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Brian Jenkins, Ed., *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right*. Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books, 2005. vii + 232 pp. Bibliography, index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 1-571-8153-76.

Review by Paul Jankowski, Brandeis University.

“If you’re incapable of managing your household and keeping it clean, get a man, Marianne, get a man!” So Gustave Hervé, revolutionary anti-militarist turned authoritarian nationalist, exclaimed in his newspaper, *La Victoire*, in February 1934, amid scandal and sedition. Exemplar of the union, said to define fascism in its purest, quintessentially French form, between renegade Marxists and dissident nationalists? Or, less dramatically, one of right-wing disillusionment with parliamentary disorder? Or of some sort of politically sublimated gender anxiety, yet another after-effect of the Great War?

This useful collection of essays, ably assembled with an introduction and conclusion by the editor, Brian Jenkins, resumes the old argument about whether France was allergic or immune to the fascisms that appeared in every other European country between the wars. Only a decade after Vichy, René Rémond dismissed the self-styled fascist “movements” in France as pale facsimiles of the original foreign article, ephemeral pretenders amid the three enduring dynasties of the French right. The Legitimists, Orleanists, and Bonapartists occupied that space, now in retreat, now on the attack. Anti-parliamentary or not, they formed the right that lent continuity to the political history of the country and kept out the raucous acolytes of an alien cult, fascism.

Subsequent modifications to Rémond’s thesis, by Pierre Milza or Philippe Burrin, for example, still retain its core tenet, the intrinsic “un-Frenchness” of one of the great ideological aberrations of the twentieth century. Its supporters usually attribute the felicitous Gallic immunity to distinctly Gallic circumstances—the implantation of liberal Republican traditions, hardly the norm elsewhere on the Continent; victory in the Great War, yielding as well a territorially satisfied nation; the softer, though longer, impact of the economic crisis; the more modest dimensions of the Communist “threat.” Another, less flattering explanation, advanced by the diagnosticians of the “stalemate society” first formulated more than forty years ago by Stanley Hoffmann, points to a salutary stagnation. The Third Republic, made of a stable compromise between grande and petite bourgeoisie, between great and small property-owners, kept revolutionary change at bay by its own Republican culture and its own more modest pace of industrialization. It managed to contain socialism and placate a potentially mutinous working class, depriving fascist movements of the breeding ground they found in more troubled lands beyond the hexagon. Once again, French exceptionalism is the order of the day.

Wrongly so, most of the authors in this volume argue. In essays re-printed here or published for the first time, they either insist upon the importance of an indigenous French fascism, or challenge the conceptual premises of Rémond, Hoffmann, and their many followers. One of the first revisionists, Robert Soucy, recapitulates his distinguished work and argues again that perhaps one-sixth of the French population, mostly right wing and conservative, fell prey to the fascist temptation. One of the most polemical, Zeev Sternhell, re-affirms the permanence of an “organic, tribal nationalism” that emerged in the late nineteenth century as a fusion of right-wing nationalists and left-wing heretics, re-surfaced with new vigor in the crisis of the 1930s, and seized power with the *divine surprise* of 1940. Both Soucy and Sternhell have long-held positions to defend. Other contributors, content to assail the inadequacies of the immunity and of the stalemate theses, decline to uphold any correct understanding of “French fascism.” Michel Dobry, for example, deplors inferring a political cause from a political

outcome, the absence of fascism from its failure to take power. But the methodological criticism can cut both ways. Dobry's perfectly valid argument ironically inverts one of the charges leveled at Sternhell's *Ni droite ni gauche*—that he makes of anyone who was a fascist in 1940, a Marcel Déat, for example, a pre-fascist in 1930. Methodology aside, the notion of a “stalemate society” seems to reside at the heart of the matter. In the longest contribution, Kevin Passmore attempts to dismantle its assumptions and demonstrate its inadequacies. But he also acknowledges how widely runs its writ, how even a Sternhell resorts to it to explain why fascism did not come to power before 1940.

No one, at least, is arguing that France in the 1930s was a fascist country. But there the consensus stops. How much fascism was there in France? And who precisely was fascist? Sooner or later, with orthodoxy happily knocked off its pedestal, most revisionists take to revising each other. Soucy stresses the right-wing dimensions of fascism, Sternhell the left-wing; others avoid the question altogether. Robert Paxton deems the Croix de Feu conservative and authoritarian, much like the Vichy regime that adopted the slogan of their successor party, the Parti Social Français; Sternhell and Soucy deem the Croix de Feu fascist, as well as the PSF, as well as the Vichy regime itself. Sternhell is upholding the admissibility of earlier arguments and the appositeness of earlier definitions. “In what way was [Pétain's Vichy], let alone the Vichy of the Milice, different from the fascist ideology analyzed in *Neither Right nor Left*?” Paxton, more dispassionately, proposes a way out of the wrangling, a constructive way to differentiate fascisms according to phase and to function, more fully set out in *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

Too many different arguments, in short, crowd this slim volume for any coherent message to emerge. French fascism has attracted enough attention anyway, and the central argument is probably insoluble. The value of *France in the Era of Fascism* lies in the wider questions about interwar France and comparative fascism that it raises, and it left this reviewer musing more about the Third Republic than about French “fascism”—reflecting, especially, that the “stalemate society” is not in the least incompatible with the presence of fascist elements in the country. It explains only why the system was able to keep them out. Or even bring them in. This Republic had brought successive lefts into the fold, Radical, Socialist, Communist; why could it not now absorb the far right, as the Croix de Feu shed their paramilitary trappings and turned into the Parti Social Français? Perhaps no uniquely French political ideals explained such ecumenical virtues; perhaps the newcomers were entering a house of mediocrity, resting on tacit accommodations, paltry compromises, the politics of services rendered and loyalty returned; but enter it they did. And when the Third Republic collapsed, it was German Nazism, not French fascism that brought it down; and if the fascists then enjoyed a minute in the sun—but mostly they hated Vichy—it was because the Third Republic was no longer there to rein them in. Was France in the 1930s immune to fascism? Certainly not. But she resisted it nonetheless.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Brian Jenkins, “Introduction”
- Zeev Sternhell, “Morphology of Fascism in France”
- Robert Soucy, “Fascism in France: Problematising the Immunity Thesis”
- Robert O. Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism”
- Michel Dobry, “February 1934 and the Discovery of French Society's Allergy to the ‘Fascist revolution’”
- Kevin Passmore, “The Construction of Crisis in Interwar France”
- Brian Jenkins, “Conclusion: Beyond the ‘Fascism Debate’”

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