

A Train in Winter: An Extraordinary Story of Women, Friendship, and Resistance in Occupied France¹

Reviewed by Major Trevor Barna*

*They had learnt, they would say, the full meaning of friendship, a commitment to each other that went far deeper than individual liking or disliking; and they now felt wiser, in some indefinable way, because they had understood the depths to which human beings can sink and equally the heights to which it is possible to rise.*²

Introduction

On 24 January 1943, a train departed Compiègne, France, bound for the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Oswiecim, Poland.³ On board were 230 French women, of whom only forty-nine would survive to return home to France at the end of World War II.⁴ The women, many communist political activists and members of the French Resistance, had rallied against the collaborationist Vichy Government and the German occupation of France.⁵ In *A Train in Winter*, biographer Caroline Moorehead⁶ tells the story of *Le Convoi des 31000*, the collective eponym by which the 230 women would be known, the name taken from the number designation of the transport train to Auschwitz.⁷

In the preface, Moorehead writes that her book is “about friendship between women, and the importance that they attach to intimacy and to looking after each other, and about how, under conditions of acute hardship and danger, such mutual dependency can make the difference between living and dying.”⁸ Moorehead oversimplifies the myriad reasons the forty-nine women survived the Nazi occupation and the death camps. Even though Moorehead does not prove her own theory, she ultimately succeeds in proving another: that the women instinctively adopt and live by a moral and ethical code of conduct. By and large, the women conduct themselves consistent with what the U.S. military refers to as

the Code of Conduct.⁹ For a judge advocate, *A Train in Winter* is an effective case history validating the importance and effectiveness of the U.S. military’s Code of Conduct.¹⁰ Time and again the women demonstrate through their actions, in relation both to each other and to their captors, the existence of an inner philosophy more indefatigable than mere kinship or good luck.

Part One: A Futile Resistance

A Train in Winter opens in 1940 with the beginning of the German occupation of France.¹¹ After Germany defeated the overwhelmed French forces, a new puppet government was created in the town of Vichy.¹² In France, the Germans found a government and a segment of the population not only willing to cooperate but also instrumental in the Nazi’s plans to eradicate ‘undesirables’ from Europe, Jews and communists included.¹³ The French communists, more akin to labor or union activists than Cold War Soviets, began to resist, utilizing skills learned protesting the disparate treatment of the French working class in the mid to late 1930s.¹⁴ In large part, the actions of the communists were non-violent; they wrote and distributed manifestos critical of the Vichy Government, or they helped those in danger escape occupied France.¹⁵

Threatened by the nascent uprising, the Nazis and their Vichy counterparts began investigating and persecuting the communist organizations and their sympathizers.¹⁶ Many of

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¹ CAROLINE MOOREHEAD, *A TRAIN IN WINTER: AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF WOMEN, FRIENDSHIP, AND RESISTANCE IN OCCUPIED FRANCE* (2011).

² *Id.* at 314.

³ *Id.* at 175.

⁴ *Id.* at 285–86.

⁵ *Id.* at 176.

⁶ *Author: Caroline Moorehead*, HARPER COLLINS PUBLISHERS, http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/34212/Caroline_Moorehead/index.aspx (last visited Jan. 3, 2012).

⁷ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 192.

⁸ *Id.* at 6–7.

⁹ See Exec. Order No. 10,631, 3 C.F.R. 266 (1954–1958), available at <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10631.html> (establishing the Code of Conduct for U.S. servicemembers), amended by Exec. Order No. 12633, 3 C.F.R. 561 (1988) [hereinafter Code of Conduct]; U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, PAM. 360-512, CODE OF THE U.S. FIGHTING FORCE (1 June 1998) [hereinafter DA PAM. 360-512] (providing the Code of Conduct as well as setting forth its principles and standards).

¹⁰ Code of Conduct, *supra* note 9.

¹¹ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 11.

¹² *Id.* at 15.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 25–29.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 176.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 62–159 (detailing the capture and treatment of several of the women by the French).

the women were arrested, tortured, and interned by their own government at a French prison, Romainville.¹⁷ As reprisals for attacks on Germans and as a means to quell the uprising, the Germans began killing the French prisoners by the hundreds, including the husbands and lovers of the women.¹⁸ Ultimately, the Nazis instituted a program of “Night and Fog,” a plan formulated to terrorize the French public by causing the women to quietly and mysteriously disappear.¹⁹

Part One of *A Train in Winter* is the lesser of the two sections of the book, both in content and structure. Primarily, the introductory chapters suffer from Moorehead’s attempt to condense volumes worth of information about the communist resistance in France, both before and during World War II. In short, Moorehead overextends herself by introducing a significant number of the women who comprise *Le Convoi des 31000*, presenting an historical background of the communist organizations in France, detailing the communist uprising against the Vichy and Nazi regimes, as well as detailing the investigation and capture of the women.

Having done too little with too much, Moorehead is forced to quickly introduce women who do not appear again for several chapters,²⁰ a relatively minor flaw, but an unnecessary distraction considering the sheer number of characters in the book. Moorehead could serve the readers better by focusing her book on a few of the women instead of them all. It is apparent that Moorehead wants to include each woman, perhaps as a way to honor each victim. Fortunately, Moorehead includes an appendix of short biographies in which she describes each of the 230 women.²¹ These short stories about the women are at times as powerful as the brief references to them in the main part of Moorehead’s book.

Unfortunately, Moorehead complicates matters by requiring the reader to possess a significant amount of complex historical knowledge about the political tension in Europe in the early twentieth century: specifically, 1920’s French communist or socialist leaders,²² Nazi leadership, and the Spanish Civil War and its traumatic impact on France. For example, Moorehead references Léon Blum, the first Socialist to become Premier of France, on six separate occasions throughout the book, but leaves the reader guessing as to who he was and what his role was in the

political movement occurring before and during World War II.²³ Referencing these figures or events without adequate context or explanation leaves the reader confused and distracted.

As Moorehead’s stated purpose is to demonstrate the connection the women had with one another—regardless of their individual politics, religion, or class—this focus on their background, upbringing and beliefs offers little. The motivation of the communist women to resist, may explain why they “shared a sense of solidarity and comradeship,”²⁴ but their political beliefs only provide an explanation why they were arrested, not why they survived. Part One of *A Train in Winter* is a somewhat informative introduction, yet due to its confusing and superficial content, ultimately expendable.

Part Two: Surviving the Holocaust

Where Caroline Moorehead is at her best and where *A Train in Winter* succeeds is in the retelling of the women’s struggle to survive in Auschwitz. Here the story of *Le Convoi des 31000* is most compelling. The list of primary characters becomes focused and the reader is able to connect with each woman and agonize over the horrors she must face. Moorehead’s focus on politics becomes less important; instead, it is the women themselves who become truly vital to the story.

Immediately upon their arrival at Auschwitz, the women were subjected to unspeakable horrors. The camp guards brutalized the prisoners. On one occasion, the women were forced to literally run for their lives as the guards beat them with clubs.²⁵ Those who did not run fast enough past the gauntlet of guards were selected for immediate death.²⁶ Many who survived the guards’ attacks later succumbed to disease or the harsh winter conditions.²⁷

Many of the 230 women, 177 to be exact, did not survive the first six months at Auschwitz.²⁸ They died of disease or starvation, were beaten to death, or died in the gas chambers.²⁹ Even those seen by the other women as invincible died. Danielle Casanova, a dentist and a leader of the group, was selected to work in a relatively clean and safe

¹⁷ *Id.* at 151–79.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 116–18, 132, 164–65.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 172–73 (describing the meaning of “*Nacht und Nebel*,” translated from German as “Night and Fog”).

²⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 52–53, 129 (introducing Jeanne Serre, then casually referencing her seventy-six pages later in the book when she is arrested).

²¹ *Id.* at 319–35.

²² See, e.g., *id.* at 32–33 (listing various intellectuals and writers).

²³ See *Léon Blum*, ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/70542/Leon-Blum> (last visited Jan. 3, 2012).

²⁴ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 31.

²⁵ *Id.* at 199.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.* at 209.

²⁸ *Id.* at 237.

²⁹ *Id.* at 286.

dental office. However, she was unable to escape the disease-ridden fleas and lice infesting the camp, dying in May 1943 after contracting typhus.³⁰

How does someone survive such horrors? Moorehead hypothesizes that sheer luck and friendship are what saved the forty-nine women who lived.³¹ However, Moorehead does note other factors that appear to play a part in helping the women survive. Specifically, Moorehead points out the French women had an “ability to adapt and organize themselves.”³² She notes that “[a]daptability was crucial, resignation fatal.”³³ Moorehead was lucky enough to speak with one of the survivors, Simone Alizon, known as “Poupette” to her friends. Summarizing what Alizon told her, Moorehead writes, “Knowing that the fate of each depended on the others, Poupette would say that all individual egotism seemed to vanish and that, stripped back to the bare edge of survival, each rose to behavior few would have believed themselves capable of.”³⁴ Rather than mere friendship, what Moorehead unknowingly describes is something greater: a combination of camaraderie and a moral code that the women possess. This ethos is ultimately more powerful than the prisons which hold the women; it saves their hearts, bodies and souls.

Part Two of *A Train in Winter* is easily the better half of the book. Moorehead’s writing is more concise and stays on point. While there are still numerous characters to follow, the description of the infinite horrors of Auschwitz and the question of who survives make the book hard to put down.

Live by Example

The lessons gleaned from *A Train in Winter* are useful for the military leader endeavoring to educate others on ethical and honorable conduct if captured by an enemy, even when that enemy believes itself to be bound neither by international customary law nor by any sense of moral obligation for the humane treatment of prisoners. As Moorehead points out, the Nazis did not abide by international rules of treatment for prisoners,³⁵ and yet the women applied an unspoken code of conduct, which helped them not only to survive, but survive with dignity. The conduct of these women in the face of unimaginable terror and violence is to be emulated.

Rather than mere camaraderie, the women developed a sense of responsibility for one another and found ways to resist their Nazi guards. While at Auschwitz, the Germans were determined to cultivate a plant to synthesize rubber, a scarcity during the war.³⁶ Several of the women were sent to work in the agricultural camp. The women performed “small acts of sabotage” including “selecting the weaker roots for propagation, mixing up the numbers of batches and treating the plants with chemicals to stunt their growth.”³⁷ These small acts of sabotage were not likely to bring the Nazi regime to its knees. Still, the acts of rebellion made the women feel as though “they were not entirely without power.”³⁸ This mind-set is recognized by the U.S. military as a valuable ideal: Article III of the Code of Conduct states in part, “If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available.”³⁹

While all the women are fitting exemplars of the Code of Conduct in practice, there are two women who most epitomize the concepts contained in the Code. The two, Danielle Casanova and Adelaïde Hautval, carried out innumerable acts of personal courage while maintaining unwavering fidelity with their compatriots. The actions of the women could easily have been the model for Article IV of the Code of Conduct, which states in part, “If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command.”⁴⁰ Danielle Casanova, a dentist by trade, a communist party member, and one of the leaders of *Le Convoi des 31000*, exemplifies this tenet. Casanova continually rallied the women to keep up their spirits. “Her energetic, cheerful, determined presence and her healthy appearance became a source of strength to the others . . .”⁴¹ Selected to serve as a prisoner dentist for the German guards at Auschwitz, Casanova was able to help her French comrades by virtue of her position. On several occasions Casanova was able to find safer and cleaner working conditions for the other women, effectively saving their lives.⁴²

Adelaïde Hautval, a doctor from Alsace, is an illustrative model of Article III, resisting her captors “by all

³⁰ *Id.* at 218.

³¹ *Id.* at 313–14.

³² *Id.* at 220.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 213.

³⁵ *Id.* at 63.

³⁶ *Id.* at 221.

³⁷ *Id.* at 224.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Code of Conduct, *supra* note 9, art. III. The pamphlet further states, “The duty of a member of the armed forces to use all means available to resist the enemy is not lessened by the misfortune of captivity.” DA PAM. 360-512, *supra* note 9, para. 4b.

⁴⁰ Code of Conduct, *supra* note 9, art. IV.

⁴¹ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 212.

⁴² *Id.* (describing various examples of how Casanova saved other prisoners, or used her position to improve their living conditions).

means available.”⁴³ Hautval, neither a member of the communist party nor particularly close to the other women, was detained after she attempted to intervene when she witnessed a group of German soldiers abusing a Jewish family.⁴⁴ Dr. Hautval was tasked with caring for prisoners who were likely to be killed if deemed too ill.⁴⁵ She resisted her German captors by finding ways to make the desperately ill appear healthy.⁴⁶ Dr. Hautval was later ordered to assist in the medical experiments conducted by sadistic Nazi doctors and scientists.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Hautval refused knowing that she would likely be executed for her disobedience.⁴⁸ She herself was saved by another prisoner and ultimately survived the war. Hautval perfectly captured the unwritten ethical code when she told another prisoner, “I was fortunate enough to have higher values than life itself.”⁴⁹

The women of *Le Convoi des 31000*, received little to no formal military training. There were no written rules outlining a code of conduct should any of the women be taken prisoner. Nevertheless, these women encapsulate the theories of the U.S. military’s Code of Conduct. In *A Train in Winter*, Moorehead and *Le Convoi des 31000* provide the military leader with countless illustrations as to how and why the Code of Conduct is not only critical but relevant to today’s servicemembers who may face similarly brutal and merciless captors.

Conclusion

A Train in Winter does not provide a complete view of either the French Resistance movement nor of the horrors of the German concentration camps. A more powerful, more descriptive, and more disturbing account of survival in Auschwitz can be found in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*.⁵⁰ However, where Moorehead and *A Train in Winter* shine is in the presentation of countless models of prisoners believing in and living by an inherently moral code of conduct in the second part of the work. The women of *Le Convoi des 31000* deserve to have their story told and heard, not just because they were victims of the Nazis, but because their actions should be known and used as a model of honorable conduct of prisoners of war. While Caroline Moorehead argues that luck and friendship explain why these women were able to survive,⁵¹ her book proves that *Le Convoi des 31000* possessed much more than those modest qualities. They maintained fidelity, strength of character, and an inherent, unwritten code of conduct. For that reason alone *A Train in Winter* is a valuable resource to educate both leaders and servicemembers on how to survive and return with honor, even in the face of true horror.

⁴³ Code of Conduct, *supra* note 9, art. III.

⁴⁴ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 123.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 232–34 (various examples of Hautval taking personal risks to save other women).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 235.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 234–35.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 236–37.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 237.

⁵⁰ PRIMO LEVI, *SURVIVAL IN AUSCHWITZ: IF THIS IS A MAN* (Stuart Woolf trans., The Orion Press 1959) (1958).

⁵¹ MOOREHEAD, *supra* note 1, at 314.