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Gavin Bowd, *The Last Communard: Adrien Lejeune, the Unexpected Life of a Revolutionary*. London and New York: Verso, 2016. 182 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78478-285-6.

Review by John Bulaitis, Canterbury Christ Church University.

The significance of the Paris Commune in shaping modern France divides opinion. For some historians, the commune marks the end of an era, “the last great uprising” of a period opened by the 1789 Revolution.[1] For others, its modern legacy is profound, “a touchstone...for an understanding of concepts ranging from class and revolution to femininity and masculinity.”[2] The conflict over the Commune’s meaning has also sharply divided the French left. The Communist Party (PCF) viewed it as an harbinger of the type of society for which they were the standard bearers: “the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative,” as Marx had said.[3] For communists, at least from the time of the Popular Front, 1871 symbolized the way the struggle for a democratic republic and national independence was fused with the aim of socialist revolution, the model for which was the Soviet Union. The party invested the *Mur des Fédérés* in Père Lachaise cemetery, the site of a massacre of Communards at the end of “Bloody Week” (28 May), with immense symbolic value. Others on the left challenged this interpretation and highlighted the communards’ commitment to a more spontaneous, democratic, and pluralist form of politics.

Gavin Bowd began the reflections that inspired this book in 1989 when, visiting Père Lachaise, he noticed a gravestone near the Communards’ Wall. It carried the inscription “Adrien Lejeune, the last communard, died in Novosibirsk, USSR, 1942.” Bowd started his research with three questions: Who was Lejeune? What was he doing in the Soviet Union during the dark years of war? How did his remains come back to France?

First appearing in French in 2007 as *Le Dernier Communard*, Bowd’s answer to these questions has now been published in an English edition with some minor changes, including a sub-title “the unexpected life of a revolutionary.”[4] A short book of around 50,000 words in 118 pages, it is neither the history of the Commune nor a biography of Lejeune. Rather, its subject is the way in which a mythological version of Lejeune’s life was constructed, appropriated, and instrumentalized by the PCF in the service of a political cause. Overall, it is a compelling read, crafted with flair and fluency, though this reviewer found himself questioning some secondary aspects of the author’s interpretation.

Bowd begins by outlining the communist narrative of Lejeune’s life. He was the “embodiment of the perfect Communard;” he “did not hesitate” to join the fray, fought on “one barricade after another” and, after the crushing of the Commune, showed defiance to his captors and interrogators (pp. 4-7). Narrowly escaping execution, he was transported to a labor camp in New Caledonia until amnestied in 1880. But Lejeune continued the struggle by joining the burgeoning socialist movement and in 1922, at age 75, the Communist Party. In the late 1920s, he left France for “his second country,” the Soviet Union, but not before donating his savings to *l’Humanité* newspaper. Evacuated to Siberia as the German army advanced towards Moscow in late 1941, he died with unwavering faith in the communist future (pp. 4-7).

Bowd's first five chapters evaluate the communist story against the evidence. Exploiting archives of the French Ministry of Defence, the Communist International and the PCF, the book outlines the gap between what the sources suggest as reality and Lejeune's "imagined life." Interestingly, Bowd explains how this heroic version of Lejeune's life was constructed with collusion from the old man himself. In Moscow, Lejeune helped to produce a ghost-written autobiography, published in 1931, and gave interviews about his exploits. Indeed, there are parallels with the way in which an official version of the life of PCF leader, Maurice Thorez, was constructed in his own autobiography, *Fils du Peuple*.^[5] One is also reminded of Paul Ricoeur's observation that all identity is a constant reinterpretation "of truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself... a cloth woven of stories told."^[6] Lejeune's early years are covered by Bowd in a short first chapter (seven pages). He was born in 1847 and brought up in Bagnolet, which would later become a communist stronghold, but which at the time was a rural community dominated by fruit growers. Politically conservative, these *croquants* would be virulent opponents of the Commune. For sources, Bowd has little to draw from other than Lejeune's own account of his youth. Yet, without accepting the exaggerations of this narrative, he convincingly explains the radicalization of a young Bagnolet resident, against the backdrop of the social and political tensions that marked the final years of the Second Empire.

Chapter two covers Lejeune's role in the Commune. Bowd has uncovered documents in the military archives that contradict the communist and Lejeune's own version of events. Evidence suggests that Lejeune's role in the Commune was, at best, "modest" (p. 47). It seems that he attempted to extradite himself from the struggle as it neared its bloody denouement. In defeat, his behaviour was less than heroic. Appearing before a military tribunal, Lejeune claimed to have been coerced into taking part in the fighting, that he had not discharged his weapons, and that he "ran away" from the barricades (p. 32). Bowd establishes that Lejeune was not deported to New Caledonia and was released from imprisonment in 1876, several years before the amnesty.

Chapter three covers Lejeune's next fifty years. Only four of its eighteen pages deal directly with the old communard's life. The others sketch the history of the annual commemoration of the Commune at Père Lachaise, a narrative that is taken up to 1933. Bowd has found no trace of Lejeune's activities in either the pre-war socialist movement or the young communist party. He is, however, able to discuss Lejeune's departure to the Soviet Union along with a small group of old communards to be looked after by the Soviet section of International Red Aid (MOPR). Communist accounts give the date of the departure as either 1926 or more usually 1928, which is also the year given in *Maitron* (the authoritative dictionary of labor movement biographies). Bowd claims that this date is "refuted" by the evidence (p. 65). He has found in Lejeune's comintern file a photograph of Lejeune with other veterans at the 1929 Bloody Week commemorations and a document signed by Lejeune in Paris in May 1930, immediately after that year's commemoration. Bowd concludes that Lejeune relocated to the Soviet Union in 1930. While the date does not seem a matter of great importance, one of the book's themes is the way in which one error in the story of Lejeune's life leads quickly to others (p.129). Bowd's interpretation of the evidence is far from convincing, however. It does not explain, for example, why Lejeune himself would say in 1930 that he had been "in Russia for several years."^[7] Nor is there any explanation of why Lejeune would depart France at a later date than others in the group of old communards to be cared for by MOPR. Bowd does not consider the possibility that Lejeune left for the Soviet Union in 1928, but returned for visits to Paris in 1929 and 1930 to attend the annual pilgrimage to Père Lachaise.

The next two chapters deal consecutively with Lejeune's life and death in the Soviet Union. The old communard did not find life easy in the socialist paradise. As his fellow veterans passed away and his own health deteriorated, he became lonely and increasingly homesick, with few visitors and little opportunity to speak his mother tongue. He was often irritated by petty institutional rules and bureaucratic mentalities. In 1940, news of the Nazi occupation affected him deeply. According to his carer, a

compassionate woman called Adela Nikolova, Lejeune's last months were "months of unbearable physical and moral suffering" (p.103). He was, nevertheless, a demanding individual. In the mid-1930s, relations between him and *l'Humanité* staff became "tense," as letters arrived in France demanding money and various items, including coffee, wine, chocolate, and tins of sardines. The "living symbol" of the Commune was, says Bowd, "voracious" (p.70).

During these years, André Marty, the PCF's representative on the Comintern leadership, enters the story. He becomes Lejeune's "great protector" (p. 118), at times showing genuine concern at the old man's situation. Marty intervened in the tension between *l'Humanité* and Lejeune. He told employees at the communist journal to give the old man "all his desires" but not to send money: supposedly, a widow of another old communard was encouraging Lejeune's demands "for her personal interests" (p. 74). On Lejeune's death, it was Marty who checked that his possessions and documents were preserved for the PCF archives and raised the idea that his remains should be brought back to Paris at the earliest opportunity. Marty also penned a hasty obituary, which would become the main source of errors found in communist texts about the old communard (p. 129).

According to Bowd, a "new symbolic importance" of Lejeune for the PCF emerged in 1935. He was from this point "the Last Communard," carrying on his "aging shoulders an important and prestigious responsibility" (pp. 71-72). Although there were other communards still living, including Emile Chausse and Pierre Vidal, for the PCF, "neither man fitted the narrative demanded by the Comintern." And so, for communists, Lejeune "seemed to be the last Communard left" (p.71). So, writes Bowd, despite Lejeune's "exasperating" demands, "the French Communists continued to supply the Last Communard" with various items of comfort as well as eulogies of admiration (pp. 75-76).

Here, the interpretation again poses problems. Closer examination of the PCF commemorations during the second half of the 1930s would have contradicted the conclusion that communists viewed Lejeune as "the Last Communard" in the years before the Second World War. As noted above, chapter three's sketch of the history of the Communard Wall finishes in 1933. Yet the following Popular Front years witnessed the biggest demonstrations in the wall's history: *l'Humanité* reports 600,000 people in 1936; while in 1937 the cortège took seven hours to pass the wall. A poignant moment during these parades was the appearance of the "old communards." In 1936, a *l'Humanité* journalist writes: "All around me, people whisper, 'it's the communards.' And slowly, bent over their walking sticks or supported by friends, several old men shuffle forward towards the Wall." The journalist recognised seven: Deshauchamps, Poënsen, Répiguët, Sureau, Sérot, Sandrice, Lagriffoul. The following year, names of more old communards are given (Caggrifoul, Crème, Malassagne, Sercau). Likewise in 1938: "an enthusiastic and continuous ovation greeted the old Communards," including Édouard et Léon Chénel, Paupy, and Fernand Desprez.[8] So in the 1930s there remained a number of "last communards"—and Lejeune's name was not amongst them. In reports in *l'Humanité* of the annual commemorations, it is also striking that Lejeune is missing from the roll call of old communards during the years between 1923 and 1930, events he would have surely attended. In short, Lejeune is remarkably absent from the communist memory of the Commune during the entire inter-war period.

Marty's letters to the directors of *l'Humanité* do not refer to Lejeune as "the last communard" but as "an old communard." In one letter—not consulted by Bowd—Marty refers to "l'affaire Lejeune" (29 March 1936). Admonishing the paper's administrator for sending cash to the old man, he says that Lejeune receives everything he needs "to lighten his old age" in the Soviet Union. What would give him "great pleasure" would be "des lettres amicales, avec par exemple quelques fleurs, quelques photos, en d'autres termes, une petite aide morale." [9] Perhaps the eulogies that frequently arrived from Paris during these years are just as much attempts to maintain the morale of a frail old man as celebrations of the "very existence" of the old communard (p. 76). Bowd does not indicate when the description of Lejeune as the "last communard" first appears in the sources. To my knowledge, it first appears in the diary of the Comintern general secretary Georgi Dimitrov on January 2, 1941, a source also not utilized by Bowd.

Dimitrov met Lejeune while visiting José Díaz, the Spanish communist leader, at the Barvikha sanatorium and appears to have immediately taken an interest in the old man. Six weeks later (February 13, 1941) he “received” Adela Nikolova and gave her “instructions” to look after Lejeune, to whom he paid another visit a few days later. [10]

Chapter 6 is entitled “The Return of Lejeune.” “Return” has a double meaning: the return of Lejeune in the public memory of the Commune and the return of his remains from the Soviet Union. Bowd outlines how in the immediate post-war years, the PCF had its own more recent martyrs from the Resistance and the significance of the commemoration at the Communards’ Wall was demoted in the communist calendar. Lejeune’s body remained in Siberia partly also because his main champion, Marty, was, firstly, isolated by the leadership and then expelled from the PCF ranks. It was not until the 1960s that a revival of interest in the Commune brought the “return” (more correctly, the emergence) of Lejeune into the public consciousness. The events of 1968 prompted a struggle for the legacy of the Commune between the PCF and others on the left, including anarchists, Trotskyists, and Maoists. Against this background, the story of the “last communard” took on “symbolic importance” for the PCF. Lejeune’s ashes were returned with great pomp from the Soviet Union on May 24, 1971 and laid to rest at the *Mur des Fédérés* during a big PCF-sponsored commemoration of the Commune’s centenary. Bowd cites a document in the PCF archives which explicitly links the request to “the soviet comrades for the return of the body of Adrien Lejeune” with the “struggle against bourgeois, reformist and *gauchiste* interpretations [of the Commune]” (p. 136).

In a final chapter Bowd sketches how the waning of the Commune in the collective memory has paralleled the decline of the PCF. Nevertheless, he rightly points out that the *Mur des Fédérés* remains “a realm of memory” (p. 163). This is why the story of Adrien Lejeune is valuable. Bowd explains that much of the pioneering research into Lejeune’s life was carried out in the 1960s by a Siberian journalist, Alexander Kukhno, who doubted the official version and “like a good historian” tenaciously sought to uncover archival sources to study Lejeune “in a detailed and accurate fashion” (p. 129). It is a shame that Bowd did not draw on all available archival sources, particularly given that traces of Lejeune’s life are scarce. Perhaps also more care could have been taken with some of the historical context: Jacques Duclos did not take “refuge” in the Soviet Union during the war (p. 81); the period August and September 1940 is rather clumsily described as one of “more and more arrests and executions of Communists, many of them Lejeune’s friends” (p.123). Nevertheless, Bowd tells Lejeune’s story with considerable flair and a certain panache. He knows how to engage the interest of the specialist, while writing with remarkable accessibility for the wider public. Yet, while correcting a communist narrative that exaggerates Lejeune’s role in the history of the Commune, he rather embellishes Lejeune’s position in the history of the party’s memory.

NOTES

[1] François Furet, cited in Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 183.

[2] Guy Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 2.

[3] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970), p. 74.

[4] Gavin Bowd, *Le Dernier communard: Adrien Lejeune* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007).

[5] Maurice Thorez, *Fils du Peuple* (Paris: Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1937)

[6] Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 101-108.

[7] Kandeiev, *Citoyen de la Commune (Adrien Félix Lejeune)*, 35 mm film. Directed by Souchkevitch and Kandeiev, 1971. See: <http://www.cinearchives.org/Films-447-273-0-0.html>.

[8] *L'Humanité*, May 25, 1936, May 31, 1937, and May 30, 1938.

[9] Comintern Archives, Lettre de Marty à Dorval, March 29, 1936, f. 517, op. 1, doc. 1812.

[10] Georgi Dimitrov, *Journal 1933-1949* (Paris: Belin, 2005), pp. 408, 427, 429, and 570.

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