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Review Essay 67

Deborah Bauer. *Marianne is Watching: Intelligence, Counterintelligence, and the Origins of the French Surveillance State*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021.

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When General Georges Boulanger committed suicide on his lover's grave in 1891, it was an ignominious end for "General Revanche," an enigmatic, if ambitious man who had threatened the republic he once served to protect. Much has been made of Boulanger's rise, the movement he inspired, his ultimate disgrace amid accusations of treason, and, recently, his reflection in the modern political landscape.¹

Deborah Bauer, in her excellent *Marianne is Watching: Intelligence, Counterintelligence, and the Origins of the French Surveillance State*, the first comprehensive examination in English of the professionalization of French intelligence in the period between the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and the beginning of World War I in 1914, argues that fixation on Boulanger's failed movement and political ambitions has obscured his perhaps more definitive and lasting impact on French society. Bauer finds that it was Boulanger, as War Minister in 1886, with his intense interest in intelligence, fear of outsiders and spies, and focus on military preparedness, who shaped the development and professionalization of French intelligence at the fin de siècle.

A robust body of scholarship has explored the nature of Boulanger's movement with some degree of consensus that Boulangism had its origins in the radical left, but that royalists and elements of the radical right coopted the movement. As Michael Burns points out, Boulangism was "...a river into which fed many streams."² At the core of these debates is the man himself. James Lehning notes that Boulanger himself maintained his republicanism.³ Burns, though, argues that Boulanger had "more ambition than firmness" that made him susceptible to royalist appeals.⁴ William Irvine confirms this malleability but notes that Boulanger's

¹ See Michael Burns, *Rural Society and French Politics: Boulangism and the Dreyfus Affair, 1886-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Bruce Fulton, "The Boulanger Affair Revisited: The Preservation of the Third Republic, 1889," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 1991): 310-320; Patrick Hutton, "Popular Boulangism and the Advent of Mass Politics in France, 1886-1890," *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 1 (January 1976): 85-106; William Irvine, *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered: Royalism: Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); James Lehning, *To Be a Citizen: The Political Culture of the Early French Third Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Jacques Nere, "Le Boulangisme et la Commune," *International Review of Social History* 17, no. 1 (1972): 431-438.

² Burns, 57-58.

³ Lehning, 164.

⁴ Burns, 106.

first expressed preference had been for monarchism.⁵ Bauer's shift in focus to the years before the notorious Boulanger Affair to Boulanger's role in the War Ministry allows us to discern not only his role in precipitating a major shift in the practice of intelligence in France, but it also demonstrates that Boulanger's xenophobic tendencies were on full display from the beginning. This is an important finding which undermines claims of his later cooptation by the French far right.

Specifically, Boulanger directed the focus of French intelligence away from foreign intelligence to counter-espionage and created new organizations dedicated to surveillance of foreigners in France itself. The 1886 Espionage Law, which criminalized espionage for the first time in France's history, originated in Boulanger's War Ministry. As Bauer notes, the next move after watching potential spies was "locating and registering them," and eventually, excluding them altogether. These steps, she argues, were the first "...on a path to a new, xenophobic surveillance regime" (167, 137).

Of course, Boulanger acted within the broad context of his time when the French public was reeling from a devastating defeat in war, and France was visibly weakened internationally. To account for these losses, French officials gazed overseas to expand the empire while latent grievances surfaced and revanchism fueled the rise of virulent nationalism and xenophobia at home. This was an era of "spy fever," when French society was preoccupied with spies and spying. Bauer seeks to illuminate the interplay of these dynamics—public and private, foreign and domestic—to understand what "practices and assumptions about intelligence tell us about turn-of-the-century France" (6-7).

Much of the relevant archives detailing the professionalization of French intelligence in the years after 1870 was lost to burn orders in advance of invasion and occupation in 1914 and again during the Second World War, which may account for the relative dearth of scholarship on French intelligence in this period, especially compared to that of the Anglosphere.⁶ Nevertheless, Bauer has made excellent use of national military, police, and foreign ministry archives, and regional archives closest to France's borders, to discern the objectives and practices of an intelligence community which evolved organically rather than by statute. Likewise, she broadens the scope of this story from "agents and agencies...to also include politicians, judges, news reporters, novelists, [and] ordinary French citizens..." who all played a key role in construction of an external threat (6). In this way, *Marianne is Watching* is a welcome intervention in the broader field of intelligence history, as Bauer smartly moves beyond accounting for success or failure or judging intelligence solely by whether it demonstrably affected the conduct of war. Bauer thus builds on the work of Sebastien Laurent, whose work focuses on the professionalization of intelligence as part of the growth and bureaucratization of the French state under the Third Republic.⁷ Bauer takes a more expansive view of the role of intelligence in society; she pays more attention to the culture that fostered the growth of institutions, as well as the roster of intelligence collectors who constructed the story of a German threat well before the first shots were fired in July 1914. Bauer shows us that the Belle Époque may have been peaceful, but intelligence, which had largely been a wartime function before 1870, was increasingly geared toward presumption of hostilities.

According to Bauer, part of the reason for more militarized intelligence was the French Army's key role in the process and development of intelligence and in socializing threat narratives into the public sphere. The Army had been unprepared when war came to the metropole in 1870, not because it did not have access to

⁵ Irvine, 3.

⁶ See Sebastien Laurent, *Politiques de l'ombre: État, renseignement et surveillance en France* (Paris: Librarie Arthème Fayard, 2009); Laurent, "Is There Something Wrong with Intelligence in France? The Birth of the Modern Secret State," *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 3 (2013): 299-312; Laurent, "Pour une autre histoire de l'état: le secret, l'information politique, et le renseignement," *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d'histoire* 83 (2004): 173-184; Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services: A History of French Intelligence from the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

⁷ Laurent, "Pour une autre histoire."

intelligence but because it did not effectively utilize intelligence in peacetime. At the same time, France had experience in surveilling and controlling the colonized in Algeria; many of the officers who served there ended up picking up the mantle in France in the aftermath of Sedan. It was into this void that Boulanger stepped in 1886.

Perhaps most significantly, Bauer argues that the French Army's outsized influence on French intelligence provides insight into the origins of World War I. Specifically, Bauer contends that the Army's focus on the assessment of military capabilities rather than the intentions of national leaders contributed to the belief that Germany was preparing for another war and a consequent "rise in belligerency" that seeped from the official sphere into the public sphere (16). The press picked up and stirred these anxieties about foreign spies and echoed them back to intelligence collectors whose own perceptions of threat shaped a narrative of future German aggression. Likewise, the press appealed across the ideological spectrum for vigilance, creating an "imagined community" of sorts around a shared sense of looming catastrophe (206). Bauer suggests that this increasingly militarized environment contributed to a "Cold War" atmosphere in which heightened xenophobia and nationalism helped to coalesce an anxious French public in opposition to a hidden enemy, and ultimately, Bauer argues, "transformed into the realities of actual war" (19). Perhaps most damning, Bauer claims that "had intelligence functioned differently, it is possible that a war could have been avoided altogether" (256). As with most episodes involving intelligence, it is difficult to prove singular causation, yet Bauer makes a convincing case that French intelligence collectors, assessments, and culture exercised an important influence on decisionmakers as they marched to war, if not through the actual intelligence they collected, then through the perceptions of threat that swirled in official circles and the public sphere. Bauer is certainly right here that "fear has its cost too" (268).

In this way, *Marianne is Watching* is a cautionary tale, with implications that echo still. Bauer argues that Boulanger's influence, the spy fever that was then just emerging, and the reluctance of French elites to question the methods required to collect intelligence, or the accuracy of the perceptions conveyed within intelligence assessments, ultimately led to abuses. Increasingly, the military used the "Carnet B," which was first designed to identify foreign sympathizers for internment or expulsion in the event of war, against "Mauvais Français" like anarchists, anti-militarists, liberated women, Jews, and other potential political adversaries (204). The Dreyfus Affair, in which officers of the Statistical Section of the Deuxième Bureau fabricated evidence to falsely accuse and condemn a Jewish army captain of espionage on behalf of Germany, is, of course, the most infamous of these incidents. Bauer refers to these concerns about subversion and dissent as a "Franco-French War," (265), an internecine struggle that was easily revived later against communist parties, and resistance and liberation movements in the second half of the twentieth century.⁸

As a result, the French public, which had only a generation before viewed intelligence as dishonorable and unnecessary, on the eve of war largely accepted the argument that counterespionage was central to the defense of the nation. Bauer sees French intelligence organizations as inherently Machiavellian and acquiescence to secretive practices as classical *raison d'état*: "the state may go beyond or against written law for the necessity of its own preservation...in accepting the ends (defense), the French people began to accept the means (espionage)" (252). Bauer points to the more recent "Fiche S" and France's current foreign intelligence organization (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*, DGSE) motto—*partout où nécessité fait loi*, "everywhere that necessity determines law"—as evidence that these practices persist (266). Likewise, she echoes Douglas Porch's contention that "the French have come to accept domestic spying as an unavoidable fact of life."⁹ Bauer concludes that "the construction of permanent edifices of secrecy...likely has caused more harm than it has prevented" (267).

⁸ Here "Franco-French" is an adapted reference to Martyn Cornick and Peter Morris, *The French Secret Services*, International Organization Series: Selective, Critical, and Annotated Bibliographies Vol 6 (London: Transaction, 1993), xi.

⁹ Porch, 483.

Porch, whose *French Secret Services* ends with the first Gulf War in 1991, claimed French acceptance of domestic spying prior to twenty-first century debates about the role of surveillance, big data, and artificial intelligence in French society that began in the early aughts; the question of domestic intelligence today is a rather complicated calculation for a society that has had to balance transparency and respond to violent jihadist and right-wing extremist attacks in the near past. At the same time, one wonders if Bauer is referring to the act of construction—and its military origins and lack of formal codification—as more harmful than not or whether she believes that the problem is actually secrecy itself.

Marianne is Watching offers us an important entry into the missing intelligence dimension of traditional renderings of diplomacy, politics, and culture; Bauer views intelligence as another category of knowledge—in this case, secret knowledge—that “wielded tremendous social and psychological power over the French population” (6). It did so through assessments that produced a narrative of a republic besieged by threats from within and without. While Bauer agrees with the arguments of Porch and of Christopher Andrew that intelligence did not alter French military preparation in the years between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, she contends that their analyses fail to account for “intelligence’s important role shaping the character of the Army and the nation” (133).¹⁰ Indeed, it is this interplay between culture and the emotions—fear, betrayal, and revenge—tied up in war and peace, and their expression through and from French intelligence, that is most fascinating and novel. Bauer’s account is highly original, well-researched, and compelling; *Marianne is Watching* is surely destined to become a seminal work on French intelligence in the period.

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¹⁰ See Christopher Andrew, “France and the German Menace,” in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).