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**Sean Kennedy**, *Reconciling France against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xxii + 364 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7735-3205-2.

Review by Brian Jenkins, University of Leeds.

The right-wing nationalist formation led by Colonel François de La Rocque was widely regarded by the Left as the most dangerous of the "fascist" leagues. It was also the largest mass political movement in the history of the French Third Republic. In its original incarnation as the Croix de Feu, it enjoyed a spectacular growth surge after the right-wing Paris riots of February 6, 1934, and could credibly claim half-a-million members on the eve of its dissolution by Léon Blum's Popular Front government in July 1936. In its subsequent guise as the Parti Social Français (PSF), its membership in 1938-9 is widely estimated to have reached around one million, more than the combined total for the Socialist and Communist parties.

In a country where levels of political affiliation are traditionally low, especially on the Right, these figures were spectacular and unprecedented. It is curious, therefore, that this remarkable political phenomenon has not attracted greater interest on the part of historians. No scholarly book-length study of the Croix de Feu/PSF appeared in the fifty years that followed the movement's demise in 1945.[1] This was due in part to the untimely death in 1981 of Philippe Machefer, whose groundbreaking research had promised just such a book.[2] However, another factor has been the enduring impact of René Rémond's classic *La droite en France*, which first appeared in 1954 [3] and, in the words of one commentator, became virtually a "bible" for successive generations of French students.[4] In the half-dozen pages Rémond devotes to the Croix de Feu/PSF, he established what became the standard view. According to this, La Rocque was far too respectful of republican legality to be considered a threat to the regime. The paramilitarism of the Croix de Feu was (in Rémond's dismissive phrase) no more than "boy-scouting for grown-ups" and the movement's eventual conversion into a political party with an electoral vocation revealed its true colours: moderate and conservative.

Rémond's verdict on La Rocque was, of course, part and parcel of his wider argument that interwar France was largely impervious to 'fascism'. In his view, the French Right was shaped by indigenous political traditions which helped to immunise the country against this 'foreign' contagion. Fascist groups had little appeal and the larger leagues — Jeunesses Patriotes and, especially, the Croix de Feu — were essentially conservative nationalist movements in the Bonapartist mould. From the late 1970s onwards, this notion of France's 'immunity' to fascism would come under increasing attack, notably from Zeev Sternhell and Robert Soucy. However, Sternhell's focus was on the intellectual bases of fascist ideology in France and he showed little interest in any of the right-wing leagues.[5] As for Soucy, his attention was directed first to the 1920s and to the Jeunesses Patriotes in particular.[6] As a result, it was not until the early 1990s that Rémond's analysis of the CF/PSF was openly challenged.

In 1991, two articles appeared arguing that the Croix de Feu should be regarded as fascist, one by Robert Soucy and the other by William Irvine.[7] These were followed in 1995 by Soucy's book, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*, with its substantial central chapter on La Rocque's movement.[8] Henceforth the CF/PSF became a major bone of contention in the long-running debate about the significance of fascism in France. In 1996 came Jacques Nobécourt's exhaustive political biography of La Rocque, which tended to support a modified version of the Rémond thesis, along the lines also argued

by Pierre Milza and Michel Winock.[9] A year later Kevin Passmore published his regional study, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939*, which reached the nuanced conclusion that the paramilitary Croix de Feu was indeed fascist, but ceased to be so when it became the Parti Social Français.[10] Sean Kennedy's new work comes hard on the heels of Albert Kéchichian's 2006 study, which rejected the fascist tag, instead depicting La Rocque as an authoritarian traditionalist.[11]

After half-a-century of relative neglect, five books on La Rocque's movement have thus appeared in little more than ten years, along with numerous articles and essays. As we have seen, this upsurge of interest has mainly been driven by the question of whether or not the movement was fascist. Even Zeev Sternhell, who for twenty years had appeared indifferent to the CF/PSF, suddenly decided to throw his weight behind Soucy, Irvine and Passmore.[12] Thankfully, however, Sean Kennedy moves us beyond this increasingly stale debate. He largely appears to endorse the view expressed by Michel Dobry, namely that there are other more interesting and pertinent research questions to pose. As Kennedy himself puts it, his book "seeks to locate the Croix de Feu and the PSF on the spectrum of interwar European politics, but without becoming preoccupied with categorization. It concentrates on situating them in the political culture of interwar France and assessing their tactics in dealing with their foes on the left and competitors on the right" (p.10).

To a great extent Kennedy fulfils these aspirations. He does not entirely avoid the issue of classification, but neither does he allow it to loom tendentiously over the narrative. He endorses the view that fascism is part of a wider authoritarian-nationalist political family, and while he maintains that the CF/PSF "lacked the desire for ongoing radicalization that proved so important to Mussolini and especially Hitler" (p. 11), he also emphasises the "powerful affinities" between La Rocque's movement and its German and Italian counterparts. So although in the end he represents the movement as authoritarian-conservative rather than fascist, this does not lead him to underestimate the threat it posed to democracy. It is to be hoped that Kennedy's book will finally put an end to attempts to sanitize the CF/PSF, the claim that it merely sought a more presidential style of Republic within democratic norms, or that it was no more than a prefiguration of De Gaulle's post-war Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF).

Kennedy's convincing portrait of the movement is due not only to the quality of his scholarship but also to the methodology that shapes his approach. Rather than focusing obsessively on ideological and organisational lineage, he recognises the crucial importance of political context and conjuncture. The nature of the CF/PSF can only be discerned if full account is taken of the circumstances (both domestic and international) in which it operated, its competitive interaction with other political forces, the constraints of the institutional setting. By adopting this perspective, Kennedy is able to explain the tensions and ambiguities in La Rocque's discourse: the need to appeal to the broadest possible nationalist constituency while at the same time preserving a distinctive identity in relation to other far-right formations; the need to challenge the regime while at the same fending off the threat of dissolution. La Rocque's tracts and speeches, if taken at face value, seem full of contradictions, and rival historians have had little trouble finding quotations to support quite opposite interpretations. Kennedy's sensitivity to political realities allows him to reach a more balanced and rounded judgement, but his conclusions will no doubt be more palatable to the "revisionists" than to Rémond's successors.

In one particularly telling phrase, Kennedy reveals the fundamental flaw in the argument that the CF/PSF sought merely to "reform" the Third Republic. "What was at stake" he writes, "was the *ideological content* of the regime, rather than a *formalistic* debate about the merits of a monarchy over a republic" (p. 115, my italics). La Rocque was no more specific about his constitutional plans than Mussolini or Hitler had been, but there can be little doubt that his accession to office would have had far-reaching political implications. As Kennedy again puts it, the Croix de Feu's "abiding hostility to the parliamentary system and its belief that political pluralism should give way to a rigid conception of

national solidarity make it highly probable that La Rocque and his colleagues, given the opportunity, would have established an authoritarian regime. The supporters of the Popular Front were right to be worried.” (p. 83).

As for the traditional claim that the movement revealed its true moderate character when it became the PSF, Kennedy provides ample evidence to the contrary. If anything, he says, the PSF was more exclusionary, more explicit in its anti-semitism and xenophobia, than the Croix de Feu had been (p. 182). In its new guise it attracted defectors not only from the parliamentary Fédération Républicaine, but from rival leagues like Action Française and Jeunesses Patriotes, and later from Doriot’s Parti Populaire Français. The PSF had a less predominantly middle-class membership than the CF, enjoying more success in recruiting workers and peasants. All in all, Kennedy’s analysis suggests that the meteoric growth of the PSF should be attributed to the radicalisation of conservative opinion, and to the perception that La Rocque’s movement was the most effective opponent of the Popular Front, rather than to any notion that it had become more moderate. The new commitment to electioneering was instrumentalist rather than an endorsement of democracy. In Kennedy’s words, La Rocque “envisioned a surge onto the parliamentary scene akin to one of the league’s mass demonstrations” (p.76).

The degree of continuity between the CF and the PSF can only be assessed in the light of strategic constraints. As Kennedy points out, “in 1937 PSF orators often emphasized the extent to which the party was distinct from its forerunner, but by 1939, with the threat of dissolution having faded, La Rocque constantly reminded readers of *Le Petit Journal* that the PSF had to carry on the work of the Croix de Feu.” (p. 223). The picture that emerges of La Rocque as a skilful political strategist is one of the most striking and original features of this book. Far from being indecisive or unimaginative, he and his colleagues “advanced their agenda with cunning and ruthlessness” (p. 11), brilliantly exploiting the *six février* of 1934 to raise their profile, sustaining momentum in the face of a united Left and numerous hostile rivals on the Right, surviving the setback of dissolution in 1936 and continuing to build a mass movement despite numerous political and institutional obstacles.

The fact remains, however, that for all La Rocque’s strategic agility, his movement did not achieve power. While Kennedy gives due weight to traditional explanations (which depict France as less susceptible to far-right extremism for a variety of reasons), he also “draws attention to the role of contingency” (p. 14). Certainly what emerges throughout the book is the level of fear and animosity the movement aroused, not only among its left-wing opponents, but also, and more crucially, among its competitors on the Right who went to great lengths to discredit La Rocque through a sustained campaign of vilification. Similarly, when the PSF sought an electoral foothold after 1936, it was seriously hampered by a non-proportional electoral system which placed a premium on the formation of alliances. As the ‘newcomer’, the PSF found it difficult to negotiate favourable alliance terms with incumbent parties like the Fédération Républicaine, which were intent on marginalising this unwelcome challenger. Thus its performance in local elections and parliamentary by-elections often failed to reflect its massive membership. Kennedy closely examines the party’s electoral strategy and the difficulties it encountered in specific cases, concluding that if the parliamentary elections of 1940 had taken place, the PSF might reasonably have expected to gain seventy seats, less than is sometimes estimated, but still sufficient to give it significant leverage (p. 171).

However, as Kennedy recognises, alongside these efforts to turn “an anti-parliamentary movement into a vote-getting machine” (p. 172), La Rocque also sought to disseminate PSF values through society, to create a counter-culture which would prefigure an eventual *Etat Social Français*. Kennedy looks in some detail at the ideology and programme that underpins the PSF triptych of *Travail, Famille, Patrie*, before examining how this value-system was diffused. Building a mass movement was, of course, part of that process, and Kennedy devotes considerable space to the sociological and geographical analysis of PSF membership. But La Rocque also developed a range of specialised agencies designed to mobilise women and youth, to reach out into the workplace, to organise in the sphere of sport and leisure. In Kennedy’s

view the effectiveness of this enterprise cannot be doubted: “the movement popularised integral nationalism amongst a massive support base...as for the counter-society, there was hardly a sphere of the members’ everyday lives where it did not seek to establish a presence” (p. 224). Not surprisingly, Kennedy reaches the conclusion that, while La Rocque and the PSF were largely excluded from political influence under the Vichy regime, “they had nevertheless helped to establish the climate of opinion that made the *Etat Français* a possible outcome of catastrophe on the battlefield” (p.269).

This fine book is not without its flaws. The epilogue which compares La Rocque’s movement with De Gaulle’s RPF and Le Pen’s Front National is ill-advised in my view, because such transhistorical comparisons seem to contradict Kennedy’s previous insistence on the importance of historical context. On the other hand a more detailed comparison with parallel developments in Italy and Germany, especially at the level of political process, might well have proved instructive. For example, if “ongoing radicalisation” (p. 117) is indeed the hallmark of fascism, might this not be the result of political pressures and contingencies (driving authoritarian regimes to increasingly radical action) rather than an innate propensity? In which case, who can say in which direction a “La Rocque regime” might have been driven by circumstance?

However, these are minor quibbles. This is the book that needed to be written on the Croix de Feu, largely filling the gap that this reviewer identified in a recent historiographical essay.<sup>[13]</sup> While variously influenced by the approaches of Soucy, Passmore, Paxton, Dobry and others<sup>[14]</sup>, Kennedy has produced an original perspective based on years of painstaking scholarship. It decisively moves the agenda on, and deserves to be regarded as the definitive work on the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français for many years to come.

## NOTES

[1] Philippe Rudaux, *Les Croix de Feu et le PSF* (Paris: France Empire, 1967) is written by a former PSF member and is not a scholarly study.

[2] See for example Philippe Machefer, “L’Union des droites: le PSF et le Front de la Liberté, 1936-1937,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 57 (1970): 12-26; “Les Croix de Feu (1927-1936),” *L’Information historique*, 34 (1972): 28- 34; “Le Parti Social Français en 1936-1937,” *L’Information historique*, 34 (1972): 74-80.

[3] René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982). [First published as *La Droite en France de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris, 1954).]

[4] Pierre Birnbaum, “Sur un lapsus présidentiel,” *Le Monde*, Oct. 21, 1994.

[5] Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire 1885-1914: les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris: Seuil 1978) and *Ni droite ni gauche: l’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Seuil 1983). [New editions of both of the above were published by Fayard in 2000.]

[6] Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave, 1924-1933* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

[7] Robert Soucy, “French Fascism and the Croix de Feu: A Dissenting Interpretation,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (1991): 158-88; William Irvine, “Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the

Croix de Feu," *The Journal of Modern History*, 63/2 (1991): 271-95.

[8] Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See also "Fascism in France: Problematising the 'Immunity Thesis'," in B. Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), pp. 6- 104.

[9] Jacques Nobécourt, *Le colonel de la Rocque 1885-1946 ou les pièges du nationalisme chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); Pierre Milza, *Fascisme français: passé et présent* (Paris: Flammarion 1987); Michel Winock, "Retour sur le fascisme français: La Rocque et les Croix-de-Feu," *Vingtième Siècle*, 90 (Apr-Jun. 2006): 3-27.

[10] Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province 1928-39* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also "The Croix de Feu and Fascism: A Foreign Thesis Obstinate Maintained" in E.J. Arnold, ed., *The Development of the Radical Right in France: From Boulanger to Le Pen* (London: Macmillan, 2000): 100-18; "The Construction of Crisis in Interwar France" in B.Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005): 151-99.

[11] Albert Kéchichian, *Les Croix de Feu à l'âge des fascismes: Travail, Famille, Patrie* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2006).

[12] Zeev Sternhell, "Morphologie et historiographie du fascisme en France," préface à la troisième édition, *Ni droite ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), pp. 11-112.

[13] Brian Jenkins, "The Right-Wing Leagues and Electoral Politics in Interwar France," *History Compass*, 5 (2007): 1359-1381.

[14] Robert Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henri Dorgères's Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture, 1929-1939* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin Books, Allen Lane, 2004); Michel Dobry, "Février 1934 et la découverte de l'allergie de la Société française à la 'Révolution fasciste'," *Revue française de sociologie*, 30 (July-December 1989): 511-33; Michel Dobry, ed., *Le mythe de l'allergie française au fascisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

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