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Totalitarianism, the Social Sciences, and the Politicization of History: Kevin Passmore's
"L'historiographie du « fascisme » en France"

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It is well known that politicians and scholars alike have used certain fields of French history for political purposes. According to Kevin Passmore such politicization has shaped the historiography on French fascism in ways that scholars have yet to fully appreciate. While Passmore focuses on France, the trends that he reveals are strikingly similar to the vitriolic debates over totalitarianism that consumed historians of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany from the 1960s to the 1990s.¹ Such debates too often resulted in the instrumentalization of historical research.² Playing a leading role in the polemics was Richard Pipes, a prominent anti-communist historian of the Soviet Union at Harvard, who served as a foreign policy advisor to the United States government, including a post as the top advisor on the Soviet Union to President Reagan. After fleeing Poland at the beginning of World War II, Pipes devoted his career to advancing the political thesis that U.S. foreign policy could defend democracies worldwide against the threat of communism. For Pipes, communism was foreign to Western liberal traditions. A strong believer in the theory of totalitarianism, he insisted that Soviet elites had created a state that was all-powerful and sought to remodel society based upon a coherent ideology. The state lacked popular support and could only maintain its rule through terror and coercion, which crushed resistance and left the masses atomized, passive, and fearful.³

His son, Daniel Pipes, continued to use the concept of a "totalizing" ideology but shifted the supposed existential threat to the West from communism to "Islamism." Daniel Pipes currently serves as the president of the Middle East Forum (MEF), which publishes the *Middle East Quarterly* and seeks to "protect Western values from Middle Eastern threats."⁴ According to its mission statement, the MEF "sees the region – with its profusion of dictatorships, radical ideologies, existential conflicts...as a major source of problems for the United States."⁵ The MEF also organizes Campus Watch, which monitors university professors, courses, and curricula for views that diverge from the MEF's positions.

These cases illustrate how scholars have deployed the concept of totalitarianism as a political weapon rather than as an analytic research category. Given this instrumentalization of history, it is worth examining in detail why Passmore argues that historical research on French fascism has been a political intervention as much as a topic of historical inquiry. In his closing pages, he discusses a French researcher who was recently denied access to the archives that hold the papers on the Croix de Feu/PSF, the influential far right movement at the center of debate on French fascism. The scholar was threatened with legal action because she published work that was deemed to be unfavorable to the Croix de Feu/PSF's leader, Colonel François de La Rocque. In denying her access, the custodian of the La Rocque papers referred to the researcher as an American even though she is French. For Passmore, this case was not exceptional. It reflects a pattern whereby prominent francophone historians of the French right created and perpetuated a powerful discourse declaring that biased "foreigners" had an agenda to prove that fascism in France was strong. This is a claim that will not die despite its inaccuracy. For example, in a book on La Rocque published earlier this year by Seuil and annotated by the Colonel's grandson, Hugues de La Rocque, Serge Berstein claims the following:

Pour certains *historiens anglo-saxons* comme Robert Soucy, et depuis peu, pour le politologue israélien Zeev Sternhell, reproduisant *l'analyse superficielle* de la gauche contemporaine des événements, La Rocque et son PSF sont la preuve de la vigueur d'un fascisme français qui se

mesure à l'une du million d'adhérents du parti. Pour *la plupart des historiens français spécialistes de la période*, le PSF s'inscrit dans la généalogie du nationalisme français héritier du bonapartisme, transformé par l'expérience des tranchées en courant de rassemblement unanimiste, mais qui reste partisan d'un régime fort, adversaire du communisme et du marxisme et se manifeste par l'action directe de rue des ligues...*le PSF loin de constituer le fascisme français, a sans doute été un obstacle à son essor.*"⁶

René Rémond's landmark *Les Droits en France*, which was first published in 1954 and revised several times, most recently in 1982, laid the groundwork for scholars such as Berstein to claim that fascism was weak in France. Seeking to differentiate the traditional right from the Vichy regime, Rémond argued that the French right was not monolithic but rather characterized by three temperaments that shifted from the 1789 revolution to the Fifth Republic.⁷ According to Rémond, none of the temperaments was compatible with fascism, which revealed the strength of French democracy and cast Vichy as a foreign import. Rémond maintained that French fascism was a myth invented by the Popular Front to discredit the right. In the following decades, notions that France was immune to fascism would become widespread.

Similar to Richard Pipes, whose historical research supported his political agenda, Rémond had much at stake to demonstrate that fascism was foreign to France and that the Croix de Feu/PSF was a precursor to Gaullism (not a French variant of Italian Fascism or Nazism). As a participant in the political struggles of the 1930s, Rémond joined a Catholic youth group (the Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne), which claimed that the Popular Front sought to "destroy the patrie, the family, and religion." Rémond also was sympathetic to the huge far right demonstrations of February 6, 1934 that nearly brought down the Third Republic, though he later gravitated towards the Catholics associated with the journal *Sept*. Passmore summarizes Rémond's work in this way: "Il faut garder à l'esprit le fait que son livre sur les droites était une intervention politique, écrite parallèlement à ses recherches scientifiques, au moment où la droite se relevait des échecs de Vichy et de l'Occupation."⁸

Passmore emphasizes that francophone historians working outside of university settings played the leading role in contesting the rémondian thesis before the 1990s. Usually supporters of the Communist Party, they contended that fascism was above all anti-Marxist, which made the Croix de Feu/PSF fascist.⁹ Passmore thus contests claims by the likes of Rémond and Berstein that "foreign historians" were the only ones interested in accepting that fascism was strong in France. For Passmore, the scholarly divide over fascism is not between francophone and anglophone scholars, as is often claimed, but between the transnational right and left.

While the political conflicts of the 1930s continue to play themselves out, Passmore is equally interested in the methodological *convergences* between historians with totalitarian views of fascism and those with Marxist interpretations. Historians across the political spectrum agreed that categories such as elite/mass, political religion, and ultranationalism could reveal significant aspects of French political culture. While those subscribing to the rémondian thesis perpetuated the notion of fixed temperaments in French political culture, so too did anglophone historians writing in the 1950s and 1960s *and* those writing from the left who explored mentalities and national psychology. A key influence driving scholarship that conflated French political culture and national psychology was Gustave Le Bon's late nineteenth-century work on crowd psychology. Deeply gendered, crowd psychology posited that the masses were irrational and could be manipulated by a charismatic leader and rational elites. Liberal British historians, for instance, considered French political culture positively in the sense that France was the birthplace of liberty. The mass, if properly guided by a capable elite, could become a force that acted for the good of the country.¹⁰ In this vein, France's national psychology was naturally inclined towards democracy. Conservative historians, on the other hand, tended to consider 1789 in negative terms. Casting French political culture as naturally chaotic and awash with irrational crowds who

lacked a strong elite to control them, historians on the right conflated the revolutionary principles with inevitable violence.

Crowd psychology influenced the rémondian thesis in large part because it made its way into the social sciences in Europe and North America.¹¹ Rémond himself based his thesis upon a totalitarian conception of fascism.¹² It was a “revolutionary movement” based upon strong nationalism whereby powerful elites, led by a charismatic leader, sought to form a “new elite” drawn from the middle and lower classes.¹³ These elites, in turn, would remake the passive masses.¹⁴ Moreover, crowd psychology prefigured political religion theory, which remains highly influential for theorists of generic fascism. Roger Griffin, for instance, argues that fascism is characterized by a messianic leader who promises to save the nation from degeneration by revitalizing the social body. Elites would use rites, rituals, and symbols to revitalize the collective consciousness of the masses in order to channel their passions and fears for positive ends (national rejuvenation).¹⁵ Passmore argues that Griffin’s totalitarian view of fascism is one of the few anglophone concepts that has been accepted in the French academy, but only because it confirmed “preexisting interpretations,” namely, bolstering Rémond’s claim that fascism was revolutionary.¹⁶

This leads Passmore to his most important point. A fixed definition of fascism, which reveals its essence and addresses the question of whether fascism existed in France, is not possible. Nor is creating typologies that might reveal the true nature of fascism. Indeed, any effort at definition leads to essentializing, often despite the best intentions of scholars. For instance, by emphasizing ultranationalism, political religion, and revolution, Griffin ignores critical components of fascism that differed according to local context such as gender and racism. To take two influential examples from the debate over French fascism, Robert Soucy argued that fascism originated on the right and sought to preserve “social and economic conservatism that was strongly opposed to Marxism.” For Soucy, the Croix de Feu/PSF fit this schema and was thus fascist, which, given the movement’s massive size, proved that France was home to one of the largest fascist movements in Europe. In contrast, since Rémond defined fascism as revolutionary and cast the Croix de Feu/PSF as conservative, the movement could not have been fascist.¹⁷ These struggles over the “classificatory logic” of fascism, in which the concept was defined in such sharply different and politically charged ways, led the influential political scientist Michel Dobry to argue that scholars should avoid using the word fascism altogether.¹⁸

Passmore disagrees with Dobry and spends the last (sizeable) section of his article outlining new approaches. Fascism can be a useful concept for scholars, he argues, but only if it is contextualized according to its own time and place. For Passmore, scholars must evaluate how men and women themselves understood fascism and analyze the contexts in which they used the concept. Most importantly, scholars must explain what historical actors believed was at stake by deploying the term. In this way, historians can avoid perpetuating the idea that people had fixed temperaments and examine instead conflicts within movements, the “frontiers” between fascism and conservatism and between the right and the left. Such new questions would allow historians to examine the emulation that occurred between different groups and the inequitable access to influence that people within groups had according to gender, race, and class.

Historians of women have led the way in conducting the type of research that avoids historical essentialism. Passmore recognizes the landmark work of Claudia Koonz, which demonstrated cleavages within National Socialism. In showing that women played a key role in Nazism, Koonz undermined the totalitarian view of it by demonstrating that women were not passive subjects who were acted upon by male elites. In the French context, Laura Downs focused on the circulation of ideas between right and left in studying the summer camp movement. Communists and the Croix de Feu/PSF used similar means (emphasizing health and hygiene) to reach very different ends (seeking to create different types of societies). Passmore himself used the concept of political religion to demonstrate that Croix de Feu women *themselves* compared La Rocque to Christ in terms of the former’s ability to save France.¹⁹

Above all, Passmore highlights the work of Bruno Goyet. Working within the framework of a transnational exchange of ideas, Goyet explores the reception of Fascism and Nazism in France in the 1920s. Despite the high degree of ignorance of Italian Fascism in France, Goyet finds that “fascist” methods were nevertheless admired by the Action Française (AF) – specifically how Fascist deputies took over the Italian government. While the AF had at one time emphasized Charles Maurras’s influence on Fascist ideology, the league rejected the fascist label after the left accused it of “imitating fascists’ violent methods” and abandoning its nationalistic claims to represent the *pays réel*. Such was the power of the left in deploying the label of fascism to discredit its opponents. For Passmore, Goyet’s “transnational history of fascism” holds great promise in revealing the ways in which historical actors understood the times in which they lived.²⁰

A few of Passmore’s points do raise questions. First, he maintains that contextualizing fascism will enable scholars to avoid getting bogged down in “endless debates” over the “republicanism” or “fascism” of the Croix de Feu/PSF.²¹ There may be a high degree of debate, but there is a surprising dearth of empirical research on the Croix de Feu/PSF, the result of the underuse of the movement’s rich archives: the La Rocque papers, which are held at the Archives Nationales and Sciences Po. There is currently only one monograph in English on the Croix de Feu/PSF: Sean Kennedy’s *Reconciling France Against Democracy* (2007).²² In terms of empirical research and scope of study, Kennedy’s book is unique and does not have a French-language counterpart.²³ While Robert Soucy’s *French Fascism* is often cited, it argues that the Croix de Feu/PSF was fascist without using the movement’s archives, relying instead on police reports and the press.²⁴ Likewise, Jessica Wardhaugh’s useful monograph on rivalries between the left and right in French political culture creatively uses Croix de Feu/PSF films, theater, and songs, but does not rely upon the La Rocque papers.²⁵ While several important articles are based upon the movement’s archives, the shorter length of the article genre inhibits an author’s ability to trace change over time.²⁶ Moreover, the variety of articles has left the field somewhat fragmented – it is difficult to imagine only one scholarly monograph on the Popular Front, the Action Française, or the modern-day Front Nationale of the Le Pen family.

The lack of full-length studies of the Croix de Feu/PSF based upon the movement’s archives has left huge avenues of inquiry wide open. First, studies of the Croix de Feu/PSF’s extensive cultural initiatives have been neglected.²⁷ While the movement sought to counter the “cultural explosion” that occurred with the rise of the Popular Front, work akin to Julian Jackson’s *The Popular Front in France* or Pascal Ory’s *La Belle Illusion* does not yet exist. Second, a monograph on women and gender in the Croix de Feu/PSF has yet to be published even though women’s participation in the movement was unprecedented for a mixed-sex political movement.²⁸ Compared to work on women in Nazism by Jill Stephenson, Gisela Bock, Claudia Koonz, and Elizabeth Harvey (to name a few), this gap is quite surprising. Third, the role of violence in 1930s France is poorly understood, as is the Croix de Feu/PSF’s role in it.²⁹ Finally, work on the Croix de Feu/PSF and empire is just beginning.³⁰ Consequently, critical questions remain, including the movement’s role in maintaining staunch metropolitan support for empire and charting where in the empire the movement created sections. Is debate over the republicanism of the Croix de Feu/PSF really endless if the categories of culture, women, gender, violence, and empire have yet to be dealt with adequately? Kennedy persuasively demonstrates that the Croix de Feu/PSF was anti-democratic even though its supporters claimed that they supported the republic. His work, which moves beyond the debate over whether the movement was fascist, demonstrates that scholars can make clear designations about political movements and avoid the essentialism of which Passmore warns.

Passmore’s arguments spur a second question. To what extent does his indictment of the “classificatory logic” apply to other fields of study? While he mentions briefly the use of labels in relation to politics, socialism, liberalism, and communism, the question merits more discussion.³¹ Feminism and its myriad definitions seem especially pertinent here. For example, in the 1990s historians of feminism such as

Christine Bard, Karen Offen, and Paul Smith proposed broad conceptions of feminism that included conservative Catholic groups such as the Union nationale pour le vote des femmes (UNVF) and Union féminine civique et sociale (UFCS).³² Founded in the 1920s, both groups attracted suffragists and promoted social action by women in civic space. In contrast, historians of the right hold narrower conceptions of feminism and generally have not considered such groups feminist. The UNVF and UFCS accepted that within marriage, the husband was the *chef de famille* and supported legislation in the 1930s to restrict the rights of working mothers. For this reason, Anne Cova and Magali Della Sudda warned that suffrage activism by conservative Catholics should not be conflated with feminist action because the ends they sought to achieve (a re-Christianized society) differed so dramatically from feminists' contention that spouses were equal within marriage.³³ Passmore has asserted that the UNVF's conception of the family was hierarchical and thus within a long tradition of "anti-feminist" action on the part of conservative Catholic women.³⁴

If historians using different methodologies conceive of an important group like the UNVF as feminist and anti-feminist, to what extent should scholars of women be mindful of the limits of classification? In what ways might the methodologies that Passmore suggests resonate in other fields? These questions are relevant because francophone authors had written of women's influence in French history long before women's history began the long process of becoming institutionalized in university settings.³⁵ One wonders if the struggles for legitimacy and inclusion that francophone scholars of women and gender confronted in breaking into the French academy are similar to barriers faced by scholars like Goyet if they dare to challenge the rémondian thesis.

Goyet pointed out that French contemporaries had a limited understanding of Italian Fascism. One might make the same argument today about the Croix de Feu/PSF. Too little is known of the movement (even among historians of France) relative to its influence during the 1930s and Vichy periods. There is great promise in analyzing the left and right on the "same analytic field," to borrow a phrase from another historiographic context.³⁶ But the first step is to ensure that the literature on the Croix de Feu/PSF is on par with the far richer scholarship on the Popular Front. Until then, accurate evaluations of the left and right will be difficult to make. It does seem as if increasing numbers of researchers are using the La Rocque archives. But it remains to be seen if their research findings will be published in French-language journals, and furthermore, if their access to the La Rocque archives will continue.

¹ Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² On the instrumentalization of history, see Nicolas Bancel and Herman Lebovics, "Building the History Museum to Stop History," *French Cultural Studies* 22:4 (2011): 271-288.

³ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism 1917-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

⁴ "Mission," *Middle East Forum*, <http://www.meforum.org/about.php> (accessed 27 May 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Berstein's introduction in François de La Rocque, *Pourquoi je suis républicain; carnet de captivité*, ed. Hugues de La Rocque and Serge Berstein (Paris: Seuil, 2014), pp. 21-22 (emphasis mine).

⁷ Rémond argued that “Legitimists” considered political legitimacy to be in the Bourbon dynasty and thus emphasized monarchism and Catholicism. Further to the left, “Orleanists” arose in 1830 and accepted constitutional monarchies, limited suffrage, and early liberal conceptions of free-trade. “Bonapartistes” emerged with the rise of Napoleon III in the mid-nineteenth century and were generally authoritarian, nationalistic, and willing to accept universal suffrage.

⁸ Kevin Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” *French Historical Studies* 37:3 (2014): 487.

⁹ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 475.

¹⁰ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 479.

¹¹ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 478.

¹² Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 471.

¹³ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 477.

¹⁴ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 471.

¹⁵ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 479.

¹⁶ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 478.

¹⁷ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 484.

¹⁸ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 497.

¹⁹ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 491, 493, and 494.

²⁰ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 495.

²¹ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 489.

²² Several monographs use the La Rocque archives extensively to study the Croix de Feu/PSF, although they are a bit more focused than Kennedy’s work. They include Passmore’s regional study on the Rhône *From Liberalism to Fascism: the Right in a French Province* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Samuel Kalman’s exploration of the doctrines of the Croix de Feu/PSF and the Faisceau *The Extreme Right in Interwar France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); and Chris Millington’s study of veterans organizations and their relationship with the Croix de Feu/PSF *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Interwar France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

²³ Jacques Nobécourt wrote a 1000-page hagiographic tome on Colonel de la Rocque using the La Rocque papers entitled *Le colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946: ou les pièges du nationalisme Chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); and Albert Kéchichian's study of the Croix de Feu, *Les Croix de feu à l'âge des fascismes* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2006) – a work Passmore does not mention – ends in 1936 without analysis of the far bigger PSF.

²⁴ Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939* (New Have: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁵ Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-1939* (Basingstroke: Palgrave, 2009).

²⁶ Philippe Machefer published several influential articles on the Croix de Feu/PSF from the 1960s-1980s, although he died before finishing a book-length study. See also several articles by Jean-Paul Thomas, including “Les Effectifs du Parti Social Français,” *Vingtième Siècle* 62 (avril-juin 1999): 61-83; Kevin Passmore, “‘Planting the Tricolor in the Citadels of Communism’: Women’s Social Action in the Croix de feu and Parti social français,” *Journal of Modern History* 71 (December 1999): 815-851; Laura Lee Downs, “Each and every one of you must become a chef: Toward a Social Politics of Working-Class Childhood on the Extreme Right in 1930s France,” *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (March 2009): 1-44; *ibid*, “‘Nous plantions les trois couleurs’, Action sociale féminine et la recomposition des politiques de la droite française: Le mouvement Croix-de-Feu et le Parti social français, 1934-1947,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 58 no. 3 (2011): 118-163; and Caroline Campbell, “Building a Movement, Dismantling the Republic: Women and Political Extremism in the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français, 1927-1940,” *French Historical Studies* 35:4 (Fall 2012): 691-726.

²⁷ The exception here is physical culture. See Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Caroline Campbell, “Physical Culture, Gender, and Racial Rejuvenation in the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français,” in *The French Right Between the Wars: Political and Intellectual Movements from Conservatism to Fascism*, eds. Samuel Kalman and Sean Kennedy (New York: Berghahn, 2014), pp. 163-79.

²⁸ Geoff Read compares the ways in which political parties and movements across the political spectrum deployed masculinity for political purposes and includes an analysis of the Croix de Feu/PSF in *Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

²⁹ Chris Millington, “Political Violence in Interwar France,” *History Compass* (2012): 1-14.

³⁰ Samuel Kalman, *French Colonial Fascism: the Extreme Right in Algeria, 1919-1939* (Basingstroke: Palgrave, 2013).

³¹ Passmore, “L’historiographie du « fascisme » en France,” 491 and 497.

³² Christine Bard, *Les filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes 1914-1945* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); Paul Smith, *Feminism in the Third Republic: Women's Political and Civil Rights in France, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 5; Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 21-22. Offen suggests that a feminist consciousness characterized the UFSC (*European Feminisms*, 334-335).

³³ Anne Cova, “*Au service de l’église, de la patrie et de la famille*”: *Femmes catholiques et maternité sous la IIIe République* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), 16; Magali Della Sudda, “Socio-histoire des formes de politisation des femmes conservatrices avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie. La Ligue patriotique des Françaises (1902-1933) et l’Unione fra le donne cattoliche d’Italia (1909-1919),” (Ph.D. diss., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2007), 24.

³⁴ Passmore, *The Right in France: from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 103, 244.

³⁵ Karen Offen, “French Women’s History: Retrospect (1789-1940) and Prospect,” *French Historical Studies* 26:4 (Fall 2003) 727-767.

³⁶ The phrase comes from Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” from Cooper and Stoler eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.