



Geoffrey Treasure. *Mazarin: The Crisis of Absolutism in France*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. xv + 413 pp. \$45.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-16211-1; \$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-01457-1.

Reviewed by Michael P. Breen (Brown University)

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The Italian Saviour of French Absolutism

Unlike his predecessor, Cardinal Richelieu, the reputation of Cardinal Jules Mazarin, France's First Minister from 1643 until his death in 1661, has suffered considerably at the hands of both contemporaries and modern historians. During the series of uprisings known as the Fronde (1648-53), thousands of pamphlets known as *Mazarinades* denounced him as an opportunist who promoted an unpopular war to enrich himself and his family; a skilled seducer, who tyrannized France from the bed of the Regent Anne of Austria; and an unscrupulous foreigner who corrupted the young king with the poisonous doctrines of his fellow Italian, Niccolo Machiavelli [1]. Twice exiled under pressure from the *Parlement* of Paris and the Prince of Conde, Mazarin nevertheless retained the complete support and devotion of Anne, Louis, and a sizable, well-placed clientele. By the time of his death, Mazarin had negotiated lasting peace treaties with both the Holy Roman Empire and Spain (securing valuable territorial and dynastic rights in the process), preserved the "absolutist" innovations of Richelieu and Louis XIII, and trained those who would direct the century's most spectacular reign, including Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Michel Le Tellier, and even Louis XIV himself.

In spite of these successes, however, many historians continue to echo Mazarin's seventeenth-century detractors. A. Lloyd Moote, for example, describes Mazarin as an "emotional", "unbalanced" man who "provided poor leadership for the monarchy", and became a "personal symbol of royal tyranny..." According to Moote, "Mazarin's duplicity and disastrous method of governing...[made] harmony within the state and the administration...virtually impossible." J. Russell Major, in his most recent book, pilloried Mazarin as a "suave and ingratiating" man of intrigue (in contrast to the "statesman" Richelieu), who "sought to govern by persuasion, flattery, and bribes." When these devices did not work, Mazarin "tried to divide his opponents by lies, false promises, and appeals to their diverse interests. Few were fooled for

long by his outwardly obliging conduct, and he soon became as distrusted as he was hated." Uninterested in governmental or fiscal reforms, Major concludes, "All [Mazarin] wanted from France was money to pursue the wars he had inherited and to line his pockets. He died the richest man in France and was very likely the biggest thief who ever served a French king." [2]

In recent years, however, some historians have begun to challenge such depictions. Georges Dethan's 1981 biography portrays Mazarin as a tireless diplomat and dedicated "*homme de paix*", who restored peace to both France and Europe. Mazarin was not motivated by "a perverted spirit," Dethan concludes, "but by a heart animated by a generous passion and a lofty ideal." In a series of articles published in the 1980s, meanwhile, Richard Bonney argued that Mazarin simply continued domestic and foreign policies inherited from Richelieu and Louis XIII. Mazarin was "duplicitous", Bonney claimed, only to preserve hard-won gains in royal authority. He did not "cause" the Fronde, he merely accepted it as the price of a more favorable peace with Spain. His enormous fortune was not a mark of corruption and petty venality, but rather the king's reward to his most loyal servant. Mazarin may have been "an Italian adventurer", in Bonney's estimation, but he was also an able and devoted "French man of state". [3]

Geoffrey Treasure's new biography, *Mazarin: The Crisis of Absolutism in France*, is a welcome and thought-provoking, though not entirely satisfying, addition to the re-evaluation of the Cardinal's personality and accomplishments. Treasure's Mazarin is a complex and often inscrutable character: a courtier shaped by his upbringing in the Roman nobility and his early career as a Papal nuncio, and a gambler whose actions were based less on personal or political principles than on careful, instinctive readings of individuals and situations. Above all, Mazarin was a diplomat committed to peace, but willing to pursue war when he deemed it in France's best in-

terest. Treasure argues that Mazarin's decision to leave the Papacy and his homeland to serve the French crown was based on both his admiration for Richelieu and a certainty that his adopted home was the rising power in Europe. A fast learner and reliable subordinate, Mazarin quickly gained Richelieu's complete confidence. Richelieu's faith in his new protege was such that he obtained a Cardinal's hat for him, made him a witness to his last will and testament, and named him as a godfather to Louis XIV. As their personal friendship grew stronger in the months before Richelieu's death, Treasure writes that "Richelieu could see Mazarin as his successor, if not as First Minister, [then] certainly as director of the great diplomatic effort that would be needed to bring peace to Europe and security to France" (p. 55).

Mazarin's close personal bond with Anne of Austria, meanwhile, virtually assured him of the First Ministership when Anne established a regency government after her husband's death. As two foreigners leading a caretaker regime in a time of military, fiscal, and social crisis, it was almost inevitable, Treasure asserts, that Anne and Mazarin would seek each other's support and understanding. Sidestepping the long-debated issue of an amorous relationship between the two (though noting that the best-placed contemporaries strongly doubted any secret marriage or sexual relationship [p. 193]), Treasure portrays the minister-regent relationship as a political and psychological symbiosis reminiscent of Moote's recent depiction of Richelieu and Louis XIII. Anne needed all of Mazarin's political skills to ensure that her son's throne would not be diminished by the pretensions of *Parlement* and the great nobles, or by a disastrous conclusion of the Habsburg wars. Mazarin, for his part, needed the regent's unqualified support to carry out these tasks and to endure the frequent hostility he encountered at court and in the countryside. Their mutual dependence even survived Mazarin's two brief exiles, with Anne secretly maintaining contact and recalling the Cardinal as soon as the political situation permitted.

Mazarin learned from Richelieu how to use patronage and clientele to govern the institutionally de-centralized and heterogeneous French state. Nevertheless, he lacked both his mentor's financial resources and feel for the subtleties of French politics. The former, Mazarin dutifully acquired, enabling him to cultivate clients who would help see him through the dark days of the Fronde. The latter, he never fully mastered. By training and inclination, Treasure comments, Mazarin's political horizons were essentially limited to courtly politics and foreign policy. The frequent mis-steps and erroneous calculations which inevitably resulted, he argues, were largely

responsible for the persistently high level of mistrust which Mazarin generated. Such lack of concern for domestic politics helps to explain, for example, how the peaceful and relatively minor protests of the Parisian sovereign courts in 1648 over a series of fiscal edicts escaped the government's control and led the capital's fractious law-courts to unite in the *Chambre Saint-Louis*, the opening act of the Parliamentary Fronde. While alternately too maladroit and too crafty for his own good, Mazarin never lost the confidence of Anne, Louis, and his leading clients. Their constant support enabled him to complete Richelieu's unfinished domestic and diplomatic programs, and made possible the most celebrated reign of the Bourbon monarchy. This ambitious son of an obscure Roman noble family, in Treasure's eyes, was indeed the saviour of French Absolutism.

According to the author, a study of Mazarin as First Minister "must also be a history of the realm that he came to serve" (p. xiii). Thus, *Mazarin* is structured very much as a "life and times" biography which devotes a considerable portion of its thirty-six chapters to social, cultural, and primarily political developments in mid-seventeenth-century France. This book is as much about the "crisis of Absolutism in France", as it is about the individual who steered the monarchy through these difficult times. Treasure presents his findings in a rather straightforward narrative form, occasionally mixing in interpretive chapters to guide the reader through complicated political and personal developments. Relying on secondary studies ranging from P. A. Chereul's *Histoire de France pendant la minorite de Louis XIV* (1879), to the recent work of Dethan, Bonney, and others, as well as published primary sources such as Mazarin's letters, Treasure organizes his study roughly corresponding with the major phases of the Cardinal's life.

The author also focuses on Mazarin's piety in the age of the French Counter-Reformation. A Cardinal who was never ordained, Treasure's Mazarin nevertheless demonstrated a conventional Christian piety which reflected his childhood education by the Jesuits. Mazarin expressed his religious sentiments in terms of service to the king and the cause of peace, and was quick to recognize Jansenism's potential threat to royal power. He was also quick to recognize the threats to royal power posed by Jansenism's "mystical excesses, covert political intrigues, [and]... pro-Spanish bias" (p. 286). The final year of his life was dedicated to tutoring Louis in the craft of kingship. As with Richelieu and Anne, Mazarin's relationship with the king was warm and personal. Deferring to "his minister's towering authority", Louis "admired and trusted [Mazarin], fellow-campaigner and guardian

in difficult days. [Mazarin] had secured the monarchy during the Fronde, and was laying the foundations for its future greatness” (pp. 305-6). Long after his death, the French monarchy bore the Italian Cardinal’s imprint. “In a sense,” Treasure writes, “Louis XIV, most commanding, most professional and among the most accomplished of kings, was Mazarin’s masterpiece” (p. 306).

Treasure, who has written several works on this period[5], clearly has a formidable knowledge of both his subject and the scholarship surrounding it. He manages to synthesize a tremendous amount of material into little more than three hundred pages of text. There are times, however, when Treasure might have been a little more selective in deciding what to include and what to exclude. This is particularly true in the section on the Fronde, where both the narrative and the book’s central themes are often lost under waves of anecdotes and personal sketches which are never really integrated into the overall argument. What makes this frustrating is the fact that Treasure, at his best, also shows that he is more than capable of offering simple and elegant summaries of both relevant issues and recent scholarly findings. Unfortunately, Treasure’s gifts as both a storyteller and a scholar never quite seem to mesh, and the cohesiveness of his narrative and the force of his argument tends to suffer as a result.

This is not to say, however, that *Mazarin* is a poorly-written book. On the contrary, the prose, while dense, rarely lags thanks to Treasure’s vigorous and engaging style. The author clearly has a flair for character and drama, and uses them effectively in crafting his biography. He also uses his vast knowledge of the period to buttress his portrait of the Cardinal—one that ultimately seems far more plausible than the villain depicted by other historians. By situating Mazarin’s life and career in the chaos of the period from roughly 1630 to 1660, Treasure demonstrates that the second Cardinal-Minister inherited a nearly impossible task from his eminent predecessor, yet managed to see it through, albeit with considerable difficulty. The problem with this approach, however, is that Treasure’s interest in the “crisis of absolutism” often tends to overwhelm the other focus of his book—Mazarin, the individual. More than once, Mazarin disappears entirely for long stretches of the book as Treasure turns to matters that seem only tangentially related to the Cardinal’s life and career. Once again, this is most evident in the section on the Fronde, where Mazarin at times appears as little more than a bit player in a drama where he is (rightly) billed as having a starring role. Unlike A. Lloyd Moote’s remarkable *Louis XIII, the Just*, a work which clearly influenced Treasure’s

study of the other great ‘mis-understood figure’ of the century, *Mazarin* never really succeeds in establishing an effective balance between the largely unknown historical figure and his well-known historical context. Treasure’s account of the formidable obstacles Mazarin overcame will likely leave the reader wondering how any modern historian could take seriously the proposition that Mazarin was simply an opportunistic liar, swindler, and profiteer. At the same time, however, it will also probably leave the reader with many unresolved questions about the enigmatic Italian. Treasure has succeeded in sketching a thoughtful and plausible outline of Mazarin, the individual, but others will need to fill it in.

Mazarin might have also benefitted from having a more clearly-defined audience. In the short bibliographic essay which follows the text, Treasure says that he has several types of reader in mind. If we take these to mean specialists, students, and a more general audience, it is clear that only the third group is likely to find this book totally satisfying. Specialists familiar with the work of Dethan and Bonney, for example, will find little new here in the way of research or interpretation. Bonney’s articles, in particular, provide a much more concise and incisive analysis of the Fronde and Mazarin’s role than the one offered in this book. Treasure also seems reluctant to confront the debate over the nature (or even the existence) of “absolutism” that has occupied so much scholarly attention in recent years. He does not hesitate, for example, to describe Mazarin as holding, “to the absolutist course” (p. 92), without clarifying what he means by this highly-contested term. Finally, the book’s curious use of endnotes also tends to diminish its scholarly value. The notes serve primarily to lead the reader to additional information about a particular individual or event, while references to primary and secondary texts (of which there are many) are generally left not cited, greatly limiting *Mazarin*’s usefulness for those lacking an intimate knowledge of the scholarship and sources. This is easily the most frustrating feature of this book. On the other hand, students will probably be overwhelmed by the book’s dizzying amount of detail and material, as well as its tendency to stray at times from the topic. Furthermore, in spite of the help provided by the endnotes, *Mazarin* still assumes a familiarity with the Old Regime that may well be beyond most undergraduates. A more general audience, however, may find this book both enjoyable and enlightening. Such readers will like Treasure’s flowing, learned, and engaging style. They will enjoy the author’s attention to drama, intrigue, and characterization, and will find this book to be a useful introduction to both Mazarin and this period, without being

alienated by a great deal of academic jargon or a relentless focus on scholarly debates.

It has been nearly a full century, Treasure observes in his preface, since the publication of the last biography of Mazarin in English (p. xiii). This glaring void in the Anglo-American historiography of Early Modern France can be attributed to the relative lack of interest in the period between Louis XIII's death (1643) and the start of Louis XIV's personal rule (1661) among English and American historians. In recent years, however, specialists working towards a new understanding of the monarchy's spectacular growth have increasingly directed their attention to this crucial transitional era and the century's final episode of large-scale resistance to expanding royal authority.[6] In doing so, they have reminded us of the undeniable importance of the "other" Cardinal-Minister, whose role in shaping the France of Louis XIV has long been obscured by the brilliant reputation of his predecessor and mentor, and who has too often been dismissed as a corrupt charlatan. Treasure is correct to remind us, however, that Mazarin "belongs to a very small group of statesmen who have succeeded in their main objectives and affected the course of history" (p. xiv). Consequently, any study of French politics and state-building in the latter half of the seventeenth century must come to terms with the enigmatic Italian who directed the king's councils for nearly two decades. The time is ripe for a careful and thorough re-examination of the life, character, and career of Giulio Mazarini. Treasure's biography is a challenging, thought-provoking, but far from conclusive step in that direction.

Notes:

[1]. On the anti-Richelieu pamphlets, or *Mazarinades*, see: Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: la Fronde des mots*. (Paris, 1985). For a broader discussion of anti-Mazarin sentiment, see Richard Bonney, "The French Civil War, 1649-53," *European Studies Review* 8 (1978): 71-100; and

idem, "Cardinal Mazarin and His Critics: The Remonstrances of 1652," *Journal of European Studies* 10 (1980): 15-31.

[2]. A. Lloyd Moote, *The Revolt of the Judges: The Parlement of Paris and the Fronde, 1643-1652*. (Princeton, 1971), pp. 68 & 168; J. Russell Major, *From Renaissance Monarchy to Absolute Monarchy: French Kings, Nobles and Estates*. (Baltimore, 1994), pp. 294-95.

[3]. Georges Dethan, *Mazarin: un homme de paix a l'age baroque, 1602-1661*. (Paris, 1981), p. 342. In addition to Bonney's articles cited in n. 1, see idem, "Cardinal Mazarin and the Great Nobility During the Fronde," *English Historical Review*, 96 (1981): 818-33, & "Mazarin et la Fronde: la question de responsabilite", in R. Duchene & P. Ronzeaud, eds., *La Fronde en questions*. (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), pp. 329-38.

[4]. A. Lloyd Moote, *Louis XIII: The Just*. (Berkeley, 1989).

[5]. *Seventeenth Century France*. (New York, 1966); *Cardinal Richelieu and the Development of Absolutism*. (London, 1972); and *The Making of Modern Europe, 1648-1780*. (London, 1985).

[6]. In addition to the works of Moote and Bonney cited above, see: Richard Bonney, *Political Change in France Under Richelieu and Mazarin, 1624-1661*. (Oxford, 1978); Sharon Kettering, *Judicial Politics and Urban Revolt in Seventeenth-Century France: The Parlement of Aix, 1629-1659*. (Princeton, 1978); idem, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*. (Oxford, 1986); William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc*. (Cambridge, 1985); Orest Ranum, *The Fronde: A French Revolution, 1648-1652*. (New York, 1993).

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