou in Perigueux where they both worked as social workers with families evacuated from Alsace following the invasion of German troops.

In my work, I have been looking at explanations of why women move from bystanders to becoming active in resistance movements. In this article, I will argue that the experiences of June 1940 in France were such radicalising factors for Annie and Gritou Vallotton and resulted in their involvement in resistance activity by 1942. I will adopt a thematic approach to the diary to consider in detail different factors within the events and experiences of June 1940 which in turn impacted on both sisters.

The primary politicising factor was the emotional impact on them of their work with those on the exodus. On 1 June, Annie records from Limoges station that there were fewer trains arriving with refugees from the exodus but that when they did arrive, they had around 50 carriages crammed with people. Annie's role was to help with any elderly or sick refugees and to provide refreshments, hot drinks and sandwiches and milk for babies. She recorded accounts of how a young mother had walked four days with a baby and had lain in ditches alongside the dead after an aerial bombardment. Similarly, on 1 June, Gritou records from Mont de Marsan, north of Pau, in Perigueux, that they had now settled eight thousand refugees on the exodus who had arrived by train, and were still expecting more. A diary entry on 10 June by Gritou in Perigueux illustrates the details of their work and indicates how their experience translated into action as their home town of Sanary was close to the Italian border:

We were woken at 7am for the arrival of a train going to Dax with 1200 passengers on board and we arrived just as it had pulled into Station. Two soldiers helped us to clean and fill babies' bottles. These people all came from outside Paris and stayed calmly in their compartments and remained polite and appreciative. They had been travelling for two days. A great many children. Madame Larousse transported many elderly people who needed hospital attention, and the English women (sadly no further details) took care of some travellers who were ill. Our

18 Domenach-Lallich, D., *Une jeune fille libre. Journal (1939–1944)* (Paris: Editions des Arenes, 2013).

service providing coffee and milk worked well but we had to use bowls which were difficult to hold. Several soldiers helped us and were very careful. As a general rule, these refugees had been able to take a good many bundles of belongings each and we even saw several baskets full of chickens. Colleagues helped with organising the buses for those getting off here and Madame Dollfuss organised with her forms, the families in need. We saw large families of 5, 6, and even 9 children who because of their age were only carrying light baggage. There were only a few men on the train who had spent the day before they left, dismantling their machines in the factory. The next train to arrive contained 1200 women who were either pregnant or had just given birth. It was coming out of the station, later that evening that I heard the news that Italy had entered the war. I immediately telephoned Limoges and it was agreed that I should go as soon as possible back to Sanary, near Toulon, and I went straight to get the passes I needed.<sup>19</sup>

Her sister, Annie, remained in Limoges at the station working at night to assist refugees and the diary is a rich source of contemporary comments from those on the exodus such as the elderly blind woman who told Annie that she liked to have her handbag close beside her even though she didn't have a centime left in it.<sup>20</sup> Another factor in the radicalisation of women, I would argue, is an increasing political understanding and awareness of current events, and the diary entries demonstrate the clear progression of Annie and Gritou's political understanding. On 13 June Gritou records that Paris has been declared an open city where the Occupying troops can enter freely and that Reynaud made an impassioned speech to the President of the USA. On 15 June she notes that there is talk of an armistice and that Russia is massing its troops on the border with Germany and wonders if their salvation will come from this direction as America has offered as much help as possible but will not intervene in the war and notes that the French Government is at Bordeaux.<sup>21</sup> It is unclear how such information is obtained although a specific note is recorded if it is from her father, as on 17 June, when she writes that her father suggests that they may need to move to Switzerland because the whole of France will be occupied and the French army will probably end up in Algeria.<sup>22</sup>

A major source of news is inevitably the radio and on 17 June Gritou records how they listened to Petain's speech announcing that France would surrender. She then comments that England will probably continue the fight alone together with the French navy and what remains of the French army in Algeria, and that the same evening the radio had reported that the army had been routed and that the Government

19 Vallotton, p. 80.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

would capitulate and that the Germans were at Nevers and had also occupied Metz near Strasbourg. The following day on 18 June she notes that Churchill made a wonderful speech and was optimistic, emphasising that they had troops, munitions, the navy and provisions.<sup>23</sup> The radio would appear to play an increasingly important role in the sisters' world and on 20 June, Gritou writes:

The Germans have reached Lyon and that while Vichy has been declared an open city, nearby Toulon has not and will fight to defend itself. The Italians are demanding that they take the Alpes Maritimes and along to Perpignan and that the Germans want the colonies and 16 of our departments. The Germans have now crossed the Loire. The population of Bordeaux has tripled and the city has been bombed. Another defeatist speech by Petain which is hardly encouraging for our English allies.

Only the next day on 21 June, she records that that ministers from the Government have met with Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Hess and Ribbentrop in the forest at Compiègne in the same railway carriage where the 1918 armistice was signed, and which they immediately took back to Germany. On 28 June, Gritou records listening to the radio to hear that Russia has invaded Romania and Japan has invaded Indochina but notes that newspapers are becoming increasingly smaller and only report what the Germans want the population to know, while foreign radio stations are jammed, especially the BBC. She is however aware that in Paris, Himmler and the Gestapo will be based on the Quai d'Orsay, the Army Commander will be installed in the Naval Ministry and the swastika flag will fly from the Eiffel Tower. Her last entry in June 1940 ends, "*What can one say?*"

A further factor in their politicisation process was the emergence of de Gaulle as a potential opposition leader in exile. On 23 June Gritou mentions that three days ago, the radio had talked of a General de Gaulle who had been sent to England, and that everything he has broadcast on the radio must be considered null and void. It is after this first mention of de Gaulle that she writes that they are now hanging onto every word on the radio and that de Gaulle, who has been stripped of his office, is broadcasting to the French people on English radio, in contravention of the orders of the French Government:

Things are seeming to go from bad to worse.... France, so loyal and so great, has been betrayed by its leaders. This evening, a splendid speech from Churchill, who called on all French people and declared that England itself will save France. At once, our morale has improved. At 10PM on English radio, General de Gaulle spoke, calling all French

23 Ibid., p. 85.

people and urging that the navy regroup in English ports. A national independent French government in exile will be established in London. This was music to our ears.

Evidence of the significance of de Gaulle's speech was that she wrote explicitly about their commitment and that later the same evening of June 23, they also listened to Swiss radio which broadcast the German conditions and the limits of occupied territories.

The Italians will want the Mediterranean coast and we shall probably be under their control...We are putting all our trust in in this General de Gaulle.<sup>24</sup>

On June 25 she writes that they heard the commentator on Radio Stuttgart state that their greatest enemies outside England were General de Gaulle and the French Minister, Reynaud, and that the French broadcast stations would be under the control of German authorities. However, it should be emphasised that neither sister, in common with the majority of the French population, records having heard de Gaulle's first call to arms speech on 18 June. A final factor in the radicalisation of both sisters was the close contact with someone who in Oldfield's phrase, 'thinks against the current', and challenges the status quo<sup>25</sup> and this is clearly their father. Benjamin Vallotton was instrumental in showing his daughters the reality of the German Occupation and on 23 June Gritou writes that her father has predicted the armistice for several days and on 25 June comments that her father anticipates that there will be a Franco German Alliance.<sup>26</sup> The reality of the German Occupation in respect of the immediate shortage of essentials had become clear to both sisters by the end of June 1940 and on 27 June they drove together from Sanary to Limoges with the boot of their car filled with provisions for refugees, clothes, shoes and, rather puzzlingly, jams. Petrol was already difficult to find and they record that whenever possible they coast downhill. They could not find a pharmacy which was open in order to buy insulin for a nursing sister who needed it, and they were aware that it was increasingly difficult to buy food. They record queues outside all food shops and that they could not find butter or milk or cakes or croissants or biscuits or cigarettes while military convoys passed endlessly.<sup>27</sup> The prescriptive reality of the Occupation is also recorded in these diaries with the comment on 25 June that the

24 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

25 Oldfield, S., *Thinking against the Current: Literature and Political Resistance* (Sussex Academic Press, 2013), p. 2.

26 Vallotton, p. 92.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 96.



refugee population of one million Belgians and seven hundred thousand inhabitants of Luxembourg had been ordered to return and to work for the German authorities.<sup>28</sup>

This article has considered the factors involved in the radicalisation of women during June 1940 which emerge well documented within the text of the diary entries of June 1940 and offers an explanation of the longer trajectory of Annie and Gritou Vallotton who by October 1941 were in Toulouse working in the welfare service in the harsh conditions of the French internment camps.<sup>29</sup> They were by then delivering clandestine newspapers and in April 1942 assisting two English soldiers who had escaped from an abortive mission in St Nazaire to join an escape route over the Pyrenees to return to England. The diary entry of 17 April 1942 records that it was critically important to find the soldiers new shoes because they were wearing army boots and the front page of the newspaper carried a photo of the regulation footwear with a caption: "*By this detail, you will recognise the English who have escaped from St Nazaire*".<sup>30</sup>

Annie and Gritou manage to do this and undertake all the other clandestine arrangements to ensure that the soldiers can join the escape route and return to England. On 28 May 1942 the diary entry records a coded announcement on the BBC that the two English soldiers had successfully reached London.<sup>31</sup> By May 1942 both sisters have been recruited by Berthie Albrecht, an influential woman leader in the Combat resistance movement in Lyon<sup>32</sup> who had joined the movement in her forties, motivated by experience and commitment, having worked as a nurse with the Red Cross during the 1914–18 war. Annie and Gritou became involved in resistance social services, arranging food and clothing for those involved in resistance activities who were living without papers or ration cards and sending the all-important food parcels to those arrested or interned.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, this article argues that the roots of the two sisters' radicalisation lie in their experiences of June 1940, that is, in their work with refugees, their political understanding of events, and finally, their awareness of the reality of the German Occupation; factors which combined to result in their decision to engage in resistance activity.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

32 Guidez, G., *Femmes dans la Guerre, 1939-45* (Paris: Perrin, 1989), pp. 106, 146. Berthie Albrecht died in prison in unexplained circumstances in June 1943 and was awarded one of the few orders of *Compagnes de la Liberation*.

33 Vallotton, p. 210.