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Steven L. Kaplan, *Le pain maudit: Retour sur la France des années oubliées 1945-1958* Paris: Fayard, 2008. 1124 pp. Maps, tables, photographs, and indexes. 39 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-63648-1.

Review by Kyri Watson Claflin, Boston University.

Since his first monograph published in 1976, Steven L. Kaplan has been the able and relentless biographer of what he calls one of the most important actors in French history: bread. At the core of his latest book, *Le pain maudit: Retour sur la France des années oubliées 1945-1958* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), is the story an outbreak of bread-borne poisoning, an incident that caused seventeen deaths in the village of Pont-Saint-Esprit (Gard) in 1951 and sickened hundreds of others. One might think that the history of a possible episode of ergotism in modern France taking up 1090 pages and ranging from the middle ages to the present would be a deadly read. [1] *Le pain maudit*, to the contrary, lives up to the traditions of the *Annales* school of social historians, such as Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, whose writing engrosses and transports a reader as thoroughly as an epic novel might do.

While the book explores a time and place caught between two more exciting eras, the German Occupation and *les Trente Glorieuses*, the "Forgotten Years" turn out to be a critical moment of *conjoncture*. Kaplan writes that "c'est avec les Trente Glorieuses que les Français commenceront à parler de leur "gagne-bifteck" plutôt que de leur "gagne-pain", ultime désacralisation du pain quotidien, déplacement historique qu'on peut lire comme la marque de leur entrée dans une société de consommation" (p. 215).

Demystified, stripped of centuries of symbolism, bread was reduced to an item of food like any other. Kaplan calls this the "banalisation définitive" of bread (p. 216). The Pont-Saint-Esprit tragedy poisoned public opinion just when the milling industry needed to regain the people's trust to promote greater bread consumption. The ensuing "psychose du pain" (p. 975) inflicted plenty of damage on the bakers as well. In telling this story, Kaplan deftly weaves the characters and facts at the center of the narrative through a larger history of France and of bread in France.

Kaplan captures a bleak picture of the condition of a vital food industry and of a national leadership in disarray in the wake of the defeat and enemy occupation of the Second World War. He meticulously relates the difficult situation in which bakers and millers find themselves during the aptly-named Forgotten Years to the corporatist organization created in 1936 that was continued during the Occupation years. In other words, the industry was dysfunctional before the war; the war years institutionalized the dysfunction; and the post-war era was hardly

conducive to the forging of peaceable accords between "frères enemies," as Kaplan calls the bakers and millers.

While Kaplan examines in great detail the professions that supplied the daily bread of French citizens, this was only one sector of the post-war economy. Similar stories can be found elsewhere. Trade newspapers for retail and wholesale butchers, grocers, dairy owners, and fruit and vegetable dealers all reflect similar stories: the lack of items to sell, a declining customer base, reduced profit margins that did not cover rising expenses, and new forms of competition, both legal and illegal. [2] Not only did bakers, butchers, and others complain that large businesses were favored over small when the corporative system doled out available resources, some post-war politicians did as well. [3]

The post-war governments earned little praise. The majority of French people were poor, hungry, and demoralized that the Liberation had not, in the end, liberated them from their day-to-day misery. People were free again, but wartime food rationing remained in place. The first eighteen months after the Liberation saw seven Ministers of Provisioning (*Ravitaillement*) come and go. As a result, there were frequent changes in the Ministry's doctrine, primarily a paradoxical shifting between policies of free market economics and state regulation at different (and rarely coordinated) stages of production and distribution. [4] Moreover, the responsibilities and decisions for different aspects of food provisioning fell to at least four separate ministries, those of Transport, National Economy, Agriculture and the Interior. The Ministry of Provisioning itself was a secondary portfolio with little authority of its own, vilified by the press and an embarrassment to the Cabinet. Most important foodstuffs were still organized with corporatist interprofessional groups responsible for the allocation of goods, just as they had done during the Vichy regime. The ever perspicacious journalist Pierre Hamp wrote of French life in 1946, "Great misery is a gold mine." [5] There were plenty of opportunities for bad behavior on the part of those with power over any foodstuff and the millers were suspected of cheating the people to their own advantage.

At the center of the book are the disturbing events that began to unfold in August 1951, in the village of Pont-Saint-Esprit. This town, like most of France, was relatively poor. Rationing had ended just two years earlier, but bread was still under tight controls to keep the prices low. The cost of living was very high and the quality of a great many foodstuffs, principally that of bread, remained nearly as bad as during the Occupation. In the Gard this was more the case than in other departments, as the Gard produced almost no wheat at all and was utterly dependent on imports from departments that produced excess amounts. Interprofessional groups were in charge of matching up producing departments with consuming departments and allocating the available supplies of grain to all the millers in France. This way, although there were in fact too many millers given the actual demand for flour (bread consumption had been declining throughout the twentieth century), all millers nonetheless were allocated their share of the available work. The *dirigiste* nature of this system meant that the bakers were assigned to specific millers, something they detested. They were not free to choose who supplied their flour, nor were they at liberty to change suppliers if they were dissatisfied. These heavy-handed controls served to enhance the power of millers over the bakers who had little redress when they received deliveries of inferior flour, a frequent occurrence in all the grain-deficient departments of France.

As the daily baguette tended to be lousy long after the Liberation, disgusting flour and grey or bad-smelling bread did not necessarily set off the alarms that it would have in better times. In the same year as the collective poisoning in Pont-Saint-Esprit, there were quite a few instances of food-borne illness around the country: 110 people in Eure-et-Loir got sick from eating horsemeat; three people died from tainted *pâté du foie* in the Ruhr; contaminated powdered milk sickened many children in Metz (pp. 36-37). As one newspaper wrote at the time, "La série noire des intoxications collectives continue" (p. 37). French reporters reminded readers that no one could really tell which foods lurking in their pantries were "le produit de la fraude ou de la négligence" (p. 39).

As Kaplan spirals toward the central event of the book, he explains the history of bread in the ancien régime, as well as the worldview of the police regarding the provision of vital foodstuffs. It is an impressive and thorough review of his earlier work that puts this particular event in its wider historical context. He draws frequent parallels between the post-war era and the ancien régime and the revolutionary period. Kaplan renders the years of the German Occupation in a concise way. In all, the first half of the book is spent circling around the specifics of the Pont-Saint-Esprit episode with a tremendous amount of fascinating (although sometimes quite technical) contextual material. The reader comes to fully understand why having something to eat was a higher priority for consumers than having food of high quality, and why French bakers in 1951 were accustomed to flour that was difficult to work with, incorporated a variety of questionable "fillers," and was often too dark. Kaplan writes that, "le pain médiocre semble s'institutionnaliser" (p. 181).

The central chapters of the book tell the main story from different perspectives. First, we meet the baker from whose oven came the only deadly loaves of bread, and the other bakers whose bread sickened customers. While the bad bread came from at least four bakeries, the two batches of fatal bread were the focus of the most intense investigation. Eventually, the names of the other bakers were even mysteriously dropped from the list of suspects to be investigated. The next chapter is devoted to the victims and their harrowing stories of intestinal disorders, headaches, vomiting, intense hallucinations and, in some cases, death. This story is truly gripping. The stricken included the young, the old and, most disturbingly, the perfectly strong and healthy. Some victims were hospitalized in psychiatric facilities for weeks or months. Dogs, cats, and chickens that were fed the bread died. Kaplan then tells the miller's tale and recounts the investigations that tried to uncover whether the cause of the intoxications and deaths was ergot-contaminated rye added as a "filler" to post-war flour. The health inspector claimed that in the mill that apparently had produced the flour used in the deadly loaves, wheat and flour were stored in close proximity to a variety of potential contaminants, including arsenic and DDT. The French press, a key player in this whole story, accused the mill in question of being unsanitary and even medieval. Indeed, the book contains black-and-white photographs of this mill that erase any doubt about this particular accusation.

Experts examined the question of what caused the mass bread-borne intoxication in Pont-Saint-Esprit for years. The suspect bakeries were closed and checked. The water was tested. After a long pursuit of ergot poisoning, that explanation was dismissed. Attention turned to a mercury compound found in a brand of pesticide. There was an investigation of the train wagons that had transported the flour in a scandalously careless and unhygienic manner. The wagons, which carried anything and everything, had not even been cleaned out before being used to ship sacks of grain and flour. Countless experts of all kinds came and went, a few

scapegoats went to jail, journalists doggedly pursued the story, and rumors and denunciations (via anonymous letters) flew. All were part of the on-going pursuit of the answer to the mystery of the "cursed bread" of Pont-Saint-Esprit in 1951. The mystery remains unsolved, but one thing seems certain: the toxic bread of a small village in the Gard was symbolic of much of what ailed France throughout the Fourth Republic.

As we have come to expect from Kaplan's work, this book is meticulously researched in numerous archives, the press, secondary sources, and includes interviews with characters involved in the original episode. Any author can sympathize with the desire to get every available piece of information on paper for a complete analysis of an event, its causes, and its repercussions. It is probably inevitable that some repetition does creep in. However, as a result, the men and women involved come alive. The byzantine wartime and post-war system of grain and bread regulations and the official and quasi-official organizations that managed the industry down to the smallest of matters are superbly portrayed. The frustration of the bakers with draconian state controls and their desire for the freedom to choose their suppliers was echoed in nearly every food sector after the Liberation. On the other side, the millers' urgent insistence on the need for continued protection against the anarchy of free market competition is a familiar story in the French food trades, not only in the ancien régime, but also in modern France. This is a very long story about French bread in the first half of the twentieth century, but it also reflects similar debates and divisions in other French food industries in the forgotten years over the lack of modernization, inferior training for apprentices, the push and pull of *dirigisme* and liberalism, and the persistence of Depression-era and wartime bureaucracy. *Le pain maudit* makes an important contribution to the scholarship on the regimes of the Liberation and Fourth Republic, while placing the little-known story of twentieth-century bread provisioning within the context of France's long and complicated relationship with this food of *première nécessité*.

NOTES

[1] Ergotism is a toxic and sometimes deadly condition that results from eating rye or bread made from rye that is infected with the ergot fungus.

[2] See for the post-war era, for example, *L'Épicerie française: Journal du Syndicat de l'Épicerie Française et de l'Alimentation Générale*, *Journal des Fruitières Détaillants: Organe de Défense Corporative et Commercial*, and *La Crémèrie française: Organe Officiel Hebdomadaire du Syndicat de la Crémèrie Française*.

[3] *Journal Officiel de la République Française - Débats*, 28 November 1944.

[4] Archives Nationales F/23/RAV/9 Fonds Chouard, "Rapport Thibodeaux sur la situation en France 1946-1947," 29 January 1947.

[5] Pierre Hamp, *Enquêtes: Et Avec ça Madame?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 205.

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