
H-France Review Vol. 13 (May 2013), No.47

Tyler Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919: Consumer Struggles, Transnationalism, and Revolution*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xii + 342 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-01810-3.

Review by Kathryn E. Amdur, Emory University.

Even as the hundredth anniversary of 1914 rapidly approaches, Tyler Stovall's new book reminds us that end points of war can matter as much as their beginnings, especially when they mark (as did this one) the start of a new revolutionary era. For Stovall, "1919 represented an era whose revolutionary hopes failed in the short run but to an important extent ultimately triumphed" (p. 2n4). In this, he says, 1919 was "like 1848 and 1968," a comparison heightened by the words of his title, an (unwitting?) echo of Gerd-Rainer Horn's *The Spirit of '68*.^[1] For both authors, capturing this "spirit" allows a focus on "an insurgent vision" (p. 2) of goals and grievances, a revolutionary fervor of excitement and opportunity, rather than on strategies or tactics, or (still less) on short-term outcomes. As Stovall further points out, 1919 lay exactly midway between 1871 and 1968, a transitional stage between revolutionary styles. Was 1871 already the first revolution of the twentieth century, as Lenin had predicted? Now the mixture of class, nation, gender, and other identities acted again to radicalize, not curb, the revolutionary impulse, at a time when "patriotism and class resentment joined hands" (p. 32).

For France (and especially for Paris), 1919 marked not just the end of the Great War, and with it the difficult processes of peacemaking and demobilization, but also the pressures of labor strikes and consumer protests, in which women, colonials, and even some middle-class families often were prominent. As others have argued, the era's rapid inflation was a revolutionary experience, because workers lost the "stabilizing, conservative habits" that led them in normal times to frame smaller wage demands.^[2] If 1920 has hitherto overshadowed 1919, as the year of the birth of the French Communist Party, it was also the start of a revolutionary downswing marked by recession, unemployment, and labor schism, when the enthusiasms of 1919 had faded.^[3] In 1919, Stovall argues, the revolutionary character of the movement lay not in a genuine threat of bloody insurrection but in the promise of transcending capitalism, as well as in the mechanism of wildcat strikes that were "spontaneous, even anarchic" in character, "in defiance" of national union leadership (p. 238)—even if often coordinated by local leaders. Yet hardly anti- or apolitical, the strikes called for a continuation of wartime consumer protections (as well as for adjunct goals such as amnesties for political prisoners and the end of Allied intervention into Bolshevik Russia), as part of "the micro-politics of working-class struggles" and the broader "politicization of the everyday" (pp. 283-284).

So, why was there so much revolutionary sentiment in France in the wake of its military victory, however Pyrrhic? Beyond the inspiration of a revolution in Russia or the frustration of a difficult transition to peacetime, Stovall cites the ways in which material issues like housing and food costs were politicized and blamed on the state, not just on employers. Indeed, he claims, it was the recent successes of state intervention that prompted this revolution of rising expectations, just when neoliberals were hoping to end the wartime controls. These protests, he adds, were an extension of what Paul Fussell had called "the versus habit": the binary oppositions (French / German; front lines / home front; male / female) that had erupted in wartime.^[4] Now the mentality of combat applied more than metaphorically

in a “consumer’s war” (the subject of chapter one). Calls for simple reforms, such as the new eight-hour day (especially if applied without compensatory wage hikes), seemed less like an empty shell than an opening salvo, at a time when ideas and slogans—if rarely real actions—rang out with the furor of the cataclysmic general strike. For Stovall, the revolutionary meaning of material hardships also radicalized the suburban “red belt” around Paris, where community networks mattered more than workplace conflicts, by the interwar years, once “the battle for control of the productive process was a lost one.” There the ongoing struggle for basic amenities (paved streets, street lights, and running water) drew neighborhoods together and “gave...workers a sense of empowerment in the present and feelings of hope for the future,” even if it did not itself bring the revolution nearer.[5]

This focus on revolutionary spirit is a welcome return to a historiographical trend that perhaps never died out but was partly subsumed by a post-’60s wave of scholarship that doubted whether wartime protest had been as trenchant as it came to seem in the wake of the Vietnam era.[6] Stovall never confronts these nay-sayers directly, though he does distinguish the postwar revolutionary spirit from the conflicts between pro- and antiwar factions in the wartime French Left. He also situates his work amid a still earlier historiography for which the dominant postwar mood was counterrevolutionary, against the “red scare” threats both abroad and at home.[7] So, for him, the Peace Conference at Paris set the stage for a “spectacle” of protest (the subject of chapter four) that coincided with (even if it was not caused by) a larger global crisis: a claim of simultaneity that echoes the cultural approaches of Gerd-Rainer Horn and Stephen Kern.[8]

In more explicit (and less revolutionary) terms, the Peace Conference also inspired union demands for a seat at the negotiating table, and for an international Labor Charter of reforms, such as the eight-hour day, to be written into the Versailles Treaty. Demonstrators also mixed their cries of protest with shouts of welcome for Woodrow Wilson, at best the hero of the moderate Left in wartime or postwar France. For Stovall, though, the Peace Conference’s greater significance lay in issues of colonialism and race, as a mark of the juxtaposition of global and local (or political and material) conflicts. Asking “how colonial and racial differences interacted with class to shape working-class identity” (p. 21), he cites the exclusion of colonial (and female) labor from the postwar workplace. But his evidence for the global linkage is scant, beyond glimpses of xenophobia and hints of occupational and geographic segregation of nonwhite workers—not yet to the suburbs, but back to the colonies—which coincided with the exclusion of colonial delegates from the conference proceedings. Stovall also connects the dots to include the consumer boycotts within the empire as part of the oncoming challenge to colonial rule.

In the colonial realm, as in the realms of consumer protest and identity politics, his aim is to show how 1919 “looked both backward and forward” (p. 288): back to the moral economy of an earlier era and ahead to both the post-colonial struggles and the new social movements of the 1960s and beyond. Some of the links are a stretch, and some assertions debatable: did the “forced departure” of colonial workers really “set a pattern” for the deportation of foreign Jews in the 1940s (p. 289)?[9] Did the strikes of 1919 “conclusively bury the prewar anarcho-syndicalist tradition” (p. 290)?[10] But the whole is a refreshing look at a revolutionary moment that “accentuate[s] the positive” in the story of consumer resistance, to show how 1919 “preserved the dream of revolution but adapted it to the new face of state power in the early twentieth century” (pp. 298, 291). It is also a compelling example of the “new new” labor history previously heralded by Lenard Berlanstein [11]: a mix of older identity politics with a post-modern sensibility, and an aptly transitional methodology for a transitional moment in time.

NOTES

[1] Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); not cited in Stovall’s book.

[2] James Cronin, "Labor Insurgency and Class Formation: Comparative Perspectives on the Crisis of 1917-1920 in Europe," *Social Science History* 4(1980): 134-135.

[3] See for example Kathryn E. Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War I* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), especially chapters six and seven.

[4] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975 / 2000).

[5] Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 178. (This book, but not this passage, is cited in Stovall's newer book.)

[6] See for example Leonard V. Smith et al., *France and the Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially chapter four, "The crises of 1917."

[7] Stovall cites especially John M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966); Arno Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967); and Charles Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[8] Horn, *The Spirit of '68*; Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[9] Stovall cites, among others, Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[10] See Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*; also Amdur, "Anarchosyndicalism" [to and since 1914], in John Merriman and Jay Winter, eds., *Encyclopedia of Europe, 1789-1914 and 1914-2000* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006).

[11] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Introduction," in Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

Kathryn E. Amdur
Emory University
kamdur@emory.edu

Copyright © 2013 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.