

**Laurent Douzou, *Lucie Aubrac*, Paris, Perrin,
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Today Lucie Aubrac (1912-2007) is remembered for two events. A daring resister, she told false stories to German officers in Lyon in 1943 to arrange the dramatic escape of her husband and fellow resistance leader Raymond Aubrac and a number of other imprisoned resisters. A half-century later, Jacques Vergès, attorney for Klaus Barbie, oversaw the creation of a document attributed to his client that sought to exploit inconsistencies in the documentation and accounts given by Lucie Aubrac to contend that she cooperated with the Germans in Lyon and this explained the liberation of her husband. A journalist, Gérard Chauvy, published the Vergès/Barbie document in a book in 1997 in which he insinuated that the charges made against Lucie Aubrac were true¹.

In an effort to put these accusations to rest, Raymond Aubrac asked for convocation of a group of historians to discuss Chauvy's work. However, once assembled, the historians did not devote much attention to Chauvy's text and several of them used the occasion to interrogate the Aubracs about their actions in Lyon in 1943. The transcript of the "roundtable" was published in *Libération*. Among the historians who participated was Laurent Douzou, author of a major study of Libération-Sud, the Resistance movement the Aubracs had helped found and in which they played central roles. Interviews with Lucie Aubrac and her husband were one of Douzou's sources, although not a major one, and he recognized in the roundtable with the Aubracs, in 1997, that he was not questioning their accounts then, since he had not found reason to do so in a decade of research².

Douzou could be seen as too implicated in the controversy over Lucie Aubrac's actions during the war to write her biography. However, he does the questioning he did not do earlier and proves to be the perfect biographer. For the events in Lyon in 1943, he makes excellent use of wartime sources to provide further evidence that the accusation that Lucie Aubrac worked with the Germans is false. He has unearthed new materials produced at the time and places the documentation we have in the historical context in which it was produced, so that we can understand and assess its meaning. Having shown that he is not part of a witch hunt, Douzou is able to write a very revealing biography in which a central point is to show that Lucie Aubrac did not relate many elements of her life accurately. A standard attack on Lucie Aubrac has

¹ For analysis of a contemporaneous conflict over the significance of inaccuracies in the text of an iconic resister rooted, like Douzou's analysis of Lucie Aubrac, in an examination of her youth, see Donald Reid, "Dealing with Academic Conflicts in the Classroom: Teaching *I, Rigoberta Menchú* As a Case Study," *Teaching History*, 31:1, Spring 2006, p. 19-29.

² What is most interesting in Douzou's account of the *Libération* roundtable, is that he appears most upset by the treatment of his thesis adviser, Maurice Agulhon, dismissed as a supporter called in by the Aubracs, rather than recognized as the internationally renowned *Collège de France* historian that he is.

been that if one detail in her accounts of her life can be challenged, i.e. the details of her confirmation ceremony when she was a teen – then anything she said about any period of her life can be selectively dismissed as the work of a fabulist. Douzou does not present himself as Lucie Aubrac's defender. He is not concerned with countering every charge made against her³. Douzou does not take up her confirmation ceremony and makes many of his responses to charges against her accounts of Resistance activities in the end notes. None of the major inaccuracies he has uncovered directly concern her acts as a resister in 1943, except that they offer evidence that she could have pulled off the daring storytelling at the heart of her arrangement of arrested prisoners' escapes.

This work is a model of what an analytical biography can be. One could imagine a biography that devoted far more space to the Resistance and her activities in it, but much of this falls within the category of the "already known" (through Douzou's study of Libération-Sud and other works). Douzou keeps his attention focused on Lucie Aubrac, the individual and her character and personality rather than on a history of the Resistance movement (or of the Communist Party) in which she participated. What Douzou does so well is to examine a wealth of diverse records, depending sparingly on Lucie Aubrac's accounts and interviews produced for the public in the last decades of her life. However, he does use effectively an unpublished autobiography Lucie Aubrac prepared for her grandson in 1993, which tells facets of her early life accurately and clearly contradicts elements of the story she was telling interviewers at this time. Among the most important sources upon which Douzou draws are the academic records of Lucie Aubrac as a student and as a teacher; and materials she wrote and others wrote about her found in the French Communist Party archives.

The most flagrant liberties Lucie Aubrac took in telling her life history concern her youth – the conditions of her birth, her parents' professions, her father's condition on his return from service in World War I, and the fact that she had to take the exam for entry to the normal school three times in order to pass it. Although she did take the dramatic step of turning down her hard-won admission to the normal school to prepare for the *agrégation*, this apparently did not lead to a radical break with her parents as she later recounted. Douzou is a good psychologist. He invariably stops and offers several possible explanations for Lucie Aubrac's later crafting of a story when inaccuracies cannot be attributed to the failings of memory. I think that Douzou is correct to attribute these stories to effects of a period of real penury in the 1930s, when she was preparing for her *agrégation*, coupled at the end of the decade with the entry into a new cultural and social world which came with achieving *agrégée* status rare for a woman of her modest social background and with her marriage to a *bourgeois* engineer, Raymond Aubrac, fresh from his training at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In an effort to present the unease and discomfort which accompanied these events, she edited her life in such a way as to make it represent her experience of this experience. Furthermore, Douzou is aware that Lucie

³ Douzou notes the "*furieuses polémiques*" around the particular date of Raymond Aubrac's release in May 1943 (328n33), but does not present her defense that the date in her *mémoire, Ils partiront dans l'ivresse*, was suggested by her editor because it coincided with a date the couple had vowed never to be apart. Does Douzou doubt this explanation or feel that Lucie Aubrac defended herself and needs no second in this duel?

Aubrac's quite real and unvarnished heroism in the Resistance made her an iconic figure even before her arrival in the United Kingdom in 1944, a status which took on new dimensions in the final decades of her life, as the Resistance myth was challenged by those who lived in what Henry Rousso refers to as the obsessive phase of the *Vichy Syndrome*⁴. When, as a mythic figure, one's life is not one's own, it can be difficult to control fully the telling of it, including one's own telling of it.

The most interesting and revealing element of Douzou's biography concerns Lucie Aubrac's relationship with the Communist Party, both for what it tells us about Lucie Aubrac and for what it tells us about the workings of the Communist party. In the 1930s, Lucie Aubrac was an active member of both the Quaker pacifist *Cercle international de la jeunesse* and of *Jeunesse Communiste*, and she ended her active participation in both in 1938, when she devoted herself to preparing for the *agrégation*. In the mid-1930s, she won high esteem from Communist leader, André Marty, for her initiative and combativeness. But these very qualities were seen to have drawbacks. School inspectors consistently rated Lucie Aubrac as an excellent teacher, spontaneous and deeply engaged, but then went on to criticize elements of her pedagogy for accuracy and coverage of material. The Communist party made a similar evaluation of her. The intrepidity for which she was praised in street-fighting and which stood her in good stead during the Resistance also suggested to party leaders that she would be too willful to be a trusted party *cadre*, that she had what Douzou suggests they found a "*comportement incontrôlable*" (p. 186). Douzou speculates that Lucie Aubrac did attend an *école des cadres* in the 1930s and had an important influence in the Ricard group, a secret group of young men who attended the *grandes écoles*, whom the party thought might go on to hold important positions in the state. However, this was probably the height of her direct engagement within the party.

During the war, Lucie Aubrac worked well with Communists she had gotten to know in the 1930s and brought several into Libération-Sud. At the end of the war, she wrote an autobiography for the party, evidence that she sought membership. However, the extent of her activities during the next decade was primarily as a prominent fellow traveler in anti-war and anti-colonial movements. She had achieved an iconic status in the Resistance, but this had been done outside the party, and the party could not help but be wary of fame and honor which did not derive from it. André Marty's proposal that she be placed ahead of Jeannette Vermeersch, companion of party leader Maurice Thorez, on the electoral lists in 1945 could have only reinforced this suspicion. The party impeded her efforts to start a Resistance-based women's magazine after the war⁵ and severely criticized her 1945 book on the

⁴ See Donald Reid, "Resistance and its Discontents: Affairs, Archives, Avowals and the Aubracs", in *Germaine Tillion, Lucie Aubrac, and the Politics of Memories of the French Resistance*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, p. 127-75.

⁵ There is more to be said about Lucie Aubrac's ambivalent relation to feminism, whose ideal type she may have embodied, but whose movement did not attract her until the 1970s. Feminist Louise Weiss called Lucie Aubrac "*une pétroleuse communiste ou communiste de la Résistance*" and blamed her for having spread rumors in the fall of 1944 about her actions during the Occupation that deprived her of what she envisaged as a role as leader of feminist forces and in so doing, broke the feminists' "*élan*." See Donald Reid, "French Singularity, the

Resistance, primarily for her presentation of the Resistance as a more open and diverse movement than the party recognized (in an appendix, Douzou reprints the many passages from her book marked as questionable by the party.) The party also criticized Lucie Aubrac's actions as *liquidatrice* of the Libération-Sud movement in the 1950s. Much later, she defended Charles Tillon, the heroic resister who had been expelled from the party. Lucie Aubrac was a good comrade in the fight against fascism and the struggle for peace, but she would not compromise her understanding of the Resistance to follow the party line. Yet, the fact that her respect and honor came from activities in the Resistance not directed by the party gave her the qualities to play a leading role in the party's mass-movement campaigns.

Lucie Aubrac was a willful, combative individual whom a "just the facts, ma'am" approach does not do justice. The *Lucie Aubrac* of Claude Berri's eponymous 1997 film was flat. The character in the 1946 American b.d., "Lucie Aubrac to the Rescue", captured something which it may have lacked in factual accuracy. Figures like Lucie Aubrac can be difficult for historians for the same reasons that school inspectors and Communist leaders had trouble with her. She spent her life living in an ambiguous relation with authorities and expectations, precisely elements that historians, by temperament and techniques, depend on, if not take for granted. Lucie Aubrac sought to do what it took to get what she wanted done. Douzou understands this and does not get mired in reprimanding her for inaccuracies he has uncovered in the accounts she gave of herself. The result is a life more interesting and revealing than one limited to those Lucie Aubrac told of herself.

Resistance and the Vichy Syndrome: Lucie Aubrac to the Rescue", in *Germaine Tillon, Lucie Aubrac, and the Politics of Memories of the French Resistance*, *op cit.*, p. 106-26.