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Chris Millington, *A History of Fascism in France: From the First World War to the National Front*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. x + 235pp. Notes, select bibliography, and index. £31.00 (hb). ISBN 9781350006546; £19.99 (pb). ISBN 9781350006539.

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The rise to prominence of authoritarian and populist political movements in many countries in the current century has given a renewed sharpness to debates over the nature of fascism. At their best, these debates interrogate the similarities and differences between diverse movements past and present, offering readers a clearer understanding of the ideas, values, practices and consequences involved. At their worst, these debates have generated checklists of characteristics which may or may not define what is meant by fascism, and have often produced polarised reactions, pitting groups of scholars against one another. Chris Millington's thoughtful and detailed study acknowledges their influence, but declines to engage in the debates. Instead, his substantive focus is on describing and understanding some of the main movements that have dominated the far Right in France since the 1920s.

After a brief contextualisation, to which we shall return, the introduction examines how the French commentators initially saw fascism as a phenomenon of postwar Italian politics. Immediately after the Great War, the new movement attracted great attention in France, especially after its leader, Benito Mussolini, was invited to form a government in 1922. Much of the attention focused on the specific conditions in Italy, though there were frequent references to the lack of an equivalent leader in France and suggestions that French governments could learn from their neighbour. In late 1925, a movement calling itself "Le Faisceau" emerged in France, blue-shirted and avowedly fascist. Other far right leagues also imitated some of the elements of Italian fascism, though declined to describe themselves as fascist. The political response of left-wing opponents was gradually to build up an explicitly anti-fascist movement, which tended to brand every far right group as fascist. And from the early 1930s, "fascist" was increasingly used as a term to describe the authoritarian regimes in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere. Millington recognises that "fascism" became a very broad and ambiguous term that "means different things to different people in different contexts" (p. 10). He declines to offer a definition of it, but offers instead a focus on the leagues and parties of the extreme Right in France, which represented a real threat to democracy, regardless of whether they are considered fascist.

The major part of the book concerns movements of the 1920s and 1930s, their leaders and their participants, noting at various points how women became actively involved. Chapter one deals with two movements of the 1920s. The Jeunesses patriotes were founded by Pierre Taittinger in

1924, as part of the Ligue des patriotes led by General de Castelnau. They broke away in 1926 to become an independent paramilitary league. Le Faisceau was founded in 1925, led by an Action française militant, Georges Valois, as an explicitly fascist movement, with corporatist ideology and uniforms. These thrived on protest against the left-leaning Cartel des Gauches government and attracted substantial funding from business interests and from Italy. However, they declined under more conservative governments and under pressure from the larger right-wing groupings with whom they competed.

Chapter two examines the role of the leagues in the events of February 1934, which were the subject of an excellent study by Chris Millington and Brian Jenkins.^[1] The demonstrations, which ended in violence and deaths, brought the downfall of the Daladier government and the regrouping of left-wing forces. The context of recession and anti-parliamentary sentiment is examined, together with the emergence of new leagues, such as Solidarité Française, founded in 1933 and led by Jean Renaud, and Les Francistes, founded in 1933 by Marcel Bucard, a former Faisceau activist. The choreography of the events is described in detail and their impact is recognised in weakening French democracy and radicalising politics on the right and left.

Chapter three discusses the influential Croix de feu movement, which was formed in 1927, initially of war veterans, but gradually extended to include women, children and non-service men. By 1932, it was led by Colonel François de la Roque who built it into a mass movement of the far Right. Millington examines the important role that women played in social events and charity work for the movement. He then analyses la Roque's hostility to the institutions of the Third Republic; the movement's deep xenophobia, antisemitism and racism, especially in its Algerian branches; and its attitude towards violence, especially in confrontations with antifascists.

Chapter four describes how some movements transformed themselves into political parties, after the Popular Front government of 1936 abolished the Right-wing leagues. The Croix de feu morphed almost seamlessly into the Parti Social Français (PSF), and began engaging in electoral politics, although this involved conflict with existing right-wing parties previously sympathetic to the Croix de feu. It also abandoned much of its paramilitary activity and looked towards the corporatist dictatorship of Salazar's Portugal as an attractive model and partner. In the same year, the Parti Populaire français was formed by a former communist mayor, Jacques Doriot, a charismatic speaker and effective organiser. The ultranationalist and anti-communist party moved to the far right supported by banking and industrial interests opposed to the Popular Front. Doriot tried to form an alliance with La Roque, but in vain. Following electoral reverses in 1937 he declared his party as explicitly fascist.

Chapter five traces the bloody trajectory of the Organisation secrète d'action révolutionnaire nationale (OSARN), better known as the Cagoule, after their distinctive hoods. Formed after the abolition of the leagues in 1936 and led by the brutal Eugène Deloncle, it worked in secret to carry out bombings and political assassinations, with support from Spanish nationalists and from the Italian secret services. Following an abortive coup attempt in late 1937, its leaders were arrested and much of its infrastructure dismantled.

The last two chapters address the legacy of the movements discussed. Chapter six sketches the familiar story of the Vichy regime, emphasizing the role of the far-Right movements and their leaders in its development. Millington suggests that fascist and even pro-Nazi elements became

more prominent towards the end of the war, arguing that this resulted from “a complex interaction of frustrated ambition, tactical calculation and competition” (p. 125). Chapter seven jumps to the *Front national* from the 1980s to the present day. It outlines the “wilderness years” of the far right for almost forty years after the war, with only the Poujadiste movement of the mid-1950s making much impact, before the emergence of the “New Right” intellectuals in the 1970s. It recognises the ambiguous relationship between the FN and France’s far right traditions, culminating in Marine Le Pen’s most recent attempts to detoxify her father’s movement. It then focuses on the electoral progress of the party, based on anti-immigration policies, and its intermittent reverses, before the shock success of Jean-Marie Le Pen in reaching the second round of the 2002 presidential election against Jacques Chirac. It examines the transition to right-wing republicanism under Marine Le Pen from 2011 to her success in reaching the second round in 2017 against Emmanuel Macron.

The brief conclusion emphasises the diversity of French “fascism” (Millington’s quotes) since the First world War (p. 145). The far right groups all shared a desire to transform France’s democratic institutions, and occasionally sought to overthrow them, especially during the war. But they usually distanced themselves from fascism even while adopting aspects of it to serve their own ends.

The question remains of how far any of the movements discussed should be considered fascist. Millington begins and ends by presenting some of the debates around fascism in France. His introductory chapter, entitled “What was fascism?,” begins by presenting the contours of the debate in France, setting René Rémond against Zeev Sternhell: the former suggesting that France was essentially resistant to the foreign ideology of fascism, while the latter argued that fascism in its purest form was French.[2] Many other scholars joined in this increasingly polarised argument. The reader is then referred to an extensive appendix that explores the intricacies of the debate.

In the appendix, Millington shows how Rémond’s “immunity thesis” became the settled view among historians during the 1950s. A quarter of a century later, Sternhell’s work challenged the consensus and drew links with the upsurge of support for the *Front national* in France in the 1980s. He was joined by Robert Soucy and others, who identified the extreme Right movements of the 1930s as fascist in varying degrees.[3] The majority of French specialists sprang to the defence of Rémond’s analysis. Some emphasized that its critics were “foreign historians,” who were less acquainted with the archival material or brought “Anglo-Saxon” agendas to the discussion. Much of the controversy revolved around the nature of the *Croix de feu*/ PSF, and about the views and intentions of its leader Colonel de la Roque. This focus had the benefit of motivating a good deal more research on the movement and others similar to it, though polarised positions continued as to whether it was fascist. Millington aligns himself with the view, first articulated by Michel Dobry [4], that arguing over definitions of fascism has become an obstacle to understanding the political movements in question. He presents a survey of recent work in the field and concludes the appendix with the hope that “entrenched positions that have thus far characterized the historiography [will] be consigned to the past” (p. 164).

From a purely scholarly perspective, an outbreak of concord may well be conducive to historical research, but the controversy over fascism is also grounded in contemporary political issues. There is a great deal at stake for current political movements in France, their supporters and their opponents, in affirming or rejecting the historical connections with fascism. The same may

well be true for other countries, including the “Anglo-Saxon” countries, which are experiencing their own movements of the far right. It is not within his scope to explore the politics of historiography, and Millington’s early suggestion that “the reader might perceive a French variant of fascism in the pages that follow” (p. 1) suggests he is taking a position *au-dessus de la mêlée*.

If this is the case, Millington should perhaps have done more to clarify why he has chosen a title for his book which runs against his nuanced interpretation. Confronted with *A History of Fascism in France*, the unwary student might assume that all of these French far right movements were straightforwardly fascist, while others, such as Action française, were not. The publisher’s text on the back cover rather confirms this impression by presenting it as “the first book in any language to trace the full story of French fascism from the First World War to the modern National Front.” It is to be hoped that readers will not be deceived by the oversimplification since they will find in this volume a wealth of archival research throwing light on movements of the far Right that formed a significant part of France’s political culture between the wars and cast a long shadow up to the present day. They will also find clues as to why the movements were successful in their day and what factors led to their failures. Chris Millington has given us a great deal to think about which may also help our understanding of the present day.

NOTES

[1] Brian Jenkins and Chris Millington, *France and Fascism: February 1934 and the dynamics of political crisis* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[2] René Rémond, *La Droite en France de 1815 à nos jours: Continuité et diversité d’une tradition politique* (Paris: Aubier, 1954) and Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: L’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

[3] Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

[4] Michel Dobry, ed., *Le mythe de l’allergie française au fascisme* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2003).

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