
H-France Review Vol. 5 (April 2005), No. 39

Yves Denéchère, Ed. *Femmes et diplomatie: France--XXe siècle*. Bruxelles: P. I. E.-Peter Lang, 2004. vii+200 pp. Index. \$32.95 U.S. (pbk). ISBN 90-5201-233-4.

Review by Margaret H. Darrow, Dartmouth College.

In his afterword to this slim collection of articles and personal testimony, Robert Frank, diplomatic historian at Paris-I, wonders if there have been sufficient women in French diplomacy to constitute a subject of historical inquiry. A key-word search of the catalog of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* seems to confirm his concern; it produces only two entries, one of which is an eighteenth-century treatise. In studies of foreign policy, women usually figure as victims--of war, of global prostitution, etc. The studies of women as makers or executors of foreign policy are limited to a handful of women--Margaret Thatcher, Madeleine Albright--none of whom are French. France ranks at the bottom of Europe, along with Greece, in the percentage of women in high positions in public service.[1] As far as women diplomats go, it lags behind African, Asian and even some Middle Eastern countries. So immediately after asking "What women in French diplomacy?", we must inevitably consider why there have been so few.

Femmes et diplomatie: France--XXe siècle attempts to answer both questions, to recount the histories of the women who have served French diplomacy in the twentieth century and also to explain why their number and their role has been so restricted. Drawn from a conference at the University of Angers in 2002, it unites five articles by young historians and five *témoignages* from diplomats. Both articles and testimony favor biography. Michel Marbeau's article on women in French foreign policy in the interwar period leans heavily on the examples of Suzanne Borel, the first woman to pass the entrance examination for the diplomatic service, and influential journalists Geneviève Tabouis and Louis Weiss. There follows Elodie Lejeune's study of Borel's later career as the wife of Foreign Minister Georges Bidault and Pierre-François Astor's biography of Jeanne-Paule Sicard, *chef de cabinet* to René Plevin. They are seconded by personal accounts from an ambassador's wife, an ambassador, four women who have held the post of Minister of European Affairs, and Françoise Gaspard, who has represented France on United Nations commissions. Framing these individual stories are two analyses of group experiences--Isabelle Dasque's fascinating exploration of the role of diplomats' wives in the early twentieth century and Eva Dalak's rather depressing exposition of the condition of women diplomats in the 1990s.

As this brief description reveals, the editor and authors do not define the limits of "women and diplomacy" very clearly. On the one hand, they ignore the lower ranks of the diplomatic service such as clerical workers and translators; on the other, they expand the definition of diplomacy to include journalists and cabinet ministers. Is it simply the absence of women in the upper reaches of what the French call *la Carrière* that has pushed the authors to widen their scope, or is it confusion about the differing nature of diplomacy, foreign policy and foreign affairs?

The subtitle of the collection of articles, "Des Femmes de diplomates aux femmes diplomates" establishes the master narrative: *Allez les filles!* It is a triumphal progression from the first article on ambassadors' wives at the turn of the century to the last about women diplomats in the 1990s. The articles in between present Suzanne Borel as the trailblazer who passes the torch to Sicard, the indispensable woman of Franco-American relations after World War II, who hands it on to today's women ambassadors. However, as Frank notes in his afterword, this linear history quickly breaks down,

most evidently in the central story of Suzanne Borel. Instead of moving from diplomat's wife to diplomat, her biography traces the opposite course. Nor has the starting point been left behind. Andrée Dore-Audibert's experience as an ambassador's wife at the end of the twentieth century is not far removed from that of the women Dasque studies at the century's start. Although Dore-Audibert did not bring her husband the dowry or social clout that was expected of ambassadors' wives in the Belle Époque, her role was still to represent France with elegant meals, *haute couture* and cultural chit-chat. And finally, Dalak's article, supported by the testimony of Ambassador Elisabeth Dahan, demonstrates that women have scarcely emerged as diplomats. At the Quai d'Orsay, they remain barely visible, relegated to minor or subordinate posts, expected to work *en coulisse*, to cast no shadow, offer no competition to the men who are their colleagues, in the words of former Minister of European Affairs, Catherine Lalumière (p. 163).

Why have women been so few in French diplomacy? The first answer, of course, revolves around family and children. The women interviewed by Dalak, as well as the Quai d'Orsay in the person of former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hubert Védrine, routinely cite the mobility of a diplomatic career and the requirement to be available twenty-four hours a day as the main obstacles to women's careers in diplomacy. These obligations discourage women from entering the diplomatic corps to begin with, and once there, encourage them to drop out or select career paths that are dead ends. And by both men and women diplomats, this is perceived as women's own problem, even the result of their own choice, about which the diplomatic corps can do little.

The second answer is a rigid egalitarianism that, by pretending not to recognize gender, establishes the masculine as the unquestioned norm. Guy Thuillier, in *Les femmes dans l'administration depuis 1900*, points out that opening the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA) to women in fact severely cut the flow of women into high civil service jobs. Previously, women could rise within the civil service from clerical to responsible positions. Opening the ENA closed this alternative channel, but the slow trickle of female ENA graduates was far less than was achieved previously through internal promotion, and the number of women in the upper administration actually declined.^[2] Dalak points out another telling example in which "equal treatment" works against women: the assignment of overseas posts. The Quai d'Orsay believes that there are a number of countries where, for cultural or religious reasons, it is "unthinkable" to send a woman ambassador. At the same time, it refuses to give women priority in the posts that do not present such problems because this would be a breach of "*égalité de traitement*" (pp. 122-123). The result is, of course, that women have fewer opportunities for overseas postings than their male counterparts, yet overseas postings are essential for promotion in the diplomatic service.

The third answer, suggested by editor Yves Denéchère (p. 182), but about which both the historians and most of the commentators are surprisingly reticent, is the misogynist culture of the Quai d'Orsay. The ideas of "woman" and "diplomat" appear so antagonistic within the diplomatic service that the women that Dalak interviewed experienced the subject of her inquiry as an "attack" (p. 112). Simply qualifying the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the most traditional of the ministries does not really answer why or how this branch of the civil service, more than most others, has so effectively resisted women's participation at every turn. Rather than a story of onward and upward, what we have here is a labyrinth of cul de sacs, detours, and multiplying hurdles that these articles and testimonies do much to reveal but not much to explain.

But to have raised the questions is important; that the answers this volume poses can only be tentative and partial is inevitable at this early stage of exploration. The articles, some drawn from thesis work not yet completed, are of uneven quality. Dasque's study of the role of diplomats' wives as perceived by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is richly documented and satisfying and Lejeune's analysis of Borel's career admirably avoids simplification. But Astor's biography of Sicard lacks the argument and context that

might make it significant. In fact, an absence of context hampers many of the pieces. There have been significant studies of women's experience in other branches of the civil service (Thuillier's book for example, cited in [2]), but none of the articles locates the slim history of French women in diplomacy in this larger story. Only Ambassador Dahan consistently compares French practices to those of other countries. And the analytic framework throughout is weak. The linear history collapses but nothing replaces it. The articles frequently refer to Borel and Sicard as pioneers and trailblazers when it is clear they were nothing of the sort. But then what were they? Anomalies? Tokens? After raising these women from obscurity, the authors have nowhere to put them.

There is another aspect of women and diplomacy that none of the articles approaches: what has been, or might be, the effect of women on diplomacy? What difference does or would female diplomats make? Only former ambassador Elisabeth Dahan addresses this question. She asserts that there is a feminine diplomacy that is different from masculine diplomacy, typically more communicative and consensual. But elsewhere in the volume there are hints of less essentialist answers. Françoise Gaspard's testimony suggests that the entry of women into multinational politics has been contingent upon the recognition of women's rights as an international issue. In a volume edited by Gaspard, Marie Claude Vayssade, longtime member of the European *Commission des droits de la femme*, makes the opposite argument: that it was the entry of women into multinational politics, especially their presence in significant numbers in the European parliament, that placed and has kept women's rights on the world's agenda.[3]

The question of women's impact on diplomacy is connected to the issue of representation. As several of the articles and testimony repeatedly assert, the main function of diplomats, especially ambassadors and their wives, is to represent France. What exactly is it that they represent, and does this change if the ambassador is, instead, an *ambassadrice*?[4] When we read the testimony of Dore-Audibert, an ambassador's wife, together with that of Dahan, an ambassador, we find some insights that deserve further consideration. The [masculine] ambassador and his wife represents a France of high culture, high fashion, sophisticated but also elitist, conformist and old-fashioned, George Bush's "Old Europe." The woman diplomat, Dahan suggests, may represent a France that is modern, open, and perhaps even multicultural.

Part of the reason for the Quai d'Orsay's essential hostility to women may be the desire to preserve the representation of the "Old France." Dore-Audibert fulminates against the introverted culture of ENA graduates, the sort of people least suited, she thinks, for understanding and being understood in a foreign country (p. 133). But perhaps the anxiety goes deeper than this and is related to the gender of representation itself. The perfect diplomat does not act, he embodies. He is a vessel through which the voice of power speaks, but that voice is not his. In self-effacement, he mediates the interests of others. What could be more feminine? When the Quai d'Orsay had no expectation of seeing women inside its walls, it was willing to credit women with diplomatic usefulness. It is ironic, but illuminating that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs's most positive comments on women's role in diplomacy come from the sources of Dasque's study of turn-of-the-century embassy wives. However, when it became possible to envision women diplomats, perhaps women's customary social role of representation made them appear as unfair competition to men to whom this role was foreign. The shortage of women in the history of French diplomacy, in fact, poses no problem to a gender history of the subject. Perhaps it is time to attempt that.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Yves Denéchère, "Introduction: Pour une étude des femmes dans la diplomatie française."
- Isabelle Dasque, "Être femme de diplomate au début du XXe siècle: pouvoir social et pouvoir d'influence."

- Michel Marbeau, "Une timide irruption: les femmes dans la politique étrangère de la France dans l'entre-deux-guerres."
- Elodie Lejeune, "Un retour aux normes? De Suzanne Borel à Madame Georges Bidault (1944-1953)."
- Pierre-François Astor, "Jeanne-Paule Sicard--De Washington au Quai d'Orsay (1951-1958)."
- Eva Dalak, "Les femmes diplomates au Quai d'Orsay dans les années 1990."
- Andrée Dore-Audibert, "Etre épouse d'ambassadeur à la fin du XXe siècle."
- Françoise Gaspard, "Les institutions supranationales et les femmes: une expérience."
- Elisabeth Dahan, "Témoignage d'une femme diplomate depuis trente ans."
- Yves Denéchère, "Parcours et paroles des femmes ministres des Affaires européennes."
- Hubert Védrine, "Regard sur une action."
- Yves Denéchère, "Postface: Réflexions complémentaires par des spécialistes de l'histoire des femmes et de l'histoire des relations internationales."
- Robert Frank, "Postface: Un nouveau domaine de recherche en histoire des relations internationales."

NOTES

[1] See Anicet Le Pors and Françoise Milewski, *Rapport au ministre de la Fonction publique, de la Reforme de l'Etat et de l'Aménagement du territoire. Promouvoir la logique paritaire: deuxième rapport du Comité de pilotage pour égal accès des femmes et des hommes aux emplois supérieurs des fonctions publiques* (Paris: La Documentation française, 2003).

[2] Guy Thuillier, *Les femmes dans l'administration depuis 1900* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), pp. 83-86.

[3] Marie-Claude Vayssade, "L'union européenne et l'égalité des chances des femmes et des hommes," in Françoise Gaspard, ed., *Les Femmes dans la prise de décision en France et en Europe* (L'Harmattan, 1997), p. 60.

[4] In 1998, following a decree on the "féminisation des noms de métier, fonction, grade ou titre," all female *ambassadeurs* became *ambassadrices*, a title formerly used only to refer to ambassadors' wives.

Margaret H. Darrow
Dartmouth College
margaret.h.darrow@dartmouth.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172