

Zitierhinweis

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François Christian Semur (dir.), Le Sacrifié de l'Empire. La spectaculaire évasion du maréchal Bazaine de la prison de l'île Sainte-Marguerite – 1874, Le Coudray-Macouard (Les Acteurs du savoir) 2022, 316 p. (Les Acteurs du savoir), ISBN 978-2-38359-041-5, EUR 24,00.

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On 10 December 1873 Marshal François Achille Bazaine was found guilty of treason by a French military tribunal and was sentenced to death. However, the president of the court martial, the Duke of Aumale, immediately appealed to the president of the Third Republic, Marshal Patrice MacMahon, to commute the death sentence to twenty years of imprisonment. Bazaine's former comrade-in-arms thereupon granted this request and Bazaine was sent to the island of Sainte-Marguerite in the French Riviera. He was confined there in relatively comfortable conditions in an old fortress. His loyal aide-de-camp was also permitted to continue to serve him during his imprisonment. This surprising leniency for a convicted traitor was in part due to a general realization amongst objective observers that Bazaine's trial and conviction had been politically motivated and represented a concession to a widespread public desire to find a scapegoat for the defeat of Napoleon III's empire in its war against Prussia and her German allies in 1870/71.

Bazaine certainly had shown himself to be incapable of commanding the Army of the Rhine during that campaign and he had entered into negotiations with Bismarck to use his army to restore the deposed French Emperor but his military record was not that of a traitor. He was a career soldier who was undoubtedly loyal to his country and to the oath he had given to Napoleon III. There was, therefore, perhaps a certain amount of justice in the fact that he was not forced to serve even this lenient sentence. The marshal's incarceration was significantly shortened in a rather sensational fashion. In the night of 9 August 1874, he was freed from his prison in a daring rescue operation that was apparently masterminded and carried out by his young Mexican wife, Josefa. His escape and subsequent flight across Europe gave rise to almost as much controversy as his conviction.

This new study by François Semur seeks to resolve some of the mysteries surrounding Bazaine's escape from his island prison and the events that led up to it. This monograph can also be considered as a sequel to an earlier work by the same author that examined Bazaine's trial and conviction in 1873 (*L'affaire Bazaine: Un Maréchal devant ses juges, Coudray-Macouard (Cheminements)* 2009). And the new volume follows the same approach and style as the earlier one. Semur uses lengthy excerpts from trial transcripts and memoir literature to fill out his account. He also provides a



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significant amount of background information in the first half of this second volume which, in effect, represents a summary of the findings of his first book on the subject. He also offers quite a bit of contextual information to set the stage for his consideration of Bazaine's escape by offering, for example, a brief history of the fortress on the island of Sainte-Marguerite and biographical sketches of the main actors. As a result of all of the background information provided by the author, only about half of the book is actually dedicated to a consideration of the main subject of this sequel which is the sensational escape of Bazaine and its consequences.

Bazaine's successful flight from his island prison immediately became the subject of considerable conjecture in the media and amongst political observers in France. The marshal was rather corpulent and was 63 years old at the time of his escape. He also suffered from a number of injuries which would have impeded his efforts to escape. Therefore it was hard to imagine how he would have been able to descend down a 60-foot knotted rope to a boat waiting below the walls of the fortress. These circumstances gave rise to questions about the veracity of the official version of his escape. As the very well-informed German military attaché in Paris reported, it was believed within high-placed military circles in Paris that Bazaine's »escape« was really just a cover story arranged to conceal the fact that the marshal's comrades in the French army had conspired to free him from his unjust incarceration.

As Semur reports, his escape was also the subject of considerable speculation in the French Republican press which also suspected that this daring rescue operation was really an »exfiltration« organized by senior Bonapartist officers. It was in fact suggested that Bazaine's jailers had simply opened the gate and allowed the marshal to be spirited away in a waiting ship. As is minutely documented in this study, there were also a number of »accomplices« on the island who were tried and convicted as a result of this escape, including the long-time aide-de-camp of the marshal who had chosen to be imprisoned with him. In addition to a consideration of the escape itself, Semur also briefly describes Bazaine's flight through various European countries before he found refuge in Spain. In a final chapter, Semur then briefly describes the marshal's life in exile in Madrid.

A great deal of the work is narrative in nature. And the author does not make use of any archival sources so a considerable amount of important detail regarding the affair is not included and therefore a definitive answer to the questions asked has likely not been provided in these pages. Even published incidents such as Bazaine's central role in the Morier Affair of 1888 are overlooked. However, the author does offer an interesting and compelling analysis and assessment of the two versions of the marshal's escape.

He also addresses the less obvious question of why Bazaine decided to flee his rather comfortable confinement. It may seem



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obvious to most readers why the marshal would prefer freedom to imprisonment but his flight meant that he had forfeited any chance of seeking a revision of the questionable verdict from his court martial that would have restored his honour. By becoming a fugitive from the law, he had also consciously forfeited any chance of returning to France to pursue a political or military career.

This work is certainly intended for a more general readership. At the same time, the monograph benefits from being written from the perspective of a legal scholar rather than a historian. However, historical researchers will also find this book to be useful as an excellent introduction to the subject with a solid overview of published primary and secondary sources.

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