

H-France Review Vol. 12 (March 2012), No. 45

Hubert Bonin, Bernard Lachaise, and Christophe-Luc Robin, eds., *Robert Boulin. Itinéraires d'un gaulliste (Libourne, Paris)*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2011. 424 pp. Biographical notices and index. \$65.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-90-5201-736-5.

Review by Andrew Shennan, Wellesley College.

Here is a classic case of a life eclipsed by its ending. Between August 1961 and October 1979, Robert Boulin held eight different ministerial portfolios for a period totaling fourteen years—to this day, a record of ministerial longevity under the Fifth Republic. Over that long span, this Gaullist lawyer from the town of Libourne in the Gironde served under three presidents and six prime ministers. He began his ministerial career by overseeing the repatriation of *pièdes noirs* and *harkis* from Algeria in 1961–1962. When his career abruptly and tragically ended, the then minister of labor was being talked about as a potential prime minister. And yet, until the last few months of his life, Boulin's public profile had been relatively modest. He became a household name only after his death, when the *Affaire Boulin*, which had begun earlier in 1979 with allegations of involvement in shady real estate dealings, was fed by the shocking news of his suicide and kept alive by conspiracy theories questioning whether he had died by his own hand or had been assassinated.

This book aims to counteract the sensationalism of the *Affaire Boulin* by refocusing or, more accurately, to judge by the paucity of the existing bibliography, focusing on Boulin's political and policy-making accomplishments. The book originated in a 2009 *colloque*—a format that often provides coverage simultaneously more exhaustive and more eclectic than would be likely in a single-authored work. At times, the detail presented here (for example, about Boulin's belated affiliation with a Masonic Order in Paris and his activities as mayor of Libourne) verges on the antiquarian. But, collectively, the seventeen contributors have produced a soberly informative study that illuminates many aspects of national and local politics in the early Fifth Republic and does justice to a long and quietly constructive career, without making excessive claims about its subject's significance.

The book's contributors address three main aspects of Boulin's career. The first is his political career—his resistance activity in the later phases of the Occupation, his career as a local militant in the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), his election to the National Assembly after de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, and his relations with the Gaullist party. Boulin was never a Gaullist "baron" or a leading figure in the national party. He was consistently loyal to the General's ideology, but notwithstanding the book's cover photograph of Boulin and de Gaulle together, the General himself barely figures in this work. Much more central to Boulin's career were his relations with other Gaullist leaders, particularly with Jacques Chaban-Delmas, the long-time mayor of neighboring Bordeaux and a national political figure of a quite different order. Chaban had played a critical role in bringing the recently elected Boulin into government office in 1961. At the end of the decade, Boulin served for three years in a cabinet headed by Chaban. He supported Chaban's presidential campaign in 1974 and shared his ardent opposition to Jacques Chirac's ascendancy within the Gaullist movement.

At the same time, the analysis here suggests a more nuanced relationship between these two men of similar ages, backgrounds and politics, but very different public profiles. In 1958, Chaban had not been wholly enthusiastic about Boulin's candidacy in the general elections, perhaps seeing a potential rival for leadership of the Gaullist party in the region. *Sotto voce*, Boulin acknowledged that the patronage of Bordeaux's mayor could sometimes be a mixed blessing. Given the long-standing rivalry between Bordeaux and Libourne, Boulin's electoral success depended on his ability to maintain a degree of independence from Chaban and to advance the local interests of his town. This volume shows just how successful he was in that effort.

The second part of the book—and the heart of its scholarly contribution—consists of a series of chapters evaluating Boulin's performance in his various ministerial assignments. Overall, the assessment is a positive one: Boulin was a hard-working and energetic minister, who built a reputation as someone who could be counted upon to advance the administration's agenda on important and technically complex issues. His efficiency and diplomacy were appreciated by those above him in the hierarchy and explain his gradual emergence as a serious contender for the premiership. It was certainly not a career of glittering prizes or brilliant achievements. As *secrétaire d'État aux rapatriés*, Boulin committed his fair share of mistakes (underestimating the extent of the exodus from Algeria, calling *pieds noirs* coming to France "vacationers," and insisting that repatriated muslim *harkis* be detained in camps), but he was also widely credited with creating a legal and institutional framework for accepting and integrating hundreds of thousands of *rapatriés* into France.

In his next post, as *secrétaire d'État au budget*, Boulin had a limited scope for independent action, as a result of his junior ministry's subordination to the Ministry of Finance and the powerful presence of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the head of that ministry. But in 1966, when Giscard was replaced by Michel Debré, who was much closer ideologically to Boulin, the latter's authority and latitude expanded. By the time he left the budget ministry in 1967, he had gained a reputation as an effective steward of the government's budget policy, even though he had little or no prior expertise in economic affairs. Such success in mastering an unfamiliar portfolio was not rewarded with a more high profile post, however, but rather with a string of similar assignments. His time as Minister of Agriculture (1968-1969) was too short to accomplish much. A longer stint as Minister of Public Health and Social Security (1969-1972) gave him an opportunity to tackle one of the major shortcomings of the post-Liberation welfare state—the inadequate pension system that put retirement out of reach for many elderly citizens.

Catherine Omnès' chapter on the *loi Boulin* of December 1971 offers a balanced assessment of this largely forgotten, but important reform of the French pension system. In his element in this kind of "technical" ministry, Boulin seems to have been less successful as minister in charge of the government's relations with parliament (1972-1973 and 1976-1977). While there, his very Gaullist distaste for *cuisine électorale* and backstage political maneuvering made him ineffective. By the time he returned to more familiar terrain—as a junior minister for economy and finance in 1977-1978 and then as Minister of Labor in 1978-1979—the *trente glorieuses* had come to an end, and Boulin, like the entire leadership of the republic, was facing the new challenges of rising unemployment, inflation, and structural adjustment. There is not much evidence that Boulin exerted a major influence on the overall direction of the French government's economic strategy in the 1970s, but it can be said that in his final post, he found himself, amid the crisis in the steel industry and growing anxiety about factory closings, in the most politically visible role of his career.

The book closes by examining Boulin's career from a more local perspective. It looks at his numerous election campaigns (both legislative and municipal), his contributions to Libourne's civic and economic development, his connections with wine-growers (naturally a critical

constituency in this region), and his relations with political opponents on the left. These final chapters leave no doubt about the mark that Boulin left on his hometown. But implicitly, by their very local focus, they prompt a larger question: what mark did Boulin leave on France. In an excellent conclusion, two of the volume's editors (Hubert Bonin and Bernard Lachaise) reiterate the eminently balanced assessment developed throughout the book. Boulin was never a leader of the Gaullist party; he was never the architect of a "signature" law or policy; he never had the opportunity to head a government (an opportunity that Giscard d'Estaing seemed to be contemplating for him when the President visited Libourne just three weeks before Boulin's death).

As someone who had come of age politically during de Gaulle's *traversée du désert* and entered national politics as a member of the new elite of 1958, Boulin never fully acclimated to the world of the Palais Bourbon. Precisely for this reason, and also because of the reputation that he compiled as a "technical" minister, he retained a certain degree of independence—indeed, he famously exhibited in December 1974 by publishing a *Le Figaro* article about Chirac's takeover of the Gaullist party under the provocative title "Le 14 Brumaire." Such independence did not necessarily work in his favor. Nor were his other attributes, such as his capacity for hard work, good listening, and thoughtful policymaking, those of a high flyer. As one of his *directeurs du cabinet* put it: "Il n'était pas une 'figure *outstanding*,' mais il représentait très bien le gaullisme de base, des gens de bonne volonté qui croyaient dans de Gaulle" (p. 157). Could this loyal and conscientious Gaullist have made it to the Matignon and converted a career of minor historical interest into something more important? It is an interesting hypothetical question and another reason that Boulin's life will never escape the shadow of his untimely death.

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ISSN 1553-9172