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Aurélien Lignereux, *Servir Napoléon: Policiers et gendarmes dans les départements annexés (1796-1814)*. Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2012. 398 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. 27€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-87673-624-5.

Review by David P. Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Some years ago Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Cobb, and Stuart Woolf published books that have become not only classics but—and here the word is justified—seminal.^[1] The work under consideration is indebted to each of these books, although Hobsbawm is not mentioned in the bibliography. Counter-intuitively, the three Anglophone historians did not write books that synthesized a significant accumulation of specialized monographs based on archival evidence, especially that drawn from provincial repositories. They produced books solidly grounded in the sources yet inspired by broad and important hypotheses or points of view. Hobsbawm's bandits existed along the porous borders between traditional economies and societies and early capitalism. His bandits and primitive rebels functioned not only as go-betweens but as a solvent. Their deaths were part of the intrusive corrosion of capitalism. The symbiosis of Cobb's police and people in times of revolutionary upheaval generated bureaucratic formulae and official presuppositions (always unfavorable) designed to keep the people fixed in familiar places where they could control them. As the people became rebellious, police ineptitude and narrow-mindedness no longer worked. In addition, Cobb's scintillating prose and his fascination with extreme terrorists were seductive. In Woolf's erudite survey of Napoleon's empire, the order imposed by the police is only one part, and not the most significant, of the huge task of forging unity out of an ancien regime undergoing revolution and occupation. All this work spawned, either acknowledged or by silent osmosis, a growing body of specialized studies, the *tesserae* of the grand mosaics they had made. Lignereux's *Servir Napoléon* is of this number.

In the "dynamic" field of "police studies," Lignereux writes, "there are doubtless other possible conceptual choices, but the central *parti pris* of this book has been to present the Empire as it was experienced by its agents" (reviewer translation, p. 352). This is a modest and circumscribed goal. He insists the fixation in much police literature on Fouché and his secret police, Paris, and sinister purposes is myopic and a small part of the story (p. 194). Fair enough, but Lignereux's determination not to generalize is obsessive and constricting. He piles up a very impressive collection of archival *tesserae*, each glittering, yet refuses to place them in a mosaic pattern. This is the chief shortcoming of an admirable but narrow work of scholarship.

In place of an overarching thesis, Lignereux offers a number of interesting observations, some revealing anecdotes, and an abundance of details, especially of police and *gendarmes* otherwise lost to history by their obscurity. He notes the failure to attach the northern provinces of Spain to France and turn them over to police supervision. The army was unable "to vanquish the insurgents and the English," while the spread of brigandage thwarted the efforts of a *gendarmarie* sent from the metropole, and additionally frustrated the zeal of the commissar general, Beaumont-Brivazac (pp. 36-7). Without conquest, the police could not function. He turns, consequently, to the *départements annexés*, where the police and *gendarmarie* could maintain order.

Napoleon himself celebrated the uniqueness of the *gendarmérie* in a letter to his brother Joseph. They were “an organization ... that exists in no other European country ... [and are] the most efficacious way to maintain the tranquility of a country” (p. 48). But Napoleonic Italy resisted the institution, despite the Emperor’s proposal that qualified Italians be sent to France to be trained for the *gendarmérie* in the *départements réunis* so as to follow “the same discipline, the same manner of operation and action” (p. 62). General Wirion thought the Piedmontese incapable and wanted to import Sardinian soldiers to train (p. 130). “The information collected by the *gendarmérie*,” writes Lignereux, “was in general very mediocre” (p. 207).

To avoid an overwhelming reliance on indigenous men, the ideal ratio for the *gendarmérie* outside France was inaugurated in Belgium in 1796. Two thirds were to be “Français nés en France” and one third “hommes du pays” (p. 114). This was seldom achieved. More often than not the ratio was reversed. In Italy the *sbires*, hated for their cruelty and corruption—they often colluded with bandits and smugglers—proved indispensable. They knew the territory and the criminals. “The *gendarmérie*,” wrote Jacques Norvins-Montbreton, the secretary-general of police in Rome, “are worthless against the brigands. We need the *sbires* and nothing but the *sbires*” (p. 246). Those charged with creating Napoleon’s provincial police and *gendarmes* did not make the same fatal mistake that President Bush’s special envoy, Paul Bremer, made in Iraq. They deliberately employed the police they inherited and the *sbires*. “Nothing,” writes Lignereux, “more reveals the imperative of adaptation than the conservation *in fine* of the old institutions, however discredited. The perpetuation of the *sbires* is the symbol” (p. 90). Continuity paid off, particularly in the war on banditry and smuggling. In addition, it blunted the edge of the humiliation of occupation by men who loathed those they sought to control and govern. “Piedmont was infested with 20,000 juvenile delinquents [*vauriens*],” wrote General Wirion of a place “where the men have the air of born thieves, like those born with a goiter in the Maurienne” (p. 240). Michael Broers provides abundant evidence that the conqueror and the conquered almost never mixed socially, seldom attempted to understand each other, and showed no empathy.[2]

The most important and intrusive policing focused on those who contrived to avoid the draft, increasingly so after 1812 as Napoleon’s military fortunes collapsed and the Grande Armée died in the snow. More than half the arrests in the *départements annexés* were for *insoumission* (p. 287). After Leipzig there were insurrections in the German lands. “The Hanseatic Spring” failed, but it proved the “fragility of French domination” and forced the “French functionaries to reflect on the vulnerability of their position” (p. 325).[3]

Napoleon policed his annexations, of necessity, predominantly with natives of the place. In Italy “the presence of the French is almost nil. Of 112 *commissaires* in Piedmont, there is only a single Frenchman sent from France” (p. 117). The original role of the police as an arm of the Revolution was deflected by non-French personnel. “The police are instituted,” reads Napoleon’s Code, “to maintain public order, liberty, property, and individual security.”[4] This ideal, redolent of The Rights of Man, disappeared in France and throughout the Empire. When the Empire started to unravel in 1812, and especially after the Battle of Leipzig, there were few French administrators willing to enforce even basic policing, while the indigenous police looked to securing a place in a future without French domination.

In closing, let me return to my original point. Lignereux cannot see the woods for the trees. This is a perennial question for historians. How does one perform the alchemy of turning the endless details of history into a coherent narrative, a compelling thesis, a provocative argument, or a work of art? It seems the closer one gets to the local or regional sources the farther one gets from a grand synthesis. Yet even in the field Lignereux has chosen there are historians who rise above the constricted vantage of policemen. Michael Broers comes to mind. He has as thorough a command of the archives as Lignereux—he was a Richard Cobb student—but he also knows how to integrate the precious nuggets of evidence extracted from the archives into a narrative.

NOTES

[1] In order of publication, they are Hobsbawm's *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959) and *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Cobb's *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Woolf's *Napoleon's Integration of Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[2] Lignereux's bibliography has an extensive list of Broers' work. The best single volume for an introduction is Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796-1814* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[3] See Lignereux's long section on the unraveling of the Empire as seen from the point of view of the police, pp. 336-344.

[4] Lignereux quotes this on p. 193.

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