

H-France Salon
Volume 6 (2014), Issue 10, #1

Comment on Kevin Passmore, "L'historiographie du fascisme en France"

by
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Kevin Passmore has written extensively on all aspects of the French right, fascist or otherwise. His grasp of the subject is both judicious and comprehensive, and it is no exaggeration to assert that he currently has the status once enjoyed by the *doyen* of the history of the French right, René Rémond. His reflections on the historiography of French fascism are therefore very welcome. He covers the debate thoroughly and expertly, posing all the right questions and suggesting important answers. In fact about the only question he does not pose is the following: why are we still debating this topic?

I raise this point because 60 years ago René Rémond rather trenchantly observed that the whole debate about French fascism revolved around the question of the Croix de Feu/Parti Social Français. This was so because unless the Croix de Feu/PSF could be shown to be fascist, French fascism did not amount to very much. The second place contender in the fascist sweepstakes, Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français, was many times smaller than the PSF. Moreover most of the reasons traditionally adduced for kicking the Croix de Feu/PSF out of the fascist chapel applied equally to the PPF. So one would be left with a handful of small and unimportant little groupuscules and a few intellectuals whose impact on the French political scene was marginal. And Rémond was very certain that the Croix de Feu/PSF was not fascist. It was a Catholic conservative formation. A tad bit muscular to be sure which led him to his celebrated (and benign) formulation of "boy scouting for adults." It was also rather more populist (and therefore many times more popular) than most conservative movements. It could hardly fit into two of the classic families of the French right, Legitimism or Orleanism. But he did believe that it more or less belonged in the third of his famous triptych, Bonapartism.¹

Now it is the case that for the better part of the next thirty-five years Rémond's assessment was, the odd Marxist dissent notwithstanding, in its broad outlines accepted by French historians as well as, and to the point, non-French historians. It was only in the early 1990s that historians, Robert Soucy and myself being the most outspoken examples, began to challenge this consensus and to argue that the Croix de Feu/PSF was in fact fascist.² To be sure neither of us claimed that the Croix de Feu/PSF was an exact replica of its Italian and German counterparts (which in any case were hardly exact replicas of one another). In fact, early on Soucy spelled out the many ways in which what he believed to be French fascists had to be distinguished from their foreign counterparts.³ So there are varieties of fascisms, and, we both argued, the Croix de Feu/PSF was one of them. At this point there were the makings of a genuine debate. Twenty years on, however, it must be asked, what impact did the Soucy/Irvine school have on the rest of the profession? And the answer would appear to be: not much.

In the early 1990s there was very little in the way of detailed scholarly literature on the Croix de Feu/PSF. That would change with the books of Jacques Nobécourt and Sean Kennedy. Nobécourt's massive and thoroughly researched biography, *Le Colonel de La Rocque* (1996), at well over 1000 pages, was far longer than any study yet produced of rather more significant figures such as Léon Blum, Edouard Daladier, Edouard Herriot, or Paul Reynaud.⁴ Nobécourt was dedicated to rescuing his subject from every accusation ever directed his way and, above all, against the charge of having been fascist. His book (oddly missing from Passmore's article) flatly declares La Rocque's movement to have been in essence a kind of Gaullism *avant la lettre*. Kennedy's *Reconciling France Against Democracy* was the first really thorough and authoritative study of the Croix de Feu/PSF. He dismissed out of hand the benign

reading of Nobécourt, insisting that the Croix de Feu/PSF represented an authoritarian and anti-democratic nationalism. But, and couched in careful and judicious terms, he was categorical that the Croix de Feu/PSF was not fascist in any meaningful sense of the word.⁵ Now it is true that Kennedy managed to ruffle a few feathers in Paris, witness the characteristically cranky review of Jean-Paul Thomas in the pages of *Vingtième Siècle*.⁶ But whatever was troubling Thomas it was manifestly not Kennedy's position on the non-fascist quality of the Croix de Feu/PSF. Passmore, who has written extensively on the Croix de Feu/PSF and at times seemed to hold a position somewhere between the early 90s revisionists and Parisian orthodoxy, now describes Kennedy's work as being "incontournable," which suggests that he is more or less in agreement.⁷ Moreover standard generic works on fascism, such as Stanley Payne's *A History of Fascism* and Robert Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism* appear, and independently of Nobécourt and Kennedy, to have arrived at the same conclusion.⁸ Payne and Paxton are very different with respect to ideology, methodology and knowledge of France. But with respect to France, their message would appear to be identical: kindly ignore the rantings of Soucy and myself. So in balance, the brief eruptions of the early 1990s notwithstanding we would appear, at least with question of French fascism, more or less back where we started with Rémond 60 years ago.

Why then this ongoing fascination with French fascism? I suspect that one reason is that the political actors of the 1930s were fascinated, to not say obsessed, by the issue and for compelling reasons. It is easy enough 80 years on to show that the 6 February 1934 riots were not part of an attempted fascist coup (not that fascists ever took power by a direct frontal assault on the state). But contemporaries did not have the luxury of this kind of hind sight. 6 February happened a scant year after Hitler's seizure of power and during the same month as the destruction of Austrian democracy. Whatever one made of the extreme circumspection of the Croix de Feu on that night, its exponential growth in the months and years after could be of little comfort. All that said, though, a case can be made that the anti-fascist fulminations of the contemporary French left were not entirely innocent nor without some cold political calculations. Stressing the fascist menace certainly did afford both the Socialists and Communists a graceful exit from their self-defeating sectarian strategies. In the case of the Socialists this meant their unwillingness to enter governments with the Radicals; for the Communists it meant their unwillingness to cooperate with just about anyone. Radicals could embrace the anti-fascist campaign in the hopes that this might obscure the elementary fact that what provoked 6 February was the Stavisky scandal for which they were roughly 100% responsible.

Passmore does make the important point that the debate about French fascism is not and never has been along national lines. Soucy and I did take issue with most French historians but also, and in equal measure, with non-French historians as well: Eugen Weber and Paul Jankowski in the United States, Philippe Burrin in Switzerland, and, above all, Zeev Sternhell in Israel. What was at stake was not so much national as ideological. Put another way the issue was less whether France was somehow allergic to fascism as to whether conservatism was. The dissenters of the early 1990s saw fascism as part of a massive counter attack on the forces of political and social progress, be they Communists, Socialists or even reformist liberals. Fascists added a leftist rhetoric and a degree of popular mobilization that the traditional right could rarely muster. For all that they subscribed to the same cause. Passmore seem to think that underlying that position is a kind of subliminal Marxism. This seems a bit of a stretch since neither Soucy nor Irvine claim, or could plausibly claim, to be Marxist.

The other camp insisted that fascism was, almost by definition, both radical and revolutionary, aiming at a dramatic upheaval of European society. From that position it followed that any movement whose DNA was even remotely conservative was by definition not fascist. Even Sternhell, convinced though he is that France was awash with fascists in the inter-war years, seems adamant that that there was an inseparable gulf between all conservatives and all fascists.⁹ One suspects, for example, that the reason most historians are more or less comfortable with describing the PPF, whose actual program so closely resembled that of the PSF, as fascist is because its leader, Doriot, as well as a number of his associates

were ex-Communists.¹⁰ And it is certainly true that one would be hard pressed to find many ex-Communists in the ranks of the PSF. That precisely the same thing could be said for the Nazi party does not seem to matter much.

It is true that most historians of fascism (Sternhell might be something of an outlier here) are prepared to acknowledge the frequent dalliances between conservatives and fascists. But they insist that these were, at most, tactical accommodations designed by both sides to be very, very temporary. The mere fact that Jacques Doriot was prepared to enter into an alliance with the traditional conservative right in the Front de la liberté (an accommodation that the PSF rejected out of hand) in no way tarnishes his fascist credentials.

Passmore also gives us a careful discussion of the current methodological wars in Paris, largely inspired by the writings of Michel Dobry. It is not entirely clear, however, just what all of this earnest discourse on method brings to the debate on French fascism. As Passmore perceptively notes, Soucy and Thomas, both apparently guilty of the sin of essentialism, nonetheless manage to come to radically different assessments of the Croix de Feu/PSF.

Finally a word should be said about the immunity thesis. Despite having come in for a bit of drubbing of late, it is not without its merits. Even those who persist in believing that many inter-war Frenchmen were not immune from the fascist temptation would be forced to admit that France very largely was. By this I mean that whatever we call them – fascists or, as Passmore prefers, the extreme right – these folks had very little chance of getting into power. France was simply a very different country from, say, either Italy or Germany. Many, if not quite all, of the preconditions for the triumph of fascism elsewhere were absent from France. Third Republic France, for all its faults, was a mature liberal democracy with several generations under its belt – something that could hardly be said for Weimar Germany and still less liberal Italy. The French forces of order had a very different sense of their responsibilities than was the case elsewhere.⁶ February is instructive. Demoralized though they might have been by the dismissal of Chiappe, when faced by the street fighting men, the response of the French police was to shoot a number of them. Contrast that with their Italian counterparts whose frequent response was to sit on their hands. Timing also matters. A critical pre-condition for Fascist and Nazi success was the crippling division of the left. But by the time their French counterparts started to get some traction they faced a unified left – or at least one sufficiently unified to agree on strenuous measures against what they perceived (or claimed) to be the fascist menace. It would now appear to be the received wisdom that when the PSF began playing the parliamentary game it was implicitly abandoning whatever vestigial fascist remnants there had been in the Croix de Feu (an analytical framework that no one seems to want to apply to either the Nazis or Fascists who, it is to the point, elected significantly more people into parliament than the PSF ever did). But whatever persuaded the PSF to recognize that their swash buckling days were by and large behind them, it is also the case that the vigilant Popular Front had made it very clear that they had little choice in the matter.

¹ René Rémond, *Les Droites en France*, 3rd edition (Paris: Aubier Montagne, 1982), 195-220.

² William Irvine, "Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu," *Journal of Modern History* 63: 2 (1991): 271-295; and Robert Soucy, "French Fascism and the Croix de Feu: A Dissenting Interpretation," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26:1 (1991): 159-188.

³ Robert Soucy, "The Nature of Fascism in France," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1:1 (1966): 27-55.

⁴ Jacques Nobécourt, *Le colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946, ou les pièges du nationalisme chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

⁵ Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

⁶ Jean-Paul Thomas, "Review of Kennedy, *Reconciling France against Democracy, Vingtième siècle*," no. 95 (July-September 2007), 279-280.

⁷ Kevin Passmore, "L'historiographie du « fascisme » en France," *French Historical Studies* 37:3 (2014): 489.

⁸ See Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 294-295; and Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), pp. 68-71.

⁹ See, for example, the epilogue to Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France*, 3rd edition (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2000).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the relationship between the PSF and PPF see Laurent Kestel, *La conversion politique: Doriot, le PPF et la question du fascisme français* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d'Agir, 2012), pp. 164-169.