
H-France Review Vol. 3 (May 2003), No. 49

Louis Bergès, *Résister à la conscription, 1798-1814. Le cas des départements aquitains*. Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2002. 598 pp. Maps, tables, notes, and bibliography. 32.00 € (pb). ISBN 2-7355-0512-X.

Review by Alan Forrest, University of York.

One of the most fascinating aspects of French provincial history during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period is its sheer diversity. Different areas of the country responded in contrasting fashion to the requirements of the state: taxation, dechristianization, and the draft. Regions began to develop a recognizable profile, whether they were solidly republican, devoutly catholic, or simply apolitical and resentful of interference from outside. In a few instances, irritation with the increasingly importunate attentions of Paris pushed people into acts of open rebellion, but these were relatively rare and usually took place in deeply religious areas where the state was intruding into deeply held beliefs as much as it was compromising material interests. Historians have drawn a useful distinction between those rebellions where there was a degree of ideological opposition—those which can justly be described as counter-revolutionary—and those, more numerous, where the response was that of "anti-revolution" and took the form of non-cooperation or of apparently random explosions of anger against the intrusion of the state in people's day-to-day lives. Such communities often accepted the republic and its ideals, but they reacted against the increased centralism of the state and the multiple demands it made of them.

Among the most persistent grievances they expressed was resentment of the weight of recruitment, the so-called *impôt du sang* that fell on more and more families as the demands of the war became ever heavier. Resistance to military conscription was widespread, especially, though not exclusively, in the countryside to the extent that it became an important element in shaping the emerging public opinion in the French provinces. It also varied astonishingly from one region to another, from parts of the east and the north where battalions were easily filled and where mayors and prefects could wallow in self-congratulation, to areas of the south and centre where resistance was endemic. Here it proved almost impossible to persuade fathers to part with sons and young men to leave their farms and villages for the army. Whole communities signally failed to carry out their republican duty, producing levels of resistance that far outstripped more obviously counter-revolutionary areas such as Brittany and the west.

The central question must be, quite simply, why? Did resistance of this kind have anything to do with politics, and can desertion figures be used to track public reactions to the regime, to the changing political landscape of the Republic, the Consulate, and the Empire? Louis Bergès, after examining the figures for both evasion and desertion across the period of conscription—between the Loi Jourdan in 1798 and the final, traditional scattering of the armies which accompanied defeat in 1814—concludes that this is unlikely. The same places register a poor conscription record across the period, and the success of recruitment has more to do with locality than with regime. I would not seek to disagree, as I

found much the same to be true when I examined recruitment and desertion figures across the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and in a range of different provinces and contrasting habitats. But Bergès demonstrates this less impressionistically, by making a detailed study of a specific region where the issue is one of regional identity and tradition, an argument based on collective psychology and culture rather than on politics. Nor is it simply any region. He picks Aquitaine, partly, one suspects, because it is the region to which he himself belongs, but largely on the grounds that throughout the Directory and under Napoleon it consistently registered unusually high levels of resistance. Here is one part of France where he can say with some confidence that a second front opened up over recruitment, and that this second front, in the domestic arena, played a significant part in undermining Napoleon and sapping the Empire's war effort.

His book is divided into three clear sections. In the first he examines the weight of military recruitment across the period, carefully dividing it into its key stages and comparing levels of refusal across time. The second examines the many different forms that draft-avoidance could take. And the third concentrates on the state's response, on punishment and repression. Of the three, the first seems to me the most problematic, since it does attach great credence to the statistics of the time, especially to the numbers produced by sub-prefects and prefects in response to circulars from the ministry. Bergès employs these figures imaginatively, using them to calculate percentages of men performing military service and to produce league tables of obedience to the conscription law. But were figures collected through these administrative channels (even the national figures which Hargenvilliers produced for the Emperor) really as dependable as he implies? They were, after all, concocted with bemusing regularity at different levels of the administration, and no doubt they represented the best information that local officials could muster at that time. But if they tell us something about the willingness of local people to present themselves for the ballot, they reveal less about the numbers actually reaching their regiment, and the generals' figures were often dramatically different. Besides, they make rather dull reading, as the reader risks being submerged in statistics produced for each of the twelve departments which the author labels as constituting "Aquitaine."

It is, some may think, a generous definition of a region that had long ceased to have any administrative competence and which could be defined in a number of different ways: the Aquitaine that is analysed here is a region delineated by natural geography, an Aquitaine of river valleys, "the cement of regional life." It includes Guienne and Gascony, the Périgord and Quercy, and extends as far as the Ariège in the eastern Pyrenees; it specifically excludes the Charentes to the north. This may seem an unduly broad terrain, though it has the advantage of bringing together territories that shared a notable dislike of the recruiting-sergeant, and hence it has a certain coherence in the context of this subject. But it means that the statistics that are amassed must cover all twelve departments, with the result that the first section of the discussion is densely stacked with numbers, hammering home the message that this was a corner of France where conscription was bitterly contested and where the rule of law barely ran. Or rather, it only began to run when Napoleon turned to massive and well-targeted repression, responding to parents' refusal to part with their sons or their willingness to offer them work and protection by building up levels of policing and seizing their property.

When Bergès moves into the second and third sections, the study becomes more accessible, with interesting and colourful examples of the sort of collective behaviour which helped to make this area so attractive to those seeking an escape from the military. The fragile rural economy clearly contributed to the problem, since a generally harsh and unyielding soil made it more difficult for a peasant family to struggle on without the labour of an able-bodied son. So, too, did the topography in a region where mountainsides and marshes, woods and river banks provided cover for fugitives. And, as he shows very convincingly, the connivance of others, whether doctors or farmers or municipal officials, played a major part in explaining the long periods many spent in hiding or on the run. Moreover, the prestige enjoyed by soldiers in these parts was very low, an attitude of mind which he puts down to long years of militia service under the *ancien régime*; boys who sought to escape incurred no sense of disgrace. Overall, Bergès

inclines to the view that it is not just economic and topographical matters that explain the high incidence of refusal in the southwest; it is also what he calls—perhaps with less conviction—"the character of the inhabitants."

It is here, of course, that a regional study has shortcomings as well as strengths, for while the twelve departments provide the author with an administrative canvas that allows him to read every sub-prefect's report and mayor's submission, they do not easily invite comparison with the rest of France. Any conclusion about why this area was particularly troublesome to the authorities implies, necessarily, some level of subsumed comparison, and in order to make his case he is inevitably heavily dependent on the views of others, and especially of the prefects. Again and again it is their opinions that are quoted to us, often verbatim, in support of some conclusion or value-judgement. This is not a problem, in as far as these reports are full and informative. But it does mean that the region is viewed from an essentially administrative angle, its citizens judged, first and foremost, by the degree of their obedience to the regime as *administrés*. As such the people of Aquitaine were difficult and troublesome; they defied the recruiting-sergeant and connived at the crimes of their children.

And why? It was not, claimed the officials, because of political opposition or a rejection of the regime, but rather because of geography and tradition, their isolation from centers of administration, their character. Napoleon would most surely have approved. But this administrative explanation does beg a number of unasked questions which could only be answered by comparison. If the southwest was so truculently opposed to conscription—for what seem to be eminently understandable reasons—why did other regions react so differently? What interest had Bretons or Picards in leaving their fields and families? Why should anyone wish to obey this law? It is worth emphasizing, too, that for much of the Empire the armies which Napoleon mustered were not exclusively French, and that similar exercises in conscription were being carried out among Germans, Italians, and Belgians. Can their resistance be explained without reference to ideology or to a nascent nationalism? It would be interesting to compare prefects' assessments of resistance in the valleys of the Pyrenees with those of their colleagues facing very similar problems in Piedmont or along the Flemish coast.

Louis Bergès' work began life as a doctoral dissertation, a *thèse de l'Ecole des Chartes* dating back to 1980. And though he has made useful additions in the intervening years, this is still largely that thesis, heavily rooted in the archives—and especially the administrative series in the Archives Nationales—which he knows so well. He writes with the keen documentary awareness of an archivist and he is appropriately generous in acknowledging the inspiration which he gained from another archivist and historian of desertion, the late Jean Waquet. The extent of that inspiration shows in the text. Bergès analyses his documents with patience and skill, and the result is a very fine regional thesis, like so many that have contributed to French historiography over the years. It will now feed in to the more general European picture, the parts of which are gradually being assembled. My only regret is that the conversion of the thesis into a book has taken so long, since in the last twenty years the subject has been opened up by a number of studies, both for France and for the *départements réunis*. Bergès does not really engage with that historiography; his remains a study based on regional materials. While we should congratulate the CTHS on making this fine thesis available at last, one suspects that it would have made more impact had it been published rather earlier.

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