
H-France Review Vol. 14 (September 2014), No. 156

Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Interwar France*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012. xi + 243 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7190-8550-5.

Review by Paul Jankowski, Brandeis University.

Of all the soldiers who served in the First World War, some nine or ten million were killed. But some sixty million were not. They survived, and during the peace that followed they mattered—in some way. They reaped acclaim: before the first postwar election in Britain, held within weeks of the armistice, Lloyd George promised voters a “country fit for heroes to live in.” They expected material rights: in June 1932, American war veterans converged on Congress demanding the promised bonus payments for their service, singing old war songs and carrying posters reading “Cheered in ‘17, Jeered in ‘32.” They fought in the political arena, sometimes angrily: in Germany their largest union, the Stahlhelm, joined right-wing nationalist coalitions, sent deputies to the Reichstag, helped shut down the screening of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and held rallies, like those close to the Polish border, in which the cause appeared more revanchist than revisionist, and the insult more the Armistice than Versailles.

In France, where their per capita weight of 6.4 million in a country of 40 million was second to none, the *anciens combattants* did all this and more. They savored the esteem of the nation, protested its miserliness, and lamented its woes. And they did so for longer than elsewhere. In most of continental Europe, regimes hostile to pluralism of any kind sooner or later silenced or co-opted them and, in Britain and the United States, relative numbers and the play of institutions conspired to disperse them into the wider polity. How exactly they mattered in France is another matter. Did they display a shared mentality or pursue a common cause? For a while some historians, prefiguring or adopting in a way George Mosse’s hypothesis about the brutalizing effects of the Great War upon those who had experienced it, attributed the intermittent violence of interwar French politics to the complicity between extra-parliamentary right-wing leagues and veterans friendly enough to join their ranks or lend their support.[1] In the 1970s, Antoine Prost challenged such notions in his magisterial *thèse d’état* about French veterans between the wars.[2] In a three-volume work, Braudelian in conception and in scope, he situated the veterans socially and demographically, as well as mentally and ideologically. He argued, *inter alia*, that a “patriotic pacifism,” democratic in spirit and republican in sympathy, pervaded the rank-and-file, whatever the posturing and vagaries of the leadership. His work acquired nearly canonical status, and often historians seeking to demonstrate the reality of brutalization or the pervasiveness of fascism in French postwar society have had almost to work around it.

Now Chris Millington, a postdoctoral fellow at Cardiff University, has revisited the matter in a scholarly and balanced book, adapted from a doctoral thesis. He takes on some of Prost’s contentions of forty years ago, not in any radically revisionist or iconoclastic way, but in a measured tone that is anything but polemical and that qualifies Prost’s work more than it undermines it. The book warns repeatedly against “essentializing” the *anciens combattants*: “to define the essence or nature of the veterans’ associations is...erroneous” (p. 11), “the veterans movement did not possess a single political character” (p. 44), “one cannot therefore reduce the veterans to a single definition whether this be democratic, authoritarian or otherwise” (p. 132), “it is unwise to explain the processes behind each

association's actions and behavior with reference to an inherent 'nature' or 'essence' "(p. 219). Such sober and cautionary comments yield conclusions that, if hardly incendiary, have the unmistakable ring of truth.

Of all the problems that the French argued over between the wars, some, such as corruption, were imaginary; others, such as reviving the stagnant economy or squaring the circle of containing Germany while propitiating their erstwhile allies across the Channel or the Atlantic, were very real; and others, such as the institutional health of an ageing Third Republic, lay somewhere in between. One of the main merits of Millington's book is his tracking of the positions, now diverging, now converging, that the two major veterans unions, the conservative Union nationale des Combattants (UNC) and the center-left Union fédérale (UF), took on such issues. More often than not they diverged, and with about 900,000 members each, they could not always keep the peace within their own ranks either.

On Germany, in the 1920s, true to their political colors, the UNC took a *poincariste* hard line on compliance with Versailles, while the *cartelliste* and *briandiste* UF sought reconciliation. By the middle 1930s the waters darkened, as conservatives hated communism more and Germany less, bringing some leaders of the UNC more in line with their anxiously pacifist counterpart UF. But the double reversal in French politics, as part of the right now feared war, and part of the left appeasement, never neatly reproduced itself within the mass of the veterans, and Munich found them and left them deeply divided, "unsurprisingly" (p. 210), as Millington says. On social unrest and the threat of revolution, the UNC tried to organize strikebreakers in the 1920s, which the UF did not and, when the Popular Front came along in the next decade, the hysterical reaction of the first contrasted oddly with the initial welcome extended by the second, its fraternal association. On the much-maligned Third Republic, the UNC usually clamored for reform from without, borne on the wings of some providential constituent assembly, while the less alarmist UF more often trusted parliament to reform itself. Members in the local chapters did not always tamely follow such varied prescriptions, and sometimes added dissent at the bottom to discord at the top.

Anyone looking for fascism or subversive intent in all this would surely have to look elsewhere, and Millington never invents what he cannot find. Yet the questions linger. The veterans were republicans, yes. But some opposed this Republic. They called, now and again, for a Republic without a parliament, or a parliament without the left. They proclaimed their independence and jealously demarcated themselves from the paramilitary leagues. But their members fraternized with them, notably with the largest of them, the Croix-de-feu. They did not aspire to topple the government by force on the 6th of February 1934. But some of their members mingled in the riot with others who did that night on the Pont de la Concorde, so much so that Millington rejects Prost's view that their actions amounted to a demonstration within a demonstration, a peaceful protest within a seditious riot. Later the UNC rejected any blame for the blood-letting, yet claimed credit for toppling the government; partisan bystanders, in short, innocent dragon-slayers.

So were they fascists? "No, but..." is the seeming answer, and it is as good as any. Did the veterans agree on anything, other than the inadequacy of their pensions? During the late winter of 1938, after the Anschluss and as the crisis over the Sudetenland loomed, the UF broke with what was left of the Popular front and joined the UNC in calling for a temporary "government of public safety" that the President of the Republic, Albert Lebrun, might appoint. He declined. The leaders argued among themselves as to who best might lead the new government. War came, and after the defeat the associations were dissolved into Vichy's Legion française des combattants. A former president of the UNC, Jean Goy, who had met Hitler and was still proclaiming Germany's peaceful intentions in 1938, now helped found the collaborationist Rassemblement Populaire français; an SS platoon presented arms at his funeral in 1944. Meanwhile, a founder and leader of the UF, René Cassin, who had opposed concessions to Hitler in 1938, now joined the Free French in London; after the war he helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Which was the more representative veteran?

In an effort to discern a pattern, Millington suggests that the veterans kept alive a culture of war into peacetime, and called in warlike metaphors and ways of thought to demonize successive enemies: the Germans, the Communists, the foreigners, the forces of division. The “culture of war” is a broad and controversial notion, probably more descriptive of civilian effusions than of soldierly minds during the Great War. In any case, politics were not noticeably more amicable before the war than after; neither the columnists of Action Française nor the assassin of Jaurès had required the acculturation of the trenches to inspire their civic conduct. But in a sense the veterans did share a conviction distinctive, at least since 1789, of their country, if not of their calling. They could agree on the diagnosis if not the remedy: unlike their counterparts elsewhere, even in Germany where a sense of national insult rankled, they attributed their country’s ills at home and abroad to its moral regime, to its political institutions, and to its state, above all else. With the debacle, the occupation, and the liberation, with the wars of decolonization, the certainty would re-appear in their most famous member, but one who would by then look on their latter-day cohorts with some hauteur and distinct coolness, namely Charles de Gaulle.

NOTES

[1] George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2] Antoine Prost, *Les anciens Combattants et la société française* (3 vols., Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1977).

Paul Jankowski
Brandeis University
pjankows@brandeis.edu

Copyright © 2014 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 edistribution/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.