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Nicolas Mariot, *Histoire d'un sacrifice: Robert, Alice et la Guerre*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2017. 434 pp. Illustrations, map, genealogical tables, and bibliography. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-0213-4370-0.

Review by Martha Hanna, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Nicolas Mariot is intrigued, or perhaps only incredulous: why were young French intellectuals, who suffered exceptionally high casualties during the Great War, such ardent patriots? In *Tous unis dans la tranchée?* he argued that the fervent patriotism of these promising scholars and writers—whose wartime correspondence is often cited as evidence that the French people accepted the necessity of the war and consented to the sacrifices demanded of them—was in many ways exceptional. Their high-minded, philosophically-inflected patriotism was not, Mariot argued, shared (or even understood) by the ordinary rank-and-file plebeian soldier. [1] But if Mariot was convinced that the “consent” thesis, which has proved so divisive in French historiography of the Great War, overstates its case, he has remained fascinated by the incontrovertible evidence of patriotism within the ranks of the intellectual elite. Perhaps such patriotism was understandable in men like Maurice Masson, a devout Catholic who framed his sacrifice in distinctly redemptive, Christian terms, but what explains the equally fervent patriotism (infused with a similarly redemptive idiom) of Robert Hertz? This is the focus of *Histoire d'un sacrifice: Robert, Alice et la Guerre*.

A contemporary of Masson, Hertz was in many ways his counterpart: a man of the left, his politics had been shaped by the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus Affair, the progressive spirit of the Dreyfusard École Normale Supérieure, and his (rather limited) contact with coal miners in the Nord. A reformist socialist—his politics were as influenced by his contacts with Fabian socialism in Britain as by the debates of the SFIO—and the son of a German Jewish émigré, Hertz embraced the secularism and progressive promise of the radical Third Republic as intensely as he despised the militaristic spirit and petty-minded martinets of the professional army. The mystery that Mariot sets out to unravel in *Histoire d'un sacrifice* is why Hertz, a *Normalien* with a brilliant career ahead of him, a loving wife and son in Paris, and no predilection for army life, would have volunteered in late 1914 to transfer from his relatively safe position in a territorial regiment well behind the lines to a front-line infantry regiment.

To understand Hertz and to make sense of the decision that would lead inexorably to his death in April 1915, Mariot makes excellent use of the extensive Hertz archive, which includes family correspondence from before and during the war and helps him understand the social position and animating principles that informed the married life of Robert and Alice. Hertz's family was affluent, bourgeois, and close-knit: the extended family customarily vacationed together, either hiking in the Alps or taking in the refreshing sea air of the Brittany coast, and lived a very comfortable life in Paris. Advocates of progressive early education, vigorous exercise and a healthy diet, Robert and Alice would not be out of place in many modern-day university towns, were it not for their complete abhorrence of alcohol.

In July 1914, Robert, Alice, their young son, Antoine, and several family members were holidaying in the Alps, oblivious until the very last of heightening international tensions. After Robert returned to Paris,

en route to Verdun where he reported for duty, Alice and Antoine joined the extended family in Brittany, well-protected from the advancing German army. There the Hertz womenfolk avidly read the patriotic essays published in *Le Temps* by such intellectual luminaries as Ernest Lavisse and Henri Bergson, and conveyed in their letters to Robert a spirit of stoic resolution and patriotic determination. Just as importantly, Alice saw in the mobilization of 1914 the same spirit of revolutionary resolve first witnessed in the *levée-en-masse* of 1793. It would be too easy, however, to blame Robert's decision two months later to transfer to a front-line regiment on the undue influence and unthinking patriotism of women far from the fighting lines. As would become evident in a series of letters Robert shared with Alice in the last months of the year, his decision was equally shaped by his aversion to the idleness of his regiment, his antipathy to the patriotic indifference of his comrades-in-arms, and his conviction that his identity—as a socialist, a scholar of sociology, and a Jew—compelled him to sacrifice himself for France.

In one of the most revealing letters Hertz wrote during the war, he explained that as a sociologist and a rationalist, he believed that every individual should aspire to advance the common good; and as a socialist, that the “desire to serve the community” was as powerful a motive as the desire to seek profit or personal advancement. More than anything, however, he was convinced that “as a Jew the hour ha[d] come to give a little more than that which I am obliged to give...there will never be enough Jewish devotion in this war, never too much Jewish blood shed on the soil of France” (p. 133). Only by sacrificing himself without reservation could he claim for himself—and, as importantly, his son—the right to be identified as truly, fully, and unambiguously French. Robert's German-born father had moved to France during the years of the Second Empire. A partner in a very successful international business, he had little interest at first in acquiring French citizenship, stating on one occasion that he would leave France when his sons reached adulthood to save them from compulsory military service. Growing up, Robert was thus conscious of the fact that he was not yet fully French. If through his wartime service and, if necessary, his death he could guarantee for Antoine the right to be considered truly French, he would have bequeathed to his son “the most beautiful gift” (p. 133) he could ever give him.

In a letter written on April 2, 1915, a scant two weeks before his death, Robert returned to the idea that through his death he could demonstrate his unconditional loyalty to, and love of, France, and thus secure for Antoine the right to be forever recognized as French. He recalled how throughout his childhood and youth he had “wanted with all his heart to be French, to be worthy of being French, and to prove” that he was indeed French (p. 353). This letter proved more significant than he, or Alice, could have ever imagined, for it created a firestorm of controversy when Maurice Barrès cited it at length in a column published in December 1916 in his series, “The Spiritual Families of France.” In the aftermath of Robert's death, there were several public acknowledgements of his sacrifice, the most poignant of which was the memorial notice Émile Durkheim wrote on behalf of his former student and colleague for the year book of the ENS. Putting aside whatever reservations he might have had about the “Barrèsian” tone of some of Hertz's letters, Durkheim's notice celebrated the patriotic idealism of Hertz while intentionally passing over those passages in which he had spoken explicitly of his desire (and his need) to prove himself fully French. This decision on Durkheim's part, prompted in all likelihood by his justifiable fear that any reference to Hertz's Jewish identity would be used against him, left open the possibility, however, of including this and other comparably patriotic letters in an anthology of wartime correspondence penned by Jewish soldiers. This volume never materialized, and it is possible that Durkheim, himself the target of vicious anti-Semitic invective in 1916, warned Alice against the project. The tragic irony, however, is that the collapse of a publishing venture that would have celebrated the sacrifices of French Jewish soldiers, led directly to the extensive citation of Hertz's last letter in Barrès's column, “Les Israélites.”

Far from affirming and celebrating Hertz's devotion to France, Barrès used his letter (and others of comparable tenor) to conclude that, Jewish sacrifice notwithstanding, the Jews of France could never be truly, essentially French: one had to be, he was convinced, at least “a little bit” Christian (p. 355). Not surprisingly, his decision to cite this letter at length and to deploy its arguments in such a malicious way proved profoundly controversial. It is not clear that Alice gave him direct permission to cite the letter,

which he had received from an intermediary. Had she known that Barrès, the right-wing polemicist most readily identified with the rabid patriotic palaver soldiers denigrated as “*bouillage de crâne*,” would use her husband’s letter to emphasize the inherent and irrevocable alien-ness of French Jews, she surely would have intervened to prevent such a travesty. Astonished that Alice had, however unintentionally, given “arms” to the anti-Semites of France, friends and colleagues were outraged by the article and by Alice’s apparent complicity in its production. She concluded, reasonably enough, that she should have kept the letters to herself.

Mariot’s close and careful analysis of the Hertz correspondence illuminates how the patriotic convictions of France’s intellectual elite led to Hertz’s fateful decision to secure a transfer in late 1914 to a reserve regiment, destined to participate in an ill-fated and futile battle in April 1915. Had he remained with his territorial regiment, he would, in all likelihood, have seen battle somewhat later: Masson, in a very similar situation, moved into combat positions in late 1915 and died at Verdun in April 1916. Had Hertz not actively sought a transfer in late 1914, he might have lived another year. Alice would have welcomed the prospect. By uncovering in Hertz’s correspondence, the cultural anxieties of France’s Jewish elite, Mariot reveals simultaneously the tragedy of one man and the even greater tragedy of a community of ardent patriots never entirely convinced that their legitimate claim to full French citizenship would be recognized, honored, and respected.

NOTES

[1] Nicolas Mariot, *Tous Unis dans la tranchée? 1914-1918, les Intellectuels rencontrent le peuple* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013).

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