

In Memoriam

Brig.Gen (Ret.) L. Poirier (1918-2013)



Lucien Poirier passed away last January. The journal wishes to pay tribute to one of France's leading strategic thinkers of the last half-century.

His Army career started as he graduated from Saint-Cyr in 1939 and soon joined an infantry unit. He saw service in World War II, Indochina and Algeria in both combat and staff positions – standard fare for his generation of officers. But fate took him off the beaten tracks on a number of occasions early on. For instance, when he kept company with philosophers and poets among his fellow-prisoners in an officer PoW camp in Germany ; or when he served in Indochina (1951) as a junior aide to the commander-in-chief, General de Lattre, in a team which also included André Beaufre and future leaders of the Army ; or again, upon returning

to France, as he met sociologist Gaston Bouthoul whose writings on *polémologie* he admired, and subsequently collaborated with him for a number of years.

The decisive turn in his career came in 1964 when he was appointed to a new Centre for Prospective Assessment in charge of providing De Gaulle's independent nuclear strike force, then under rapid development, with a strategic concept adapted to France's position and new foreign policy doctrine. He was familiar with the writings of American authors (Brodie, Wohlstetter, Kahn, Schelling, and others), and of French strategic thinkers both in and out of uniform (Aron, generals Ailleret, Gallois and Beaufre). He had by then an encyclopaedic command of 18th, 19th, and early 20th century classics. His conceptualizing power did not pass unnoticed, and he soon became one of the leading defence intellectuals of the time – though the Army, which had mostly remained alien to developments in nuclear strategic thought, failed to give him the recognition he deserved : he was promoted to brigadier *in extremis* – upon the Defence minister's personal recommendation – before reaching the statutory age-limit in 1974.

Now retired, he penned and published a string of books which soon acquired the status of classics in their own right, clarifying, placing in context and discussing the tenets (counter-value options, proportional deterrence, strict sufficiency, etc.) of French nuclear strategy doctrine, later analyzing the relationships of policy, politics, culture, and strategy in all its dimensions, as well as the impact on the concepts he had helped forge of ongoing technological, contextual and doctrinal change. He thus fruitfully spent the last four decades of his life exercising his sharp mind and crisp writing talent on the arduous topics he obviously relished, receiving foreign strategic scholars for interviews, and teaching at France's elite schools (Sciences Po Paris, École Normale Supérieure, École Nationale d'Administration) and universities. Surprisingly, none of his numerous books seems to have been translated into English.

The countless tributes paid by the community of French "military" scholars since his demise bear witness to the value of his works and the recognition he enjoyed from the 1980s onwards. There is reason to believe that his intellectual legacy will be a long-lasting one in the strategic field and beyond. And he will be fondly remembered by those (this writer, for one) who met him personally for his unique mix of gravitas, openness, warm personality, unpretentious manner, and sense of humour.

Bernard Boëne