

[Whalen on Wieviorka, 'The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945'](#)

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Olivier Wieviorka. *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945.* European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Maps. 512 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-18996-5.

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The Second World War did not end when it supposedly ended and neither did the resistance. The aftershocks and controversies of both still resonate today. Anyone interested in the resistance would do well to turn to the work of Olivier Wieviorka, professor of history at the École normale supérieure de Paris-Saclay. In 2016, Wieviorka published his definitive history of the French Resistance, *The French Resistance*. The text reviewed here expands Wieviorka's work to include resistance in western Europe, that is, in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and France.

The French title of Wieviorka's book is *Une histoire de la résistance en Europe occidentale, 1940-1945*, which might better be translated as "a" history rather than "the" history, as Robert Paxton notes in his foreword. Wieviorka focuses not on the entire resistance during the war but only the resistance in the West, nor does he address German Resistance, a phenomenon quite distinct from the resistance in German-occupied Europe. He writes especially about the organizational and political dimensions of the resistance, returning frequently to the endless turf wars between official and unofficial groups and military and political bureaucracies. While he considers military strategy, he is not especially interested in operational tactics. He does not address the moral, cultural, artistic, or experiential dimensions of the resistance. Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, resistance films, or *romans résistancialistes* (resistance novels) are not in his index. So this is "a" and not "the" history of resistance in western Europe.

What is, though, in Wieviorka's account is remarkable. A prelude and epilogue bracket twenty-two chapters. The chapters are arranged chronologically, though this book is more a thematic analysis than a narrative.

As he explains in his prelude, resistance histories have their own history. The earliest accounts stressed military action as well as national insurrection. By the 1970s, though, the "politics of remembrance" had vigorously revised earlier accounts (p. 2). The number of resisters was, in fact, small; resistance was slow in developing; western Europe was liberated not by national insurrections but by the Allied armies. This revisionism itself is undergoing revision, in part because of Wieviorka's work. It is now clear, for example, that while each national resistance movement had its own peculiarities, the "Anglo-Americans' role was clearly preeminent," which is why so much of Wieviorka's work focuses on the British and the Americans (p. 4). Moreover, it is also long past time

for a “transnational history of the resistance,” which is Wieviorka’s great achievement here (p. 6). To be sure, Wieviorka’s book is only about western Europe, not Germany, and not resistance in eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Still, this transnational history is a unique and important beginning.

Wieviorka is a master of the astonishing intricacies and complexities of resistance politics. Within each nation, political groups, ideological factions, and inflated egos clashed, and all of these collisions then constantly rattled the Anglo-Americans. Tensions around Charles de Gaulle and within the French Resistance are well known (in part thanks to Wieviorka’s earlier work); here, Wieviorka explores in detail matters ranging from factionalism among Norwegian politicians to interest group battles among the Danes and the Dutch. Wieviorka’s account of Anglo-American resistance politics is equally masterful. The British, for example, had not one but several bureaucracies designed to “set Europe ablaze,” including the SOE (Special Operations Executive), MI6, and a variety of military intelligence agencies, and of course, they did not exactly get along (p. 29). While Wieviorka highlights bureaucratic infighting, he also offers intriguing commentary on a variety of other issues, including the underground press, propaganda, and technology. Wieviorka’s chief concern is with the resistance, but his concluding comments about the politics of liberation are just as insightful.

Throughout, Wieviorka’s transnational perspective is especially fruitful. What is the relationship between the resistance and the “Anglo-Americans”? “The Western resistance would have been powerless without Anglo-American aid; but the Allied secret services would have been blind without the cooperation of national resistance movements” (p. 394). To understand the French Resistance it is helpful to compare it to, for instance, the Belgian Resistance. If, by 1944, France and Italy were at the center of Anglo-American operations, one must not forget the “peripheries” of the resistance, including the Norwegians, the Dutch, and the Danes (p. 334). And what were the Soviets up to? Wieviorka explores all of these issues, and more, in careful and precise detail.

Wieviorka is rightly considered the premier historian of the World War II resistance in western Europe. His earlier work on the French Resistance and now this work on the western European Resistance are fundamental sources for any inquiry into this topic. *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945* is a splendid example of erudition, exhaustive research, and thoughtful analysis.

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