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Ivan Ermakoff, *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdications*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. xxxiii+ 402 pp. Appendices, bibliography, index. \$95.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8223-4143-7; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-4164-2.

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This review must start with the disclaimer that I am not a political scientist or sociologist, and even less so an authority on game theory. Therefore, it is possible that the author will receive something less than a complete or balanced evaluation of his work from this historian. My assessment of *Ruling Oneself Out* is essentially an attempt to determine to what extent the work may add to our understanding of the case studies that are the object of the author's inquiry—the collapse of Germany's Weimar Republic and the end of France's Third Republic.

Viewed from an historian's perspective, the sections in which the author provides a detailed narrative of the events of March 1933 in Germany and France in July 1940 are excellent. Although there are no surprise revelations, Ivan Ermakoff has sifted through a very substantial amount of primary documentation and a fairly reasonable (if limited) selection of historical and political science secondary literature to offer a thoughtful and convincing reconstruction of the events he describes. To my knowledge the final capitulation or "political suicide" of the Weimar Center Party and the French National Assembly has not been described in such rich detail elsewhere. Consequently, it is unfortunate that the author, more concerned with positing a generic theory of collective behavior in moments of extreme stress, chose not to develop more comparative conclusions about the two cases. As he noted in his preface: "The framework is comparative, but the method is not" (p. xx). Was this possibly because such an effort might have produced as many differences as similarities in the two cases, when the author's primary object was to produce a theory that would apply to any number of other historical events? His theory of collective alignment, he writes, "has no time and space. It stands on its own, and needs no empirical referent to set forth its claims and counterclaims" (p. xix). Ermakoff lists, for example, the Italian passage of the "Acerbo bill" in April 1923, the collapse of the Czech Republic in January 1948, and the granting of full powers to de Gaulle in July 1958, marking the end of the Fourth Republic, as well as the early modern example of the appointment of William, Prince of Orange, as the Dutch Stadholder in July 1672, as cases that might presumably have been used to demonstrate equally well the processes his theory seeks to explain (p. xxi).

To the extent that its nuances have not escaped me, I understand the author's theory to assert that in moments such as these, particularly crucial to an ultimate action (in this case parliamentary votes) are the actions of prominent personalities whose stances sway the choices made by the undecided, confused, or those individuals of lesser status in the political system. At first glance this seems a logical and convincing proposition, especially in view of the numerous examples Ermakoff cites of witnesses who, in explaining their votes, referred to the influence of the heads of the Chamber of Deputies (Edouard Herriot) and Senate (Jules Jeanneney) in France and the chief leaders of the Center Party in Germany (Heinrich Brüning and Ludwig Kaas). However, while agreeing that in general the author may have captured the behavioral dynamics of these crucial moments, my chief reservation about this work is that perhaps the single most important figure in the French case, Marshal Philippe Pétain, could be

described as “missing in action” from this account. While most historians would agree with Ermakoff that Pierre Laval was the prime mover in the *promotion* of the campaign at Vichy for constitutional revision in the early days of July, as Yves Durand reminded us long ago, “All of Vichy was indeed ‘Pétain’s Vichy.’”[1] In this particular case, Pétain’s words, not those of Laval, Herriot or Jeanneney, carried by far the most weight in the circumstances that produced the Vichy Regime. As Henri Michel, the author of one of the most penetrating French studies of France in 1940, and Geoffrey Warner, one of Laval’s early biographers, emphasized, especially crucial was a letter that Pétain gave to Laval on July 7, 1940, specifying that Laval was speaking for him.[2] These words made the outcome of the final vote on July 10 all but inevitable.

Overall, I found the author’s description of the German case more compelling and generally in line with the existing secondary literature. The combination of factors offered, for example in Chapter eight, “The Production of Consent,” to explain the ultimate outcome in Germany is well reasoned and convincing. Here, and elsewhere, the author displays a grasp of the complexity of historical causation, and marshals his arguments successfully. This said, he can seem at times overly categorical, blind to nuance, and somewhat uncharitable, as when he concludes: “Miscalculation was voluntary blindness and wishful thinking” (p. 94). He argues that the Center Party Delegation knew, they had to know because of prior Nazi statements and actions, what was going to happen in Germany as a result of the Enabling Act. Like the actors in the game theory exposition concerning “Constitutional Abdication” at the end of chapter two, these parliamentarians should logically have chosen opposition rather than abdication and subservience. Here, I think that the author might have benefitted from the distinction between knowing and believing that Walter Laqueur proposed in his classic account, *The Terrible Secret*, in which he sought to explain why, during the Second World War, so many people, including future victims of the Holocaust, who had valid information about the mass murder of the Jews, failed to believe that this evidence was true.[3] The implication in both the German and the French cases that the parliamentarians *knew* what was to follow their vote is problematic at best.

This issue illustrates one case where the author perhaps missed out on a fruitful example of comparative analysis which might have featured the behind the scenes roles of two important military heroes, Paul von Hindenburg, the German President, and Marshal Pétain in France. It is not that the author fails always to note significant comparative perspectives, as when, for example, he emphasizes the German political tradition of unanimous party votes to help explain the unanimous vote for the Enabling Act following a party caucus; and contrasts that to the much less disciplined tradition in French republican politics and split voting within parties on the issue of full powers for Pétain. However, in my opinion, he understates significantly how important, especially in the French case, the general reverence for Pétain was in July 1940, and similarly, the extent to which members of the Center Party were counting on Von Hindenburg to restrain Hitler after the passage in March 1933 of the Enabling Act. It seems curious that in a book which ultimately highlights the roles of key personalities, a small number of French and German parliamentarians, whose views at the crucial moment allegedly swayed the undecided into supporting the Enabling Act and the grant of full powers to Pétain, the two most imminent personalities involved are largely left on the sidelines of this account.

Finally, issues of organization and writing style at times detract from the effectiveness of the author’s presentation. This is not always the case. As mentioned earlier, much of the narrative description is well written and compelling, and the author often ends his chapters with excellent short summaries and succinct conclusions. See, for example, the conclusion to chapter nine, “Vacillations, Convergence” (pp. 303-304). However, elsewhere, he complicates the reader’s understanding of key arguments by referring him or her to a later chapter or an appendix for resolution of the issue under discussion (p. 201), or through the use of dense prose. The latter is usually in the context of theoretical discussions, as in this example: “To the extent that group members differ with regard to the amount of uncertainty they experience, we should also expect them to differ with regard to their propensity to fall into the fallacy of the local—an undue reliance on the availability heuristic” (pp. 199-200).

Overall, *Ruling Oneself Out* is an interesting, and at times challenging, account that attempts to blend in an innovative manner the disciplines of traditional narrative history with the insights of political science theory. Historians of the period under discussion will find few significant new revelations, but they will be impressed with the careful articulation of the author's theory of the dynamics of political decision-making in moments of crisis. At one point, in explaining his decision to use ideal-types as representative of traditional accounts of the events he is examining, Professor Ermakoff postulates a distinction between traditional historical explanations and his method: "Historical accounts are multivocal. They convey the complexity of events by invoking multiple causal factors, and they describe this causal web by retracing the actors' points of view, actions, and beliefs. Types, by contrast, are intended to provide blueprints and expositional clarity" (p. 60). Ultimately, the reader may debate whether or not the author's achievement in this regard was "clarity" or merely "simplicity."

NOTES

[1] Yves Durand, *Vichy 1940-1944* (Paris: Bordas, 1972), p. 50.

[2] Henri Michel, *Vichy Année 40*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1966), p. 65, and Geoffrey Warner, *Pierre Laval and the Eclipse of France 1931-1945*, (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 203, 210-211.

[3] Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret*, (New York: Penguin Books), 1980.

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