



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

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Author's Response by William D. Irvine, York University

Given how thoroughly generous all of the reviews in this forum are, it would be pointless, not to say churlish, to issue a "rebuttal." Instead, I will treat these careful reflections, coming from several generations of distinguished French historians in the spirit that inspired them, as an invitation for a broader discussion of the complex history of modern France.

I found Talbot Imlay's contribution to be extremely thoughtful and most challenging. I am inclined to think that what underlies his review is the suspicion that I was a tad bit too quick to mount my moral horse and castigate the Ligue for not fully abiding by my own twenty-first century standards. (Although he most certainly did not put it quite that way!) For my own part I am inclined to think that I held the Ligue and its leaders to the standards they had articulated. Imlay wonders, for example, if it is not asking a bit much of the kind of people who joined the Ligue that they "remain detached from politics." A good question and one to which the answer is probably: yes. Still, it is worth noting that it was the leaders of the Ligue themselves, and not I, who incessantly decreed that the LDH should stay out of politics. Nothing like that happened of course. But the reason why Ligue leaders were so fond of declaring, for example, that the LDH was not on the right or the left but on the ceiling, above and detached from the partisan fray, was the reason they themselves so frequently gave: a non partisan Ligue would have the necessary accrued moral authority to pursued more effectively questions of justice. This was what led me to assert that a non-political Ligue, or at least one more detached from politics, might have been more willing to abide by its principles on matters like the rights of women and congregationists and the question freedom of the press. Imlay quite rightly counters that this is a counter-factual and therefore unprovable hypothesis. As of course is his own assertion that such a Ligue, necessarily much smaller, might not have had the political clout to make much difference on those kinds of issues. He could well be right, a point I concede (albeit obliquely) on p. 216. But all we can say for sure is that the LDH was very large and very well connected politically and did little for the cause of women, congregationists and a free press.

Imlay also suggests that I take a rather benign view of the threats to the Republic, most notably with respect to the allegedly "apolitical" officer corps. In fact I did not use that word (p. 231, fn 23) but what I did say is probably not quite good enough. I ought to have said that some fraction of the officer corps was indeed very political. But the point is that their politics were not always anti-republican. One can certainly point to reactionaries like Castelnau or Weygand, but also to impeccably republican generals like Sarrail, Gamelin and even, if Léon Blum in 1936 were to be believed, Pétain. To put the point another way, for every colonel or general frequenting the salons of monarchists, there were rather more pacing the ante-chambers of Radical politicians, either out of sincere conviction or a sharp eye for the main chance. But I wholeheartedly agree with Imlay that what counts when assessing the past is not merely objective reality as determined from the comfortable perch of a twenty-first century historian, but the very genuine subjective perception of that reality by contemporary historical actors. I did make some allowances for this (pp. 72-73,

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109) but perhaps not enough. This might be explained by the fact that I seem to be incurably wedded to the belief that the old Third Republic was, *_pace_* its critics and the events of 1940, both a very good regime and a pretty stable one too. Here I seem, at long last, to be on the same page as my good friend Joel Blatt. Although I appreciate that he was making a slightly different point, I cannot but agree that the Third Republic appears to be a shabby regime if, but also only if, one does not compare it to any other contemporary regime. So perhaps I went a bit far in suggesting that the frequent invocation of “*la république en danger*” served merely as a convenient pretext, permitting the Ligue to overlook inconvenient principles. But if so, what then do we make of the repeated (not to say pious) statements by Ligue leaders to the effect that the mission of the Ligue was to pursue justice no matter where that might lead even if the result would be comfort to their enemies?

I also agree that memories of the republic’s foundational decades carried over into the twentieth century and that many republicans persisted in seeing any criticism, especially if coming from the Right, as a threat to the regime. Of course, when criticism came from the Left – maybe not so much. Instructive in this regard are Léon Emery’s remarks at the Ligue’s 1935 congress to the effect that he could see no fundamental difference between bourgeois democracies and fascist regimes. It is very much to the point that his remarks were greeted by a standing ovation.

Given how all-persuasive issues of foreign policy had become by the 1930s, in marked contrast to the years that saw the foundation of the LDH, Imlay is surely right to suggest that it is not very realistic to argue that the Ligue ought to have declared that foreign policy “is simply not our issue.” Granted, it would be hard to find much in the 1789 *_Declaration of the Rights of Man_* that would have given the Ligue much guidance on this matter. But its leaders could, and did, declare that they could, and should, be guided by the “spirit” of that declaration. Fair enough. But it is then not entirely unreasonable to suggest that any position on foreign policy informed by the “spirit” of the Declaration ought to have been devoid (as was manifestly not the case) of flattering references to, and exculpatory statements about, either of the two most murderous dictatorships of the era.

Vichy looms large in my book as it does in the commentaries. In truth, when I began this project I had not anticipated that Vichy would be of much importance and effectively stumbled upon this dimension of the Ligue’s history. Fairly early on I came across a pamphlet dealing with the Ligue’s internal divisions in the mid-1930s, written by prominent members of the Minority. One of the signatories was Félicien Challaye, a name that then meant nothing to me. So I thumbed through the *fichiers* in the old BN (which gives an idea as to the gestation period of this project) and discovered his appalling wartime anti-Semitic novel. I repeated the exercise with other signatories and sometimes got comparable results. Soon I was scouring the pages of the collaborationist press, tracking down ex-Liguers gone bad. And the obvious questions this raised was: why were these people, of all people, writing the things they were. Or, better: what on earth had people like this been doing in the LDH in the first place. I still think those are good

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questions. But, as several commentators suggested, answering that question does not quite explain the process by which Liguers, often prominent ones, could come to embrace both Vichy and collaboration with Nazi Germany. I think they are right and this might explain a certain uneasiness I detect about my over-all treatment of this question

To be sure the book has the elements of an explanation and at its core is the whole question of pacifism, or more accurately a certain kind of pacifism driven by a relentless reductionist logic. If one believed that Germany was no more (and possibly less) responsible for World War I than any other nation, then it would follow that the Treaty of Versailles, which did rather assume German guilt, was, at best, devoid of moral legitimacy and, at worst, a certain recipe for another murderous go around. If one believed that Hitler came to power in large measure because of Versailles, then it followed that France (and everyone else) had only itself to blame if it now had to confront this particular dictator. If one believed that Hitler's demands on the international community were essentially limited to getting rid of Versailles and its illegitimate provisions, it followed that accommodating those demands was a reasonable course of action – especially since the alternative seemed to be war. Just as, if one believed that the root causes of war were economic, it followed that closer economic cooperation with Germany was a far better way to ensure the preservation of the peace than collective security which sounded suspiciously like a new label for what amounted to a new version of prewar entangling alliances. Since the Third Republic did not, in the end, heed this doctrine, it followed that its defeat and destruction were not altogether a bad thing and that the regime that replaced it, one that at long last was openly collaborating with France's neighbor across the Rhine, was not without its redeeming features. If one believed that even a willingness to contemplate war with Germany was morally odious then perhaps the anti-Semitism escaping from more than a few lips, before and after 1940, could be excused as no more than the understandable frustration at the spectacle of some Jews, including some erstwhile pacifists on the Ligue's Central Committee, who were contemplating precisely that and for no better reason than their obsession with the fate of a few co-religionists across the Rhine. Toss in a certain penchant in the 1930s for viperous attacks on bourgeois democracy, couched in Jacobin, socialist or at times even fascist terms, and suddenly Vichy, or at any rate the early Vichy, antithesis of bourgeois democracy though it was, did not seem all that bad.

I could not however (and did not) erect any of this into a grand theory and David Schalk, Bert Gordon and Norman Ingram are not wrong to suggest that this part of my argument is somewhat under-developed. This is so because there is a fair bit that the aforementioned model cannot explain. And I fully agree with Imlay that choices made in Vichy France often owed less to pre-war views and values than to the traumatic shock of defeat in 1940. I said as much with respect to Théodore Ruysen and to some degree René Château. But this line of reasoning does not help much with Challaye or Emery, whose wartime outpourings did not add much, in tone or substance, to the vituperative lines they penned in 1938. But, as Ingram so aptly reminds us, relentless though the logic of some pre-war pacifists could be, it was not always relentless enough to take them into collaboration. Michel Alexandre did not go there, for pretty obvious reasons. George Michon, a born again Jacobin if ever there

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was one, was on the same page as his pal Delaisi in the 1930s but not at all, to the latter's evident distress, after 1940. Elie Reynier's fulminations in 1938 make him sound like a Challaye clone, something he manifestly was not under Vichy. And at times it gets hard to tell the players without a program. Better minds than mine will be needed to get a handle on Eugène Frot, simultaneously sitting on the Vichy National Council and writing articles defending the parliamentary regime in the pages of an overtly collaborationist newspaper! As for that greatest of all enigmas, Gaston Bergery, this is a question that only Diane Labrosse will be able to handle.

Given how long Wendy Perry and I have been teasing one another about our divergent views of the Ligue, I looked forward to her review and was not disappointed. In light of her unparalleled knowledge, her spirited questions must be taken seriously. Was it really necessary, she asks, to approach the Ligue with quite so much sarcasm and irony, to be quite so relentlessly cynical and acerbic? Probably not, although a more measured tone might have required a personality transplant. To some degree the tone reflects the fact that I was reacting (and arguably over-reacting) to the version canonique (a wonderful phrase I owe to Claveau Claveau) currently prevailing in Paris. I think though that the reason for what appears to be my cynicism is more fundamental. As Claveau usefully reminds us, in any large organization there is often a gulf separating the leaders from the rank and file. I was trying, at least to some degree, to view the Ligue through the optic of its militants, not all of whom shared the lofty visions of the members of the Central committee listed by Perry.

Why the cursory treatment of the Dreyfus affair which, as Perry correctly points out, was the guiding star for future generations of Liguers? Reasons of economy, to be sure, because that story is well known. But I was also trying to suggest that, moral compass though the Dreyfus Affair might have been, it was a pretty crude navigational instrument for a Ligue faced with the far more complex issues of the following decades. (I am reminded here of H. Stuart Hughes' observations about Julien Benda and how the formative experience of his youth, the Dreyfus Affair, an essentially black and white issue, really did not prepare him for the shades of grey of the 1930s.)

But why only a couple of paragraphs on the courageous men and women of the LDH who fought and sometimes died in the resistance and endless pages on the rather smaller number who rallied to Vichy? A very good question. Here I was guided by the old American newspaper axiom to the effect that when dog bites man it is not a story whereas when man bites dog it makes page one. This is so despite the fact that man rarely bites dog but also because of that very fact. We have a pretty good idea of why a dog would bite a man but no idea at all of why a man would possibly bite a dog. By extension, that a group of men and women who had belonged to a Ligue founded to defend a Jewish captain and which identified itself as the conscience of democracy would oppose the Vichy regime which was the negation of democracy and thoroughly anti-Semitic is to their eternal credit but not really a very surprising finding. But that men (I found no women) who belonged to that same organization could openly support the Vichy regime, embrace its collaborationist

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policies and engage in savage attacks on Jews is a genuine puzzle which deserves an extended examination.

Claveau raises the capital question of the degree to which the distressing views expressed by the high profile members of the Minority were shared by the rank and file. Alas, it is difficult to speak to that question with any confidence. Yes it is significant that 40% of the delegates at the 1935 congress rallied to the thesis of the Minority but only up to a point. In the first place (and despite the best efforts of the Ligue), delegates at congresses did not necessarily reflect the views of the membership at large. Moreover it is entirely possible that many of the delegates who voted for Emery's motion did so less because they subscribed to everything therein than because they were irritated by the antics of Edouard Herriot and his supporters on the Central Committee. Support for the Minority had largely collapsed by the 1937 congress although this might have reflected little more than a desire to make platonic gestures in favor of a Republican Spain which Emory and company seemed to have abandoned in the cause of peace. Overall Ligue membership declined dramatically in the last years of the Republic but there are a host of possible reasons for this, none of which tell us very much about how the average militant stood with respect to the battles of principle going on at the leadership level.

Implicit (and at times explicit) in all of these reviews are some important general questions about the Ligue and also about the political culture of the Third Republic. They can probably be best addressed if we get beyond my periodic sermons about the Ligue and politics. One good question is: why did so many people join the Ligue. Put another way, did most really join because they thought the Ligue to be a cheap political party, a patronage machine or a low cost form of personal insurance? The answer is: probably not. To be sure it was Ligue leaders themselves who harbored these suspicions about unworthy motives; I simply confirmed those suspicions. But there is no telling why most of the 180,000 members joined and no way of knowing whether the worthy gentleman who thought the Ligue should protect his right to fish without a license was more typical than the indefatigable Mme. Bosser devoting her energies to getting an innocent man off Devil's Island. I suspect though, that both were a-typical of Ligue militants for most of whom the Ligue was a small town political club devoted to discussing and advocating progressive politics. I quite agree with Imlay that in this regard the Ligue was a *Rassemblement Populaire avant la lettre* or, probably more accurately, a coordinating agency for assorted Cartels or Blocs of the Left, from 1902 to 1938. Certainly this would be one way to read the otherwise odd statement by the president of one of the Ligue's largest federations to the effect that the Ligue never cared about the political orientation of its members providing that they were "red." Nor was this necessarily a bad thing. Although I did not say so in the book, I take it as an article of faith that having the citizens of a small town actively discussing the political issues of the day – regardless, in my view, of their exact political orientation – is healthy for, and arguably essential to the survival of, a vibrant democracy which I persist in thinking Third Republic France was. Indeed I am prepared to extend that charitable reading to include those sections whose members were there primarily for patronage and pork barrel. It could well be argued that when the little guy (and they mostly

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were guys) feels he is getting the shaft from an impersonal state apparatus or even being denied positions or promotions to which he is entitled, it augurs better for the survival of a democratic regime that he can find an organization that might plead his case or at least level the playing field, than that he be reduced to a permanent state of impotent rage.

Finally, while no one disputes that historians should present their actors warts and all, in the hands of someone like Irvine, don't the warts take on a life of their own thereby unfairly diminishing the admirable work of admirable men and women? I'm not so sure. Although nobody seems to have noticed, even in the case of people about whom I was most judgmental, I leaned over backwards (in the case of Challaye, very very backwards) to find some redeeming qualities. I did not feel it necessary to lean over quite as far with the many admirable people cited by Perry and felt I could expose their flaws and inconsistencies precisely because they were, at the end of the day, genuinely admirable individuals whose historical reputation would withstand whatever mild drubbing I delivered. So let me end this comment the way I ended my book. The hero of the book (if there indeed is one) is certainly the indomitable Marie-Françoise Bosser and she is not made less so by my periodic critical comments.

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