

H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 199

Rachel Chrastil, *Organizing for War: France 1870–1914*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. xiii + 226 pp. Map, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45 (hb and pdf). ISBN 978-0-8071-3679-9.

Review by Elizabeth Greenhalgh, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

France's Third Republic has a poor reputation. Born after the first Franco-German war, and surviving the 1914–18 War, it died soon after the start of the Second World War. The seventy years of its existence, from 1870 (although the constitution was settled finally only in 1875) until 1940 were dominated by war and its ignominious end in military defeat. Vilified for cronyism, incompetence and general decadence, the Third Republic's politicians and political institutions are reputed to have staggered through instability to final collapse. With its presidents assassinated (Sadi Carnot), dying in amorous circumstances (Félix Faure), or allegedly consumed by the desire for revenge and recovery of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine (Poincaré-la-guerre), its ministerial instability was, nonetheless, more apparent than real. Nor are characters such as Léon Gambetta or Georges Clemenceau to be downplayed.

Such criticisms leave out the very real achievements of the Third Republic in creating, after successive empires and monarchies throughout the nineteenth century, a republican identity that commanded the loyalty of French citizens to the extent that they survived a hugely destructive war with unimaginable cost to life and property, fought for more than four years mainly (in the West) on French territory. The reasons why France survived between 1914 and 1918 to become one of the powers that sat at the victors' table when the Treaty of Versailles was signed have been cited as the result of a *réveil national*, a conscious cultivation of nationhood leading in some cases to a nationalist and right-wing ideology. Rachel Chrastil's book examines this period of France's history and provides a completely new way of looking at the years between 1870 and the outbreak of the First World War.

The dual theme of nationhood and nationalism is not new. Raoul Girardet and Zeev Sternhell writing in French, and Eugen Weber writing in English are perhaps the best known among the historians of this period.[1] A conference held in Cambridge in 1989 covered some of Chrastil's themes, and its proceedings were edited by Robert Tombs and published two years later (though it is oddly missing from her bibliography).[2] It is Chrastil's approach that is novel in its combination of micro- and macro-history. Her close study of some of the civilian associations that grew or failed to grow in three representative and distinctive departments is linked to the larger events in the history of the Third Republic. Her aim is to investigate the ways in which French citizens, men and women, recovered from the war of 1870 and defeat of 1871 and then laid the groundwork to be better prepared should war break out again. Chrastil does not focus on the ideology of nationalism, which historians often restrict to the Franco-German question and whether or not the French sought revenge for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine; this latter question is one about which most historians have reached a consensus. Instead she focuses on the ways in which "French men and women sought to achieve [the] elusive goals" of "postwar recovery and war preparedness" (p. 7).

The book has a dual focus, therefore, and it divides almost evenly into two parts, the first four chapters dealing with the "postwar recovery" and the second part devoting three chapters to "war preparedness." The themes of part one include the responses of charities to the refugees, returning wounded, and prisoners-of-war; the fund-raising to pay off the war indemnity that the new German

Reich had imposed in the Treaty of Frankfurt; the creation of war cemeteries and the commemoration of the human sacrifices made by the more than 37,000 French who died during or because of the Franco-Prussian conflict, in addition to the more than 300,000 Frenchmen who spent several months as prisoners of war in Germany. Part two describes the shift in commemorative practices to an emphasis on martial qualities, as conscription was gradually extended during the 1880s to engage almost all twenty-year-old males who were fit enough to serve. Chrastil then looks at the greater emphasis on physical education and shooting clubs, mainly for men, and the growth in organizations under the umbrella of the Red Cross (its International Committee had been founded in 1863) where women came to play an increasingly important role.

The details of the practical work of the civil associations involved in all these activities are taken from archival records in three French departments: Meurthe-et-Moselle (chef-lieu Nancy); Sarthe (chef-lieu Le Mans); and Hérault (chef-lieu Montpellier). Socially and geographically, these three administrative units are very different and represent a good cross-section, given that it would have been impossible to cover a large number of departments in the necessary detail. In eastern France, Meurthe-et-Moselle, created after the amputation of part of Lorraine, had suffered most from the war, and the defeat at Mars-la-Tour within its borders was commemorated annually. Nancy grew in size with the influx of Alsations who had opted for French nationality and the growth of heavy industry in the Briey iron-ore basin. The Sarthe on the other hand, south-west of Paris, was predominantly rural and had been occupied only briefly by German troops after General Antoine Chanzy's Army of the Loire was defeated near Le Mans. On France's Mediterranean coast, the Hérault had not suffered directly from the war, although many sick and wounded passed through its hospitals. The department's mixed economy was based mainly on viticulture, and it had a strong tradition of political activism. Finally, the fact that all three have good local, municipal and departmental archives means that Chrastil's extensive deep mining has paid dividends, as the forty pages of endnotes attest.

Large themes such as the role of the state in the life of the citizen, the relations between organised religion and the state, the civic duty of male citizens to undergo military training, the status of women, and the relationship between social classes, are illustrated by local examples of "thriving associative culture" from the three representative areas (p. 9). Chrastil's innovative approach links history and political science as she describes the role of charitable, sporting and commemorative associations as occupying an intermediate level between the state and the individual. This leads to the bold statement that "French citizens wanted the next war to turn out differently, and they changed their behavior accordingly" (p. 7). Chrastil does not deal, however, with the international aspect of the causes of that "next war," nor with what David Stevenson, in his study of the armaments race in the years preceding the First World War, has called the "militarization of diplomacy and of society."³ Nevertheless, she illustrates with her chosen civilian associations some of the "ideas of 1914" and the "unspoken assumptions" that made Europeans ready to accept a war that they did not want.

She claims persuasively that the "associative culture" she has described enabled the French to unite in a "*union sacrée*" in July and August 1914 because they had been rehearsing such unity for many years during which "civil society" had "fostered a culture that largely consented to the war when it came" (p. 157). However, her final remarks in the last paragraph of the book are less persuasive. Preparations for war in their shooting clubs and their commemorations at Mars-la-Tour helped the French, she suggests, to "consent to and prolong a conflict that turned into a tragedy of world-historical proportions" (pp. 157–8). Thus, Chrastil turns implicitly to the old revanchist view of French society. Yet, to hint that the French should not have prepared for war, because thereby—and "undesirably"—they prolonged what was, after all, a global and not merely a Franco-German conflict, is to accept that a breakdown of society such as occurred in Russia and Germany would have been preferable.

Many French (and many historians) would disagree. Moreover, such a claim needs to take into account the "associations" that did *not* contribute to the culture of acceptance of the resort to war. There is no discussion, for example, of the business associations that played such a prominent part in Lorraine (the *Comité des Forges* and François de Wendel, for example, with the economic

relationships to German steel-making), nor of associations of workers, such as the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, nor of groups such as the *Association Internationale Antimilitariste* or the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (the latter with over 80,000 members by 1910). There is no hint of the prolonged debate over conscription between the proponents of a professional army and those favoring universal (male) conscription; no linkage in the account of the changing commemorative practices in Mars-la-Tour to the new *Fête nationale* (celebrating the fall of the Bastille on 14 July) inaugurated in 1880, and during that decade the promotion of Joan of Arc by both Right and Left that ended with her beatification in 1909.

This emphasis on commemorating the Franco-Prussian war and preparing for the First World War is reflected, accurately, in Chrastil's title: *Organizing for war: France 1870–1914*. The choice of the word “organizing” implies, however, a conscious intention among a large tranche of French citizens to go to war that her more nuanced comments do not support. As she writes, “willingness to prepare for war in times of peace did not necessarily indicate a desire for revenge,” although it did reflect “a drive for self-preservation and devotion to the French nation” (p. 156). Self-preservation and devotion to *la patrie* could be promoted in associations such as those formed by business interests or by workers that did not support preparations for war, nor, indeed, in some cases did either those workers or bosses see any connection between self-preservation and devotion to the French nation.

Despite this caveat that a limited evidential base should not lead to wide-ranging claims, Chrastil has organised a wealth of material in impressive fashion. All the chapters announce what they are about to examine and sum up at the end what they have discussed. Occasionally, some sections give the impression of being truncated; perhaps the book is a cut-down version of a doctoral thesis. Nevertheless it is an impressive achievement to have shed a new light on a complex period of French history.

NOTES

[1] Raoul Girardet, *Le Nationalisme français, 1871–1914* (Paris: Colin, 1972); Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français* (réd. edn, Paris: Fayard, 2000); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The modernization of rural France, 1870–1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977).

[2] Robert Tombs, ed., *Nationhood and Nationalism in France: From Boulangism to the Great War 1889–1918* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991).

[3] David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 421.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh
University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy
e.greenhalgh@adfa.edu.au

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172