Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue des droits de l’homme, 1898-1945

Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:


Roundtable Editor: Joel Blatt
Reviewers: Sylvie Claveau, Bertram Gordon, Talbot Imlay, Norman Ingram, Wendy Perry, David L. Schalk
H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: Diane Labrosse

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Between Justice and Politics is written with verve and elegance. It is a seminal contribution to the history of the second half of the Third Republic. William Irvine is to be congratulated.

Irvine provides us with an iconoclastic corrective to a new hagiographical orthodoxy which seems set to emerge in French historical writing. Having ignored the Ligue des droits de l'homme for decades, at least insofar as a full-length monographic study is concerned, French historians have now discovered the Ligue. Much of this is due to Emmanuel Naquet’s doctoral thesis at Sciences Po, supervised by Serge Berstein and defended in 2005, which is shortly to be published in somewhat slimmed down form by Fayard. Interest in the Ligue also grew over the course of the 1990s because of the influence of the eminent historian, the late Madeleine Rebérioux, who was also the Ligue’s first woman president. That said, it was North American and non-French historians who were the first authors of major monograph and university studies of the Ligue.¹

Irvine’s main thesis is that the Ligue des droits de l’homme was destroyed by politics, that if it had limited itself purely to the many possible issues of human rights in Third Republic France, it would have been a smaller entity, but also ultimately a more successful one. Moreover, at the local level especially, it was weakened by venal politics. He gives many examples of the banal, indeed sometimes bizarre, cases that made their way to headquarters in Paris, ostensibly because they involved some question of human rights. He is quite right to see this sort of political patronage as one of the weaknesses of the Ligue by the time of the Great War. One of the best examples that I have found of this less than high-minded view of the Ligue’s mission, is the request by the Romorantin section in the Loir-et-Cher for help in defending two members accused of outrage à la pudeur. Essentially,

the Ligue’s legal advisors suggested that the two men in question might consider hiring their own lawyers.²

Thus, according to Irvine, if the Ligue had genuinely championed the cause of women’s suffrage or taken a more forthright position on the Moscow trials, to name but two bona fide human rights issues, one domestic and the other foreign, then it might have had less direct influence on French politics, but would have benefited from an immeasurably stronger moral position. In this he is undoubtedly correct. Third Republic France was far from lacking cases of human rights abuses which needed to be addressed.

Instead, the Ligue, almost from its inception, crossed the line into a defence of a certain type of left-wing politics. In its early years, this was often elided with the notion of the defence of the Republic against the clerical-military threat posed by the right wing. With the passage of time, the politics of the Ligue gradually came to centre more on foreign policy questions than perhaps on anything else. Of central importance was the question of peace and of pacifism.

How did this come about? From virtually the beginning of the First World War, a vocal, but important minority of ligueurs contested the moral validity of the Union sacrée, refusing to see in France’s war effort anything more than the lamentable result of the Franco-Russian Alliance which they detested. From 1915 onwards, the LDH was thus divided between those, like Victor Basch, who believed that France was fighting a just war, and those opposing him who believed that the Great War was being fought under false pretences. At the outset, these members of the nascent minority can hardly have been called “pacifists”, at least not in any meaningful sense of the word. What they claimed to be looking for was the truth – namely, the truth about the origins of the War. The group they formed to search for this truth, the Société d’études documentaires et critiques sur la guerre, quickly came to the conclusion that there was nothing “sacred” about the War and that France was being bled white for nothing. By 1917 at the very latest the battle-lines had been drawn for the entire interwar period.

The Ligue’s President, Ferdinand Buisson, attempted to anthropomorphise the French nation during the Great War. With a rhetorical flourish, he re-integrated the Ligue’s ideals into those of the nation, those of the collectivity, and made of the Ligue an integral part of the pre-war nationalist revival. According to Buisson, the cataclysm convulsing Europe was in no way a “sinister denial of the doctrines of liberty, of the hopes in progress and of the desire for peace that had always inspired the Ligue”. Far from it! Buisson was convinced that the Ligue had actually

² See Ligue headquarters to the Section de Romorantin, 7 May 1937, in Archives de la Ligue des droits de l’homme [ALDH], Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine [BDIC], F∆Rés 798/147.
contributed to this “magnificent élan affirming the national community”. After all, was it not the Ligue which for the past fifteen years had familiarised people with the notion that “an injustice done to the most humble amongst us cannot leave the Nation indifferent, and that no injustice done to the Nation can leave a single Frenchman unmoved”? Clearly, this was something different in Ligue discourse. The first part of Buisson’s phrase defined the very essence of the Ligue. The great struggle of the Dreyfus Affair had been to defend the rights of the individual over those of the State, and yet in the first year of the Great War, the Ligue’s president was arguing the case, in time of war, for the rights of the State. In many ways, this was a logical extension of the Ligue’s not-so-latent Jacobin Republicanism, but on another level it was a new departure – in tone, if not in substance.

Irvine spends a good part of his book (Chapters 6-8) dealing with the failings, moral and political, of the pacifist minority. It is perhaps too easy to castigate the minority as a whole for the clear and obvious failings of some of its more visible members. There is no excuse for the tawdry anti-Semitism of Challaye or of Emery, for example. Irvine does an excellent job of highlighting the ways in which, by the collapse of France, both had slid over the line from a principled pacifism to outright collaboration. In the case of the agrégé de philosophie, Challaye, one might usefully meditate on the words of Jean-Paul Sartre regarding Martin Heidegger: “C’est un homme qui n’était pas à la hauteur de sa philosophie”.

While it is clear that many members of the minority, by the time of the Second World War at least, were anti-Semitic and collaborationist, it is less clear why this evolution should have occurred. What was it that allowed a Challaye to become an anti-Semitic collaborator, but did not permit his erstwhile colleague in the minority, the architect of the historical dissent which underlay the new pacifism of the 1930s, Georges Michon, to abandon the side of right? It seems at times as if Irvine is content to let the political and moral position of a Challaye or an Emery speak for the entire minority, suggesting, perhaps unconsciously, that pacifism leads ineluctably to defeatism, anti-Semitism, Vichy, and collaboration. If one were to take this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, then one would argue that it was pacifism which killed the Ligue des droits de l’homme – in other words, a very specific sort of politics that ultimately stifled the Ligue’s original purpose of defending human rights.

Such a view fails to take into account, however, the enormous impact of the Great War on the men and women who eventually became the pacifist minority. If


Ferdinand Buisson could anthropomorphise the French nation in terms which glorified the Union sacrée, so, equally, could the nascent minority in terms which vilified the slaughter of 1.35 million Frenchmen and untold millions of other Europeans in the “war to end all wars”. If the Ligue (quite appropriately) interested itself in the campaign to rehabilitate the “fusillés pour l’exemple”, surely there was nothing wrong with the minority’s search for the “truth” about the origins of a conflict which cost so much French blood. Irvine rather unfortunately seems to take this aspect of the minority’s worldview far less seriously than its execrable positions during the Second World War. What seems clear is that until perhaps the mid-thirties, the minority was right on a whole range of issues, including its critique of the Union sacrée, women’s suffrage, and the Moscow Purge Trials.

The Ligue des droits de l’homme was dead or dying long before the Second World War broke out. Irvine situates the beginning of the end in the mid-thirties, shortly after the effects of the Stavisky scandal and the Herriot affair wrought their nefarious influence on the Ligue. Certainly, by the time of the 1937 Tours Congress, the Ligue was already on the ropes. When the Nazis arrived in the spring of 1940, they expected to find a dynamic LDH which they would have to extirpate; instead they found a Ligue which in the case of many sections had already expired. One could plausibly infer, therefore, that it was not the war experience that killed the Ligue, nor the collaborationist activities at Vichy or in Paris of some of its high-profile members, but rather that the Ligue’s demise antedates by several years the coming of the Second World War.

How to explain this? Once again, a facile view might be that the Ligue was destroyed by pacifism.

This simplistic analysis holds, in the words of Jean Defrasne, that pacifism is simply a political “perversion”: “it is easily assimilated to defeatism, to cowardice, to treason”. Another explanation could be the Sudhir Hazareesingh thesis that the war/peace debate in France has been completely deformed by the presence of the Communist party. This would explain, although certainly not excuse, some of the more aberrant political choices made by Ligue pacifists during the late 1930s who were increasingly anti-Communist in their outlook. Perhaps more helpful is Martin Ceadel’s thesis, based on Weber and the sociology of religion, that pacifism represents an “ethic of ultimate ends”, that it becomes, in essence, a faith rather than a political doctrine as such. There is much to commend this thesis, but it seems

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5 See the reports of the Gestapo interrogations of 171 sections in occupied France in the autumn of 1940 in BDIC/FARés 834.


largely inapplicable to the French case in which the religious “inspiration” (to use a Ceadelian idea again) for pacifism was largely absent.

I would argue that the LDH was not destroyed by pacifism, but rather by its inability to deal with the Great War and its legacy. The historical debates within the Ligue on the Union sacrée, war origins and war guilt all coalesced to provide the intellectual bases for the historical dissent upon which the emergent new-style pacifism of the late 1920s and early 1930s was formed. The increasingly strong conviction that the Great War had been fought under false pretences fuelled the minority attacks on the Ligue’s leadership which they accused of having blindly colluded in the slaughter of millions of Frenchmen and Europeans. What the minority seemed unable to recognise was that 1933 had changed everything. Hitler was not, pace A.J.P. Taylor, just another German statesman. But it was possible to believe in all good faith that he was until the invasion of the rump Czechoslovakia in March 1939. By then it was too late.

What is interesting in Irvine’s analysis of the pacifists within the Ligue des droits de l’homme is how the political choices of the Second World War years seem to have cut across the old-style/new-style pacifist divide. Théodore Ruyssen, the president of the Association de la Paix par le droit, a quintessential old-style pacifist and a long-time ligueur, succumbed to the same temptations to publish in the collaborationist press as did Gerin, Emery, and Challaye, all of them new-style, integral pacifists. Even in the case of the latter three, however, distinctions have to be made. In a small book written in 1937, Gerin declared that if he were Spanish, he would be fighting in the civil war alongside the Republicans. Right up until his untimely death in 1957, he proclaimed his innocence against the conviction for collaboration by the courts of the épuration. Challaye, for all his anti-Semitism and collaborationism, was defended (as Irvine points out) by Michel Alexandre, a Jew who had been interned by the Vichy authorities, but whose pacifism stretched all the way back to the Great War and the Société d’études documentaires et critiques sur la guerre.

How to explain these apparently bizarre chassés-croisés politiques? Did “la paix prime le droit”, as Henri Jeanson had already suggested in 1936? The only

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plausible explanation must be the heritage of the Great War. Sandi Cooper sees the pre-World War One French peace movement as imbued with the notion that international peace was, or ought to be, a human right.12 For the pacifist minority in the Ligue, the bloodletting of the 1914-18 war defined their entire approach to politics right on down to the next war. Their politics was in turn based on an historical understanding of war origins and war responsibilities which completely rejected the “official” Pierre Renouvin/Camille Bloch thesis of unilateral German responsibility shared by so much of the Ligue’s leadership. This had profound implications for the internal life of the Ligue. As Mathias Morhardt, the pre-1914 Secretary-General of the Ligue, wrote in a 1936 letter to his friend and fellow minoritaire, Georges Demartial, “We are those, in effect, who suffer more from an injustice committed by France than from an injustice committed against her.”13


13 Mathias Morhardt to Georges Demartial, Capbreton (Landes), 19 March 1936 in BDIC/ALDH/FARes 798/7.