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### Abstract

This exploratory article analyses a number of photographs concerning the events around the first two years of the Second World War in France. It focuses on two key groups of pictures; the first presents the official and strategic narratives which were produced by the military, and the second those taken by freelance photographers who were less subject to restrictions. Among the images in the latter group, a recurrent visual vocabulary has emerged which posits fleeing refugees in a particular way. However, a close analysis of the work of the American photographer Thérèse Bonney suggests very different kinds of visual narratives from those which are commonly taken to represent this experience, and also implies the existence of a possible gendered narrative. This exploration therefore suggests that further research into the work of other photographers has the potential to uncover numerous visual narratives which nuance and complicate the existing dominant visual images of these events.

### Keywords

War photography; visual narratives; France 1940; refugees; exodus, defeat

### Author biography

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# Representing Defeat: Photographic images of the French Exodus of 1940<sup>1</sup>

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The phoney war which followed the outbreak of the war in September 1939, the eventual defeat and occupation of France were unexpected and traumatic events for the populations who experienced them. While millions of French people were displaced from their homes, the later experiences of German occupation have tended to dominate French popular memory. Part of the reason may have been that many of those who found themselves caught up in the exodus believed that it would be impossible to represent it either verbally or visually and this contributed to its occlusion. One witness, André Morize who participated in the evacuation of the Ministry of Information from Paris in June 1940, wrote about the exodus in 1941 that 'No printed words or photos have ever succeeded in exactly recreating the atmosphere of the nightmarish scenes of desolation' (Morize 1941: 35-6). Similarly, Camille Bourniquel wrote in his diary on 11 June 1940:

Hell is on the roads and at the entrance to the bridges of the Loire. No films from the cinematographic service of the army, no reporter who was there could give the slightest idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Nikki Cooper and Claire Gorrara for their constructive and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

shuffling flow of humanity under the beating sun! (Bourniquel 1960: 1555)

Nonetheless, archives, personal narratives and sources of all kinds have survived which deal with these events and they are increasingly being mobilised to help us understand the popular experience of the mass displacement which followed the outbreak of the war and the defeat in France. There is now a growing literature on the civilian experience of the defeat.<sup>2</sup> However, although numerous images of this experience have survived, to date, little has been written about visual representations of these events.

This article will focus on two main types of photographs taken at this time. Firstly, the officially endorsed propaganda photos which were circulated by the authorities, and secondly, a number of freelance photos, some of which were circulated through agencies, others belong to the personal collections of the photographers themselves. The discussion will focus in particular, but not exclusively, on a corpus of images held in the photographic collection at the BDIC/MHC in Paris.<sup>3</sup> This remarkable archive contains pictures which belong to both these categories, official and private. They depict events from the time of the declaration of the war in September 1939, through to the ensuing occupation of France by the Germans. The collection has benefited from the donations of their work by several photographers, including for example Noel Le Boyer, Jean-Gabriel Seruzier and Thérèse Bonney. The latter, an American woman who spent most of her life in France, put together a series of

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<sup>2</sup> Vidalenc (1957), Amouroux (1964), Ollier (1969), Kedward (1981), Miquel (2003), Diamond (2007), Gemie & Reid (2007)

<sup>3</sup> Bibliothèque de documentation contemporaine/ Musée d'histoire contemporaine. My thanks to Thérèse Blondet-Bisch for all her help and guidance in contextualising the collection and making it available to me.

pictures she took while travelling with the population of Givet in the Ardennes as they fled to Paris in May 1940. While these images are a very personal vision, if only in terms of the subject matter they deal with, the makeshift encampments, cooking in the open and so on, they provide a valuable and less common reading of this experience which complicates and nuances some of the more widespread and well known images in circulation. Unfortunately, those responsible for the majority of the other pictures remain anonymous. Yet, there are clues. Some pictures carry the stamps of the photographic news agencies which processed them, or those of the photographic services of the French army (the Services Photographique de l'Armée - SPA). A substantial number remain impossible to source. With reference to this rich and diverse collection, the objective of this exploratory article is to assess what we can glean from them about the period and the way this experience was presented through photography. What insights can these pictures offer? How do they compare with other sources and personal narratives from the period? Do they suggest different readings of the events? What can the historian learn from them?

The dominating narratives of the exodus experience under discussion here concern the representation of the military, in particular its involvement in the displacement of populations, and the portrayal of refugees. Images of fleeing refugees are now horribly familiar to us. We are regularly bombarded with news photos and televised images of destitute populations escaping war or natural catastrophe. The representational conventions which photographers draw upon in telling these stories has evolved and developed throughout the twentieth century. While the 1940 exodus was the first time population

displacement was witnessed in Europe on such a large scale, it was not without precedents. The German invasion and occupation of several departments in 1914 led to the departure of more than two million people from their homes in France alone (Nivet 2004). In her path-breaking study of representations of refugees during the Second World War, Val Holman states that, 'by 1940 well-defined artistic tropes were attached to the representations of the refugee experience, many derived from the First World War or earlier' (Holman 2002: 58). The photographs of the populations who fled to France during the subsequent Spanish civil war also did much to reinforce what became an increasingly well established iconography of refugees in flight. Caroline Brothers in her work on the photographs of refugees during this period identifies a visual language which 'represented the refugee flight as great, emotionalised drama shot though with pathos, a drama which sometimes attained the stature of an epic statement about the nature of war' (Brothers 1997: 141). Most photographs depict the 'refugees as powerless and feminised in their passivity', 'their experience was portrayed as incomplete or open-ended since they show journeys in progress, and their plight was frozen within a framework of spectacle' (Brothers 1997: 141-2). 'Flight was never perceived as an active choice or a positive decision, escape was not a bid for survival involving the rejection of the passive role' (Brothers 1997: 143). Val Holman pointed to the importance of objects as symbols of the experience of loss, 'many images of refugees circulated within a framework of shared understanding that on an individual level the exodus meant loss of possessions and a way of life, and that loss and impediment could be symbolised metonymically by the farm-wagon in Paris, the dead horse at the roadside or by shoes impossible to walk in and bundles too heavy to carry' (Holman 2002 : 62). This article will argue that while

these kinds of narratives can be identified in many of the photographic images under discussion here, there are other cultural narratives which emerge strongly from the material and which draw on a different type of iconography suggesting a different tonality and a more nuanced reading of this experience.

### *Representing the military*

Michael Griffin, who has written about the relationship between war photography and history, highlights the ability of photos both to capture a particular moment and their tendency to transcend the moment. This transcendence involves a connection to enduring cultural narratives, to memory and to history. As Robinowitz has put it:

Photographs are ... records of the camera's presence at the moment they are taken, and representations of that moment for another set of eyes. Here history and image rearrange themselves as the image produces historical meaning as much as history makes sense of the image. (Quoted in Griffin 1999: 122)

We can understand this to mean that history and the image are interdependent, each structures the other. These connections can perhaps be best understood not just by exploring the nature of the photograph itself but also by placing the images within their historical context and attempting to decode some of the cultural narratives that may have come into play.

The first body of photos concerns those which projected official narratives endorsed by the military and the government. Many of these were taken by the *Service cinématographique de l'armée*, a term often

used interchangeably with the *Service Photographique de l'Armée (SPA)*. These 'services' were created during the First World War, and by April-May 1915, the SPA had become the only authority allowed to diffuse pictures of this conflict. Its staff believed that the trustworthiness of photos was unquestionable and that the scenes it portrayed offered intangible proof that it was showing an irrefutable reality. (Blondet-Bisch 2001: 55) Dismantled in 1919, from 1920, the SPA remerged as part of a body whose main role between the wars was to censor negative portrayals of the army. By July 1939, this body had become a civil as well as a military authority and was christened the '*Commissariat général à l'information*' (CGI) under Jean Giraudoux. The SPA still remained a part of it, though its role was considerably reduced. The CGI was mainly preoccupied with censorship, and, as France went to war again, military personnel dominated its staff. Throughout the phoney war it closely controlled the daily communiqués and prescribed in detail the information which the press had to print under threat of sanctions if they did not do so. At this time, photography was seen as being of negligible importance. Few photographers were employed. The military only allowed some rare staged propaganda pictures to circulate which dealt with the everyday life of soldiers including images of them eating, washing, reading letters. These were designed to reassure French families who were separated from loved ones on the Front (Denoyelle 2001: 117). These first images were fuzzy and were often stills taken from the newsreels; few were released out of fear that they might divulge information to the enemy. This restrictive information policy led the Italians and the Allies to complain that they had no pictures from France at a time when they were being swamped with carefully prepared images from the German propaganda departments about their preparations for war (Denoyelle



2001: 116). Many more images of these weeks were in fact available than were ever circulated. Six months into the phoney war, Henri Cartier-Bresson, the photographer, was working for the SPA at the Hotel Continental in Paris, and he told his friend Georges Sadoul that since no one had thought to equip them with the necessary materials to retouch the thousands of photos they had of the military, and since censorship rules forbade the circulation of pictures where the soldier's number was visible on his insignia, all these images languished unused in the archives (Sadoul 1994: 170).

Several series of pictures by the SPA present in the corpus of photographs under discussion here. A number of them document the evacuations of refugees during the early weeks of the phoney war. While comparatively few preparations were made for evacuation of the population at large, and virtually none for the evacuation of Paris, those populations thought by the authorities to be in danger, especially those who had been directly affected by hostilities during the First World War, were evacuated to host departments further south. In this way, the residents of the contested border areas of Alsace Lorraine were evacuated to Périgueux in September 1939. One series of photos in the collection is entitled, 'Alsace au Coeur de la France' (Alsace in the heart of France) and chronicles this experience in detail. It includes for example, pictures of an Alsatian restaurant in Périgueux, a male Alsatian refugee peeling potatoes, people preparing food, chatting, eating and relaxing in the reception centres. All these images have a particular focus on food and want to get across the sense that help is available. The narrative here is one of successful evacuation. Similarly, other images focus on soldiers helping elderly and sick refugees on to trains and

coaches. The captions on the back of these pictures reinforce the message that the French army is engaged in useful deeds. Such captions play an important role in explaining the photo and provide guidance to the viewer as to how they should be contextualised. For example, the caption on one such photo reads thus:

An image of the impact of the war on the innocent victims.

A French soldier lifts this infant who is in danger of German bombardment into a train of evacuees where it is safely returned to its mother's arms.

These 'strategic' pictures evidently sought to sanitise this process of preparation for war. They suggest a sense of authority and calm, there is a distinct absence of fear or panic of any kind, just a sense of urgent necessity to evacuate these families to safety away from the front line. These images offer a positive image of evacuation and suggest that arrangements were in hand should further evacuation prove necessary. Politically and militarily loaded, they show a concern by those in authority to project an image of the army in control. They project the Republic as a paternalist institution able to cope during times of crisis and which has come to the aid of those in need, the most vulnerable members of the populations, and mothers with infants. Indeed, such images of refugees being fed and looked after gives a counter image of what would actually occur some months later when the authorities were quickly overwhelmed by the scale of people who fled south.

*Figure 1: Belgian refugees flood across the frontier into France.*

*Copyright: BDIC/MSH*

Figure 1 is a rather different image and offers a rare example among these pictures which deal with the early population movements of May 1940 after the first incursions which became known as the First Exodus. It is a powerful depiction of the Belgian refugees who fled across the frontier into France in May 1940 and were channelled down certain roads by the military. In this picture, the crowds have been brought to a standstill by a passing military convoy. Its wide angle allows the photographer to provide a panoramic view of a country road swamped with refugees who wait on the side of the road while a military convoy passes by. Meanwhile the French army is travelling in the opposite direction making its way to the Front, probably not very far away, perhaps even within striking distance. Few of the refugees are personalised and their faces are not visible, nor are those of the soldiers. There is a powerful contrast between the populations on foot who spread along the road and into the horizon as far as the eye can see, and the large military vehicles. The camera is positioned in such a way that the latter dominate the image suggesting strongly the power of the military and emphasising the vulnerability of these civilian refugees. Many appear to be dressed in black indicating that they are rural populations. There are many women and children, though there also men in the crowd; one can be seen carrying a heavy sack of luggage over his back. One woman accompanied by two children appears to have managed to gain a lift on the platform of the second convoy vehicle though it is not clear why they would want to do this, if indeed the convoy is heading towards the front, it may not be. They look down on the mass of refugees as they pass. In the foreground of the picture a number of French soldiers can be identified. Two uniformed, capped soldiers can be identified walking towards the camera, evidently in motion at the time the photo was taken, they are out of

focus. They are not interested in the refugees but just in moving on and getting where they need to go. A group of helmeted soldiers is positioned not far behind them, two of whom are standing at the edge of the crowd in a position which suggests that they might be controlling the civilians and attempting to keep them out of the way of the military vehicles. The picture offers a powerful symbolic representation of the civilian and military boundaries of war. The focus is not on helping refugees as in the earlier pictures, here the refugees are not the key subject, and the focus has shifted to a different hierarchy of concern. The refugees seem an irritating detail which needs to be controlled so as not to interfere with the important work of the military in its conduct of war.

These first refugees were probably mainly Belgians but there were also populations from Holland and Luxembourg who fled into France in May 1940 to escape the battle front and attempt to reach safety away from the bombs. While there was a high degree of confusion, this First Exodus was managed reasonably well and the military successfully guided thousands of such refugees to stations where they were able to board trains to the capital. Other pictures in the collection monitor the experience of refugees who reached Paris and who, in order to avoid creating widespread panic, were then quickly taken through the city to rail connections which took them to host departments in central and southern France. This image was probably taken at a time when the full scale of the disaster had not yet become clear. The French military subsequently argued that the presence of thousands of refugees on the roads had hampered troop movements and undermined the army's capacity to organise a defence and that the presence of these populations thereby contributed to the defeat. While it seems likely that the

presence of civilians probably added to the atmosphere of confusion, historians generally agree that they probably had little bearing on the final outcome of military events (Diamond 2007: 198).

Few images like these have survived. This is almost certainly due to the low priority accorded to photography both by Daladier's government and the military. Soon after the start of the German offensive, Paul Reynaud, who took over as Prime Minister in March 1940, named Jean Prouvost, director of *Paris-Soir*, Minister of Information. Subsequently, Philippe Boegner, one of his close collaborators, was appointed to direct the SPA. His appointment came too late for him to effect any change to the disastrous situation he discovered in the SPA offices in Paris.

When I arrived in the rue de Plateau, I immediately took stock of the extent of its non-existence. The French army had only seven photographers at its disposal from Narvik to Beirut in order to make people aware of its 'existence'. I immediately demanded thirty, a step which triggered violent protests from the High Command. (Boegner, 1976 quoted in Denoyelle 2001 117)

As the invasion continued, the Germans were able to encroach increasingly on the capital. It soon became clear to Parisians that the German advance was not going to be held back as it had been in the previous war, and that the invaders would soon reach the city. From early June onwards, people started to leave in droves. Finally, on June 10, the government left for Tours. Most of its Ministries had already evacuated the city. This departure was read by the population as a signal to leave. By this stage, the railway stations had closed and the situation on the roads heading south out of the capital were appalling. People commenced journeys with no idea what to expect and were unprepared for what

faced them. Without food supplies or petrol, refugees were forced to sleep rough. The populations of towns and villages in the south doubled, even tripled, as the volume of the arrivals far exceeded capacity of local authorities to provide food supplies or accommodation. Just days after Boegner's appointment, on June 9, Prouvost had ordered the evacuation of the Ministry of Information, and the staff of the SPA withdrew to Agen where its members were demobilised. Some SPA photographers who had been posted to the Front were less fortunate and were among the 1800,000 troops who were taken prisoner by the Germans. Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of them.<sup>4</sup> With the SPA in collapse, there were no military photographers to document this catastrophe. It would certainly have been a challenging task to try to present the routed French army in a positive light at a time when they were fleeing for their lives.

*Figure 2: Soldiers at the roadside look on as civilian refugees pass by.*  
*Copyright: Topfoto.co.uk*

If the SPA was not in a position to provide any visual documentation of these events, pictures from different origins do give us some visual insight into the fate of the French army. One of the most telling of these is Figure 2. This extraordinary photo is an extreme contrast with the strategic army pictures discussed above. In this image we can see the soldiers who were caught up in the confused withdrawal which followed the collapse of the army and found themselves mingled in with civilians heading south. Taken somewhere along the roads of the exodus, we are

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<sup>4</sup> It is not possible to identify any photos which may have been taken by Bresson since all the SPA carried the same stamp and do not give the name of the individual photographer.

not told where, their physical appearance, dishevelled uniforms and messy attire would have been very shocking to those around them. The absence of uniform would have put out a frightening message to those who were fleeing and they would be able to interpret from this the scale of the disaster. The soldiers appear to be idly standing at the roadside uncertain as to what to do. Their immobility is juxtaposed with the man pushing the child in the pram and rushing by, hurriedly trying to escape. It contrasts with the purposeful action and momentum of the army in the previous picture. A couple of the soldiers appear aware that the photo is being taken and direct their gaze at the camera. One of these men appears to be dressed in civilian clothes. Many soldiers who found themselves separated from their regiments attempted to acquire civilian attire as quickly as possible in order to escape identification as soldiers if and when the Germans caught up with them. This powerful photo offers a compelling visual interpretation of the plight of these soldiers but is unsourced; it is not part of the corpus but was probably circulated through an agency.

Unlike the photos of the SPA which projected the official narratives of events, other pictures were taken by free lance photographers who had more room for manoeuvre in their work; these can give us insights into less obvious narratives. This kind of photojournalism had developed considerably between the wars. The Spanish civil war provided the press with their first opportunity to cover a conflict in meticulous detail. In reaction to unprecedented public interest, the growing number of papers and magazines across the continent tried to assuage an unquenchable thirst for the publication of often dramatic pictures which appeared in

the increasingly popular illustrated weekly magazines as well as the daily press (Gunthert 2001: 85). In the face of this growing demand, several photographic agencies established themselves in Paris but the French agencies struggled to compete with the better organised foreign ones (Denoyelle 1997: 65). Nonetheless, at the eve of the Second World War, Paris was the world capital of photography. French photographers who were employed by these agencies were called up in September 1939, many foreigners emigrated. Robert Capa, for example, who was from central Europe, went to the US at the outbreak of the war. The mass departure of these photographers caused most organisations to fold (Denoyelle 1997: 147). A few foreign agencies were given leave to carry on their activities during the phoney war but even these stopped working in June 1940 when their staff joined the exodus from the capital (Denoyelle 2001: 116). Only two photographic agencies continued to operate during the Occupation having gained authorisation from the Germans: the Fulgur agency and SAFRA (Service des agences françaises de reportage associées) which in October 1941 became SAFARA (Service des agences françaises d'actualité et de reportage associés).

### *Representing refugees*

Most of the images of fleeing refugees available to us are seen through the lens of the freelance photographer. It is therefore important to reemphasise that such composite images are embedded in cultural narratives and many reflect the ambient public perception of what the flight of refugees should look like at this time. Caroline Brothers, drawing particularly on the work of Victor Burgin, explains this process thus:

... simply by looking the viewer is implicated in a highly structured pattern of vision and representations. Meaning inheres not in the



photograph itself, but in the relationship between the photograph and the matrix of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions to which it refers. The photograph is the site at which these 'invisible' beliefs are made manifest, the gaze of the photographer directing the gaze of the viewer, and it is in this constant dialogue between image and society that lies the photograph's greatest interest for the historian (Brothers 1997 23).

*Figure 3: Refugees flee Paris in June 1940*

*Copyright: Keystone, Paris/ Getty Archives*

Figure 3 reflects a very common composition of refugees in flight. A queue of people is represented here travelling in lorries, in cars, on bikes, all heading hard in the same direction. Bikes were often so heavily laden and progress so slow that people simply pushed them along. All forms of transport including the large lorries are loaded with luggage. Two men in the foreground are passing the photographer and their rather determined expressions can be seen, but the faces of the other refugees are not visible. It is not clear whether these refugees have been deindividualised because the photographer intends that their plight should be a representation of the epic story of flight, or it could be more simply because they did not wish to be photographed. Nonetheless, the story told here fits with the kinds of open narratives described by Brothers and many of the tropes identified by Holman relating to objects carried by refugees and loss are evident. Such narratives are also very

similar to those in the personal narratives of the period. One British spectator put it thus:

There were lorries, cars, bicycles, horses, perambulators, and wheelbarrows all mixed up with pedestrians of every age, type, size and description. Some of the cars were straight from the showroom; others looked as if they had been rescued from refuse dumps. And every vehicle was laden to its capacity with anything you can think of, from an empty carrot cage to a grandfather clock. (Downing 1941: 17-18)

While this image appears to conform to what had become a well established visual vocabulary relating to refugees in flight, other freelance pictures in the BDIC/MSH corpus offer a rather more nuanced reading and even contest such contemporary narratives. Thérèse Bonney's pictures are particularly interesting in this context. Rather than columns of miserable refugees filing down the roads of provincial France, her photos concern small groups or individuals and adopt an almost portrait-like quality of those she studies. Bonney spent many years in Paris and after completing her postgraduate studies at the Sorbonne she decided to remain based in the capital. She made her reputation publishing widely on art history and in particular documenting the modern design movement in Paris between the wars (Kolosek 2002). She actively sought to develop cultural relations between the US and her adopted France and worked closely with the Red Cross to this end. She founded the first American illustrated press service in Europe but became so dissatisfied with the quality of the pictures that she decided that she would have to do the work as a photojournalist herself. During a visit to Finland in 1938 to cover preparations for the Olympic Games, she witnessed the Russian

invasion. She was able to take advantage of her presence there to take pictures, and remained in Scandinavia until 1940 when she returned to France to work with the Red Cross on the Franco-Belgian border to assist with evacuation of refugees. In Givet, in the department of Ardennes, she photographed the experiences of those she was travelling with as they all fled the Nazi invasion. Her pictures, since they represent the gaze of a foreigner, are doubtless overlaid with her own cultural reading of the situation, but there does seem to be here a conscious blurring of national identities on Bonney's part. She adopted a French identity and a French name despite her American credentials and did not hesitate to draw on her American contacts to solicit support for her cause. Bonney's photos were also explicitly embedded with a very clear intent. Appalled by the war which she believed threatened civilisation itself, she undertook "truth raids" as she called them. 'I go forth alone, to try and get the truth and then bring it back and try to make others face it and do something about it' (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/wcf/wcf0007.html> downloaded 8 May 2008) Later in the year she travelled to the US where she mounted an exhibition 'To Whom Wars are Done' in the Library of Congress. She paid for the first edition of the publication of her book, *Europe's children* (1943) which brought together her collection of pictures of children in the early years of the war. In this collection, she has included large versions of her pictures sometimes taking up the entire page along with short captions alongside. These captions direct the viewer and layer the visual representation, thereby predisposing the viewer to a certain reading of the images. Bonney along with Lee Miller and Margaret Bourke-White were three of the most prolific American photographers during the Second World War. All three women believed they had a mission to show the world the impact of the war on individuals. Ethically

invested, all three focused on the vulnerable, suggesting perhaps that they were offering a specifically gendered narrative of the war.

It is certainly the case that photographs give insight into some of the overlooked intimate details of life on the road in 1940. Her shots cover a range of experiences from the makeshift encampments, to women struggling with heavy bags and carrying children who were not able to walk, as well as the frightening moments taking shelter during the raids before moving on. Women, children and the elderly are her subjects, unlike the other pictures of fleeing refugees on the roads where they seemed not to be so present despite historical evidence to the contrary. Her pictures portray aspects of the exodus experience that are less common elsewhere. For example, one of the major problems for fleeing refugees caught up in the massive population movement was the fact that they lost one another and this was not always simply a matter of accident. People would often split up for practical reasons. Mothers were even blithely prepared to hand over their children to refugees with space in their cars or passing military convoys and then could not track them down. It may now seem extraordinary to us that mothers took these kinds of risks, but the very fact that they were prepared to do so suggests that they had no idea of the scale of the disaster. Many simply imagined that they would easily catch up with their children later in the journey. Of course, this proved much more difficult than they ever imagined (Diamond 2007: 63). Bonney's photo of a chateau gate 'taken in the Valley of the Seine in the last days of May when things were becoming desperate' covered in chalk messages directed at other family members evokes this experience very movingly. Bonney includes the following caption with her pictures:

Searched in vain  
For loved ones  
Lost on the road  
Tried to communicate  
With each other.

Here we see how the visual is inscribed within a textual reworking. Once again, the phototextual narrative overall is more powerful than that of an image or text in isolation. The caption offers us an effective layering of the image which clarifies how we should understand the composition of the narrative.

Even more telling perhaps are her pictures of the displaced population of the village of *Givet* with whom she travelled to Paris. Embedded in these pictures we can see the respect she holds for these refugees. There appears to be a genuine effort to positivise their flight and to offer more than just a depiction of disaster and victimhood. Her pictures show how these people enacted their survival strategies. Unlike the more traditional portrayals, her photos do not suggest movement, but are often static, showing refugees at rest. Few have their backs turned to the camera. Like the better established representations of refugees, we can still recognise an element of pathos, and the nature of their flight remains open-ended since they have no idea where they are going. Bonney does not deny the drama of their plight. However, her pictures also emphasise their stoicism and their capacity to carry on in the face of social collapse. There is a real individualisation of their flight experience, their faces are visible and studied. She avoids a narrative suggesting an anonymous collective mass of refugees, but prefers to present individuals with their own particular experiences.

*Figure 4: 'Took refuge in barns'*

*Copyright: BDIC/MHC*

Figure 4 is worthy of particular mention. Here we see two women and two children making themselves at home in a barn and managing well despite their difficult circumstances. Seated on bales of hay, both children look directly at the camera, their attention perhaps momentarily diverted from what is going on elsewhere in the barn. The youngest child is sitting on her mother's knees and they are both sitting next to another woman with whom the mother appears to be chatting happily. The other woman is apparently smiling at something across the barn out of the frame of the picture. To the right of this party stands an older man who seems intently absorbed in something on the other side of the barn. In the foreground of the picture is evidence of a recent meal, pots and a number of glass bottles lie on the ground. On a nearby bale folded bed linen is piled up reinforcing the sense of domesticating an alien space or area. Despite a rather dark environment the refugees look at home and reasonably content.

*Figure 5: 'Meals cooked in the fields'*

*Copyright: BDIC/MHC*

Figure 5, from the same series of pictures, is a powerful portrait of a woman cooking on an open fire just by the roadside. She is looking directly at the camera and has broken off from her cooking in order to do so. She has succeeded in recreating domestic space in a field showing her capacity to create a home and prepare food even in the most extreme of

circumstances. There is little sign of desperation here, merely resignation, even perhaps determination. This kind of narrative chimes in perhaps with Vidalenc's interpretation of why people fled. He argues that the high number of people who left their homes when they could in reality have stayed put, did so because they were determined to avoid German occupation. They left not because of fear but more out of an instinctive sense that they should try to stay on the French side of enemy lines (Vidalenc 1952).

The choice of the subjects of Bonney's pictures is not arbitrary. Most of the pictures are those of women and children fleeing, and her particular interest in them comes through here. She also seems to be telling us that there is a gender divide in place and that this was a predominantly female experience. She shows how these people are coping with deprivation and is normalising this experience by portraying this quiet heroism and showing how these individuals are adaptable to such extreme situations. She endows them with a sense of human dignity. This terrible experience of loss of home is happening to people we can identify with and this creates an affective link, they are managing to survive, there is no confusion and no despair and they deserve our respect.

A further interest of Bonney's collection of photographs lies not just in the subject matter but also in the fact that we know something of the fate of her pictures and her intentions in taking them. She openly expressed her explicit intent to mobilise and trigger a reaction. In style, they strongly resonate with that of the documentary photos that were taken in the US during the depression of the 1930s. The effect that

these photographers sought to create is defined by William Stott in his book on *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973)

[Documentary] ... defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak ... since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium. ... The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content. (Quoted in Wells 1997: 77)

Bonney's work bears a particular similarity to the photos taken by Dorothea Lange while she was employed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the US in the late 1930s to provide a pictorial record of the impact of the Great Depression on the nation. Her task was to provide images to illustrate and support the written accounts of conditions in agriculture that would be given in official reports (Wells 1997: 81). She and other photographers employed on this project sought to use their work as a tool of social reform. This aim is at the heart of what is known as documentary photography. The photographers intended their photographs to be conscious acts of persuasion and they did not balk from using their photos as a mean of communicating their views. Like Lange, Bonney has used 'a complex repertoire of gestural forms through which to express their strength and their dignified response to suffering' (Wells 1997: 82). Like Lange, Bonney appears to choose her subjects not just for their "'representative' qualities, and while they are anonymous, their individuality' is also stressed (Wells 1997:82). Bonney's message here is quite transparent. These people were doing their best in difficult



circumstances and she appears to be celebrating their capacity to do this. Her images suggest a narrative of survival and adaptability rather than one of flight and fear. She offers us a narrative of human resilience.

Further evidence perhaps that her pictures offer a strong, more positive representation of the exodus experience is the fact that several of her images appeared in *La Revue de la France Libre* published in 1942 in a dedicated supplement entitled - *1940-41 - Ici la France*. This publication was produced in London by members of de Gaulle's Free French movement. Those editing it were able to make little use of photography in its publications as it had few photographers to hand (Denoyelle 2001: 123-4). Bonney's images met its key objectives on two levels. Firstly, the pictures themselves bear witness to events that were not being discussed. Secondly, they are a moving attempt to counter the Nazi propaganda which was submerging the press in France. Not resigned, nor defeated, they show how French people can adapt psychologically and not collapse, even when they find themselves under extreme pressure

## **Conclusions**

The very existence of this collection of images seems to challenge the observations of certain historians that no such photographs were taken or circulated. The photographic historian Françoise Denoyelle, for example, asserted that in photographic terms 'le désastre de l'exode [fut] totalement occulté', ie that the disaster of the exodus was totally obscured or hidden (Denoyelle 2001: 118). While it is doubtless true that by comparison with the countless other images of France during the Occupation, photographs of this earlier period are relatively rare, this

discussion has shown that in this collection alone, several photographs exist.

In the context of France in 1939-40, how helpful are photographic images to our understandings of these events? It is perhaps more than coincidental that the images present in this archive reflect some of the same trends present in the personal narratives, both those that were contemporary to events and those that have been published since. Like these photos, witness accounts of all kinds tend to dwell predominantly on the experience of flight and often present the experience in the form of open narratives. It is also noticeable that little attention is paid to their experience of returning home, similarly, few photographic images represent this experience. The *Germans*, however, were alert to the propaganda opportunity that such an event could offer. In a concerted attempt to persuade refugees of their good will, they circulated images of immaculately-dressed, friendly *German* soldiers. Posters appeared in the occupied areas depicting a smiling *German* soldier with a child in his arms with another two children looking curiously on. The caption urges: 'Abandoned populations, put your trust in *German* soldiers.' In numerous communities, the *Germans* were able to appear as generous victors offering food to destitute French citizens. Much was made in photographic propaganda of examples of *German* soldiers shepherding people back to their homes. By presenting themselves as competent and organised, they cleverly contrasted themselves with the recent memories of the French army in collapse. These manipulations show how the *Germans* were effectively able to draw on the contemporary visual vocabulary to further their own political ends.

A visual composition which depicts long columns of refugees overwhelmed with luggage moving slowly down a country road has become a longstanding symbolic representation of the French defeat of 1940. These kinds of representations were present not just in many of the images at the time, but have also dominated later efforts to visually portray these events. Reproduced in filmic narratives as early as *Casablanca* in 1942, this image re-emerged in other films after the war, firstly in the French film *Les Jeux Interdits* (1952), then again in the American film *Me and the Colonel* with Danny Kaye, (1962). The same kinds of images have recurred more recently in the French films *Les Egarés* (2002) and *Bon Voyage* (2003). Such images both reproduce existing narratives and influence contemporary perceptions of the exodus. The photographs discussed here, in particular those of Thérèse Bonney, contrast with these widely circulating images. There are doubtless other freelance photographers whose work remains to be uncovered and explored, and whose images would offer additional narrative readings of these events. A further aspect of this research would be to pursue the evident gender dimension which has emerged here. When it comes to Bonney's work, there appears to be a strongly gendered perspective not just in the choice of subjects but also in the choices she has made about what she wishes to portray and how she wishing to portray it. This exploratory discussion of photographic visual representations shows that by analysing these images and the narratives behind them, we can identify those which are being mobilised to political ends and draw on others which complicate the existing narratives and help to foster a more fragmented and fractured perception of events.

7072 words with pictures and captions

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