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Stéphane Genêt, *Les espions des lumières: Actions secrètes et espionage militaire sous Louis XV*. Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions et Ministère de la Défense, 2013. 511 pp. Annex, bibliography, and index. €26.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-36583-370-7.

Review by Christy Pichichero, George Mason University.

What was it like to be the James Bond of the French Enlightenment? According to Stéphane Genêt, being a secret agent during the reign of Louis XV involved all of the grit and gore of the adventures of “007,” but none of the glory or glamour. Indeed, if our popular culture has idolized the figure of the spy, it was quite the opposite in eighteenth-century France, where informants were regarded as among the basest actors in political and military life—dishonorable, mercenary, and treacherous. Definitions in dictionaries and the *Encyclopédie* characterized espionage as a predominantly military pursuit and an “acte infâme,” never failing to condemn the dangers and displeasures of engaging in such activity: “On pend les espions quand on les découvre”; “C’est un vilain métier que d’espionner.”[1] According to Genêt, this historic disdain for spies and their occupation long discouraged French scholars from treating the subject in a serious manner, and when they finally did, their research centered on the twentieth century. This situation changed thanks to the work of Lucien Bély, professor at Paris IV-Sorbonne and director of Genêt’s doctoral thesis upon which *Les espions des lumières* is based. From 1990 to the present, Bély’s ground-breaking work on early modern espionage and diplomacy has transformed the field, bringing Intelligence Studies to France and particularly to the Ancien Régime.[2]

Of course, distaste was not the only reason that scholars balked at the prospect of researching espionage in early modern France. “Comment exposer ce qui doit se taire?,” Genêt asks (p. 17).

Indeed, such work poses a daunting methodological challenge, since the clandestine mode and raison d’être of espionage translate to a distressing paucity of extant sources, archival or published, and to the few sources available being cloaked in deliberately misleading claims, allusions, anonymity, and understatement. Focusing primarily on the arena of military espionage during the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the Seven Years’ War (1754-1763), Genêt takes on this challenge with diligence and aplomb, seamlessly weaving together published primary sources with manuscripts from the Service Historique de la Défense and the diplomatic archives at the Quay d’Orsay to shine light into the shadowy underworld of espionage during the reign of Louis XV.

“L’espionnage militaire, une mosaïque,” the first and most conceptually rich part of the book, is a global reconstruction of the players, policies, ideologies, and practices of military espionage. Genêt begins by proposing a taxonomy of informants both passive and active (p. 33). Chapters one and two examine imperfect and improvised sources of intelligence: locals, *chasseurs*, and *contrabandiers*, or enemy deserters and prisoners. Generally speaking, information divulged by these groups was of dubious utility. Most civilians were not adequately familiar with things military to offer useful insights (p. 43), and members of enemy armies frequently chose purposefully to misinform or did not possess sufficient military rank to access critical intelligence (pp. 51-2).

A truly effective informant came in the form of a more seasoned and professional “espion militaire,” the subject of the third chapter. Genêt describes the ideal spy as “une synthèse de plusieurs archétypes

sociaux, particulièrement prégnants au XVIIIe siècle: 'l'honnête homme' (bonne moeurs, 'intelligence', sociabilité), le militaire (fidélité totale, obéissance absolue au roi et à son commanditaire, 'coup d'oeil' (pour percevoir ce qu'on attend de lui) et l'aventurier (le goût des voyages, du secret et du risque)" (pp. 59-60). In addition to these qualities, having access to an extensive and reliable network was also highly valued since spies did not work alone and usually depended on collaborators to help with both acquiring and transmitting information (the subject of chapter four). Admitting laconically that "les candidats remplissant tous les critères doivent se faire rares" (p. 60), Genêt abandons such ideal portraits in favor of the real. He surveys the dossiers on twenty-six secret agents working between 1740 and 1763 to yield concrete evidence about the recruitment of spies, their careers and commissions, their motivations, and the cost and the quality of their work. Despite this small sampling, a problem that the author acknowledges, Genêt is at his best in these analyses in which he adeptly maneuvers the sparse archive to unearth new and significant material.

Who were these spies? The majority were officers and veterans of the French army whose military experience, technical competence, relations, and facility with navigating spaces of war made them ideal candidates for the job. Merchants (known for their mobility and networks) and ecclesiastics (thought capable of keeping secrets) represented important groups in Genêt's sampling of agents, which is completed by a menagerie of random individuals from a doctor in London and a banker in Strasbourg to a financial advisor of Charles VII. Genêt makes particular mention of Jewish spies such as Cardoso de Bruxelles (pp. 73-81) and women spies like the infamous Prussian agent known by her alias "*Nachtfleischerin*" (pp. 81-8). Though he indicates a few examples of Jews and women proposing themselves, or indeed acting as spies, he stresses that these occasions were rare due to the numerous, well-documented social prejudices and legal blockages against these groups at this time in France.

So how did one become a spy? Genêt argues that most potential spies volunteered themselves by following a typical procedure. They drafted a letter containing a sample of their knowledge, their contacts, or what they could find out and sent these letters to either an officer near their home, the commanding officer of the nearby army, a diplomat on post, or to the Minister of Foreign Affairs or of War (p. 65). A loosely contractual negotiation followed in which the potential agent made a list of demands and conditions for his service—money, guarantees of security, names of contacts in certain strategic places. This list was typically reviewed by a military officer, diplomat, or bureaucrat, then spies were interviewed and evaluated for their "worth," and subsequently counter-offers were made to the list of demands, and the appropriate remuneration was determined (pp. 119-121). The sums spent on funding different spies and their operations were extremely variable, though Genêt notes that they depended on more or less objective criteria: the information itself, the degree of urgency, the intricacies of harvesting and conveying the information, the nuisances of travel, the social and strategic position of the agent, and the level and means of compensation. The author assembles an inventory of types of agents and the salaries that they commanded, which is particularly illuminating not only with regard to the economics of espionage, but also the hierarchical range of activities in which they were engaged. At one end of the spectrum one finds an ordinary correspondent writing from a foreign country paid some 20 *livres* per month and, on the other, a well-placed spy like Ytellinguen who was writing from within the headquarters of the Duke of Arenberg (Field Marshal and Supreme Commander of the Austrian forces in the Netherlands) during the War of Austrian Succession and earning 480 *livres* per month.

Despite Genêt's impressive work to reconstitute these procedures, one must not get the impression that Louis XV had anything so systematized as the British MI6, the American CIA, or any of the six intelligence agencies in today's French government. The "system" of espionage was largely decentralized. Military officers, intendants, and diplomats were not only trusted to judge when, where, how many, and which spies to employ, but were charged with deciding upon the spies' payment in form and quantity. They were also habitually obliged to pay spies themselves and then ask for reimbursement from Versailles, which was slow in coming and at times refused if the information culled was not deemed worth the government's investment. The uncertainty surrounding repayment put even

more pressure on commissioning parties to find good spies and to produce results. This often meant hiring multiple spies and then a taxing process of verifying the information through intuitive guesswork, wisdom from experience, and hours cross-checking spy accounts against one another and against news reports. Such efforts were necessary in order to avoid garnering inaccurate intelligence—partial, exaggerated, true but obsolete, or simply false—that not only wasted financial resources, but could also prove deadly if errors were logged about the location of the enemy, their munitions, or the size of their forces.

If this ad hoc system of hiring spies seemed onerous for local officials and military officers, it was even more disadvantageous for the agents themselves, for as the salaries above reveal, they received relatively little pay for work involving considerable risk. This raises a fundamental question with regard to motivation. Given the dangers, low pay, and scorn associated with the work, why become a spy? While some people were coerced through money, kindness and generosity, force, or threat of execution (pp. 44-5), Genêt avers that most spies ignored deterrents and volunteered themselves for reasons unknown. The archive is silent on the matter of motivation since letters of interest from potential spies exhibited little more than hackneyed epistolary formulations on being a loyal subject wanting to serve the King or the *patrie*. Borrowing the acronym MICE (Money, Ideology, Coercion, Ego) to hazard a few hypotheses, Genêt broaches considerations such as vengeance, political and religious affinities, and national sentiment (pp. 89, 91-9). These speculations on motivation are interesting and fertile, and would have been more so had Genêt engaged not just with Dziembowski's *Un nouveau patriotisme français*, but with the larger historiography on propaganda, the nation, and public opinion toward royal authority including English language works by David Bell, Jay Smith, Lisa Jane Graham and others. [3]

Following Part One's remarkably elaborate view of military espionage during the reign of Louis XV, Genêt dedicates the second and third parts of the book to further substantiating elements of this "system." As a consequence of this structural decision, a certain repetition marks the ensuing five chapters, making some content seem less worthy of full-blown chapters and rendering the second half of the book more useful to specialists seeking specific information on individuals and case studies of military espionage. Chapter five on the military secret and Chapter six on types of sedentary and mobile spies are particularly affected by this tendency toward redundancy, since both chapters are largely based upon a rather tedious and forced sub-classification of ideas or categories that are either self-evident (spies find out information by observing, listening, and conversing) or have already been sufficiently explained.

The third part of the book is more substantive as Genêt turns his focus to the French counter-espionage effort. This involved successfully communicating French military secrets as well as snuffing out and neutralizing (or indeed profiting from) enemy spies in their midst. In chapter seven, Genêt explores the material cultural of espionage as a "société de papiers" (p. 299), a non-republic of letters in which the greatest jeopardy lay in having correspondences intercepted. After an entertaining section on the classic and often ineffective techniques of using invisible ink or alphanumeric code to write letters, Genêt makes the factual, but nevertheless jarring assertion that since hiring private couriers was very expensive and risky (because correspondence depended on a single man), most people elected to use the postal service to transmit their top secret information. Accordingly, Louis XV created the first official French bureau of postal inquisition, transforming the "Cabinet noir" into the "Cabinet du secret des postes" (p. 332). In the eighth chapter Genêt lists the target groups and warning signs that authorities examined to locate enemy spies. For example, local authorities paid special attention to foreigners traveling in France, to the usage of temporary housing, to the sudden acquisition of riches, or to excessive frequenting of barber shops and wig stores which were centers of gossip and *nouvellisme*. Again, some of this material reads as a bit obvious and makes the chapter seem an excuse to include more findings from the archive, though specialists may appreciate the specific examples.

Genêt's ninth and final chapter proffers a fascinating look at the procedures in place for dealing with spies caught by French authorities. The habitual process, at least nominally, was to involve up to five steps: a signaling or denunciation; surveillance of the subject; interception of mail; arrest, imprisonment, and simultaneous search for proof including interrogation and the confiscation of all papers; and a dénouement that could involve the intercession of protectors, an attempt at "retournement" trying to get the spy to serve as a double agent, and quite rarely a trial leading to punishments ranging from liberation to execution (p. 395). Despite the existence of these legal (or paralegal) procedures, in military zones during a time of conflict, scores of enemy spies were unceremoniously slaughtered after an initial impromptu interrogation without any further due process. Genêt concludes that cases that went through all of the above steps were most likely in the minority. In a decidedly "unenlightened" fashion, the decision to kill or preserve the life of an enemy spy was not based upon the law or a notion of human dignity, but rather on the worth of that spy in terms of utility, as an accessory to attain information, or as a pawn for negotiation.

Genêt's work is outstanding in its depth and breadth. He deftly combines macro- and micro-historical perspectives on espionage and artfully counterbalances narratives starring the usual suspects (Frederick the Great of Prussia, maréchal Maurice de Saxe, Minister of War the comte d'Argenson, and the chevalier d'Éon) with stories engaging a captivating new cast of characters in the era's own "James Bonds" (Simon Louvrier, Madame de Leotardi, Labunague, Pazetti, and others). Genêt's keen intuition, logic, and lucid prose cogently bring to life the seemingly innumerable practical challenges that constrained the actors and activities of espionage. The plethora of examples that he cites span throughout France, the European continent, and the French colonial world, making his work of broad interest to a wide range of scholars.

Despite these excellent qualities, Genêt's efforts to include and categorize so much of the information that he surely spent endless hours to mine and synthesize actually lead to some conceptual and structural problems. In effect, Genêt transforms a scarcity of resources into an embarrassment of riches. The book contains an unwieldy quantity of taxonomies that are hard to keep track of and distinguish from one another. Also, in certain cases there is a lack of clarity on how impactful the spies and the intelligence they procured may have been. Continued scholarly work on these points would be beneficial. From a compositional standpoint, the general architecture is unbalanced and unintuitive at times, which is further encumbered by a surfeit of chapter sub-sections whose conceptual divisions, narrative chronology, and alternating bold and italic typeface can feel arbitrary and a bit dizzying. Redeeming the tripartite structure and profusion of sub-sections—all of which are listed in the detailed table of contents at the end of the volume—is that they render the book easily searchable, enhancing its use as a reference tool for consumers of the World Wide Web looking to access information quickly and with little effort.

Overall, Stéphane Genêt's *Les espions des lumières* is an impressive, interesting, and important work that makes a critical contribution to the development of early modern intelligence studies and to our understanding of the mechanisms of information that shaped military and political history during the French Enlightenment.

NOTES

[1] *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th edition (1762) and Jean-François Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (1787-88) cited on p. 9. of Genêt's book.

[2] Among Lucien Bély's many volumes, see especially *Espions et Ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Fayard, 1990); *Les Relations internationales en Europe: XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: PUF, 2007 [1992]); *L'Europe des traités de Westphalie. Esprit de la diplomatie et diplomatie de l'esprit* (Paris: PUF,

2000); and *L'Art de la paix en Europe. Naissance de la diplomatie moderne XVI^e - XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: PUF, 2007).

[3] Edmond Dziembowski, *Un nouveau patriotisme français: La France face à la puissance française, 1750-1770* (Oxford: SVEC, 1998); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); Lisa Jane Graham, *If the King Only Knew: Seditious Speech in the Reign of Louis XV* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

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