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Charles Oberthür, *Lettres de guerre (1914-1918)*. Edited by Bernard Corbé and Yann Lagadec. Preface by Odile Oberthür-Gury. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016. 418 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €24,00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-4994-4.

Review by W. Brian Newsome, Elizabethtown College.

Charles Oberthür, manager of a Rennes printing company, was forty-three years old in 1914. Though his age exempted him from mobilization, and though he headed a firm employing 1000 workers and had six children, he volunteered on August 2. Promoted in October 1914, Oberthür served as an artillery captain for the next four years. He participated in some of the most important engagements of World War I: the Battle of Charleroi, the First Battle of the Marne, the Battle of Verdun, and the Second Battle of the Marne. Yet Oberthür did so not in the trenches or the artillery batteries but in the immediate rear. He commanded a supply unit that ensured ordinance deliveries to gunners. As editors Bernard Corbé (*Armée de Terre*) and Yann Lagadec (*Université de Rennes 2*) note in their introduction, the experience of soldiers in Oberthür's position is underrepresented in published testimony. His correspondence thus fills an important gap.

Oberthür and his men encountered their share of danger, as German forces targeted supply detachments whenever they came within range. By 1917, air raids on Oberthür's base camp had also become more common. The attacks resulted in little damage but were a growing aggravation—and in some instances an outright source of terror—for Oberthür and his men. Yet Oberthür's most common foes were exhaustion and the weather. To avoid enemy fire, Oberthür conducted many of his runs under cover of darkness. Extremes of heat and cold, as well as large quantities of precipitation, created their own problems. Black ice was especially hazardous, resulting in broken limbs among men and horses alike. Oberthür took as much care with the latter as with the former. Adequate shelter, sufficient food, minimal rest, safe routes from base camp to artillery positions—each was essential for both the soldiers and the steeds under his command. *Poilus* in the trenches faced similar challenges of fatigue and climate, but Oberthür's experience was different enough to render his testimony a fascinating source for scholars.

The content and volume of Oberthür's letters indicate the importance of correspondence for soldiers and their families. In this regard, one is reminded of insights afforded by other collections, such as "*Si je reviens comme je l'espère*"—Rémy Cazals and Nicolas Offenstadt's edited compendium of letters between the Papillon brothers at the front and their sister in the rear.^[1] Here again, though, Oberthür's correspondence offers an intriguing perspective. Much as infantrymen were concerned with farms and shops left in the care of their families, Oberthür worried about the viability of his printing company, deprived not only of its manager but of many of its workers (some of whom were in Oberthür's own unit). Oberthür peppered his letters with advice to his father, who reassumed sole direction of the enterprise. A talented artist, Oberthür sent back sketches and watercolors for use in the company's almanac, one of its bestselling items. And he took advantage of deployments to reinforce collaboration with regional distributors.

The presence of former employees in Oberthür's unit augmented his longstanding tendency toward patronization. Oberthür made frequent comments on his soldiers' behavior, particularly drunkenness, which he was at continual pains to limit. A political and a religious conservative—an anti-Dreyfusard and an observant Catholic far removed from the likes of progressives like Marc Sangier—Oberthür sought to encourage “proper” conduct among his men. He urged them to attend mass, for example, celebrating high attendance rates and decrying periods of laxity. As Oberthür himself recognized, the former corresponded with the opening of the war and with subsequent engagements of notable intensity, while the latter accompanied postings in relatively calm sectors, such as the Argonne, where troops considered themselves in less mortal danger and in less immediate need of confession and communion. Oberthür did not wish his men to be in harm's way, only that religious observance would continue unabated. Unlike the historian Annette Becker, Oberthür failed to look beyond participation in formal rites to other forms of spiritualism. Still, Oberthür's observations on the vicissitudes of faith provide a nice complement to Becker's *La Guerre et la foi*.^[2]

Oberthür's letters also offer remarkable insights on identity formation. Of Alsatian origin, Oberthür's great grandfather had left Strasbourg first for Paris and then for Rennes, where he settled in 1838. By the time Germany annexed Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, the Oberthürs had lived in Brittany for three decades. Yet Charles Oberthür considered his Alsatian heritage an important part of his identity, mentioning it as frequently as his roots in Brittany and his overarching pride as a Frenchman. The imagined and multi-layered nature of Oberthür's sense of nationality is on full display, turning the reader's mind to Benedict Anderson's classic treatise *Imagined Communities*.^[3]

The Oberthürs' Alsatian heritage caused his family some hardship during World War I. In 1915 state officials demanded that Oberthür's father prove the printing company was a French business. The apparently German name had raised concern as the war had dragged on and national hatreds had intensified. State officials were ultimately satisfied with the French nature of the enterprise, but one can only suspect that the proceedings had something to do with the intense pride that Oberthür exhibited as his unit marched into Strasbourg in November 1918. “C'est aujourd'hui,” wrote Oberthür, “que mon rêve s'est enfin réalisé. J'ai été à Strasbourg, j'ai vu le drapeau tricolore flotter au haut du clocher de la cathédrale, j'ai vu les premières troupes françaises entrer dans la ville. Ce fut, pour moi et pour tous ceux qui étaient présents, une journée inoubliable...” (p. 391).

Oberthür's Alsatian roots also contributed to his ultimate perspective on the war. He observed and exhibited great joy at the French reclamation of Strasbourg, “Ah! Je vous assure que les quatre années et demie de guerre ne comptent pas pour grand chose, quand on a eu le Bonheur de vivre cette journée” (p. 391). The same sentiment appears—in anticipatory form—throughout Oberthür's correspondence. He was determined to see the war through to victory. Oberthür's testimony thus indicates that his *culture de guerre* was grounded in consent, providing further evidence to support the argument of scholars such as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau.^[4]

To situate the letters in context, editors Bernard Corbé and Yan Lagadec have provided both a general introduction and shorter openings for each of the five chapters and the epilogue into which they have divided the correspondence. Each section parallels a distinct phase of Oberthür's service: the opening battles; postings in Artois, the Argonne, and Verdun; the renewal of a war of movement; and the triumphal entry into Strasbourg. Detailed footnotes also identify almost all of the individuals whom Oberthür mentions in his letters. Based on research in national archives, regional depositories, and personal inventories, these explanatory notations facilitate comprehensive understanding of Oberthür's experience. By publishing such a fine compendium, Corbé and Lagadec have rendered invaluable service to scholars of French history.

NOTES

[1] Rémy Cazals and Nicholas Offenstadt, eds, "*Si je reviens comme je l'espère.*" *Lettres du front et de l'arrière, 1914-1918* (Paris: Grasset, 2003).

[2] Annette Becker, *La Guerre et la foi. De la mort à la mémoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994).

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2016).

[4] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. Helen McPhail (Providence: Berg, 1992).

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