

APPRECIABLE SERVICES

Julia Wambach – I am a historian working on the French occupation of Germany after 1945. What interests me the most is the long history of mutual French and German occupations throughout the 20th century. The most evident link between these different occupations are the people who lived through them. So I dived into the archives, made a list of the members of the French occupation in 1945, and tried to find out as much information as possible about their past. Among those names, one particularly captured my attention, the name of Francis Thiallet, because of his very long implication in the history of French and German occupations. The file that bears his name at the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in La Courneuve, on the outskirts of Paris, included also his picture. Putting a face to his name did change the way I perceived his story. A simple document in the archives suddenly came to life and I found myself in front of an actual human being.

Being a historian is a little bit like being a detective and I was burning to find more traces of this Francis Thiallet. I started by the simplest thing to do: I typed his name into Google. And although I did not expect it at all, I came across a little book, a memoir, available on eBay, and entitled “Au soir d’une longue vie” [In the evening of a long life]. Thiallet had written it for his family and friends and had published it at his own expense in 1989. This book was the only copy on sale and nobody had ever taken it to a library or an archive. A real treasure for a historian! In this tiny book of a little more than a hundred pages, Thiallet narrates his life, in which the various French and German occupations are the main thread. Born in 1898, Thiallet first came into contact with the Germans as a soldier in 1917 in his “bleu horizon” colored uniform. At the end of the war, Thiallet learned that his company would take part in the occupation of Germany and he wrote: “It is with a very understandable joy that I entered as victor a country in which I would thereafter spend fourteen years of my existence.”

During World War II, one of Thiallet’s friends from the Rhineland occupation, Jean Rivalland, became secretary general of the police under Vichy. In 1942, he recruited Thiallet as police intendant of Rennes in Brittany. In his memoir, Thiallet claimed that their plan was to remodel the police to prepare a powerful national army for the postwar era, drawing on the German example of the interwar period. But Thiallet also received the Vichy medal, the francisque, and required that a picture of Pétain was put up in every police station in Brittany. I found this information not in his memoir, but in the archives.

At the end of the war, Thiallet was dismissed. The rejection was bitter for him and he spoke in his memoir of an “unjust administrative decision.” But Thiallet remembered his agreeable time in occupied Rhineland and considered himself qualified for “rendering appreciable services in analogue circumstances.” And indeed the French army chose the freshly purged Francis Thiallet to form future occupiers of Germany in training courses. So, finally, twenty years after his departure from occupied Rhineland, Thiallet returned to occupied Germany. He became one of the first administrators of the city of Speyer, in the Palatinate. Thiallet stayed in Germany until 1952. This was exactly the kind of story I was hoping to find – thank you, eBay!

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