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**Peter Davies**, *The Extreme Right in France, 1789 to the Present: From de Maistre to Le Pen*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. x + 209 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-415-23981-8; \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-415-23982-6.

Review by Andrés H. Reggiani, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires.

Peter Davies is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Huddersfield and author of two other books on twentieth-century French history. [1] *The Extreme Right in France* is, in his own words, "not primarily about people or events, but ideas" (p. 4). Convinced that "for good or for bad the far right has been a major player in French history," Davies seeks to approach the topic in a "non-polemical fashion" (p. 144). He wants neither to "denigrate or undermine" the extreme right nor to be "overjudgemental or pejorative" but to explain it in "neutral and objective" terms (p. 4). The book consists of an introduction, a historiographical essay, five thematic chapters that span the period between the French Revolution and Le Pen, and a final evaluation. Most of the introduction reads as a personal account of the author's "eye-opening" trip across France that led him to the "discovery" of the Le Pen phenomenon where he least expected it (p. 6). Chapter one condenses some of the historiographical debates and attempts, not entirely successfully, to offer a working definition of the extreme right. The book relies almost exclusively on secondary sources and must be regarded as a work of synthesis. Among the scholars that have made major contributions to the subject, Davies mentions René Rémond, Charles Tilly, Zeev Sternhell, Pierre Milza, Michel Winock, Jean-François Sirinelli, Robert Paxton, and Robert Soucy. In addition to these names, the author cites various English-language works with which many non-British scholars may not be familiar.

The five thematic chapters (two through six) are arranged chronologically and deal with specific episodes in which the far right became particularly active. The historical narrative starts with the counterrevolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and focuses on the conspiratorial activities of the Bourbon court and the aristocratic émigrés, the peasant and Catholic uprising of the Vendée, the ultras' plans for restoration of divine monarchy after 1814, and the writings of Joseph de Maistre. Chapter three takes up the history half a century later, in the years between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I. By the 1880s the old counterrevolutionary right had gradually extinguished itself, and a "new" populist right appeared. It was different from the "old" reactionary right in that it was concerned with nation rather than religion; it was "forward-looking" and "revolutionary" rather than conservative; and it sought to appeal to the masses rather than to the old elites. Moreover, it was viciously xenophobic and anti-Semitic and despised the liberal values and institutions of the Third Republic. The chapter focuses on Paul Déroulède and the Ligue des Patriotes, the Boulangist movement, Maurice Barrès's "blood and soil" nationalism, and Louis Drumont and the anti-Dreyfusard movement. Chapter four explores the full development of the pre-1914 "proto-fascist" movements in the interwar years. Focusing on Charles Maurras, Action Française, and the fascist leagues of the 1920s and 1930s, Davies shows the extent to which the far right was able to imitate the Italian fascists and the Nazis—as well as the left—by taking politics "to the streets." Moreover, he rightly sees in the riots of 6 February 1934 an example of how much organized violence had become an accepted practice in French politics. The defeat of 1940 and the German occupation seemed to offer the enemies of the republic what parliamentary politics had denied them until then: the control of the state

in order to "remake France." This is the subject matter of chapter five. In it Davies discusses the politics of wartime collaboration from the double perspective of Vichy and the Paris-based French fascists, such as Alphonse de Châteaubriant's Groupe Collaboration, Joseph Darnand's Milice, Marcel Déat's Rassemblement National Populaire, Marcel Bucard's Francistes, Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français, and the Légion des Volontaires Français contre le Bolchevisme. The book closes its 200-year survey with an analysis of three recent and contemporary cases: the French Algeria and Poujadist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Front National.

Any one-volume book that seeks to condense two hundred years of French right-wing history in some 150 pages confronts difficult choices as to what to include and leave out. Most contemporary scholars would probably refrain from undertaking such an ambitious project, and only those endowed with vast knowledge, a sharp sense of what is important and needs to be told, and a gift for insightful synthesis might consider it feasible. Davies has not shied away from the challenge. At first glance his looks like a book conceived for a non-expert audience. His preference for non-academic language--sometimes even excessively non-academic (he writes "Déroulède and company" and refers to important characters as "VIPS")--the short thematic chapters, and the brief historical chronologies that precede each of them suggest that it would make a good reading in a French Politics 101 class. Here probably lies the book's main strength. It offers readers who are unfamiliar with the topic a good deal of factual information. Moreover, the uneven but extensive bibliographical section gives a good idea of the vast literature on the subject, thus contradicting Davies's own claim that the French extreme right has been a "neglected topic" (p. 4). This is hardly the case. Fewer books and articles on French fascism than on German National Socialism are no proof of a lack of scholarly interest in France's extreme right. Far from that, as the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent acknowledged some years ago, by the early 1990s students and scholars working on French fascism, Vichy, and related topics already outnumbered those interested in the French Revolution--until then the most popular subject.

Unfortunately, those seeking a quick and general overview of the French far right will find their task considerably burdened by the overwhelming number of quotations and bibliographical references--1,134 endnotes for a 153 page-long essay. Many citations reproduce commonsensical statements and non-controversial arguments and seem to have no purpose other than to conceal the author's own opinions. Moreover, there is no attempt at establishing some sort of historiographical hierarchy. Instead, important names are ignored--such as Pascal Ory, Philippe Burrin, and Pierre-André Taguieff--or, as with Rémond's work, grouped together with scores of others who should have been consigned to the bibliographical section. One of the obvious problems is the book's somewhat vague focus on a set of "ideas" and attitudes that our ordinary common sense would characterize as "extreme right." Davies digresses about the problems of finding an adequate labeling for the phenomenon, thus forgetting his own advice of not letting oneself "get too hung on the precise definition of a term" (p. 11). At one point it seems as if he would settle for Winock's characterization of the extreme right as anti-parliamentarian, authoritarian, anti-Marxist, ultranationalistic and racist, and obsessed with "remaking France" (p. 12). Yet we are reminded that some of these features have been also shared at different times by other conservative and moderate actors. Not without some inconsistency, he states that all continuities are "vague," "tenuous," "ill defined," and highly disputed, only to write in the next line that "on the basis of these views it is possible to argue that there is a single extreme-right tradition in France" (p. 12).

The book presents several other methodological and conceptual shortcomings. For example, the interwar years and Vichy--undoubtedly the periods of most intense extreme right activity--receive scant attention (twenty-one pages each) than the French Revolution and the early Third Republic (twenty-nine and twenty-four pages respectively). This unevenness sometimes translates into excessively schematic analyses. The author describes the fascist leagues as "shallow" because "they were good at agitation, good at making public statements, but not very good at doing anything meaningful or substantive" (p. 91). Nor do the conclusions that close the quick survey of the historiography on French fascism seem particularly illuminating. In the section's last paragraph we read that "the era of the

leagues is interesting, but not hugely impressive" as there was "a lot of bluster and a few ideas, but not much else" (p. 93). Likewise, by dismissing the Paris-based collaborators as idealistic "hooligans" and intellectual "thugs" of "little substance," he fails to probe deeper into the politics of those who—like Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Robert Brasillach, Lucien Rebatet, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Marcel Déat, Jacques Doriot, and Joseph Darnand—threw in their lot with the Nazis. Perhaps with the exception of Pierre Laval, none of the protagonists on the losing side of the Franco-French civil war is discussed in detail—the entire collaborationist spectrum of the Paris "ultras" is dealt with in three pages. The conspicuous absence of any reference to the work of historians Ory and Burrin may explain the insufficient attention paid to a topic so central to the author's concern.[2]

Considering the substantial progress made by research to date on Vichy, readers will also be surprised by some of Davies' statements. For instance, taking issue with the conclusions of Robert Paxton, he states, without going into detail, that collaboration was "a necessity and an inevitability" (p. 113). Repeating the old myths held by the pro-Vichy historiography of the 1950s, he portrays Marshal Philippe Pétain's project as one "founded upon 'common sense' and 'back to basics.'" Laval, instead, was someone who "lacked genuine convictions" and had made a political career "out of ducking and diving" (pp. 113, 115). On the whole, the author concludes, Laval's "record in office after 1942 was a good deal more creditable than his record in 1940" (p. 114). Such characterization of Vichy's leadership is compounded by other sweeping generalizations regarding the regime's policies. The most obvious, perhaps, is the discussion of the National Revolution. Vichy's "back to the soil," pronatalist, and youth policies, to name a few examples, had a long history and in no way can be reduced to a political project of the extreme right. Certainly the regime gave them an extremist twist, which Davies acknowledges for the anti-Semitic policies. Nevertheless, this should not obscure, as the book does, the well-proven fact that many of these policies had been on the agenda of the conservative and moderate right for decades—and in some cases, such as family and demographic policy, on the left's as well.[3]

Even judged by the author's explicit aim of focusing primarily on ideas, the book has important gaps. To begin with, there is no discussion of such a crucial period for the postwar right as the controversial purges and trials conducted between 1944 and 1951. Likewise, the discussion of the post-1945 period leaves the reader with the impression that the complex phenomenon of the postwar "new right" was limited to the protest and "anti-everything" politics of the Pierre Poujade's Union des Artisans et Commerçants (UDCA) and Le Pen's Front National and the terrorist tactics of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS). Influential intellectuals, study groups, and ultra-nationalist organizations, such as Alain de Benoist's Groupement des Recherches pour la Civilisation Européenne (GRECE), the Club de l'Horloge, and Défense de l'Occident, among others, are mentioned without discussion or ignored.[4]

For readers who approach the topic for the first time, *The Extreme Right in France* will be a useful guide on major trends, organizations, and events. Davies will also convince them that France has a strong and enduring extreme-right history. Yet they will find it hard to understand the human dimension of this political tradition—how ideas and attitudes were given concrete meaning, appropriated, and redefined collectively in different circumstances. Partly this is because Davies does not help the reader to think historically. At one point, he portrays the counterrevolutionary émigrés as "a standing joke" and "not serious people" who were "intent on wining and dining and not much else"—although shortly before he had written that "they were taken extremely seriously" by the revolutionaries in Paris (pp. 36-37). In another passage he dismisses Maurras's royalism as "out of touch" and his ideas not to be taken "seriously" on the grounds that he paid "scant attention" to economics (p. 86). Thus, with the exception of the last section on the Front National—by far the book's best part—the reader is left wondering why so many ordinary French men and women supported xenophobia, anti-Semitism, militarism, and terrorism. Perhaps here lies the book's main paradox, and its weakness, as it never resolves the tension between the author's explicit goal of understanding the extreme right "on its own terms"—that is, outside the canons of partisanship—and his decision to neglect the very realm, that of people's life

experiences, in which "ideas" become the embodiment of collective feelings of hope, anxiety, fear, and hatred.

## NOTES

[1] Peter Davies, *France and the Second World War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); and *ibid.*, *The National Front in France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[2] Pascal Ory, *Les collaborateurs, 1940-1945* (Paris: Seuil, 1976); and Philippe Burrin, *La France à l'heure allemande, 1940-1944* (Paris: Seuil, 1995);

[3] On this, see Charles-André Rosenthal's thesis, "L'intelligence démographique: sciences et politiques des populations en France (1937-1958)" (doctoral thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2002, to be published this year by Odile Jacob); and Andrés Reggiani, "Procreating France: The Politics of Demography, 1919-1945," *French Historical Studies* 2 (1996): 725-54.

[4] There are some conspicuous absences here, notably, Pierre-André Taguieff's *Vu de droite: jalons d'une analyse critique* (Paris: Descartes, 1994).

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