



***Between Justice and Politics:  
The Ligue des droits de l'homme, 1898-1945***  
**Roundtable Review**

Reviewed Works:

**William D. Irvine.** *Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue des droits de l'homme, 1898-1945.* Stanford University Press, 2007. 288 pp., bibliography and index. ISBN-13: 978-0-80475-317-3. \$60.00 (cloth).

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**Introduction by Joel Blatt, University of Connecticut Humanities Institute**

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William D. Irvine's *Between Justice and Politics: the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, 1898-1945* offers a sharply revisionist, liberal critique of what is usually regarded as the foremost liberal institution of the Third French Republic, the French League of the Rights of Man. The author deepens our understanding of the functioning of The Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH), tensions within the interwar French Left, and the increasingly desperate last years of Marianne (the Third French Republic). He provides insights into the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy and of foreign policy on domestic politics. In attempting to explain how this "quintessential" liberal institution spawned significant members who became anti-Semitic and collaborated during World War II, Bill Irvine has written a provocative work inviting discussion.

Irvine's exceptional breadth of knowledge of the Third Republic as well as a penchant to question accepted historical interpretations both inform *Between Justice and Politics*. His two previous books explored the conservative right and the far Right of the French political spectrum.<sup>1</sup> He has also questioned the widespread assertion that France generally avoided the Fascist temptation. Instead, Irvine argued that the Croix de Feu was a fascist movement; therefore, given its large membership, France experienced a significant Fascism.<sup>2</sup> Another essay vigorously maintained that France was far more united from 1938-1940 (unlike 1934-1937) than historians have previously assumed.<sup>3</sup>

In *Between Justice and Politics* Irvine challenges the widely accepted image of the League of the Rights of man in a manner that sparks discussion. The League of the Rights of Man was founded in 1898 in defense of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain on the French Army General Staff falsely accused of treason. The organization came to be regarded as the primary defender of individual liberties in Twentieth Century France, even influencing the establishment of the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920 in the United States (1). To be sure, Irvine includes Chapter 5 which focuses on the generally accepted primary function of the League. He observes, "The energy and persistence with which the League pursued these cases (of injustice) is striking" (121). He notes "...the tenacity of the League, the intellectual rigor it deployed, and the moderately satisfying outcome of its efforts" in defending cases brought against soldiers during World War I (126). He follows the role of a local member of the League, Marie-Françoise Bosser, and of League lawyers, in defending

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<sup>1</sup> *French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation of France in the 1930s* (1979) and *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered: Royalism, Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right in France* (1989).

<sup>2</sup> William D. Irvine, "Fascism in France: the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu," *Journal of Modern History*, 63 (1991) 271-295. Robert Soucy has made the same point about the Croix de Feu in a number of works including *French Fascism, The Second Wave* (New Haven, Yale, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> William Irvine, "Domestic Politics and the Fall of France in 1940," In Joel Blatt, Editor, *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn, 1998), pp. 85-99; originally published in *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 22, 1 (Winter 1996).

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Guillaume Seznec against murder charges and finds in the case “two conflicting but equally admirable sides to the League: passion for justice...and a hard-nosed mastery of the judicial system...” (130). He writes of “the one thing it incontestably did so well-the defense of victims of injustice” (216). Nevertheless, Irvine’s paramount thesis is that politics overwhelmed the LDH’s commitment to individual freedom. He rejects as “in most senses...utterly untrue” the LDH’s claim: “Ici on ne fait pas de la politique” (“Here one does not do politics”), or that the League was above politics (20). The LDH should have limited itself, he bluntly asserts, to a more focused defense of individual rights and civil liberties in accord with its inspiration: The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789.

Instead, the LDH expanded its areas of concern to include the decisive political issues of its time. After tracing the emergence, functioning and social composition of the LDH, Irvine turns to a sustained discussion of the consequences of the League’s political “immersion.” It grew enormously in membership, peaking at 180,000 during the 1930s. It became a major political force on the Left, with its “center of gravity” (44) at the juncture between the Radical and Socialist Parties, and it aspired “to be a coordinating agency of the parties of the Left” (49). The numbers of political leaders of the interwar years who joined the LDH, served on its Central Committee and became cabinet ministers and even prime ministers were extraordinary; that its membership included names such as Laval, Déat, Doumergue, is startling. The majority of ministers in Léon Blum’s Popular Front Cabinet of 1936 were members of the League. As such, the League became deeply enmeshed in the practical workings, patronage, and corruption of the interwar Third Republic.

Irvine asserts that the LDH advocated “liberty with all its risks,” but balked at implementing the lofty goal in practice (96). Among examples provided by the author of serious gaps between the League’s professed values and its practice were its lip service to, but failure to support, the emancipation of women (83-91), and its hostility to “freedom of association for religious congregations.” Both practices originated in the League’s anti-Clericalism; in the case of women, the league feared emancipated women would vote conservative. The League also compromised its support for free speech and a free press when it perceived or rationalized that “the Republic was in danger” (109-110). One of Irvine’s central themes is that the LDH often resorted to the Jacobin rhetoric of 1793. Leaguers warned of the dangers of excessive liberalism. Irvine writes, “For too many...‘la république en danger’ was an intellectually lazy shortcut serving...to spare them the possibly inconvenient political consequences of living up to their professed beliefs” (110). One of the worst violations of its founding principles was the LDH’s general whitewashing of Stalin’s Moscow Trials of the mid-1930s and failure to recognize them as murders. In this instance the League majority wanted to maintain the Popular Front in France with Communist Party participation, and also hoped to include the Soviet Union in a coalition against Hitler (173-179).

Another gap between words and deeds emerged with reference to corruption, particularly the Stavisky Affair of 1934. Serge Stavisky floated large swindling schemes by purchasing political and journalistic influence. When his massive financial deceit finally collapsed, despite the LDH’s long condemnation of corruption, according to Irvine, “...Virtually all of

the deputies and ministers incriminated...were members of the League” (although Irvine adds that “all but two” were cleared eventually of criminal charges and “for the most part guilty only of injudicious conduct and an appalling lack of discrimination in the company they kept”) (63). Subsequently, after the tumultuous (mainly right wing) riot of February 6, 1934, the LDH participated in organizing resistance against the rightist surge as it had in the time of Dreyfus. Irvine comments, though, “But unlike in the days of the Dreyfus affair, this time the Right had a case: The regime *was* corrupt, and the corruption extended into the League itself” (63).

Among the most important consequences of the politicization of the LDH was the degree to which political issues divided the organization. From World War I through Vichy, a minority emerged and clashes between it and the majority escalated and weakened the LDH. World War I generated serious discord within the League. The majority supported the war and regarded Germany as generally responsible for it while the minority strongly opposed the war and rejected German war guilt. The majority regarded the Versailles Treaty as basically legitimate; therefore, Germany should pay for postwar reconstruction. The minority condemned the Versailles Treaty and postwar structure of peace as illegitimate. The League’s minority espoused two dominant themes between the wars: integral pacifism and anticapitalism. The latter led the minority to become bitter critics of corruption in the Third Republic, parliamentary practices, and the press, regarding the Republic as dominated by money. At the same time, the minority condemned French colonialism while the majority muted its responses given the League membership of a number of France’s most prominent colonial administrators. At first, the minority’s anti-capitalism even carried it towards considerable sympathy for the Soviet Union while the League majority condemned Communist abuses of individual rights, but this situation turned around during the mid-1930s. At that time Stalin shifted to his popular front policy of seeking anti-German alliances with a corollary of moderating support for social revolution. From the minority’s perspective, with the Soviet Union now favoring war and damping down revolution, the minority turned against Communism. While the majority in the League supported the Loyalist popular front government in Spain and opposed Blum’s declaration of French non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War (Irvine says Blum “really had no choice” (170) given political polarization at home, the danger of civil war in France, and British opposition), the minority opposed involvement in Spain that could escalate into a wider war. The minority condemned the Moscow trials for the travesty of justice they were (George Pioch--“...the Dreyfus Affair a hundred times over”-- 176), while the majority (at best) adopted a low profile and at worst swallowed the Soviet line. As Hitler destroyed the post-World War I balance of power and raced towards war, the League’s Central Committee condemned the Munich Treaty that handed Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland to Germany, while the minority favored it. In part because some of the most important leaders of the League’s majority were Jewish, for example Victor Basch and Emile Kahn, a number of the minority, in their increasingly isolated integral pacifism and under Hitler’s incessant drumbeat, blamed Jews for the approach of war. Their anti-Semitism escalated into a crescendo under Vichy.

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During World War II more of the LDH's leaders joined the Resistance than collaborated. Among the resisters, some died; for example, in January 1944 the Milice arrested and shot perhaps the foremost leader of the LDH, Victor Basch, and his wife, both more than eighty years of age, while Odette Renée Bloch, one of the few prominent women on the Central Committee, perished at Auschwitz. "What was surprising," Irvine writes, "was the number (albeit a rather smaller number) of former League leaders who were actively involved in the collaboration" (195). He ascribes the apparent aberration to "continuities" between the views of the minority during the 1930s and "collaborationist Leaguers" during World War II, including integral pacifism, blaming the Jews for war, and intense disenchantment with the Third Republic. The author adds, "What the Vichy experience so strikingly reveals is the degree to which people who fundamentally shared little in common could have for so long remained in the same organization by virtue of sharing the same demagogic discourse" (218).

Irvine appends an "Epilogue" comparing and contrasting the LDH and the American Civil Liberties Union, finding similarities and differences. He reiterates his preference for a smaller LDH devoted solely to the defense of individual rights, which might have fought for the vote for women, favored equal treatment for religious congregations, defended press freedom, and adopted an "honorable" rather than a "disgraceful" response to the Moscow Trials (216). Irvine states, "...Judicial murders --whether committed by Jacobins, Stalin, or Hitler--were all overt violations of the rights of man, did not justify one another, and ought to be condemned out of hand" (218). He concludes:

Both the League and its American counterpart would prove, at times, incapable of abiding by the liberal principles to which they subscribed. It is important to acknowledge, however, that those very liberal principles are notoriously demanding, precisely because there is no guarantee that they will yield a desirable (or 'progressive') outcome... 'Liberty with all its risks' is an easy slogan in the abstract, but in concrete terms the risks can at times seem overwhelming. The enduring image of the League is not, therefore, only the various ways in which it failed to live up to its mandate. Equally worth remembering is the little schoolteacher who rode a bus for 600 miles to passionately plead the cause of an innocent man (224).

First and foremost, *Between Politics and Justice* adds substantially to what we know about the League of the Right of Man. Few will have realized before reading this book the extent of the League's influence in interwar French politics. Its networks reached to the highest levels of government. Bill Irvine's knowledge of the Third Republic is so extensive that one of the rewards of the book is the range of information readers will absorb as the author establishes and frames the historical contexts for the contentious issues considered by the LDH. He writes with great verve; you can hear his voice throughout. His tone is often ironic, but usually does not fall into cynicism. The book presents sufficiently the arguments of the minority so that readers can follow their reasoning, rationales, and rationalizations, especially important given the outrageous positions many of them espoused blaming the primary victims, the Jews, for causing the Second World War, and making Vichy and Hitler over in their own self images. The book provides another illustration of the colossal impact of World War I on France's interwar history since the minority's long journey to Vichy began in revulsion against the slaughter of the Great War. Bill Irvine does not present a

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complete history of the LDH, but his book will be essential reading for historians who attempt wider histories in the future.

The book also makes a substantial contribution to the history of the Left during the Third Republic. Irvine helps explain interactions within the Left, connections between its components, how the Left and even to an extent the whole Third Republic functioned (or malfunctioned). Divisions within the League over World War I and its aftermath, which spawned strong pacifist currents within the LDH including the minority's more extreme integral pacifism, reflected similar phenomena within the wider Left and influenced French foreign policy making. At the same time, foreign policy dramatically impacted domestic politics. Discord within the League over World War I, the postwar peace, the Communist Revolution in Russia, and how best to confront Hitler's rapid ascent mirrored divisions within the wider Left. Although not the primary intention of this book, Irvine also offers additional illustrations of the degree of political polarization during Marianne's last years.

Among the highest praise for a provocative work is serious discussion, and this book invites response. There are problematical areas. Although Irvine notes the LDH's intense labors to correct violations of individual rights, does his emphasis on the League's politics lead to a completely balanced assessment of the LDH? The title of the book, *Between Justice and Politics*, is apt up to a point, but the book leans more towards the latter than the former. Ultimately, the "center of gravity" of the book falls closer to the minority than the majority, but is that fully indicative of the League? Was the LDH a beneficial institution? This book's answer sounds ambivalent.

The whole issue of the League's politics warrants additional debate. When Italian political émigrés to France during this period got into trouble with French authorities, they frequently approached the League for succor. It was precisely the League's political contacts who offered potential recourse. Irvine refers to this himself, but does not pursue it; as an aside, the book might have considered more the League's responses to immigration.

If the founding Dreyfusards and the League majority could have responded to *Between Justice and Politics*, they might have defined their primary mandate as both the preservation and construction of the Republic, the struggle against individual injustices but also to strengthen the Republic. They would almost certainly have called themselves republicans rather than liberals. They might also have noted the political dimensions even of the Dreyfus Affair and The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Although the Dreyfus Affair represented one of the purest examples in history of the defense of individual rights against power, the affair certainly became enmeshed in politics. Perhaps even more so, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 was a political document, the product of political compromise. I regard the Declaration as one of the great landmarks in the history of liberty, but one does not have to stretch too far to see tensions in it between the individual and the community. In addition, there were momentous struggles during the Revolution concerning whether the Declaration's tenets would be applied to women, slaves in the French Empire, and others.

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This book raises issues of contemporary political relevance too. In the post-9/11 world where real threats of terrorism exist and governments assert the primacy of the executive, even placing the executive above the law, and where torture is on the table as an issue, how do politicians who believe in individual freedoms and civil liberties respond? With “the republic in danger” for a long time, if compromise is necessary, how far should compromise go?

Bill Irvine’s references to the Third Republic as corrupt also demand discussion. Granted, the Third Republic and its parliament experienced a measure of corruption. Granted, the press was venal; the wide variety of opinion in interwar French newspapers emerged from their large numbers whose survival (and profits) were aided by funds from the French and foreign governments as well as from a bevy of domestic interests. Still, the Right exaggerated the Stavisky Affair for its own political purposes. Stavisky bought the services of a small number of politicians, administrators, newspaper owners, and lawyers, but most of the prominent members of the LDH were not involved. Paul Jankowski, the author of an excellent book on the Stavisky Affair, writes that it occurred “in a Republic hardly more corrupt than previous regimes in its own country, and drastically less so than most contemporary ones elsewhere.”<sup>4</sup> If the Third Republic was corrupt, one may ask compared to what: Fascist Italy? Stalin’s Soviet Union? Hitler’s Germany? Great Britain? The United States of the 1920s? Was the Third Republic corrupt?

In concluding these observations, it is important to note that Bill Irvine’s criticisms of the LDH are informed by liberal principles. He suggests that basic freedoms and civil liberties apply to one’s opponents too, and wants to apply them to everyone. Another liberal value at work in his book is the idea that means and ends should be in harmony. He advocates the practice of liberal precepts even in difficult times. At a moment when liberal principles are widely under attack, when liberalism’s survival is problematical, and when candidates for President in The United States shy away from the appellation “liberal,” if basic freedoms and civil liberties are to survive in dangerous times, it will be because individuals value liberty so much that they are willing to join in the struggle to preserve it.

Our panelists bring expertise either directly on the Ligue des Droits de l’ Homme or in related areas. I thank the panelists for their participation. I would also like to thank Diane Labrosse who originated the panel and served as the Co-Editor of it. Our panel includes the following scholars:

**Cylvie Claveau**, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, has written a PhD Dissertation focusing on those left aside by the Ligue des Droits de l’ Homme, *L’ Autre dans les “Cahiers des Droits de l’ Homme,” 1920-1940. Une sélection universaliste de l’ altérité à la Ligue des Droits de l’ Homme et du Citoyen*, McGill University, 2000.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Jankowski, *Stavisky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 2002), p. 265; also see the book review by Joel Blatt of Jankowski, *Stavisky*, *Journal of Modern History*, 76, 2 (June 2004), pp. 457-459.

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**Bertram M. Gordon**, Mills College, has published important works on Vichy France. See Bertram M. Gordon, *Collaboration in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1980); Gordon, Editor, *Historical Dictionary of World War II France: The Occupation, Vichy, and the Resistance, 1938-1946* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1998).

**Talbot Imlay**, Université Laval, Québec, has published an insightful book comparing French and British preparation for World War II, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003).

**Norman Ingram**, Concordia University, Montreal, is the foremost historian of interwar French pacifism. See his book, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939* (Oxford: Oxford, 1991).

**Wendy Perry**, University of Virginia, has written a PhD Dissertation on the LDH, *Remembering Dreyfus: The Ligue des Droits de l' Homme and the Making of the Modern French Human Rights Movement*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998. Following over 300 pages of analysis, the Dissertation includes an extraordinary prosopographical appendix, which includes close to 600 pages of biographies of 204 Central Committee members of the LDH from 1898-1939.

**David L. Schalk**, Kenan Professor of History, Emeritus, Vassar College, has written on (and lived) the topic of engagement; for example, see *The Spectrum of Political Engagement: Mounier, Benda, Nizan, Brasillach, Sartre* (Princeton: Princeton, 1979) and *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (New York and Oxford, 1991).

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