

Laurent Joly (dir.), *La Délation dans la France des années noires*, Paris, Perrin, 2012, 377 p.

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The Occupation era has earned a reputation as a “golden age” of *délation*. Informing is a repugnant subject, but it is one that is revelatory of how dictatorships work, the German Occupation and its Vichy regime partner among them. The volume under review, edited and introduced by Laurent Joly, brings this point home in thought-provoking ways, in part because of the quality of the individual essays, but above all because of the range of subjects covered. The collection is comparative in design, including a contribution by François-Xavier Nérard on denunciation practices in Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union. An essay by Cédric Neveu examines the situation in the Moselle, French territory that was absorbed into the Hitlerian Reich and subjected to a concerted program of Germanization. A number of articles, moreover, do not confine themselves to the Occupation years alone. Virginie Sansico’s on “*délits d’opinion*” treats legislation enacted in the last years of the Third Republic constraining free speech and the Republic’s invitation to the public to inform on offenders. The volume’s final three essays deal with the purge of *délateurs* at the Liberation and the role that denunciation played in identifying culprits for trial. And Fabrice Grenard’s article on the black market makes clear that citizens, exasperated by the persistence of shortages and the shady business dealings attendant on penury, continued to snitch on their countrymen into the late forties. The choice to broaden out the discussion geographically and temporally allows a trio of key questions to be asked. In what Élie Halévy called the “era of tyrannies,” at a historical moment when informers were legion, did France stand out? What role does *délation* play in the functioning of authoritarian regimes? And given that informing is not unique to authoritarian settings, are there nonetheless distinctions to be drawn between how denunciation is practiced in a democracy and how it is practiced under dictatorship?

On the first question, the collection does not permit a clear-cut verdict. No doubt, the volume of denunciations shot up under the Occupation. Price-control authorities received far more letters informing on black-market activities than they were able to process. The poison-pen phenomenon was of sufficient significance that it got cinematic handling in Henri Georges Clouzot’s stunning but perverse *Le Corbeau* (the subject of an essay by François Rouquet). One source claims that the traffic in denunciations during the war years reached a shocking total of three to five million letters, though it is not clear how such an estimate was arrived at. Two additional points bear keeping in mind, however. An understaffed Gestapo could not have earned its reputation for ruthless efficiency without the cooperation of masses of *délateurs*. As for the Soviets, it is said that they were buried by the “torrents” of poison-pen letters that poured in. There’s no reason to believe that the French stood out when it came to informing on one another. In fact, in some instances (and this is

the second point), they knew very well how to keep quiet. Raphaël Spina's article on "*les réfractaires au STO*" shows just how little cooperation Vichy got from the public when it came to implementing and policing a policy that was so unpopular. The Gauleiter of the Moselle, hard as he tried to Nazify the region, ended up relying more on police methods to achieve his ends – networks of infiltrators and paid agents, not to mention brutal interrogation techniques – than on the snitching propensities of the local population. So, perhaps the stereotype of the poison-pen writing Frenchman is not so deserved after all. Such a conclusion, even if provisional, does raise a puzzle: how is it that the stereotype gained such wide currency in the first place?

As to the second question – how *délation* works in authoritarian settings –, the volume's findings are wide-ranging and provocative. They come in two parts, the first having to do with how *délation* fits into structures of authoritarian rule, the second with how it functions in ways that benefit both informants and the regimes they serve.

Informing in authoritarian settings is a systemic phenomenon. The Nazis seconded by the Vichy authorities encouraged the practice, as did the media, above all the press, and there were no sanctioned voices arguing to the contrary. The offenses worthy of denunciation, moreover, were numerous – *délits d'opinion*, black-market activities, and dodging the labor draft. The collection, as already noted, devotes an essay to each, and there is a contribution as well on *la traque des communistes et des Juifs* by Joly himself and one on *délation en matière d'avortement et de déviances morales* by Fabrice Cahen and Christophe Capuano. Nor was it just the man in the street who was called on to inform. There were official bodies that made a specialty of denunciation, in Germany any Nazi-party affiliate, in the annexed Moselle a party-like structure known as the Deutsche Volksgemeinschaft, and in Vichy France the Légion française des combattants. The Legion staked out a place for itself as the ideological shock troops of the National Revolution, making denunciation of backsliders one of its specialties, enough so that it won for itself the dubious nickname of *Légion des mouchards*. It's not just that informing was institutionalized but that there was a proliferation of state agencies charged with processing denunciations and making arrests. The regular police were just one piece of a ramifying repressive apparatus. There were *brigades spéciales* to hunt down communists and Jews. The Commissariat général aux questions juives maintained an anti-Jewish police unit of its own. The office dealing with price controls on food stuff maintained a network of *contrôleurs* and inspectors to follow up leads provided by self-appointed snitches. Not least of all the penalties for falling afoul of the authorities, whether German or French, were severe, including torture, execution, and deportation. One of this volume's great strengths is that it looks at *délation* not just in isolation but as an indispensable cog in larger, authoritarian machine.

Part of what made it indispensable was the bond it created between informant and regime. Cahen and Capuano in fact write of an "*instrumentalisation mutuelle*". According to received wisdom, the *délateur* was most often female, a mean-spirited concierge or a wronged wife or lover. This image, it turns out, was on the whole false, another stereotype exploded and another whose etiology merits a closer looking into. But whether male or female, informers did in fact tend to be city folk, often acting in concert with co-complainants (as Marc Bergère's essay on *délation* in the Anjou points out). Joly writes of them as "*déclassés*" and "*marginiaux*", although it might be fairer to characterize them as persons of modest to middling background and means.

For such people, denunciation was a way of settling scores, of making the regime work for them. It was a way of claiming, as Nérard puts it, “*une parcelle... du pouvoir symbolique*.” It was a way of shaping the world according to their own moral standards. From the perspective of the *délateur*, ratting out others was a form of empowerment and participation. The authorities reaped substantial dividends from the phenomenon themselves. A *délateur* may not have been an enthusiast for the regime, but he (or she) was at least caught in the snares of complicity. Denunciation, moreover, created a climate of fear that discouraged non-conformity, let alone outright dissidence. And in many domains, *délation* supplied the authorities with useful knowledge. It was more effective to employ paid informants or undercover agents when tracking down Résistants. Denunciations for black-market offenses were too numerous and so often unfounded that they hindered policing more than helping it. Yet for hunting down Jews, labor draft dodgers, or sexual deviants, *délation* was a valuable tool. Now, the public was not always as willing to take the initiative in these areas as the authorities might have liked. People did not tend to denounce *réfractaires au STO*. There was a spate of denunciations of Jews who had gone into hiding after the round-ups in the summer of 1942, but there appears to have been a let-up after that. Still, whatever the limits on the system’s effectiveness, whatever the irrationalities built into it, denunciation bound the regime and its informants together in a pact that afforded advantages, symbolic as well as material, to both sides.

But is this how denunciation works in more democratic settings? Three final essays – one by Christiane Kohser-Spohn on Alsace, a second by Marc Bergère on the Maine-et-Loire (he has two essays in the collection), and a third by Benn E. Williams on the Rhône – take this question head on. They all discuss how Liberation-era authorities dealt with persons accused of *délation*, of selling out their fellow citizens to Vichy or to the Nazis. Three points on this score come through clearly. In the summer of 1945, as the official purge geared up, denunciations of *délateurs* were indeed solicited, but republican officials insisted that all denunciations had to bear a signature; the era of the poison-pen letter was over. In the Rhône, elements of the local press backed up the authorities on the issue, pushing back against the continued practice of the *lettre anonyme*. And in the fall, the question was rethought altogether; as of September, Alsatian officials turned their backs on denunciation in whatever form. The implication is this: that denunciation in democracies does not operate on the same scale as in authoritarian regimes; that there are safeguards against the worst abuses; and that all in all, the phenomenon it is not systemic to the same degree.

Collective volumes are often hit-or-miss affairs. This one works and works well because of its comparative design which allows major interpretive issues to be addressed in ways that would not be possible in a more focused, single-country study. These issues are critical to an understanding of the authoritarian conjuncture of *les années noires*, but it is worth remembering that they also have relevance to our own historical times. In moments of crisis, above all where national security is concerned, democratic polities are susceptible to the creep of authoritarian practices. The anonymous tip and the *lettre anonyme* come back into play, sometimes with a vengeance. Do they have a role to play in the life of a Republic, and if so, with what caveats?