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Philippe Secondy, *Fabrication d'un collabo: Le cas Joseph Laporte (1892-1944)*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019, 275 pp. Notes. 23 euros (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-12888-1.

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In October 1944, a military tribunal in Albi heard the case of “a certain Joseph Laporte,” who had experienced the horrors of the trenches during the First World War and then joined the sinister colonial campaign against “dissident” Africans in French Equatorial Africa during the interwar years. In December 1941, Laporte joined the Légion des Volontaires Français contre le Bolshevisme and put his extensive military experience to use in the service of Hitler on the Eastern front. At the military tribunal in 1944, the government commissioner told Laporte: “You have earned the death penalty five times. My one regret is that I do not have the power to have you executed five times” (p. 9). In his compelling biography of an ordinary man who developed a chilling taste for combat and a fascination for the Nazi regime Philippe Secondy asks what kind of human being would deserve execution five times?

The author’s fortuitous encounter with this “fanaticized unknown” began when he consulted the departmental archives of the Hérault as part of a national educational project concerning the resistance and deportation during the Second World War. One particular box of documents, put together by the regional judicial police in Montpellier, attracted Secondy’s attention. An archivist’s brief descriptive note on the box [Activities of a captain, departmental secretary of the LVF and the Milice (1918-1946)] did not, however, do justice to its contents: an extensive collection of mainly private archival materials seized by two conscientious gendarmes in the Aveyron in 1946. Their initial remit had been simply to conduct a routine investigation into Laporte as a local man who had joined the LVF. According to public rumor, a tribunal had condemned him to death and executed him in 1944. The police and the judiciary had opened but then closed a dossier about him (p. 219). Some local citizens refused to forgive or to forget; they wanted to know more. On their own initiative, the two gendarmes searched Laporte’s former home and discovered an archival treasure trove. (Those of us who have spent many long hours in the archives know just how thrilling such discoveries are.) The multitude of photographs, reports, letters, diary entries, and other period documents compiled by Laporte reflect the extraordinarily different, violent universes he inhabited from 1914 until his execution in 1944.

Nevertheless, such impressive archival documentation spanning several decades and three continents has its own sizeable omissions and silences. Many questions, as always, remain unanswered. By partially reconstructing Laporte’s past, Philippe Secondy seeks to understand why the “unknown fanatic” developed such a taste for war, such disgust for democracy, and such

a deep fascination with Hitler and Nazi doctrine. The author also knows that, in order to do so, he needed to interrogate the socio-political and cultural context of his subject's trajectory, as well as his personality. Secondary embarks upon a journey that is both fascinating and disturbing.

The author traces Laporte's trajectory through three stages in the three main parts of this book: Laporte's formative experiences as an increasingly war-hardened infantryman and prisoner of war during 1914-1918 (the least documented stage); the consolidation and acceleration of Laporte's transformation into a brutal "hunter" of Black "dissidents" during military campaigns in French Equatorial Africa from 1922 until 1933 (p. 12); and finally his "fulfillment" as a combatant engaged not only in wartime against a clearly defined adversary, but also in a permanent struggle against the enemies of National Socialism (p. 139).

In the first part of the book, the author explores the roots of Laporte's "hardening to war" (*l'aguerrissement*) in his difficult, early familial circumstances. At the end of the nineteenth century, his parents experienced economic hardship and divorced soon after Laporte's birth. Both parents had died by the time Laporte was thirteen years old. As an orphan in the care of the state, Laporte mainly worked as an agricultural *domestique*, and from the correspondence he saved it is evident that the adolescent Laporte was quick to express his displeasure with placements he did not like and to cause trouble if his wishes were not granted (p. 27). He attended school in the village of Plaisance in the Aveyron and quickly learned how to defend his rights in confrontations with his employers and with administrators who would not let him do what he wanted (p. 28).

In 1913, Laporte joined the 163rd infantry based in Nice. A veritable rite of passage, his entrance into the highly regimented life of the *caserne* and its hierarchically structured male, military society marked a new phase in the young man's life (p. 31). Ten months later the First World War broke out. Laporte's papers reveal little about his experiences in the trenches. He received his first promotion in September 1914, and became a squadron leader. A second promotion came just one month later. By March 1915, Laporte had attained the rank of second lieutenant, a promotion normally requiring officers' training school and four years of experience as a non-commissioned officer. Laporte was only twenty-three years old (p. 39). He fought in the forest of Argonne, where French forces incurred heavy losses during four months of incessant combat. Taken prisoner there in July 1915, Laporte endured captivity in Germany for more than three years. Little is known about his experiences there. He disappeared during a German attack in July 1918, and made his way back to France in December. Soon thereafter, he married his longstanding fiancée in Plaisance (pp. 41-42). During the legislative elections in November 1919, when most French citizens, traumatized by the atrocities of the war, longed for the preservation of peace, the newlywed Laporte chose to enlist in the colonial infantry.

In the second part of the book, Secondary follows Laporte to French Equatorial Africa. The return to combat offered Laporte a reconnection with male, military camaraderie, opportunities for leadership, advancement, adventure, and violence against "primitive savages" in multiple foyers of rebellion against French colonial oppression, notably in the Kongo-Wara conflict (1928-1931). Laporte was charged with re-establishing order in the subdivision of Oubangui-Chari and brutally tracking down "dissidents" and the prophet who led the rebellion. His journal entries, in casual asides, reveal his disdain for the indigenous people he pursued, whom he called a "dirty race" (p. 88). Laporte thrived in the military culture of like-minded officers "on a crusade" against people whom they perceived to be racially inferior. He and his colleagues reluctantly relied upon and simultaneously distrusted their indigenous couriers and intermediaries, whom they dubbed

as “zebras” and “vulgar negroes.” One longstanding Black Muslim sultan in northern Cameroon, Bouba Jama’a, established close relations with Laporte, despite the several hundred kilometers between them. Laporte’s private archives contain several letters from the sultan, whose correspondence emphasized his subordination to the French colonial officer whose patronage he sought (p. 103). Meanwhile, by 1929, bolstered by the admiration of his fellow officers, Laporte effectively created his own “kingdom” in Baïbokoum, over which he reigned as a tenacious “hunter” of “insubordinate peoples,” the Pana and the Baya of the Oubangui-Chari (pp. 111, 113).

By 1931, however, Laporte’s behavior as an isolated leader of a colonial subdivision had begun to offend his military superiors, who found him stubborn, capricious, and too self-confident (p. 116). Despite such reprimands, Laporte and other regional leaders continued to kill “insurgents” with considerable impunity in their efforts to quash the Kongo-Wara rebellion. By May 1932, the general commander of French Equatorial Africa had fully registered senior officers’ exasperation over Laporte’s “dubious discipline” in military matters and placed the lieutenant under house arrest for thirty days. Repatriation for twenty-one months (owing to poor health) occurred just as the sanction was issued. After only three months of leave in Plaisance, however, the authorities posted Laporte to the 16th regiment of Senegalese Tirailleurs in Castelsarracin, an assignment Laporte regarded as an unjust step backward (p. 128). In 1933, at the age of forty-one, Laporte sought retirement from military service. Fulfillment through military engagement remained, however, a central obsession and came from other sources with the rise of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

In the third section of his book, Philippe Secondy traces the return of Laporte and his family to the Aveyron in 1932, where he struggled economically in small-scale agriculture and then found a more lucrative profession as an insurance agent until 1938, when Laporte became increasingly involved in extreme right-wing movements. Attracted to fascism, he joined the Action française and then the Parti populaire français (PPF) four months after its creation in June 1936. In 1941, when he joined the LVF, Laporte wrote on his membership application that he had always been actively opposed to free-masonry, “international Jewry and all French governments emanating from them” and offered to utilize his extensive military experience as a former “Colonial officer” on the new battlefield, “the Moscow Front” (p. 146). Joseph Laporte was among the eight hundred men who donned the German uniform with LVF insignia and formed the second battalion of the LVF in September 1941 in Kraków, Poland. Laporte led a heavy artillery company. Soon thereafter, he was promoted to captain, recognition that he craved.

Laporte also thrived upon the devotion and praise of his daughter, Josette. Correspondence between them reveal their close affective relations, as well has a shared commitment to Hitler’s New Europe. In February 1942, when she was in her early twenties, Josette wrote to her father, still on the Eastern front, from Montpellier: “I’ve showed my comrades in the PPF the photo of a German officer saluting the French flag. Everyone was astonished by and marveled at this symbolic gesture.” When Josette and her friends discovered that the standard-bearer was in fact her father, she insisted that everyone (in Montpellier) “loved and revered” him even if they had never met him. Heaping praise upon her father, Josette assured him that she and her PPF friends remained deeply committed to removing communists, Jews, and free masons from their beloved France (pp. 163-164). Within weeks, however, the military authorities demobilized “Hauptmann Laporte” and sent him back to France, much to his consternation and to that of his men at the front, who sent him adulatory, illustrated birthday greetings. In his personal papers, Laporte

noted in May 1942 that he had been decommissioned “without reason and against (his) wishes.” He redoubled his efforts to continue the struggle for Hitler’s National Socialism (p. 168).

Willing to make any sacrifice in order to eradicate communism, Laporte became a departmental delegate of the LVF in the Aveyron in July 1942, while also subscribing to the newly created Légion tricolore and hoping for another chance to fight on the Eastern front (p. 171). Soon thereafter, however, he quarreled bitterly with senior figures in both the LVF and the Légion tricolore and was reproached for dereliction of duty and insubordination. Laporte then became secretary-general of the Service d’ordre légionnaire (SOL) for the Aveyron in November 1942. In January 1943, he joined the Milice in his continuing battle against democracy, communism, Jews, free masons, and Gaullist “dissidents” but abruptly resigned in April. He found the Aveyron branch of the SOL too “timorous” about fulfilling the demands of the Nazi regime (p. 193).

In January 1944, members of the regional Resistance singled out “the bastard J. Laporte” as a prime target for execution (p. 204). Hunting down “bands of terrorists” greatly appealed to the former colonial officer, who filed meticulous reports on resistance activities for the Gestapo in Toulouse (p. 209). In early summer 1944, resisters kidnapped Josette Laporte. Under the vigilant eye of Laporte, surrounded by members of the SS, Gestapo and Feldgendarmarie, the resisters agreed to exchange Josette and three German officers for four *maquisards* (p. 211). Laporte vowed to take revenge against the FFI and, alongside the Gestapo, became implicated in the brutal murders of numerous resisters that summer. Accompanied by his daughter, Joseph Laporte abruptly left Albi on August 17, 1944, with a German convoy, only to abandon it in Carcassonne. He then tried to join the FFI. Recognized and denounced, father and daughter were imprisoned. Josette Laporte spent twelve months behind bars. Her father faced a military tribunal in Albi on October 4, 1944. He was executed the following day (p. 216).

Joseph Laporte belonged to the group of collaborationists whom Philippe Carrard dubbed “the unlikable vanquished,” French volunteers associated with the Nazi regime.[1] Both Carrard and Secondary observe that exploring the lives of such men poses certain drawbacks. Among other problems, they do not attract our compassion and are difficult to fathom. As Carrard points out, scholars and their readers are sometimes drawn to the cases of men like Laporte by a “fascination with the evil.”[2] Secondary draws upon a rich archival source that enabled him to reconstruct partially the grassroots experiences of a zealous hunter, prone to violence against those whom he deemed to be racially inferior, dangerous, and legitimate prey. Opening box numbered 796 W 97 in the departmental archives of the Hérault revealed “an evil genie” (p. 223). Secondary’s lengthy scholarly engagement with a “detestable” individual reveals choices and actions that inform and enhance our understanding of French men who fought for Hitler, thanks to the initiative of two gendarmes in 1946 whose curiosity about a local *collabo* extended well beyond the compilation of a few, rudimentary police reports (p. 221). *Fabrication d’un collabo* makes an important contribution to the existing historiography.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Carrard, *The French Who Fought for Hitler: Memories from the Outcasts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 204.

[2] Carrard, p. 209.

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