

Paula Schwartz. *Today Sardines are Not for Sale: A Street Protest in Occupied Paris*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2020, pp. 242. ISBN 978-0-19-068154-8.

Reviewed by
Eileen M. Angelini
SUNY Empire State College (NY)

On May 31, 1942, Mother's Day in German-occupied Paris, a group of French women fought back against the collaborationist government and the Nazi regime, whose principal aim had been to humiliate the French by starving them via food shortages and rationing. At the Eco grocery store on the corner of the rue de Buci and the rue de Seine, Madeleine Marzin led the fatal protest initiated by the French Communist Party. The protest started with women storming Eco, grabbing sardine cans, and throwing them into the crowd. The women were supported with chants from the crowd and the men who were present to protect them from the French police. This clash lasted twenty minutes and resulted in five French policemen being shot, with one dying and one being gravely wounded, and some of the men being arrested and later executed. Paula Schwartz's *Today Sardines are Not for Sale: A Street Protest in Occupied Paris* frames the protest in context, specifically by identifying the key players involved and, more importantly, showing how and why they became involved. In introducing the significance of this *cause célèbre*, Schwartz offers:

For all its apparent banality, the demonstration on the rue de Buci turns out to be hugely important – if not necessarily in all the ways its organizers intended. As a protest action emblematic of its time and of its type, the Buci affair presents an extraordinary opportunity to understand some signal features of everyday life in Paris under German occupation. It also reveals the inner workings of the underground Communist movement, from the coordination of its political and paramilitary wings to the deft deployment of illusion and symbol, words and images, by party propagandists. We can see, too, the roles of the Vichy government, the French police, and the German occupation authorities in the elaboration of a system of repression that had its own procedures and its own courts. Yet the Buci affair was as exceptional as it was emblematic. It marked a turning point in the escalation of public protest and the

repression of protest, *the very moment when the authorities began to recognize the political potential of women.* (3-6, my emphasis)

Critical to the planning of the protest was the role played by women as many of the men in the Communist Party had been put into prison or executed by the Nazis. Recruiting women who were fed up with food shortages to join the Communist Party ranks was easily achieved. Schwartz does an exceptionally thorough job of explaining the detailed planning process (e.g., what needed to happen when as well as possible pitfalls that could cause the protest to go dramatically wrong). Furthermore, Schwartz investigates how the protesters were identified by the police after the protest took place.

Schwartz also draws much needed attention to Marzin and her role as the protest's lead organizer. For example, Schwartz provides an analysis of the wanted poster for Marzin that had been issued by Rottée, Director-General of the *Renseignements généraux* (police intelligence):

"If found," advises the circular, "take all precautions. May be accompanied by a security team comprised of terrorist activists assigned to protect her."

The description of the escapee notes that she may be wearing a beige rain cape, the same clothing identified by witnesses on the day of the demonstration. Textiles were so scarce that many people had only one or two changes of clothing; their clothes were as much a part of their physical description as eye and hair color. That said, Marzin had probably long disposed of this incriminating garment, just as she removed it upon leaving the scene of the demonstration in order to change her appearance. (118)

The wanted poster for Marzin demonstrates clearly how much she was a person of interest for Rottée, especially given her courageous escape from custody and her underground resistance efforts until the war ended. Equally interesting in her analysis of the wanted poster is how Schwartz explains the connection between one's clothing and one's identity.

In conclusion, *Today Sardines are Not for Sale: A Street Protest in Occupied Paris* will appeal to those wanting to know more about how the Vichy authorities and the Nazi regime worked hand in hand to oppress the French people during the World War II Occupation of France. By probing into the planning, execution, and aftermath of the May 31, 1942 incident at the Eco grocery store, Schwartz opens up a discussion of how some view this protest a heroic act of resistance while others see it as having been a crime against the French state. However, more noteworthy is Schwartz's effort to bring to the forefront the role played by women in resisting their oppressors.