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Norman Ingram, *The War Guilt Problem and the Ligue des droits de l'homme, 1914-1944*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. vii + 294 pp. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-882799-3.

Review by Peter Jackson, University of Glasgow.

This excellent book by Norman Ingram provides a fresh new perspective on the influence of the Great War on French politics during the inter-war period. More specifically, Ingram explores the impact of the “war guilt question” on the Ligue des droits de l’homme, the largest as well as the most dynamic and influential republican civil society association of the Third Republic. Based on very extensive archival and primary research in France and Germany, *The War Guilt Question and the Ligue des droits de l’homme* reconsiders the course of republican and pacifist politics in France and illuminates the impact of the debate over the origins of the Great War on national, international, and transnational European politics.

Ingram makes a number of bold arguments. His core thesis is that internal debate over the “war guilt question” proved corrosive to the ideological sinews that held the Ligue des droits de l’homme (LDH) together. From this proposition flow three subsidiary lines of argument, all of which in different ways have implications beyond the particular fate of the Ligue.

The first is that the decline of the Ligue’s influence over French politics and society must be traced to 1914 and its decision to support the Union sacrée. “[T]he demise of the Ligue,” Ingram insists, “was a function of its *political* position during the Great War and its ongoing, festering, unresolved twenty-year crisis with Germany” (p. 14). Doubts as to the legitimacy of France’s participation in the conflict, as well as its responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities, grew among a small but voluble minority of Ligue members, including one-time Ligue secretary general Mathias Morhardt, who by 1915 was convinced that Russia (and therefore also France) bore a greater responsibility for the war’s outbreak than did the Central Powers in general (and Germany in particular). Ingram then goes further to argue that the “historical dissent” over “war guilt” within the LDH “called into question the very bona fides of all that was dear to the Republican tradition in France” (p. 12). Debate over the origins of the Great War eroded support for the Republican regime.

Ingram’s second key argument is that debates over the war’s origins were an important stimulant for the emergence of an “integral” or “new-style” French pacifism that rejected war under any circumstances. Ingram explored the nature and evolution of this new form of pacifist dissent in his excellent 1991 monograph *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939*. *The War Guilt Question* provides a new perspective on the origins of this movement by tracing it to “historical

dissent” over France’s responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914. Ingram makes it clear he finds this revisionist case persuasive in broad terms.

Added to this was the nature of the “victors’ peace” imposed on Germany in 1919. Germany was forced to accept very substantial territorial losses, was forbidden from profiting from the principle of self-determination to effect an Anschluss with Austria and to accept to make massive reparation for the damage caused by the war. The justification for imposing—rather than negotiating—the peace settlement with Germany was that it had been the policies of the German government that had caused the war. This justification was embodied in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. In the eyes of the *minoritaires* within the LDH, the “war guilt clause” undermined the legitimacy of the peace settlement, and indeed of France’s decision to wage war in the first place.

The combination of doubts concerning the legitimacy of the war and outright opposition to the nature of the peace provided the conceptual underpinnings for “pacifisme nouveau style.” It also animated arguments that the Treaty of Versailles must be revised that were advanced consistently during the interwar period by the dissenting minority within the LDH. These arguments were made even after the advent of the Nazi regime in 1933, with its aggressive revisionism and its programme to reorder Germany’s economy and society to prepare for wars of conquest.

Without endorsing the position of the *minoritaires* by the late 1930s, Ingram makes clear that he finds the “revisionist” interpretation of the origins of the war and the iniquitous character of the peace treaty to be on balance more persuasive than the “orthodox” position adopted by the majority within the Ligue. From this position flows Ingram’s much broader judgement that “the seeds of Nazism and the Second World War were planted during the Great War” (p. 9). The Second World War was caused, to a significant extent, by the mistakes and misjudgements of French and Allied statecraft before, during, and after the First World War. This is an ambitious argument about the dynamics of European international relations that goes well beyond the particular case of the Ligue des droits de l’homme.

Ingram’s third line of argument is that our interpretive framework for understanding French responses to defeat and occupation during the Second World War must be expanded to include this new-style approach to peace. In addition to the traditional categories of collaboration, accommodation, and resistance, we must consider the influence of “integral” pacifism, which set peace as a moral objective above all other political considerations. This is a perspective that holds out rich potential for further research by historians of the Vichy regime, in general, and attitudes towards war, peace, and international politics, in particular.

All three of these arguments have much to commend them. So too, has the clarity and elegance with which Ingram advances his case throughout. The book is an extraordinarily mature and thoughtful analysis of important issues. One does not need to embrace all of the Ingram’s arguments to appreciate the importance of his contribution to the historiography.

Two issues are worth exploring further. The first is the claim that Ligue’s decision to support the Union sacrée had far-reaching consequences not only for its future unity and effectiveness, but also for the Republic as a whole. Ingram asserts that “If one can argue that the seeds of Nazism and the Second World War were planted during the Great War, one can equally make

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the case that the eventual demise of the Ligue des droits de l'homme (and, indeed, of the Third Republic) also began in 1914 with the Union sacrée" (p. 9).

There is certainly room for disagreement here. It is difficult to imagine a context in which the LDH did *not* support the Union sacrée. The Union sacrée was, after all, a commitment to set defence of *la patrie* above all partisan political quarrels. The Union sacrée and the Ligue des droits de l'homme shared the same discursive family tree. The Ligue was, after all, born of a movement to protect one of the fundamental pillars of republicanism, the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. For the centre-left milieu of the LDH, where patriotism and republicanism were effectively synonymous, adherence to the Union sacrée was participating in a war of republican defence against a retrograde autocracy that had invaded French soil. Indeed, as Ingram shows, this was the very language deployed by Ligue president Ferdinand Buisson at the opening of the conflict (pp. 20-22). Significantly, Ingram provides no evidence of any substantive opposition to support for the Union sacrée during the opening phase of the war.

Also problematic, for this reviewer at least, is the straight causal line drawn from the opening of the Great War through the episode of the Versailles treaty to the rise of Nazism and then the return of war in 1939. It is undeniable that the ideological furies unleashed during the Great War (along with the unprecedented suffering and destruction that resulted) were fundamental structural elements in the social and political context of the interwar period. But there is much more to the story. The inevitable result of drawing such a straight line between 1919 and 1939 is a teleological analysis that marginalises everything that happened in the intervening years. The financial stabilisation initiated by the Dawes Plan of 1924, the political détente achieved by the Locarno Accords the following year, and the entry of Germany into the League of Nations in 1926 are all treated as epiphenomena and mere preludes to the coming of war in 1939. The same is true, most problematically, of the global economic crisis after 1929 and its radicalising effects on European politics.

For at least two generations historians have been challenging this narrative. They have argued against the remarkably durable Keynesian view that the Treaty of Versailles was a vindictive regime that aimed above all at destroying Germany as a great power. As Georges-Henri Soutou and others (myself included) have argued, the Versailles treaty was a dynamic and open-ended peace settlement that held out prospects for co-operation with Germany. They have emphasised the need to take international politics on their own terms and have stressed the importance of contingency when trying to understand the origins of the Second World War. Ingram evidently does not find these arguments persuasive.

This interpretive discord in no way detracts from Ingram's achievement in this impressive study of the Ligue des droits de l'homme. As Pietr Geyl noted long ago, "History is an argument without end." And that is how it should be. *The War Guilt Question* will take its place as a landmark study with resonance well beyond the political history of France in the era of the two World Wars. Scholars interested in human rights, in the role of history in public debate, or in the impact of the Great War on transnational intellectual exchange, will all find much to think about in the well-researched, well-written and imaginative book.

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