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André Loez et Nicolas Mariot, eds., *Obéir/désobéir: Les mutineries de 1917 en perspective*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2008. 448 pp. €28 (pb); ISBN 978-2-7071-5619-8.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Is it time to declare a truce in the historiographical battles of the Great War? Some evidence would suggest that the possibility, at least, now exists. Scholars on both sides of the divide—those who argue that most front-line soldiers freely consented to serve, whatever the personal price, because they believed in the justice of their national cause vs. those who stress that coercion, enforced from above or subtly cultivated in the small-group loyalties of combat units, kept men at the front—are beginning to blur the lines. A conference sponsored by the Historial de la Grande guerre in Péronne in November 2008 posited that “acceptance, refusal, and endurance” were overlapping and by no means mutually exclusive responses to the experiences of war; another conference, held a year earlier in Laon/Craonne to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the mutinies of 1917, also suggested that obedience and disobedience in warfare should not be understood as diametrical opposites but rather as points on a continuum, in which degrees of obedience and shades of disobedience are as important as automaton-like obedience and outright disobedience, rebellion, and mutiny. Yet in this historiographical battle no man’s land remains wide, the possibility of meeting half-way, to fraternize and exchange stories, elusive.

Nowhere is this more evident than in scholarly interpretations of the mutinies that roiled the French Army between late April and mid-July, 1917. Did the mutinies constitute a rejection of the war itself, as some would have it, and a politicized demand for an immediate, negotiated peace? Or were they a manifestation of the enduring patriotism of men who were willing to die for France but only if they were convinced that the strategies proposed by the High Command would indeed lead to victory? Were the mutinies the exceptional acts of a small minority or the expression of near-universal dissatisfaction with the war? What role did political culture, and the cultivation of republican sentiment, play in both the maintenance and the erosion of discipline on the front-lines? And what can we learn about the mutinies – and what drives men to outright disobedience—by situating the mutinies in a broad, comparative context?

These are some of the questions that inform *Obéir/désobéir: Les mutineries de 1917 en perspective*, a collection of twenty-six essays originally presented at the Laon/Craonne conference in 2007. Rather than concentrate on the mutinies alone, the editors and their contributors propose a comparative analysis that seeks to explain the upheaval on the French front in 1917 by comparing it with other instances of disobedience and, as important for the editors, obedience in twentieth century warfare. Given the book’s ambitious scope and collaborative spirit, it is perhaps not surprising that only a small portion (approximately one fifth) of the essays speak directly of the mutinies themselves. Others address topics as diverse as the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the sociological character of the Wehrmacht in World War II, and the changing character of conscientious objection in the Israeli Defense Force from its founding in 1948 to the present day. Each of the essays in this collection is informative, although some will be of greater interest to historians of war than to French historians as such. In the final analysis, however, the argument that informs this collection—that we can best understand the mutinies of 1917 by studying them in comparison with incidents of obedience and disobedience in other

countries and at other times in the twentieth century—is not as convincingly demonstrated as one might wish.

First, it is not clear that the comparative case studies presented here, interesting though they are, are the ones best suited to illuminate the character and relative severity of the French mutinies. It is striking, for example, that no attention is paid in this collection to the collapse of military discipline that so disabled the Russian army in late 1916 and through much of 1917. Surely an examination of obedience and disobedience in wartime—and in the Great War most particularly—would benefit from such an analysis. Second, I am not convinced that the obedience of French (or British and German) soldiers in the First World War can really be understood by reference to case studies that illustrate how easily ordinary people will obey orders that compel them to inflict debilitating, sometimes mortal pain on others. Unlike participants in Stanley Milgram's famous experiments into the nature of social obedience, the men who served on the Western Front were not being asked, at no risk to themselves, to bring pain, suffering and death to defenseless bystanders. Rather, the astonishing truth of the Great War is that so many men on so many separate occasions obeyed orders that all too often had the effect of harming themselves.

Only six essays in this volume focus exclusively on the events at the front and behind the French lines during the late spring and early summer of 1917. A seventh, Markus Pöhlman's very fine piece on what the German High Command knew of the mutinies, what they did with that knowledge, and how they then re-construed that knowledge when writing their memoirs in the 1920s, also pays attention to the events on the Western Front following the failure of the Chemin des Dames offensive. When read together, Pöhlman's essay and André Bach's analysis of the French High Command reveal how critical the political preconceptions and prejudices of the military elite were to their understanding of and responses to the mutinies. Pöhlman proves that the German High Command had access to detailed intelligence reports, derived from the interrogation of French POWs, which told them unambiguously about the collapse of discipline in some sectors of the French front. Yet the German commanders refused to take advantage of the military edge the mutinies presumably gave them because they underestimated the severity of the crisis; were too embroiled in the political struggles of 1917 that pitted the Reichstag and Bethmann-Hollweg against the German High Command; and because they feared that knowledge of the mutinies and the subversive message they conveyed would exacerbate the public unrest that already threatened social order in Germany. The German General Staff were not alone, however, in interpreting the evidence presented to them of mutinies in the French army in light of their overriding political anxieties. As André Bach reminds us, the French High Command believed that the impulse to mutiny originated in civilian society rather than in the misery of front-line soldiers dismayed by the military mismanagement of the war. The General Staff thus responded to the evidence of indiscipline in the ranks first by expanding surveillance of military correspondence: the postal control authorities hoped to identify how insidious ideas made their way from troublesome civilians to susceptible soldiers. Insofar as such written evidence would identify the individual men who were deemed responsible for leading their suggestible comrades astray, it would allow for the meting out of swift, sure, and individual punishment. But if firm repression targeted at ringleaders was the order of the day in June, 1917, when more than half of all the capital sentences decreed between May and September 1917 were meted out (p. 206), Bach stresses that the heavy hand of repression gave way in July 1917 to a more conciliatory emphasis on accommodating the legitimate, material complaints of the mutineers.

It is easy in retrospect to be astonished that German generals who had access to credible information about the mutinies failed to act on this intelligence because they underestimated the severity of the crisis that swept through their enemy's ranks. Yet ninety years on—and much careful work in the archives notwithstanding—it remains difficult to determine with any exactitude the scale of the mutinies or the precise nature of French morale on the front lines. As Nicolas Mariot demonstrates, inadequate sources undermine all efforts to establish precisely how many men participated in acts of “collective

indiscipline;" he is convinced nonetheless that more men participated in the mutinies--and even more supported their disobedience--than we have customarily believed. When seeking to establish the scale of the mutinies, two statistics are often cited: at least 60% of all French divisions serving on the Western Front in 1917 were affected by incidents of collective disobedience; and upwards of 40,000 men participated in the mutinies. The first figure suggests that the mutinies were wide-spread and thus constituted a serious challenge to France's capacity to wage war; the second figure is more difficult to interpret and considerably more controversial. Mariot, for example, takes exception to the calculation, offered in 2000 by Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, that only two percent of the men serving in the French army in 1917 mutinied, for he fears that such a meager proportion misrepresents both the depth of discontent and the degree of sympathy for the mutineers evident more broadly in the ranks of front-line French soldiers (p. 350). He proposes instead that there were considerably more than the 30,000 mutineers Guy Pedroncini first proposed in his classic study, *Les Mutineries de 1917*, and subsequently much repeated, because Pedroncini did not include the many acts of indiscipline that occurred in railway stations thronged with men returning (reluctantly) to the front. Moreover, and this is Mariot's essential argument, a mere enumeration of mutineers tells us very little about the scope of or broad-based sympathy for the mutinies. Deploying a cartographic analysis of regiments that are known to have mutinied by tracing their paths while behind the lines, he concludes that countless non-mutineers knew, either directly or by word of mouth, of the acts of indiscipline that disrupted the rest camps behind the lines. Moreover, he argues, insofar as these men chose not to report many of the incidents they observed they implicitly supported their more rebellious comrades (p. 371). But were all (or most) of the men who witnessed these acts wholly sympathetic to their comrades' actions? Here, I think, the jury is still out. It is very likely that men who did not actively rebel felt some real sympathy for those who did: it was, after all, a rare French soldier in 1917 who was not dismayed at the failure of the spring offensive, not disgusted by the misery of the trenches, not desperate for better food and more frequent leave. Yet we also know that companies and regiments that did not mutiny often paid a heavy price for the acts of those who did: the war memoirs from the 1920s that Pierre Schoentjes analyzes in this volume testify as much, as do recently unearthed collections of letters. "Reliable" regiments, like those in which Paul and Fernand Maret served, spent longer in the front-lines where they continued to confront mortal danger, because they had to stand in for regiments that had refused to return to the front lines.[1] It is not surprising, then, that the mutineer emerged in the fiction and memoirs of the inter-war years as at best a morally ambiguous protagonist.

If we do not yet have (and might never have) an accurate census of the mutinies, we do have a better sense, thanks to André Loez's sociological analysis, of who was, and who was not, likely to mutiny. Turning received wisdom on its head, he suggests very persuasively that married men, men with children, and--most significantly, given the attention paid at the time and subsequently to the role socialists might have played in fomenting the mutinies--members of trade unions were under-represented in the ranks of the mutineers (p. 325). The young, the unmarried, the peasant and the employee of small businesses: these are the men who were most likely to challenge the orders of their commanding officers to return to the lines. This is not to say, however, that older men, married men, and junior officers were happy with their lot in the spring of 1917; rather--as Fabienne Bock and Thierry Bonzon demonstrate--they were more likely to express their discontent in other ways, including through direct correspondence with the Chamber of Deputies. Their analysis of the letters written by front-line soldiers in 1917 to the parliamentary Committee of the Army reveals that these correspondents were older men (in their forties) and junior officers, all of whom had internalized the discursive practices and political values of the Third Republic. Convinced that it was their right as citizens to petition the Chamber for redress of the injustices they suffered, these men framed their very real complaints in terms of equality, justice, and citizenship. So, too, did Louis Barthas, whose socialist politics and pacifist sentiments have been the subject of much debate in recent years: when he sought the intercession of socialist deputies he did so, Romain Ducoulombier reveals, by appealing to the ideals of republican equality and justice. But unlike Barthas, who was eager to circulate pacifist tracts among his comrades at the front (p. 276), the men who corresponded with the parliamentary committee were

neither defeatist nor pacifist. In fact, they seem to have been the very epitome of the resolute, republican “citizen-soldier.”

It is more than ironic that Barthas perceived his front-line comrades much as the French High Command did: as men susceptible to the defeatist arguments that pacifist agitators put forth in pamphlets and broadsheets generated behind the lines. But they shared a belief in the political suggestibility of front-line troops for very different reasons. Barthas wanted to politicize his comrades and persuade them of the merits of an immediate, negotiated peace settlement; the French General Staff (like their counterparts in Italy) wanted to deflect blame for the mutinies from their failed offensive strategies and thus preferred to believe that nefarious influences on the home front were responsible for the collapse of military discipline. There is, however, little evidence that the French troops who spent some or all of their leave in Paris in the spring of 1917 or the Italian men who challenged the brutal, authoritarian character of General Cadorno’s command, were overly influenced by pacifist cells, defeatist propaganda, duplicitous women, or any of the other agents of moral dissolution suspected of sapping the military spirit of front-line soldiers. The role the home front—and Paris, first and foremost—played either in inspiring or sustaining the mutinies is now much better understood, as several of the essays in this volume attest, yet also more complicated than the French General Staff appreciated. Emmanuelle Cronier demonstrates that pacifist civilians’ influence on front-line troops was minimal. Certainly some soldiers were encouraged to desert while home on leave in Paris, but they were more likely to seek out organized criminal gangs (from whom they could purchase the forged papers they needed to evade arrest) than representatives of pacifist groups. And although some soldiers actively supported the strikes in the spring of 1917, their motivations were neither overtly political nor expressly defeatist. Cronier also demonstrates that the troops who vandalized railway stations on their return trip to the front were not inspired by agents of defeatism lingering in the shadows of the Gare de l’Est. The dismal conditions of troop trains—filthy, unreliable, over-crowded—were enough in and of themselves to provoke the men’s ire and precipitate their disorderly conduct.

Irene Guerrini and Marco Pluviano tell an even more chilling tale of men pushed to the limits of their endurance. Until his dismissal following the disaster at Caporetto in October 1917, Cadorno, the Italian commander-in-chief, was notable for his pig-headed determination to secure a break-through in the Italian Alps—eleven failed offensives notwithstanding—and his harsh punishment of those he deemed insufficiently soldierly. Summary executions, unforgiving courts martial, and the systematic decimation of units involved in acts of disobedience: these were the hallmarks of Cadorno’s disciplinary regime. Its relentless, unforgiving character did not, however, prevent acts of disobedience in the ranks, and the men who rebelled prior to Caporetto were, Guerrini and Pluviano attest, battle-seasoned, loyal, and frequently highly decorated. Like the men who mutinied in France, the Italians rebelled in the wake of a series of costly, failed offensives and in defiance of a system that denied them adequate rest and leave. As in France, political motivations were only occasionally a factor and these men did not need to hear from socialists at home to know that reform was needed on the front lines.

Although Paris and its putatively wanton ways could not be held to blame for corrupting front-line soldiers and inspiring them to mutiny, the womenfolk of Paris did infuse the collective imagination of at least some mutineers, as Jean-François Jagielski demonstrates in his sensitive analysis of racially tinged rumor in the spring of 1917. He examines the nature, origins, and cultural significance of the rumor that circulated among some mutinous troops that colonial soldiers, especially those brought to France from south-east Asia, were “massacring French women and children in Paris.” He demonstrates that this rumor did not spring from knowledge of real events: the one incident in which a racially inflected riot led to the death of a Parisian woman occurred after the rumor of murderous colonial troops first surfaced at the front. Thus it was not the case that a distorted account of a real incident gave rise to the unease of front line soldiers and their resolve to return home to defend their womenfolk. Rather the rumor acquired its potency because it gave expression to the convergence of pre-existing fears, animosities, and cultural prejudices. Because troops had good reason to mistrust officially sanctioned

information, because many Parisian workers had an established animus against colonial troops (whom they disdained as agents of the bourgeoisie), and because they despised all *embusqués*—here conveniently represented in the figure of the “Annamite”—who prospered from the war while the hard-pressed *poilu* suffered at the front, it was easy for uniformed men to give credence to exaggerated and racially charged stories that reflected their deepest fears and animosities. Jagielski makes the interesting point that these atrocity rumors, like those of August–September 1914 analyzed by John Horne and Alan Kramer, played upon cultural stereotypes of the barbarian foreigner.^[2] But whereas such atrocity tales worked in 1914 to galvanize military solidarity in defense of the home-front, in 1917 similar rumors contributed, in his judgment, to the disintegration of military resolve.

Several conclusions emerge from this collective portrait of the mutineers and their discontent. Political culture informed how men at the front defined their identity and protested their lot: they were republican citizens entitled to respect and uninhibited in their expression of discontent. Furthermore, revolutionary socialism (which by 1917 was calling for an immediate end to the war) and pacifism (which rejected the war outright) found some adherents, which is to be expected in a nation as politically diverse as France, but defeatist propaganda produced behind the lines did not cause the mutinies. Rather, the mutinies emerged out of the circumstances, frustrations, and sometimes overheated anxieties of front-line service. There is nothing overly controversial about these findings, and historians on both sides of the historiographical divide can find common ground here. So, too, with the book’s important observation that obedience and disobedience must be considered as constitutive parts of a continuum on which the two end points—unconditional obedience and absolute disobedience—are truly exceptional. Paul Jankowski’s piece on disobedience at Verdun makes this point most effectively. Rather than accepting uncritically the national mythologies of France and Germany—according to which both armies demonstrated unwavering resolve at Verdun, never sullied by criticism of their respective high commands or by significant breaches of military discipline—Jankowski demonstrates that French and German troops alike succumbed to disillusionment, dismay, and occasionally, outright defiance. Disobedience was manifest in various ways, ranging from fraternization with enemy troops, to mass surrender, desertion, and refusals to return to the front lines when ordered to do so. There were, he concludes, portents at Verdun of the collapse of military discipline that characterized the French ranks in 1917 and the German lines in 1918. Alexandre Lafon is also interested in the graduated character of disobedience, evidence of which he finds in the letters Henri Despeyrières sent to his parents in 1914 and 1915: on some occasions, Despeyrières reported, companies and regiments cultivated the tactic of live and let live; on others, individual soldiers delayed their return to a dangerous sector; sometimes units went so far as to refuse orders to charge when they were not convinced that anything would be gained thereby. This conscious ‘limitation of violence’ that Lafon defines as the essence of Despeyrières’s wartime experience seems to offer yet more proof of Leonard Smith’s thesis that front-line troops engaged in an ongoing “negotiation” with their commanding officers, obeying orders most of the time but also toying with the boundaries of disobedience.

Disobedience in the ranks, however multiform its manifestations, however destabilizing its effects, was not unique to the French army nor to the First World War, as several of the case-studies included in this volume make evident. Flemish soldiers, alienated from an army that privileged those who could speak French, were more likely to desert to the enemy than their Walloon comrades, especially in the spring of 1918 when the prospect of a German victory and the promise of German-protected Flemish autonomy were most potent. Israeli troops, whether inspired by secular concerns about international justice or religious identification with settlers in the West Bank, have resisted, on the one hand, orders to occupy territory outside the boundaries of Israel established in 1948 and, on the other, commands to dismantle Jewish settlements. And French reservists, recalled to service in Algeria after having been returned to civilian life, protested what they took to be this grave injustice. Insofar as they protested their recall but then obeyed orders to return to Algeria, their protests were “acts of disobedience in obedience” (p. 183). Similarly, Parisian policemen who joined forces with the Free French in August 1944, accepting if necessary the sacrifice of their own lives in the liberation of Paris, did so not as

incongruous advocates of anarchy in the streets but, as Christian Chevandier suggests, as defenders of order and protectors of Leclerc's newly established authority (p. 288).

Ultimately, however, the editors of this collection contend that obedience is more common than disobedience: "aujourd'hui comme avant, ici comme ailleurs, le refus reste l'exception statistique" (p. 14). To understand obedience as a military phenomenon, contributors to this volume take one of two tacks: some examine the culture of military discipline that emerged in the French army during the first half of the Third Republic; others offer case-studies--of the German army on the Eastern front in World War II and of Hutu participants in the mass murder of their Tutsi neighbors in the Rwandan genocide of 1994--that illuminate the chilling lessons derived from Stanley Milgram's psychological experiments into the nature of social obedience. These explorations of why soldiers (and sometimes civilians) are inclined to obey orders--even orders that require the commission of morally reprehensible acts--allow for several fascinating case-studies and one less than satisfactory conclusion.

Julien Mary and Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien argue in separate essays that the French army prior to and during the Great War worked to develop a culture of military obedience informed by and mindful of the egalitarian, patriotic values of the Third Republic. Mary focuses on the prewar years when French military thinkers applied themselves to the question of how to cultivate in the ranks of conscript, republican soldiers a sense of obedience and duty, and argues that they extracted from Gustave Le Bon's work on crowd psychology a singularly important insight: crowds were moved not by reason but by emotion. An effective commander, therefore, was one who could develop affective links with his men so powerful that when he demanded their obedience in the name of the *patrie* they all loved, they would obey. Saint-Fuscien carries the analysis into the war years when an official tolerance for harsh disciplinary measures--expressed in orders issued in September 1914 and June 1919 to prevent acts of pillaging--coexisted uncomfortably with the reluctance of junior officers to use violence against their own men. Indeed, for an officer to fire on his own men was tantamount to acknowledging his own lack of authority. The threat of violence--drawing a pistol or threatening to use it--was enough. And the testimony of front-line officers reveals that even this practice was increasingly rare after 1915. Whatever factors kept French troops in the field and willing to obey their commanding officers, it was not brute force. But was it the human inclination to obey orders, however reprehensible their effects, that Milgram's experiments appeared to uncover? This is the less than satisfactory implication embedded in this volume. Milgram's experiments revealed that ordinary people were all too willing to obey orders the effect of which was to inflict pain--including pain so severe as to be life-threatening--on others. These experiments certainly help us understand the conduct of German soldiers on the Eastern front in World War II, Hutu civilians driven by local elites to massacre their Tutsi neighbors, and other acts of military atrocity. But surely what we need to understand in order to appreciate why troops obeyed--and then chose not to obey--orders in the First World War is not why these men were willing to obey orders that would inflict pain, suffering, and death on others, but why they were willing to follow orders that would have the effect of inflicting serious harm on themselves. Obedience of this type, existentially and morally different from that witnessed in the Wehrmacht in 1941 or in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, is the great and defining mystery of the Great War. *Obéir/désobéir: Les mutineries de 1917 en perspective* does more to advance our understanding of military disobedience than to unravel the enigma of obedience.

LIST OF ESSAYS

André Loez, Nicolas Mariot, "Introduction générale."

Julien Mary, "Ordonner ou persuader? Les ambiguïtés du discours militaire français à la veille de la Grande Guerre."

Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien, "Forcer l'obéissance': intentions, formes et effets d'une pratique militaire dans l'activité combattante de la Grande Guerre."

Sophie Richardot, "L'apport de la psychologie sociale à la question de l'obéissance: les travaux de Stanley Milgram sur la soumission à l'autorité."

Paul Jankowski, "L'autre Verdun: doutes et désobéissances dans la bataille."

Irene Guerrini, Macro Pluviano, "Italie 1917: l'été de feu de la désobéissance."

Christoph Rass, Peter M. Quadflieg, "Une garantie d'obéissance? Discipline, cohésion sociale et conformisme dans la Wehrmacht durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale."

Claudine Vidal, "Grands tueurs et petits tueurs: la question de l'obéissance dans le génocide des Rwandais tutsis."

Emmanuelle Cronier, "Le rôle des permissionnaires dans la révolte de 1917: un front contaminé par Paris?"

Jean-François Jagielski, "Entre fiction et réalité, la rumeur des Annamites massacrant les Parisiennes."

Alexandre Lafon, "Obéir, contourner, refuser: les stratégies dévoilées par le témoignage du combattant Henri Despeyrières."

Fabienne Bock, Thierry Bonzon, "Il faut que vous sachiez ce qui se passe chez nous...': 246 lettres de militaires français au Parlement en 1917."

François Buton, "Quand les disponibles ne veulent pas l'être. Le 'Mouvement des rappelés' pendant la guerre d'Algérie."

André Bach, "La gestion des mutineries par le Commandement militaire."

Philippe Garraud, "L'obéissance des généraux allemands au pouvoir nazi: un 'faisceau de facteurs' singulier et sa possible remise en cause."

Florent Brayard, "Au risque du mal. La résistance de Kurt Gerstein."

Stéphanie Prezioso, "Obéir pour mieux désobéir? Les volontaires italiens dans la Première Guerre mondiale."

Romain Ducoulombier, "La 'Sociale' sous l'uniforme: obéissance et résistance à l'obéissance dans les rangs du socialisme et du syndicalisme français, 1914-1916."

Christian Chevandier, "Cesser d'obéir et maintenir un ordre: les policiers parisiens en août 1944."

Karine Lamarche, "Obéissance et désobéissance en Israël: l'objection de conscience en question."

André Loez, "Éléments pour une sociologie des mutins de 1917."

Bruno Benvindo, "Désertre le front belge. La guerre et ses marges, 1914-1918."

Nicolas Mariot, "Pour compter des mutins faut-il soustraire des moutons?"

Emmanuelle Picard, “Les mutineries dans les manuels scolaires français de l’entre-deux-guerres aux années 1980.”

Markus Pöhlmann, “Une occasion manquée? Les mutineries de 1917 dans la stratégie et l’historiographie allemandes.”

Pierre Schoentjes, “Être ‘héros si on compte six au lieu de dix’. Images de mutins dans la littérature de fiction.”

Philippe Olivera, “Le mutin derrière le fusillé, ou le silence durable de l’acteur.”

NOTES

[1] Fernand Maret, *Lettres de guerre 14-18* (Nantes: Siloe, 2001). Letter dated 16 June 1917.

[2] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

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