

**Frédéric Genevée: La fin du secret. Histoire des archives du Parti communiste français [The End of the Secret. The History of the Archives of the French Communist Party], Paris, Editions de l'Atelier, 2012. 176 pp. – ISBN 978-2-708-24190-9.**

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The “secrets” of the French Communist Party’s archives have nourished many fantasies among historians as well as among the party’s political adversaries. During the 1990s, undergoing the “mutation” launched by national secretary Robert Hue and facing a significant decline of its political influence, the FCP opted for a “generalized opening” of its archives in March 1993 and deposited them in the *Archives départementales* of Bobigny (Seine-Saint-Denis), a former electoral strongpoint of the “Red Belt” around Paris. Frédéric Genevée, director of the Bobigny Archives, defends this opening policy in a concise and clear book: according to him, the FCP has “put an end to the secret” that surrounded its archives. This is partly true. Any historian working on French communism nowadays, particularly concerning the Cold War years, has to spend some time in the Bobigny Archive. Working conditions are excellent and the staff is qualified and welcoming. The archives can be consulted on the same legal basis as other national archives, while they remain the property of the FCP. The disclosing of its archive has been a winning strategy for the FCP and its historians. However, a few critical points can be directed towards Genevée’s book.

The historical debates triggered by François Furet’s *Passé d’une illusion* (1995) and the *Livre Noir du communisme* (1997) unveil the so called secrecy policy of the communist archives. In fact, the FCP had no clear strategy concerning its archives. The growing difficulties of the 1990s compelled it to provide public access to its heritage. The FCP, however, tried to give way to this claim in a way it could benefit from. This gesture has probably defused some of the criticisms against the communist “obsession for secrecy”, but it didn’t stem the decline of interest towards communist history among historians in France. Attendance is good, say the Bobigny responsables, and they are right. But the interest for French communist history has faded – yet.

Besides, the opening of the archives was only partial. There is no access to the biographical material of the party’s Cadres Section for the postwar years. The files of the Political Control Commission have been partially released, and their contents are somewhat disappointing. The microfilms copies of the FCP holdings within the Comintern archive (RGASPI, *fond* 517) are partial and mainly concern the party’s local and regional organization. Whereas some of the Western European communist parties have simply dissolved themselves and let their archives go, the FCP retains control over the declassification of its documents.

In fact, the partial opening of French communist archives is clearly a side-effect of the Russian archives revolution. The problem of “secrecy” in the history of international communism has therefore been displaced, but not resolved. The so-called French “dependency” towards Moscow has been the backbone of historical debates for twenty years and the opening of its archives was, in a way, the French communists’ answer to them. Nevertheless, Frédéric Genevée clearly underestimates the importance of the flow of documents that linked Paris to Moscow: this flow was set earlier, was more massive and went through a wider range of intermediaries (the Soviet embassy, for instance) than

Genevée acknowledges. Rather than “offensive”, as he says, the FCP is in a “defensive” position towards its history: the national secretary Pierre Laurent has clearly stated in a debate in October 2012 at Blois’ *Salon de l’histoire* that history of communism was now the matter of... historians and was no concern anymore for the FCP. Ignoring whether they have to be proud or ashamed of their history, French communists now prefer to disregard it. The “mutation” triggered by Pierre Laurent is therefore very different from the Robert Hue’s repentant years (in the mid-1990s). One must acknowledge that repentance doesn’t distract but attract attention and nourishes the claim for moral redress. Besides, Hue’s policy took place at the worst moment for the FCP. The conservative reformation of Laurent, linked with the rallying of the Front de Gauche, is much more careful. The communist documentary policy is therefore depending on the changes undergone by the communist “policy of the past”.

One of the qualities of Genevée’s book is its comparative stance. Communist parties and regimes have disappeared, and the FCP is the only communist party that has retained control and property over its archives. Genevée also compares the FCP to other states or bureaucratic institutions, in order to show that there is a “kinship” between them. This is probably true: one can consider communist history in the wake of a wider, European history of modern bureaucracy. But one cannot forget the Soviet detour the FCP took in the 1920s, to become a model of a *parti de masse* for the other French political parties in the twentieth century. The origins of the communist bureaucracy and authoritarianism are Soviet, rather than republican or Jacobin. Sadly enough, Genevée does not quote the reviewer’s recent monograph (*Camarades! La naissance du PCF*, Perrin, 2010) which attempts to rethink this paradoxical situation. He often insists on the importance of the communist historiography, and underestimates the impact of the “totalitarian” side of the problem. The FCP, however, reacted to the attacks of the latter, not to the progresses of the former. There is nothing left of the communist monopoly over its own history. Genevée’s insightful, honest and stimulating book therefore accounts for the limits and contradictions of the communist “mutation” in France.