

From Frenchmen to Foreigners

by Clifford Rosenberg

In July 1940, the Vichy government passed a law to overturn naturalizations granted by its predecessor, the liberal Third Republic. Around 15,000 people, including many Jews, were stripped of their nationality between 1940-1944. In her path-breaking study, Claire Zalc shows how this politics of exclusion was implemented.

Reviewed: Claire Zalc, *Dénaturalisés. Les retraits de nationalité sous Vichy*, L'Univers historique, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2016, 388 p.

From 1940 to 1944, Vichy France denaturalized roughly fifteen thousand men, women, and children. A disproportionate number of them, over seven thousand, were Jewish. The broad outlines of this story have been known for some time. Robert Paxton devoted a few pages to the subject in his landmark *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (1972). Principally concerned with showing that French policy was not imposed unilaterally by the Germans and calling attention to a homegrown French xenophobia, Paxton stressed the anti-Semitic character of the measures. Paxton's subsequent work as well as research by Bernard Laguerre, Patrick Weil, and others have deepened his treatment of Vichy's denaturalizations, with an emphasis on the novelty of racial anti-Semitism in French policy.¹ Claire Zalc follows in their footsteps. She accepts with some minor qualifications the numbers earlier scholars produced, and she devotes a great deal of attention to the role of anti-Semitism. But she largely takes the existence of anti-Semitism as a given, as a point of departure. Zalc explores how French xenophobia and anti-Semitism interacted and fueled one another, how they functioned; above all she shows how they were put into practice.

¹ Bernard Laguerre, "Les dénaturalisés de Vichy (1940-1944)", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 2, October-December 1988, p. 3-15 ; and Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français ? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution*, Paris, Grasset, 2002.

The research for this book is a tour de force. The denaturalization commission (*Comité de révision de naturalisations*), the magistrates who oversaw the process, left no archives. As a result, Zalc has pieced her story together from a wide range of archival collections, making particular use of naturalization files kept by the ministry of justice. Nationality law was sufficiently complex that Vichy chose the same jurists who had naturalized foreigners on behalf of the Third Republic in the generation before the Strange Defeat to denaturalize them during the war, and their working methods can be followed in those files. Without rich deliberations to rely on, Zalc infers intent from action. She compiled a sample of a thousand of the roughly fifteen thousand denaturalizations and explored them in depth, teasing out official intent and showing how local realities shaped its application in different settings around the country.

A law against the “Anti-France”

Less than two weeks after the French Chamber of Deputies voted to ratify the armistice with Germany and granted sweeping, authoritarian powers (*pleins pouvoirs*) to Marshall Pétain, the Vichy government passed a law on July 22, 1940 to overturn naturalizations granted by its predecessor, the liberal Third Republic. Stripping citizens of their nationality was not new. High crimes and treason, for example, had long been grounds to deprive (*déchoir*) citizens of citizenship. After 1848, those who remained active participants in the slave trade, buying and selling, could be stripped of their nationality. During World War I, the French government targeted naturalized citizens who fought for or whose origins tied them to enemy powers. By 1920, the Republic stripped roughly 250 people of their French nationality, mostly Germans and Austrians. The major reform of French nationality law in 1927, primarily open and progressive, included provisions to strip the nationality of those deemed to commit acts “incompatible with the virtues [*qualité*] of a French citizen and against French interests” (p. 33). Vichy thus built on existing tradition when it came to stripping citizens of their nationality. But the scope of the effort and, above all, the centrality of the exclusionary measures to the regime’s identity set Vichy effort apart. It was among the very first major legislative initiatives undertaken.

The first article of the law of July 22, 1940 explicitly singled out people naturalized since the landmark reform of 1927. Vichy set out to uproot the “anti-France,” the supposedly dubious, cosmopolitan characters that the Third Republic had too generously welcomed and had sapped the strength of the nation. There was, to be sure, a considerable racist component to the effort to denaturalize people, but it is important to note that it went into effect before Vichy drafted specifically anti-Semitic legislation in October 1940 and June 1941. The effort to roll back the inclusiveness of the Third Republic figured prominently in Vichy’s effort to define itself.

The question immediately posed itself: how to find the suspect citizens? Who posed the greatest risk? Where and how could they be found? There was no registry to monitor the naturalized. The legal distinctions that applied to them – not all French citizens were entirely equal, for example, in terms of voting rights or standing for office – no government bureau kept track of them all. The law, which was quite short, just ten lines altogether, concerned many thousands, an overwhelming number given the administrative and logistical realities of the day. It provided no guidance, no criteria to decide who among the naturalized should lose the status. The great merit of this book is to show how the government proceeded, carefully to weigh the tension between a starkly racist, authoritarian state of exception and a punctilious legalism, between ideological principle, happenstance, and brute practicality.

Bureaucracy at work

Vichy immediately targeted the work of the Popular Front. The Commission began its work in the summer of 1940, starting with naturalizations from 1936. By their actions, the commission showed that undoing the work of the Popular Front was the top priority. Next came those of 1939-1940, targeting the newly naturalized and supposedly least French; then 1937-1938; before tacking back to earlier acts of naturalization. The *Journal officiel* published its first acts of denaturalization in November, just after the first of the anti-Semitic laws was passed.

While the committee relied on local authorities around the country to bring problematic cases to their attention, it also improvised criteria of its own. Among those naturalized by the Popular Front, the committee prioritized those whose files contained letters of support from Republican luminaries. They took aim at the “Republic of favors,” so often denounced in the 1930s. Moreover it was easy: naturalization dossiers were stamped with a capital R when they contained at least one letter of recommendation and RR when the administration deemed the letters particularly important. Beyond letters of support, the commission used its discretion, looking broadly at the work, family, and connections of the naturalized to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy, effectively reversing the procedures followed to naturalize them in the first place. The first months of work were particularly intense, the rate of denaturalization high.

Even before the anti-Semitic measures of October 1940 that defined Jewish status and ordered a census in the Occupied Zone, before the Germans or Vichy’s Jewish Affairs Office (*Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives*) began to apply pressure, the commission began to denaturalize Jews. Working through the thousands upon thousands of files, with no central list to work from and no legal criteria for Jewishness, members paid particular attention to Jewish-sounding names. For all that the magistrates looked at supporting evidence, education, family ties, profession, all too often they returned to Jewish sounding names to make a

determination, to make the decision on an otherwise ambivalent case. People who had applied to change their names – naturalization and name changes were both treated by the same branch of the ministry of justice – received particularly skeptical attention from the magistrates.

After the initial rush of political decisions in the first few months of 1940, bureaucratic routine set in. Nearly one million French citizens were potentially concerned. The Commission's work did not follow the logic of state collaboration, which grew more intense with Admiral François Darlan's rise to power in February 1941 and especially Pierre Laval's return to power in April 1942. The Commission's work, on the contrary, was most intense at the outset, from September to December 1940 and then moderating afterwards, as increasingly lengthy and formalized verifications were carried out by different branches of the French government. There were certain constants. All magistrates weighed marital and family status; national origins, with a preference for those deemed most assimilable in racial terms; and profession, with tailors and doctors at a special disadvantage. But they did not do so equally. Nicolas Moussard, born in Bône (Annaba), in eastern Algeria, and having spent most of his career in Algeria, distinguished himself with his severity, tracking down elements that pointed to Jewish origins. Others, like Albert Vieilledent, refused. They used their legal expertise to slow down investigations and supported the conservation of French nationality in a disproportionate number of cases. The single most important variable in any individual case was the magistrate in charge of the dossier.

The politics of exclusion

Those people Vichy denaturalized became foreigners subject to all the laws and exclusions that entailed. Invited to the nearest city hall, they had to turn in their identity papers and register as immigrants or, more likely, stay away and brave the consequences of illegality. Their right to remain in France and the terms were determined by a complex legal framework that varied depending on origins. For Jews, the stakes were vastly higher than for others. French nationality provided an important, if incomplete, protection against anti-Semitic measures. To be registered as a foreign or stateless Jew substantially increased the danger of arrest and deportation. Three quarters of the Jews deported to their death by Vichy were foreigners. In that context, the Commission effectively notified the anti-Semitic Jewish Affairs Office (*Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives*) and the police – which had pledged to round up quotas of Jews for the Nazis – of their existence and location. German authorities exerted no direct influence over the investigations, though in 1942 and 1943 they increasingly complained about the laxity of Vichy's efforts.

By focusing on a precise historical problem, denaturalization, Claire Zalc sheds fresh light on big questions about causality, responsibility, the relationship between deep structures

and the role of chance. She shows how abstract, often unarticulated ideas about honor, virtue, and authenticity took concrete, material form, how they shaped the boundaries of the national community and influenced people's opportunities and life chances—and, all too often, sent them to their death. *Les dénaturisés* is a model for the social history of politics (*socio-histoire*) as a genre and makes a fundamental contribution to the study of anti-Semitism, exclusion, state collaboration, and the very nature of the Vichy regime.

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