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Chris Millington, *Fighting for France: Violence in Interwar French Politics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxvii + 250 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$64.95 (US) ISBN: (hb) 9780197266274.

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The last decade or so in Europe and the United States has seen the resurgence of something many assumed was gone for good—street violence between the political left and right. In August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, that trend turned deadly when extreme right activists drove a car into a crowd of anti-fascist protesters. With such events in the news once more, the question of the place of violence in the political culture of democratic republics is back on the agenda for journalists and scholars alike. In *Fighting for France: Violence in Interwar French Politics*, Chris Millington undertakes a thoughtful, thorough, and timely inquiry into the role of violence in French political culture between the World Wars. Millington's intelligent, compact, and focused monograph approaches familiar and contested historiographical terrain with new tools.

The impression the scholarly literature gives of the French Third Republic in the twentieth century is paradoxical. How did a system in which governments routinely rose and fell in a matter of months stand against the threats of fascism and communist revolution? Two broad scholarly narratives have developed to explain the path the Third Republic took in the 1920s and 1930s. The first, originating in France and best exemplified by the work of René Rémond and Serge Berstein, alleges that France's republican tradition was in fact a solid bulwark against extremes of left and right and rendered France "immune" to fascism.[1] The second narrative stresses the "decadence" and disfunction of French politics during the interwar period. That narrative depicts a Third Republic that was out of its depth, facing crisis after crisis and weakened by internal divisions that were too deep for liberal norms to contain. This interpretation is accompanied by a school of thought that argues that fascism was in fact more mainstream and influential in France than earlier historians had acknowledged.[2]

Millington's original approach to the political culture of the late Third Republic succeeds in reviving interest in a larger debate that has, to some degree, grown stale. His approach is fresh because it supplements familiar questions about the success or failure of the Third Republic with a spatial approach to analyzing violent incidents and with tools from the field of masculinities studies. Another interesting angle is his emphasis on the importance of symbolic confrontation. Millington places organized, nonviolent counter-demonstrations on a spectrum with acts of physical violence in order to show the circumstances that produced and intensified political violence. In his words, "In interwar France it is apparent that antagonists and witnesses experienced and interpreted threat, intimidation, and symbolic confrontation as no less a form of violence than actual bodily harm" (p. xxi).

Perhaps the greatest strength of Millington's work is how he situates it within particular physical spaces where violence occurred. As evidenced by the titles of its chapters, those spaces lend the book its structure. In his first chapter, "The Battle for the Street," Millington introduces what Jessica Wardhaugh calls the

“battle for the transient control of public space” as a major dynamic at work in interwar political violence (p. 3). Through detailed accounts of street violence involving newspaper sellers, pamphleteers, paramilitary groups, and police, he establishes a convincing picture of the street as a key site of struggle between factions for symbolic dominance. He also introduces concepts that are key to his later analysis, including the importance of claiming towns and neighborhoods as either right or left-wing bastions. That context gave rise to efforts at provocation and counter-provocation as factions sought to invade the territory of their political opponents or to drive opponents from “their” space (p. 4).

Millington argues that the street fighters were generally young men who had not served in the Great War (p. 17). Key to many street fighters’ motivations was proving their manliness, a complicated proposition given the strictures of normative French masculinity at the time. While courage in the face of the enemy and willingness to fight was important, “sangfroid” and discipline was also highly valued and factions did not desire to be viewed as aggressors but instead insisted on their readiness and willingness to fight in self-defense. However, once they could credibly claim to be acting in self-defense, paramilitary groups on both the right and left bragged of their ability to deal back a worse beating than they had received. According to Millington, “both the communist party in 1926 and the Jeunesses Patriotes in 1935 employed the same slogan when it came to revenge: ‘For one eye, both eyes. For one tooth, the whole filthy mouth’”(p. 29). Needless to say, some of the talk of self-defense and attempts to frame opponents as aggressors was in bad faith. The picture that emerges is one of brinkmanship between communists, socialists, royalists, and nationalists/fascists attempting to get the better of the propaganda opportunities presented by frequent, routine street violence. Those incidents allowed them to present their organizations as powerful, manly, and dynamic enough to be likely to win in the event of a *real* confrontation—a potential future attempt at a fascist coup or a communist revolution. Paramilitary groups such as the right-wing Jeunesses Patriotes and the Action Française’s Camelots du roi recruited burly young men and gave them combat training in order to intimidate and, when necessary, fight their opponents (p. 21). Women were also participants in violence, though more frequently among the left than the right, and when they were victims of violence their factions made hay of it to portray their opponents as especially barbaric (pp. 24-25).

In his second chapter, “Dueling in the Meeting Hall,” Millington focuses on the frequent brawls and individual combats that unfolded inside of political meetings. Interwar French political meetings were tinder boxes for political violence, not least because they often played host to debates between factions that could easily devolve into verbal or physical confrontation. The armed cadres who populated the streets of towns and cities sometimes served as security guards at the entrances to meeting halls and among the crowd. At these meetings, debate took on the aspect of a duel, with party newspapers and observers reporting on the manliness, courage and *sangfroid* of speakers and attributing their ability to sway the crowd to their strength and conviction as much as to the quality of their arguments. It is in this chapter that the question of the relationship between violence and the republican norm of rational debate is most clearly illustrated. By the 1920s, Millington argues that the public meetings and debates that had originated as efforts at educating the public about their democratic rights and about policy gave way to “affective and theatrical appeal to the audience” (pp. 42-43). The fascist leagues and the communist party alike populated their meetings with uniformed paramilitaries meant to intimidate and provide security (p. 43). Here as elsewhere, Millington does an excellent job bringing the reader into the space of the meeting hall, revealing how every aspect of the meeting was planned for the eventuality of confrontation. Meetings were not merely a pretext for violence, though. According to Millington, “to deny an opponent the right to speak was deemed cowardly,” and the usual rules of disciplined manly behavior were meant to govern when and if activists would engage in violence (p. 59). The regulating norm of manliness that discouraged unprovoked attacks, attacks from behind, and other such behavior likely served to make French political violence in this period less deadly than it might otherwise have been. Political violence was to show strength, preparedness, and superior moral qualities as much as it was to control space.

In his third chapter, “The Mob and the Mass,” Millington takes on the mass violence that could sometimes

occur at demonstrations, parades, and riots. Expanding on notions developed in earlier chapters, he guides us through the complicated dance of provocation and revenge that ruled mass street demonstrations and processions. A mass street rally could serve to intimidate or provoke political opponents, to demonstrate strength and preparedness for revolution or counter-revolution, and to demonstrate manly virtues and the lack of those virtues among one's opponents. To that end media, especially party newspapers, was key to presenting incidents of symbolic and actual confrontation in a light that would be favorable to a given side. Communists and socialists were likely to conceive of the streets as their own turf, and to see any right-wing demonstration as a provocation. The right saw the street as a place made unruly by left-wing domination, and sought to demonstrate their taste for order with militarized marches (pp. 108-109). While most such demonstrations were peaceful and organizers by and large saw that as a good thing, in light of the cultural understanding of violence put forward by Millington elsewhere, they were part of a continuum of political violence (p. 110).

Chapter four, "Brutes and Bludgeoners," focuses on the police and their role in violent incidents between political factions. Millington takes a fairly sympathetic view of the police, who were called upon to behave with discipline and *sangfroid* in the face of the deliberately provocative behavior of both left and right-wing factions. While the communist and socialist parties openly attacked the police as servants of capital and class traitors, right-wing groups also attempted to associate the police with their political enemies by alleging they were infiltrated by communists. The case of the death of Jeunesses Patriotes activist Maurice Ridard at the hands of police on Paris' Place de L'Opera in 1926 is illustrative—police who could, under other circumstances, represent order and a bulwark against revolution could as easily be accused of siding with the left (p. 112). Millington finds little evidence of any pronounced bias toward right or left in his sources, a remarkable finding. While he acknowledges brutal behavior by police during the period of his study, he also emphasizes attempts at reform and the difficult circumstances under which police worked. Millington finds no evidence of the kind of collusion that occurred between, for example, Italian fascist *Squadristi* and the *Caribineiri* (p. 130), instead arguing that in general "police lashed out in anger, exasperation, or exhaustion," often under extreme stress (p. 152).

The final chapter, "Fighting for the Factory Floor," looks into the role of violence in strike actions and other workplace disputes. While violence during strikes declined greatly as policing techniques and training were honed during the early twentieth century, it remained a common feature of strike actions and attacks on blacklegs and police were undertaken by strikers as tactics. Here again, Millington's emphasis on the control of space is salutary, allowing us to see how violence and the threat of violence served to advance the aims of strikers and strike-breakers alike. Union workers controlling entrances to factories to deny access to scabs, for example, could easily lead to incidents of violence (p. 161). The "symbolic geography of power" proper to strikes could also expand far beyond the factory floor, to places where scabs congregated and to the offices and homes of management (p. 163). Strikes could be extremely complex, militarily organized affairs that served as much to show the strength of the left and its revolutionary potential as to win concessions from bosses. It was in the workplace that women's roles in political violence were most pronounced, as women had leading positions in many unions and were full participants in all aspects of strike action.

In his conclusion, Millington returns to the historiography of the period in order to clarify his contribution. Reflecting on the notion of a "latent French civil war" beginning with the 6 February 1934 riots and leading up to the 1939 outbreak of World War II, he notes that while violent incidents became more common, no outright left-right "war" in fact occurred and political violence actually declined in the months before the war (p. 184). Yet if violence in French politics during the interwar period may have been less severe and deadly than in, say, Russia in 1917-1922, Millington's reinterpretation of the meaning and means of violence employed shows that that does not diminish the importance of violence to French politics in the period. The relatively controlled, limited, and even ceremonial nature of political violence in interwar France does not lessen its mass scale and routine nature, or take away from its integral place alongside such democratic traditions as meeting hall debates and newspaper selling. Millington gestures

to the strange but productive tension between routine political violence and democratic norms. That does not mean that that violence had no consequences for democracy. Millington argues that the cooptation of republican forms, such as the meeting hall debate, and their efforts to combine such forms with more illiberal practices such as paramilitarism, did serve to chip away at the functioning of the democratic public sphere.

Another strength of Millington's book is his attention to the interplay between mass media, such as newspapers and radio, and violent events in the streets, meeting halls, and on shop floors. Millington shows how leaders and journalists narrativized recent events to favor their point of view or in order to construct a larger narrative about the country's political situation. The notion of a "guerre franco-française" put forward by *The Times's* Alexander Werth and others was, after all, a narrative interpretation of very complex events that continues to have broad consequences for our understanding of France's dual fall in 1940—to German arms and to internal right-wing authoritarianism.[3] Nuanced work on the reality of violence that was as routine as it was limited and constrained, such as Millington's, will go a long way toward banishing a stereotypical view of the interwar period either as one of unchecked political decadence and failure or of unassailable peace and democracy. *Fighting for France* is sure to be of interest to specialists in French twentieth-century politics and political culture, as well as to those with an interest in the comparative study of democracies' responses to political extremism in the era of fascism. It could serve as a readable and engaging supplementary text for an undergraduate course on Europe in the era of the World Wars, and could also be used to provoke productive discussion about the similarities and differences between political violence in interwar Europe and in our own time.

## NOTES

[1] René Rémond, *The Right Wing in France from 1815 to De Gaulle*, 2d American ed. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969); Serge Berstein, "La France des années trente allergique au fascisme: A propos d'un livre de Zeev Sternhell," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 2 (1984): 83-94.

[2] For example: Eugen Joseph Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: Norton, 1996); Jean Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat: The Collapse of French Diplomacy 1932-1939* (New York: Enigma Books, 2004). Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[3] In such works as: Alexander Werth, *Which Way France?* (New York, London: Harper, 1937).

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