

Jean-Claude Caron, *Les Deux Vies du Général Foy (1775-1825). Guerrier et Législateur*. Ceyzérieu : Champ Vallon, 2014. 357 pp. Tables, figures, notes. 27€ (pb). ISBN978-2-87673-970-3.

Review by Alexander Mikaberidze, Louisiana State University-Shreveport.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars produced a whole generation of talented statesmen, diplomats, and generals who shaped that tumultuous era. One of them was Maximilian Sébastien Foy, one of the ablest divisional commanders in the French army, who went on to enjoy a stellar legislative career. An experienced general, he was also a gifted orator and major opposition voice in the Chamber of Deputies against the conservative policies of the Bourbon Restoration. His death in 1825 was mourned by tens of thousands of Parisians at one of the most spectacular funerals the French capital had ever seen. A true apotheosis of a remarkable career!

Foy's life is the subject of this excellent book by Jean Claude Caron, professor of contemporary history at the Université Blaise-Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, who is well known for his in-depth research in the history of nineteenth-century France. At the start of the book, the author poses the simple question whether it is reasonable to devote several years of an historian's life to explore the life of a man who has been dead for two centuries and who is better known for his funeral than for his military exploits. For Caron, the answer is a resounding yes due to the duality of Foy's life, consisting of distinguished military and legislative careers, the latter of which, in the author's mind, clearly outweighs the former.

The book consists of twenty-two chapters, but this is not a standard military biography. In fact, Caron devotes relatively little space to a discussion of Foy's military career. For him, the general is more important for what he did away from the battlefield. Furthermore, the author breaks with the customary biographical narrative by starting at the end of Foy's life. The first four chapters of the book are devoted to examining existing sources on Foy's life and, more importantly, to his death and funeral in 1825. Starting with Chapter 5, the author returns to a chronological narrative, starting with the general's birth on 3 February 1775 into the family of Florent-Sébastien Foy, a veteran soldier, and his wife Elisabeth-Joachim Wisbeck. At the age of fourteen, Foy passed exams to the famed *École d'artillerie de La Fère* and spent three years studying there. He began his military career in the artillery in 1792, when he was commissioned as sous-lieutenant (p. 71). Young and idealistic, Foy became involved in the political agitation that was so rampant in France in the wake of the outbreak of the French Revolution. In April 1794, he was arrested for "moderantisme"—a potentially fatal accusation during the Terror—but fortunately survived the revolutionary turmoil and was reinstated in the army following the Thermidor coup of July 1794 (pp. 74-75).

Caron has little interest in following his subject through the ups and downs of the next six years, when Foy took part in several major campaigns in the Rhineland and Switzerland. This period of his life, as tumultuous and interesting as it was, is addressed in just four pages (pp. 76-79). Foy quickly advanced, rising to the rank of chef de brigade (colonel) in March 1800. Yet he had seriously harmed his military aspirations in standing firm by his republican sentiments, rejecting an offer to become Bonaparte's aide-de-camp and opposing the establishment of the Consulate and, later, the Empire. Consequently, Napoleon relegated him to secondary positions, sending him to command coastal defenses at Boulogne or taking over an artillery battery protecting the flotilla that was preparing for the invasion of

England. At the start of the War of the Third Coalition in 1805, Foy was assigned to General (later Marshal) Auguste de Marmont's corps. He took part in the French victory at Ulm, but was not present at the decisive battle on 2 December where the "Sun of Austerlitz," which shone so brightly on so many of his comrades-in-arms, cast no light on him. Thus, in 1806, while his peers were earning new promotions and ranks, Foy was leading a much more sedate life at Udine in Italy, where he met and married his wife Elisabeth Daniels (p. 80).

In 1807, Foy was briefly sent on a military mission to Constantinople but returned in time to serve under General Jean Andoche Junot during the French invasion of Portugal in November-December 1807. Thus began a new page in Foy's life. For the next seven years, the general found himself in the middle of what eventually became the "Spanish Quagmire," a bloody and merciless war in Spain and Portugal that is the subject of chapters six and seven. In 1808, Foy distinguished himself at Vimeiro and earned promotion to *général de brigade* (p. 85-86). The following year he was involved in the French pursuit of the British army under Sir John Moore, culminating in the Battle of Corunna. In May, Foy was tasked with negotiating the surrender of Oporto but was captured and mistreated by the Portuguese who eventually had to release him. In 1810 Foy was made a baron but was badly wounded at the battle of Busaco on 27 September. Marshal Andre Massena then sent him to deliver a report on the military situation in Portugal to Napoleon, with whom Foy had an audience. Promoted to *général de division*, Foy returned to Spain as a divisional commander in the 6<sup>th</sup> Corps. He fought with great distinction at the battle of Salamanca (22 July 1812), and his division's resolute rearguard action at the end of the day allowed the defeated French to escape across the Tormes River and avoid the British pursuers. Foy's troops, however, were less fortunate as the British heavy cavalry mauled them the following day at García Hernandez.

Chapters seven and eight are devoted to what Caron refers to as the "inglorious war," that is, the concluding campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1813 Foy defended Tolosa and took part in the engagement at Maya (25 July 1813), where the French were successful, though they were later defeated at the Battle of the Nive (9-12 December 1813). As the war in Spain drew to a close, Foy was once more wounded at Orthez (27 February 1814). Upon Napoleon's downfall in 1814 Foy was allowed to retain his commission by the Bourbon government, but less than a year later he decided to rally to Napoleon. In 1815, he was given command of a division in General Honoré comte Reille's corps during the Waterloo campaign. His forces were engaged at Quatre Bras (16 June), where he occupied a position in the French center. Two days later, at Waterloo, he was wounded in the shoulder while his men were engaged in the bloody assaults on Hougoumont. After the French defeat, Foy retired from military service but remained under close supervision of the Bourbon police (pp. 139-143).

Caron's discussion of these campaigns is concise and devoid of military details, instead focusing on what he believes are more important issues, i.e. Foy's views on the guerrillas in "the war of all against all" (p. 110), violence against women (p. 119), or the general's attitudes towards the Emperor. Caron explains that the relations between the Emperor and the general were rather "ambiguous" (p. 122). Foy was never able to rise high enough to enter the circles of Napoleon's confidante, even though the Emperor did appreciate his military talents. This was largely due to the general's republican sentiments. Early on he accused Bonaparte of aspiring to become "a Roman emperor" (p. 123) and later castigated Napoleon for ruining the nation. Yet, neither could Foy escape the long "shadow of the Emperor." After the fall of the First Empire, Foy, still in his prime, decided to write his famous "*Histoire de la guerre de la Peninsule sous Napoléon*," which was published in four

volumes only after his death and served as an important counterpoint to the British perspectives on the war. Far more important was Foy's decision to pursue a political career to defend the revolutionary ideals that had been consolidated by Napoleonic rule. In 1819, with 622 votes out of 1089 cast, Foy was elected as a deputy of the department of Aisne to the Chamber of Deputies (pp. 134-144).

During the last six years of his life, Foy emerged as "one of the principal voices of the opposition left in the Chamber" (p. 157). He worked tirelessly to ensure, as he once stated, "that the liberties in [the Constitutional Charter of 1814] are not just vain words, and that its dispositions are observed everyday... The fundamental principle of the Charter is equality before the law. Any law that attacks that sacred dogma, essential to French existence and fundamental to social order, is in itself contrary to the Charter." [1] His vast memory, intelligence, and oratorical skills earned him immense popularity, which he used to considerable effect. A contemporary described Foy as "the marble of the tribune, and there was in him a little of the sibyl on her tripod... Often was he seen to spring impulsively from his seat and scale the tribune, as if he was advancing to victory. When there, he flung forth his words with a haughty air, like Condé flinging his baton of command over the redoubts of the enemy." [2] Between 1819 and 1825 he was second only to the famed Benjamin Constant in his activities inside the Chamber, making over 100 speeches to remonstrate against government's policies. Here lies one of the interesting aspects of the book as it delves into Foy's political career. It not only provides a closer look at the evolution of the French political left but also demonstrates the Bourbon Restoration's role in producing a syncretism of liberalism and Bonapartism. Foy, who had been earlier so critical of the Emperor, could be heard at the Chamber extolling him as a "grand homme" (p. 126). But Foy never embraced Bonapartism as many of his comrades-in-arms did. He was careful to distinguish that he had served on behalf of the Nation, not the Emperor. He used his exceptional oratory in fervently defending not only the liberal values of the Revolution but also the military ethos of the Napoleonic soldiers and officers. During one of his speeches, he famously stated,

"Nineteen-twentieth of those who drew the sword during the Hundred Days in defense of their country had in no respect contributed to the success of the 20th of March [when Napoleon reclaimed Paris]: they marched, as their fathers had marched twenty-three years before, at the cry of Europe united against France. Would you have liked it better if, for the first time, we had halted in front of our enemies and demanded how many of them there were? We ran to Waterloo, like the Greeks to Thermopylae. All without fear, and almost all without hope. It was the accomplishment of a magnanimous sacrifice, and that is the reason why this recollection, painful as it may be, has remained as precious to us as the most glorious of the rest." [3]

Maximilian Sébastien Foy was just fifty years old when he died of an aneurism of the heart in Paris on 28 November 1825. In a procession that lasted four hours, as many 100,000 Parisians (a number that Caron considers unverifiable, pp. 9, 53) followed his coffin from the church to the cemetery in a heavy rain (chapter four). The funeral procession in itself was a political show of force at a time when the new monarchy of Charles X had tightened controls over public gatherings. So strongly was the public feeling excited by Foy's passing that a public subscription raised considerable funds to support the general's family, while medals were struck in his honor and portraits engraved (pp. 337-48). Reflecting public admiration for Foy and the political cause that he had defended, a public monument was erected to his memory between 1827 and 1831. A modern visitor to the "City of Sepulchres," as Victor Hugo famously described the cemetery of Père Lachaise, can hardly miss this 30-foot-high neoclassical tomb designed by David d'Angers and Leon Vaudoyer as a liberal opposition statement against the conservative policies of the Bourbon government (pp. 335-

37). A full-scale figure of Foy, wrapped in the classical toga of orator, surmounts bas-reliefs depicting his military and political career.

The author must be commended for undertaking the herculean task of sifting through a vast body of material, much of which is derived from French military and national archives, including Foy's personal journals and family documents. There is much to learn from this dense but discerning work as it explores many facets of Foy, not just as a general on the fields of battle or defender of liberty in the Chamber, but also as a loving husband and father of five children. This is a superbly researched and well-written book, but the publisher should be faulted for failing to include index and bibliography, which would have been of considerable utility to the reader. Two dozen illustrations provide sufficient visual material, but some selections could have been improved. These are minor quibbles, however, to what is otherwise a great book.

## NOTES

[1] *Discours du Général Foy* (Paris: P.A. Moutardier, 1826), I, pp. 294-95 <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k24292c>>

[2] *Études sur les Orateurs Parlementaires* (Paris: Pagnerre, Editeur, 1839), I, p. 129.

[3] *Discours du Général Foy*, I, pp. 66-7.

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