

Bertrand Jost, Vicissitudes militaires. Sept générations de conscrits d'une famille alsacienne aux armées de cinq empires (1809–1959). Cinquième période: Un instituteur alsacien dans la tourmente (1939–1945). Mémoires de guerre de Marius Meyer commentées et complétées par son petit-fils, Barr (écrits Calleva) 2016, 432 p., 7 cartes, 22 ill. en n/b (Histoire militaire, 5), ISBN 978-2-917-582-28-2, EUR 20,00.

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The region of Alsace has long been portrayed as the victim of imperial and national rivalries. Bandied back and forth between France and Germany as a spoil of war, stories abound of how Alsatians were affected by these frequent regime changes. Between 1870 and 1945, Alsatians changed nationality four times, and were forced to submit to the legal, educational, religious and linguistic reforms that each new governing administration imposed. For the region's men, each regime change also meant serving in a different military and, in some cases, fighting wars on the side of a former enemy. In his six-part series chronicling the lives of seven generations of his own family, Bertrand Jost explores how these »military vicissitudes« were experienced by Alsatian men forced to fight.

»Un instituteur alsacien dans la tourmente«, the fifth volume in Jost's series, focuses on what was arguably the most tragic of these »military vicissitudes«. After France's defeat in June 1940, Alsace was not occupied but instead annexed by Nazi Germany, and underwent an intensive policy of Germanization and Nazification. In August 1942, in an effort to speed up the process of assimilation, and with casualty rates mounting on the Eastern Front, military service was made mandatory in the annexed region. Between 1942 and 1945, 100 000 Alsatian men, plus another 30 000 men from neighbouring Moselle, were forced to serve in the German Wehrmacht and, after 1944, in the Waffen-SS. 40 000 of these French »forced conscripts« lost their lives. These men became known collectively as the Malgré-nous and, as symbols of the Alsace's victimization by the Nazis, are central to the region's collective memory of the war. The Malgré-nous have been the subject of academic research, films, documentaries, websites, children's books and graphic novels. They have been commemorated in memorials, museum exhibitions, and pilgrimages to Russia to the site of the Tambov camp where many Alsatian recruits died.

Most of this »work of memory« has been conducted in the last twenty-five years by descendants of forced conscripts. Jost's »Un instituteur alsacien« is part of this trend. Jost explores the plight of the Malgré-nous by telling the story of his maternal grandfather, Marius Meyer (1917–2006), who was drafted into the Wehrmacht in April 1943. Much of Jost's text comes directly from Marius's memoirs, wartime diary, poetry and letters. Jost's narrative also moves beyond a simple family history or biography, placing Marius's experiences within the broader contexts of a region, a nation, and a world at war, by incorporating archival and secondary sources, editorial commentary throughout the text and in the



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footnotes. Photographs and maps are also included. An English version of Marius's story was published in 2013 under the title »This too shall come to pass«¹.

Jost sets his prologue in 2006, when he returns from the United States to his native Alsace to attend his grandfather's funeral. The little medieval church of Hohatzenheim (arrondissement Saverne) is packed: as the village's former school teacher, Marius Meyer was a prominent member of the community, and well-known throughout the region. The church also holds special meaning for Marius: not only was he the church organist, but it was here that he had spent the last months of the war in hiding from the Gestapo after deserting from the German army. It was also from here that Marius had engaged in work as a member of the Forces françaises de l'intérieur (FFI), a role that earned him a leadership position in the village during the liberation and the immediate postwar period.

In the following chapters we learn about Marius's childhood and adolescence, his teacher training, his service in the French army, his move to Hohatzenheim, and his marriage to Louise. Marius is mobilized in September 1939, is in Paris in the spring of 1940, and is caught up in the exodus of June. In Tulle he learns of France's defeat, is demobilized in August, and becomes a teacher for the Alsatian refugees in the Dordogne. Marius's wife has just given birth to their daughter, Simone. As she is unable to travel to join him in the free zone, Marius returns to Nazi-annexed Alsace. He is reinstated as the village teacher, but must conform to the new teaching requirements, and is sent on multiple occasions to Karlsruhe to undergo Nazi *Umschulung*. It is during these sojourns that Marius begins to write poetry. Marius is expected to act as the local representative of the new administration, but refuses. Details about Nazi policies, local resistance organizations, and the opening of the Vorbruck-Schirmeck and Natzweiler camps remind the reader of the terror inflicted by the Nazis on the Alsatian population.

The central drama of Jost's book, and indeed Marius's life, begins to unfold in chapter 6, when Marius is drafted into the Wehrmacht. But Marius never sees combat: instead, he suffers from a series of self-inflicted illnesses and injuries that keep him from active duty until the spring of 1944, when doctors catch on to his serial malingering and declare him fit to serve. On his final leave in Hohatzenheim before being sent to the Eastern Front, Marius makes the decision to desert, is taken in by Franciscan priests, hidden with other young deserters, and joins the local branch of the FFI. When the Americans liberate the area and are billeted in the village, they become friends with Marius and his family. The war finally ends, followed by the purges. We learn that six men from Marius's village drafted into the Wehrmacht were killed in combat. Jost's epilogue details the research he engaged in to locate, among others, the American Colonel Evans, a legendary figure in his family's lore. Jost concludes his work by calling on present and future generations to continue to uphold the values for which their forefathers had fought.

»Un instituteur alsacien dans la tourmente« will appeal to individuals interested in the history of Alsace during the Second World War, and



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¹ Bertrand Jost, *This Too Shall Come to Pass: The Story of One of the 130,000 Frenchmen Drafted Into the Wehrmacht – Les »Malgré-Nous«*, North Charleston, SC 2013.

adds to the already significant body of work dedicated to recording the experiences of the Malgré-nous. Jost, an executive director at Morgan Stanley in New York, is not a professional historian, but he is clearly passionate about Alsatian history and preserving the stories of his family. The book reads at times like a novel, and those with little knowledge of the region will find Jost's historical overviews and commentary helpful. Unfortunately, the overall structure and style of the book are ill-conceived. There are breaks in Marius's narrative that are jarring and at times confusing, especially when it is unclear whose voice we are listening to.

At one point Jost transcribes several pages of Charles de Gaulle's memoir of the war, with little contextualization and none of his own analysis. Jost wants his characters to speak for themselves, in an effort to uncover »the Truth«. But without a clear indication of whose truth we are dealing with, the power of the first-hand account is lost. Jost, who writes mostly military histories, also seems to struggle with reconciling this with the fact that his grandfather did not see any combat after he had been drafted into the Wehrmacht. Jost provides descriptions of various other campaigns, such as the Battle of the Bulge (*bataille des Ardennes*), to illustrate what is happening on the front, but these are out of place here.

Marius becomes a secondary character in his own biography. It is a shame that Jost does not delve into some of the more controversial elements of the annexation and forced conscription related to his grandfather's experiences, most notably draft-dodging and desertion. When Jost writes about »values« that need to be protected, it is unclear to which ones he refers.

Jost does draw on some archival sources and the work of historians, but these are very limited, and he does not use them critically, or engage with recent historiographical debates. Jost's book is not without some scholarly value. Marius's narrative could provide texture to future historical works, especially if Jost shares his grandfather's original, unedited documents with researchers. The book is also an interesting example of the Malgré-nous literature of recent years that has helped shape collective memory and public history. Finally, the book serves as a reminder to professional historians to engage with the work of genealogists and amateurs. Historians should not simply dismiss or ignore this work. But nor should they allow it to be reified as more authentic or accessible to a generalist audience.

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