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Alain Chatriot, *Pierre Mendès France pour une République moderne*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2015. 317 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and table of contents. 22.00€. (pb). ISBN: 978-2-200-60319-9.

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On the occasion of Pierre Mendès France's death in October 1982, a cartoon appeared in the French press showing an ethereal de Gaulle, standing on a heavenly cloud, his hand extended in welcome to Pierre Mendès France. The implication was that de Gaulle regarded Mendès France alone of the politicians of his era worthy of his personal welcome to heaven, and the image became the logo for a conference devoted to the comparative history of the two men held by the Comité Scientifique of the Institut Pierre Mendès France in 2010. The existence of the Institut (given only a passing, almost sarcastic reference by Chatriot), its frequent historical meetings, and its conference devoted to the two men, are in themselves powerful testimony to the historical importance of PMF and the power of the myth that still surrounds him in today's France. (Full disclosure: I was a member of the Comité scientifique of the Institut Pierre Mendès France and a participant in many of its conferences). At first glance, the effort of so many historians to juxtapose the two men in historical memory might seem exaggerated. De Gaulle, after all was head of the Free French, head of state in France from the August 1944 Liberation through January 1946, and President of France from 1958 to 1969. Mendès France governed France for only seven months, from June 1954 to February 1955. All of PMF's career took place in the shadow of de Gaulle. Yet to the participants, the conference seemed appropriate, and the comparison of the two men worth the effort.[1] Chatriot's book does a long way in explaining why.

De Gaulle was fifteen years old when PMF was born in 1905. PMF was a prodigy, receiving his law degree at twenty-one and his Ph.D. in Economics when he was twenty-three. His thesis was a study of the stabilization of the franc achieved by the Poincaré government of 1926, and it won the praise of Poincaré himself, even though it criticized Poincaré for neglecting the negative social impact of the stabilization on the nation's productive classes. The thesis made the young economist's reputation as a zealous advocate of monetary stability and an economic wizard of sorts for the rest of his career. This was somewhat paradoxical, because Mendès France exercised his economic expertise for the most part in international forums: he was delegated by France and served for years at the International Monetary Fund and the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and he was present in 1946 at the Bretton Woods conference in New Hampshire that established the basic institutions of the postwar economy. But as de Gaulle's Minister of the Economy after the war, his policies were rejected and he felt obligated to resign, while as Prime Minister in 1954-1955 he was preoccupied by questions of war and diplomacy with little time for the economy.

Mendès France early entered the Radical Party, which was by that time economically conservative, and he never abandoned his early belief in an economic system based on private property, despite his later career and reputation as a socialist. He was precocious. In 1926, he went off to the Norman town of Louviers, within easy enough reach of Paris (100 kms), and there rapidly established himself, becoming mayor of the town and elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1932. He became the youngest deputy in France, and remained for much of his career representative of Norman peasants, despite his origins as a

Parisian Jew. His first campaign also brought the first of the anti-Semitic attacks that were to dog him through the rest of his career. In 1936, he was reelected as part of the Popular Front majority that included the Radical Party, Socialists, and Communists, and he was selected by the new Premier, Léon Blum, to be Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Finance.

Pierre Mendès France was aboard the *Massilia* during the fall of France, a ship that was carrying a group of deputies to Algiers where the government was expected to relocate in order to continue the struggle. Instead, Pétain came to power, and PMF found himself under arrest for desertion. Tried and imprisoned by Vichy for alleged desertion he escaped, joined de Gaulle and the Free French in London, and flew several combat missions as an aviator for the Free French. He was appointed Minister of the National Economy in the Provisional Government in Algiers by de Gaulle, then in the restored government of France in Paris at the Liberation. As Economics Minister, Mendès France's passion for rigor and fear of inflation were his undoing. He proposed a radical cure for the massive flood of francs printed by the Vichy government through rapid introduction of a new currency, forced conversion of banknotes, and accompanied declaration and confiscation of illicitly garnered fortunes during the occupation by black marketers. This was too unpopular a policy even for de Gaulle and, when his policy was rejected, Mendès France resigned. Thereafter, Pierre Mendès France became the lone voice of opposition to the Indochina war that increasingly consumed the blood of the French officer corps and the treasure supplied by the Americans, first meant as economic aid under the Marshall Plan but rapidly converted into weapons and munitions. In the wake of Dien Bien Phu, PMF decried the absurdity of French policy, which he described as selling the Americans a war to solve the country's balance of payments problems. In the wake of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the Assembly voted him to power at the head of a government committed to the war's liquidation.

Many no doubt thought to let the Jew liquidate the empire if must and bear the opprobrium; but instead his action as Premier made of Pierre Mendès France a popular hero, and the *bradeur des colonies* as he was later termed became the most popular leader in the Fourth Republic's brief history. This was not only due to the Indochina war. Having settled that during his first month in power, he put the project for a European Army before the Assembly right after. This project was originally proposed by France as a substitute for rebuilding the Wehrmacht, but after Washington embraced it the French started turning against it. French politicians continuously postponed dealing with it from 1952 to 1954, while debate over it raged in France that some compared in intensity to the Dreyfus Affair. Chatriot is very sharp here; he shows clearly how PMF tried to finesse the issue by making changes in the proposed treaty that would have Europeanized the German army but not the French. The Americans and the allies refused to accept the changes, despite warnings from PMF that without them there was no majority in favor of the treaty in the National Assembly. PMF did not care to see his government overturned by making passage of the treaty a question of confidence when he was never enthusiastically in favor of it himself. The treaty was overturned. Chatriot could have pointed out here that Dulles and Adenauer saw in PMF a subverter of the Western world as a consequence.

But PMF went on to negotiate the London and Paris accords that allowed the rebuilding of a German army in the context of NATO. In the course of his travels as both Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, he managed a side trip to Tunis where he announced the autonomy of the French protectorate there and probably forestalled a good deal of burgeoning violence in the process. He opened the way for both Tunisia and Morocco to become independent of France peacefully in 1956.

The French had never seen such a dynamo as their new leader, but popular opinion and politics were two different things. Mendès France's government was totally paradoxical, says Chatriot; a majority of the Right supported a Premier from the Left, who constructed his cabinet from fresh faces, men who had not previously served in any of the governments that preceded him. The Communists hated Pierre Mendès France, because he refused to count them in his majority. The major party of the moderate Left in France, the MRP, never forgave him for allowing their precious European Army treaty to go down to

defeat. The Socialists, whose thunder he stole, supported his policies but refused to serve alongside him. Everybody resented him for his “fireside chats” on the radio, in imitation of FDR, that helped “PMF” become popular in the process. Finally, he was an insurgent within his own Radical Party. He managed to settle three wars while Premier: Indochina, the civil war in France over the European Army, and an incipient war in Tunisia. It was fourth that defeated him.

Having worked on the subject myself, I find the most to criticize in Chatriot with regard to his treatment of Pierre Mendès France and the Algerian war.[2] PMF was trapped by it; to stay in power he had to subscribe to the popular fantasy that Algeria was not a colony, but part of metropolitan France, while the best he could do was to offer a liberal program for the territory in the hope of winning over the Muslim population to France. But the Assembly was having none of it, and the traditional party leaders, jealous of his popularity, wanted him out. His majority disintegrated in February 1955 and he was ousted. But he was not the brand of politician the French were used to and he did not go quietly. He seized the podium and made a speech of self-justification in the National Assembly, unheard of for a resigning Premier. He put himself at the head of a “Republican” Front coalition, winning over his Radical Party to an alliance with the Socialists and taking over its leadership from within, hoping to lead it and France to a reformed *République moderne* that would be endowed with truly democratic institutions that allowed for ministerial stability and increased democracy. And he formed a “Republican Front” with the Socialists and campaigned against the prevailing repression in Algeria under the reigning Premier, Edgar Faure. When the smoke cleared after the January 1956 elections, the Republican Front alone appeared capable of forming a government and it was expected that French President René Coty would call upon Pierre Mendès France to be Premier. But that did not happen. The old cliché is apt here: the rest is history, the tragic story of de Gaulle and Algeria that we all know.

Why did Coty call upon Guy Mollet instead of Pierre Mendès France in January 1956? Mollet’s party got the most votes in the Republican Front and Mollet loudly demanded power for himself. To do the same was not PMF’s style. He later told Simone Gros, his executive assistant, that as a Jew he was just as glad to let Mollet have the premiership, given his reputation as a decolonizer and the strong anti-Semitic feelings rampant among the Algerian colons. However, in PMF’s personal papers, one finds several drafts of an investiture speech that PMF apparently expected to deliver once the Assembly restored him to power in January 1956. In it, he demands full powers to deal with Algeria, where he proposes newly democratized institutions for Europeans and Algerians who were to share power equitably between them. PMF was ready to try his hand as Premier in 1956. It is doubtful he could have succeeded where Mollet failed so abysmally; but of course Mollet became the immediate captive of the *colons* and escalated the war in a vain attempt to create *Algérie française*. PMF, to be sure, would not have done that. There was an understanding between Mollet and Mendès France that whomever became Premier, the other would have a major Ministry as well. But the MRP would not tolerate PMF as Foreign Minister and the Socialists would not allow him near the Economy. He ended up powerless as Minister of State and, when Mollet escalated the war against his advice, he resigned.

Chatriot misses all this. But his strong point is his discussion of PMF as the reformer and the builder of a *République moderne*. The tragedy was that Mendès France laid out these ideas after de Gaulle had carried out his near putsch and instituted the presidential system of the Fifth Republic in 1958. PMF denounced the newly installed system in the same terms as Mitterrand, as one of “personal power” (p. 174) a virtually “permanent coup d’état,” to borrow the title of Mitterrand’s book.[3] He outlined a complex series of recommendations for the implementation of democratic practices in all spheres of life. He repeated again and again that democracy could not be matter of a simple vote every few years and then total abandonment by the citizenry of government to those elected. Democracy must be a system of continued involvement and citizen participation. Mendès France’s ideas in some respects anticipated the ideas of *autogestion* or self-management in the workplace that became the basis of the student movement.

It was François Mitterrand, however, who rapidly accommodated to the system and became leader of the Socialist-Communist Left which he united under a common program and that brought him to the presidency in 1981. PMF maintained his principled opposition to the new system and became relegated to the margins. But one has to wonder whether his principles were not mixed with the *arrière-pensée* that, as a Jew, he was unlikely to win a popular election whereas he could more easily rule as the leader of a parliamentary majority.

After ten years of principled opposition to the Fifth Republic, PMF had his final moment of glory in 1968. In late May the combination of student protests and general strike had brought the regime to its knees, and de Gaulle disappeared briefly without any announcement or indication in the press as to his whereabouts. There seemed two oppositions to the regime, the putative electoral alliance of François Mitterrand's Federation of the Left with the French Communist Party, and the students, who had no nominal leader, but their manifestation at Charlety stadium on May 27 had Mendès France in attendance. Could he have emerged as leader of the opposition? Despite appeals, Mendès France sat silently at Charlety and refused to speak. Mitterrand, the next day, said he was prepared to take power. But there was no broad alliance of the Left and there was no opening for the opposition to come to power. De Gaulle returned, and subsequent elections swept him back into power with a reinforced majority. The same elections saw Mendès France, who had been reelected to the National Assembly from a constituency in Grenoble, again defeated and this time definitively banished from electoral politics and his party, the PSU, consigned to oblivion. He did lend his support to Gaston Defferre, the Socialist candidate in the presidential elections of 1969, agreeing to a kind of "ticket" with the understanding that Defferre, if he won, would make PMF his premier. But the tandem got only 5 percent of the vote. Mendès France lived to see Mitterrand become the first Socialist president of the Fifth Republic in 1981 but there was no love lost between the two and it brought him little consolation. He died a year later.

Chatriot is comprehensive, brief, and clear. The chapters are short and to the point, the major elements of Pierre Mendès France's career are clearly laid out and explained. The emphasis on the *République moderne* is well-placed; it was a project dear to Pierre Mendès France, but at the same time it came too late, when the Fifth Republic had already been installed. The emphasis on the *République moderne* must also be tempered by the realization that PMF never really so much criticized the institutions of the Fourth Republic so much as the use the politicians made of them. With regard to Guy Mollet he remarked that, no matter what the institutional paradigm, there could be no protection against a politician who promises to do one thing when campaigning and then does the opposite in power. Chatriot would have done better, in my opinion, to focus more on PMF and decolonization; the Vietnam War made his career and the Algerian war destroyed it. That the first ended only a few months before the second began explains at once the brevity and brilliance of his period in power. The real missed opportunity was in January 1956. I do not mean to argue here that the plans laid out in PMF's putative investiture speech could have worked; only that PMF was committed to finding a peaceful solution in Algeria and, had he been invested with plenary powers in 1956, the entire course of the Algerian war and the history of France might have been less turbulent and bloody. My own view is that the outcome brought about by Mollet, who shortly thereafter was succeeded by de Gaulle, led France down the road to tragedy. The path de Gaulle forged eventually to Algerian independence was the worst path possible. PMF said as much about de Gaulle when it was all over.

Readers of Chatriot will also want to be aware that PMF has attracted the attention of France's most gifted biographers, and beautifully written works exist about him by both Jean Lacouture and Eric Roussel. Of course both also did biographies of de Gaulle as well; Roussel presided over the Institut Pierre Mendès France for many years before and after the *colloque* on PMF and de Gaulle. Finally there is the question that few of those who have written about PMF care to deal with: his Jewishness. This played a larger role than his historians have recognized; they all prefer to dismiss it, Chatriot included, with the ritual notice that PMF was not religious but never repudiated or denied his Jewish identity.

Pierre Birnbaum, however, has given a good account of what Pierre Mendès France had to contend with in *Un Mythe politique: la République Juive de Léon Blum à Pierre Mendès France*, and in his *Les Fous de la République*, he provides an earlier model of “State Jews” under the formative years of the Third Republic that works as well for Pierre Mendès France as his predecessors.[3] The peculiar blend of assimilated French Jews who saw their Jewish values realized in the democratic ideals of the secular Republic provided the Republic with a number of state servants willing to undertake the Republic’s most arduous and dangerous tasks. In particular they drew upon themselves the resentment of those who endured the regime’s most ferocious manifestations of anti-clericalism, diverting a great deal of what could have been anti-Republican sentiment into anti-Semitism. Mendès France similarly took upon himself responsibility for the inevitable trauma France had to undergo in the twentieth century, the end of the French empire. This was at once his glory and his tragedy.

NOTES

[1] The *colloque* has appeared in book form: Robert Frank et Eric Roussel, eds., *Deux Passions Françaises: Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle* (Paris: Editions CNRS, 2014).

[2] Irwin Wall, “Pierre Mendès France et la guerre d’Algérie,” in Frédéric Turpin et Jacques Frémaux, eds., *Pierre Mendès France et les Outres-Mers* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012).

[3] François Mitterrand, *Le Coup d’Etat permanent* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

[4] Pierre Birnbaum, *Un mythe politique: la « République juive » de Léon Blum à Mendès France* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); *Les Fous de la République. Histoire politique des Juifs d’Etat, de Gambetta à Vichy* (Paris: Fayard, 1992).

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