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John Bulaitis, *Maurice Thorez: A Biography*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018. xiv + 353 pp. £80.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84511-725-2; £28.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 978-1-838606-718.

Review by Michael Kelly, University of Southampton.

John Bulaitis's judicious and well-documented biography of Maurice Thorez provides a careful analysis of the communist leader's life and a convincing account of his complex role in French history.

The French Communist Party (PCF) was a powerful force in French history for nearly seventy years of the twentieth century. Maurice Thorez was a party activist from its beginnings in 1920 and served as its leader from 1930 until his death in 1964. He is now mostly remembered for his advocacy of the Popular Front strategy of the mid-1930s, for his role in government after the Second World War and for the personality cult that developed around him within the PCF. The influence he wielded in France and in the international communist movement make him a very appropriate subject for a political biography.

As Bulaitis points out, there are interpretative challenges in writing Thorez's biography. In the first instance, it has been a highly contested domain in France, bookended in the 1930s by his ghost-written autobiography, *Fils du peuple*,^[1] which was published by the PCF as a campaigning document, and then in the 1970s after Thorez's death by the critical biography of historian Philippe Robrieux, whose debunking study uncovered many of the personal details behind the communist mythology.^[2] This challenge has been attenuated with the passage of time, as extensive archive material has become available, and as the collapse of communism after 1989 has taken a good deal of the passion out of the events of Thorez's life. As examples of the new ethos, Bulaitis acknowledges the importance to two recent works, by Stéphane Sirot and Annette Wiewiorka, upon which he draws at different points, albeit with some reservations about their interpretations.^[3]

The second interpretative challenge highlighted by Bulaitis is "how to handle the relationship between the French and Soviet elements within Thorez's politics" (p. 9). This becomes the main organising theme of the book, which traces its subject's deep attachments to his own nation and to the Soviet Union. The relationship was a constant refrain during the whole of Thorez's career, worn as a badge of pride by communist militants and used by their opponents as a stick with which to beat the "parti nationaliste étranger," as Léon Blum put it.^[4] Bulaitis uses this relationship as a framing device for his narrative.

He begins with Thorez's childhood in a mining community in northern France, providing a dispassionate appraisal of his family background, his Catholic upbringing, and his early experience of the mines, all of which have been the subject of controversy. He argues that Thorez's beginnings contributed to the iconic role of miners in the later culture of communism, and to the conciliatory line that Thorez pursued with Catholicism throughout his leadership of the party.

Thorez became a socialist militant in his late teens and played a peripheral role in the founding of the French Communist Party in 1920, though he was serving as a soldier during that period. At the end of his military service he threw himself energetically into organisational work for the party. He was a zealous advocate for a strict adherence to the Bolshevik model and to the decisions of the Communist International. During the early 1920s, his energy and competence led him to increasingly senior positions of leadership in the party and in the CGTU trade union. He rose rapidly from local to regional responsibilities, and finally to the party's Central Committee in 1925, when he paid the first of many visits to Moscow. He did not always find himself on the right side of Comintern decisions, or in support of the successful faction in the various policy conflicts. He even got briefly on the wrong side of Stalin. Having been compelled to reverse his position and fall into line more than once, Thorez developed what Bulaitis describes as a "hesitancy," which continued to characterise his leadership style.

It was in 1930 that Thorez began to be referred to as the general secretary of the PCF, and for over thirty years he was the leader and embodiment of the party. Much of his activity was spent in the public eye, and his role in French political history has been extensively studied. Bulaitis largely avoids reiterating well-known events, sketching them lightly and drawing on more recent archive material to flesh out what Thorez was thinking and writing. The reader gets a "behind-the-scenes" view of the PCF's strategies and tactics in France through the 1930s, the Second World War, the post-war rebuilding, the Cold War, and the crises of decolonisation. They also get private insights into the conflicts within the international communist movement, with particular sidelights on the reign of Stalin and on Khrushchev's campaign of destalinization.

Bulaitis presents Thorez as an influential voice in the world communist movement. Though he did not become a Comintern apparatchik, along the lines of Togliatti and Dimitrov, Thorez was in close contact with the shifting currents in the movement. He spent many periods in the Soviet Union, whether on business or on holiday, usually in the company of Soviet and other communist leaders. He spent five years in the Soviet Union, following his widely denounced desertion from the French Army in October 1939, and he spent two and a half years there after his stroke in October 1950, followed by many other visits for health or business purposes. Bulaitis often shows how Thorez's perspectives on the situation in France had an influence on the international movement, but also how his views were in turn affected by his discussions with leading figures in Moscow.

Bulaitis argues that the relationship between Thorez's two loyalties, to France and to the Soviet Union, varies from being energising and creative to being agonising and destructive, largely depending on how well Soviet priorities aligned with French national interests of the time. He quotes Eric Hobsbawm's dictum that every communist party was "the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national left and the October Revolution."^[5] In these terms, he concludes with a "satisfecit," arguing that "Thorez's achievement was to manage the 'ill-sorted marriage' at the heart of the PCF's identity" (p. 291). Although this may sound like damning with

faint praise, Bulaitis presents the relentless succession of vicissitudes that the party leader faced and survived over a quarter of a century. They range from some of the defining historical events of the twentieth century at the national and international levels, through the twists and turns of Comintern and Cominform policy, to the personal and ideological struggles within the PCF. Managing all of these was no trivial undertaking.

The tension between French and Soviet loyalties sat alongside many other tensions. Undoubtedly, the most difficult one in the French context was the constant conflict between unity and sectarianism among parties of the Left. Thorez certainly knew how to enforce a hard line against the socialists, when they were viewed as the enemy, but he also distinguished himself as a persistent advocate of cooperation with them at key moments, especially in the Popular Front, during the war, and in the post-war government. There were many other tensions to manage too, including those between the PCF as a party of working-class struggle and as a party of government, between democracy and authoritarianism within communism, and between freedom and political orthodoxy in the cultural sector (art, literature and philosophy in particular). Bulaitis hints at the tensions in Thorez's personal identity, not least between his humble origins and the exalted rank he reached, which sometimes undercut his self-confidence. He also details the serious health problems that beset him, following his stroke in 1950, which left him severely incapacitated.

Bulaitis sketches in details of Thorez's family life, especially his long-term partnership with Jeannette Vermeersch, who became his second wife. Personal matters appear largely as a context and only occasionally become politically significant, particularly when Vermeersch became an active member of the PCF leadership. We glimpse Thorez seizing opportunities to remedy his educational disadvantage, leading the singing of revolutionary songs, enjoying the company of writers and artists, or struggling with his disabilities by writing a diary with his left hand. But we are not shown how he managed his family life, or whether he was gifted at languages, for example (the Moscow State Linguistic University bore his name for many years). Bulaitis does not stray far into the territory of personal life, so extensively covered by Annette Wiewiorka's biography of the couple, and as a result, his subject does not appear with the same degree of human warmth. Thorez's personal charisma is intermittently noted, but the reader is rarely invited to feel it. As a result, the cult of personality that grew up in the "party of Maurice Thorez" appears as a curious episode, from which no real lessons can be learned. In the current age of populist leaders, this may be thought of as a missed opportunity.

One of the striking features of Thorez's leadership of the PCF is how well it survived his absence from direct involvement in person. His many sojourns in the Soviet Union are the clearest example, but Bulaitis also gives details of his spells in the army, in prison, or in hiding, as well as his residence in the south of France, grappling with health issues for the last ten years of his life. Perhaps absence makes the heart grow fonder, and perhaps Thorez was fortunate to be out of the way at particularly difficult times. Certainly, he maintained contact with the party leadership as best he could, but communications were often limited. Why were there so few attempts to challenge or supplant him? The most threatening of his internal opponents, André Marty, was easily dealt with while Thorez was in Russia recovering from his stroke. Perhaps the secret of his success was the hidden hand of Moscow, though this possibility remains to be more fully elucidated.

In the early 1960s, Thorez planned to retire, but was persuaded to take a new role as president of the PCF. In the event, he did not live long enough to show whether this was a dignified withdrawal or a way of clinging on to power. Certainly, it confirmed his long-term role as figurehead. Reviewing his legacy, Bulaitis sees a direct continuity in the route taken by the PCF for a dozen years after his death, after which his legacy was quietly dismantled during the late 1970s. On this count, Thorez's afterlife was therefore rather longer than Stalin's, and the sentimental attachment to his memory still lingers in street names and the occasional school or sports hall in the suburbs of Paris.

John Bulaitis has written what will almost certainly be the definitive biography of Maurice Thorez in English, and in the process has brought careful clarification to many of the aspects of his life and political work that have been debated for half a century. His use of published sources and archive material is impeccable and well referenced. The seventeen photographic plates included are very illuminating, complete with pithy captions that are usually unpacked in the main text. There are occasional infelicities, such as translating "*gueules noires*" (referring to miners) as "black mouths" rather than "black faces" (p. 9), or calling "La Carmagnole" a chant rather than a song (p. 66), and one may regret that the many quotations are only given in English. However, these are minor details which do not detract from a very fine study.

For a general reader, some of the interest in a biography of Thorez is likely to be in what we can learn from his life. It provides plenty of material for personal lessons in how to survive the rough and tumble of politics, how to play on several different tables at the same time, how to make friends in the right places and how to manage your public image. However, this study will especially be a valuable resource for historians of the Left in France. It illuminates many aspects of French history, including the persistent challenges in achieving left-wing unity, in balancing national and international loyalties and in attempting to pursue radical policies while in government. Thorez was a commanding figure in French communism and this political biography may justly be taken, as Bulaitis suggests, as "a history of the PCF through the prism of its general secretary" (p. 13).

NOTES

[1] Maurice Thorez, *Fils du peuple* (Paris: Éditions sociales internationales, 1937); 2nd edition (Paris: Éditions sociales internationales, 1960).

[2] Philippe Robrieux, *Maurice Thorez: Vie secrète et vie publique* (Paris: Fayard, 1975).

[3] Stéphane Sirot, *Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2000); Annette Wiewiorka, *Maurice et Jeannette: Biographie du couple Thorez* (Paris: Fayard, 2010).

[4] Léon Blum, *À l'échelle humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 106.

[5] Eric Hobsbawm, "Problems of Communist History," *New Left Review* 1/54 (1969): 85-90.

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