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William D. Irvine, *Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, 1898-1945*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 253 pp. Bibliography and Index. \$60.00 (cl). ISBN: 978-0-8047-5317-3.

Review by J. P. Daughton, Stanford University.

Few modern French institutions are more iconic than the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme. Founded in 1898 by a group of Parisian intellectuals troubled by the conviction of Alfred Dreyfus, the League quickly became the largest civil liberties organization in the world. Its conduct at critical junctures in the history of the Third Republic has achieved near mythical status. Reminiscences of the League's activities, many of them written by members, have traditionally highlighted its role in clearing Dreyfus, its campaign against arbitrary military justice during the First World War, its struggles against fascism, and its victimization during the occupation, which included the murder of prominent leaguers at the hands of Vichy thugs. As a *lieu de mémoire*, particularly of the republican Left, the League has come to symbolize an unflagging quest for justice and a resolute commitment to democratic values in the face of tyranny.

William D. Irvine's rich and complex new book sets out to scrutinize this "heroic version" (p. 2) of the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme. *Between Justice and Politics* is the first major study of the League to appear in eighty years, in large part because the organization's archives, stolen first by the Nazis and subsequently confiscated by the Soviets, were only returned to the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine at Nanterre in 2001. Irvine's book draws on extensive research in these archives to assess some of the more prominent myths about the organization, particularly its self-professed role as "the conscience of democracy." The author investigates what he considers the central challenge faced by the League: "its attempt to balance its dedication to civil liberties and its commitment to left-wing politics" (p. 4). The result is both a critical examination of one of the most important and lasting institutions of the Third Republic as well as a provocative evaluation of the French Left more generally in the troubled decades leading up to Vichy.

Irvine makes clear from the outset that his findings will force a reassessment of the League in the first half of the twentieth century. He asserts that, while some historians have turned a critical eye on the League, they regularly gloss over some of the more striking--and shameful--details of its history. Few studies reveal, for example, that some surprising names can be found in the League's membership files, including Gaston Doumergue, Marcel Déat, and Pierre Laval. Ignored, too, has been the considerable number of leaguers implicated in the Stavisky and other political "affairs" of the 1920s and '30s. But Irvine's aim is to uncover more than a few dark details. Indeed, what he is most interested in understanding is the relative ease with which some of the most committed leaguers abandoned and even betrayed the organization's core principles for purely political gain.

The first three chapters tell the story of the League's remarkable growth in the first years of the twentieth century as well as the attendant conflicts over the organization's identity. From the moment of its founding, the League grew exponentially, counting 180,000 dues-paying members in 2400 sections nationwide at its height in the early 1930s. While early members included centrists, the League's essential political values ensured that it naturally appealed to those on the Left. Its sheer size made it a formidable political power; at its height, the League's membership was likely greater than all the parties of the Left combined. And leaguers included some of the most prominent politicians, civil

administrators, and intellectuals of the day. Nonetheless, divisions within the League abounded. The workers, teachers, and civil servants of the provincial rank and file often felt snubbed by the upper-class Parisian intellectuals, deputies, and senators who made up the organization's Central Committee. And, even among its leaders, there was little consensus on the League's *raison d'être*. In the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, the League retooled itself from a one-issue movement into the great defender of civil liberties, inspired by the "spirit" of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man. But, in practice, members' opinions of what kinds of injustices were covered by this "spirit" ran the gamut from the regulation of bicycle lights to the payment of public debt.

By examining publications, debates, and other records, Irvine portrays a League bogged down by indifference, pettiness, internecine bickering, and political maneuvering. He argues that the League's stated commitment to remaining above the political fray was, as he puts it, "utterly untrue" (p. 20). Its positions on issues clearly betrayed certain left-wing political philosophies, such as anticlericalism, pacifism, and anticapitalism. More importantly, with its extensive social and political networks, the League became for many members a springboard to elected office. After the First World War, the Central Committee even organized a parliamentary group whose "unavowed" purpose was "to ensure a greater degree of concordance between the League's stated principles and the voting patterns of its parliamentary members" (p. 59). Thus "thoroughly immersed" (p. 78) in politics at all levels, the League played into the hands of right-wing critics who denounced its secret dictatorship of the Republic. It was an unfounded accusation, Irvine notes, but the League's intimate involvement in republican politics was undeniable.

For Irvine, the League's political aspirations are key factors, for its goals and tactics in the legislative arena often contrasted sharply with the organization's principles, greatly undermining the work it was founded to do. The League's most scrupulous leaders, such as Victor Basch, insisted that the organization defended civil liberties regardless of the risks involved, even when doing so served its political enemies. But *Between Justice and Politics* documents a long list of cases that prove otherwise. Throughout the interwar years, for example, the League made no real effort to win women's suffrage, to defend religious congregations' freedom of association, or to defend the freedom of the press (at least when right-wing journalists were involved), despite the obvious relevance to civil liberties. On such issues, leaguers regularly adopted double standards or put forward "transparently specious" (p. 82) arguments, defending their unprincipled position by adopting the rhetoric of "*la république en danger*." But, Irvine asserts, this was a slippery slope; the 1930s brought constant danger to the Republic, and many leaguers began "saying things that would have horrified the League's founders" (p. 107).

While the first half of *Between Justice and Politics* is largely thematic, the second is more expressly narrative, covering the tumultuous years from 1914 to Vichy and focusing more on foreign policy. The book makes an important addition to scholarship on the destabilizing impact of the First World War on French politics, particularly on the Left. One of the most divisive issues for the League was the origins--and therefore the legacy--of the war itself, and Irvine skillfully portrays how one's perception of the causes and resolution of the war shaped political views in sometimes surprising ways. Well into the 1930s, for example, an outspoken minority of mainly socialist "ultrapacifists" (p. 146) defended Nazism by pointing to the injustice of the Versailles Treaty. A militant desire for peace, combined with mounting hostility towards the ineffectualness of the Republic, even drove some prominent minority leaguers to insist that Nazi anti-Semitism, while unjustified, was little more than an "irritating detail" (p. 149). As news of concentration camps came to light, Irvine writes, "the defense of the rights of man did not necessarily entail hostility to Nazi Germany" (p. 189).

The events of February 6, 1934 shook the League and led to greater unity, manifested by its instrumental role in forming the Rassemblement Populaire. Radicals, Socialists, and Communists had little difficulty agreeing on general principles, such as fighting fascism, preserving the peace, and reform of the power held by the *puissances d'argent*. But divisions persisted. The victory of the Popular Front

essentially put the League in power. But, Irvine argues, its principles were in no less jeopardy than before. While leaguers had long decried the purging of left-wing civil servants at the hands of conservative regimes, they now openly questioned the loyalty of right-wing bureaucrats and judges. One federation even organized tribunals of Public Safety to seek out, try, and punish suspect civil employees. Despite a belief in freedom of assembly, leaguers supported outlawing right-wing antiparliamentary organizations, though none spoke out against the “flagrantly subversive language” (p. 167) of the Communists. During the Popular Front, Irvine demonstrates, Jacobin rhetoric easily replaced the language of civil liberties, and few in the League seemed to mind.

As war loomed, foreign policy proved too much for the League. It was divided on intervention in the Spanish Civil War, as many decried Léon Blum’s policy for being weak on fascism. Stalin’s notoriously corrupt show trials were equally troublesome: if the League condemned them outright it risked criticizing France’s anti-fascist ally and ostracizing the Communist contingent of the Popular Front. Pacifists and anti-Bolshevik socialists in the minority pounced on the majority’s indecisiveness, denouncing it as bellicose on Spain and pathetic on Stalin. Staunch pacifists felt they no longer had a place in the League; many resigned, including seven prominent minority members of the Central Committee.

Irvine’s final chapter, on Vichy, tries to explain the surprising twist in his story: why seventeen one-time members of the Central Committee became actively involved in the collaboration. A significantly larger number either joined the Resistance or were deported or murdered, but Irvine here is clearly interested in probing the consistencies between pre-war left-wing ideology and Vichy. He argues that there was a “perverse logic” (p. 196) that guided former minority leaguers’ *ralliement* to Vichy. All those who collaborated were unconditionally opposed to war, believed in European economic integration, and were disillusioned by the political sterility of the Third Republic. These men chose to see collaboration as a way to avoid war and claimed that Vichy could offer a “new” socialism with great promise. Irvine explains collaborators’ general acceptance of Vichy anti-Semitism in similar terms. Few were prone, as was the longtime minority-leaguer Félicien Challaye, to rabidly anti-Semitic diatribes. Instead, argues Irvine, most held Jews responsible for the ills of capitalism, Bolshevism, and war—an indefensible accusation, yes, but in keeping with many minority leaguers’ pre-war politics. For Irvine, there was therefore much in the “Vichy experience” that was “not inconsistent” with what many, by the 1930s, “thought the League ought to stand for” (p. 212).

Lest it still seem unbelievable that members of an organization originally founded to defend a Jewish captain could ever embrace Vichy anti-Semitism, Irvine rightly reminds his reader that being pro-Dreyfus was an unreliable predictor of one’s stance on Jews or democracy. More pertinent to consider are the conflicting and ambiguous meanings of the Revolution to the French Left that could inspire pacifism or ultrapatriotism in “partisans of liberal democracy” or “those who sought a more authoritarian regime” (p. 215). Irvine stops short of finding the origins of Vichy in the left-wing republican politics of the 1930s—indeed, a study of the League is too limited to make such a case. Rather, *Between Justice and Politics* powerfully demonstrates the need to move beyond binaries such as dreyfusard/anti-dreyfusard and revolution/counterrevolution when examining the political nuances of the Third Republic. As Irvine shows, in the 1930s, many League members with very little in common politically could share very similar “demagogic discourses” (p. 218). But the occupation laid bare their differences, making possible a scenario where one leaguer could be murdered by Vichy henchmen at the very moment another worked on an article for the collaborationist press.

Between Justice and Politics is a well-crafted and elegantly written book. The thematic organization, particularly in the first half of the book, results in some repetition of material, but is generally very economical, covering a broad period of time in deep detail. Irvine’s mastery of the historical landscape allows him to tease out the myriad strands of political significance in League debates and tie them into a broader national context. He also skillfully weaves in humor and moving individual stories, such as

those of Basch and Challaye, lending a human element to his institutional history.

Where the book might be faulted is in terms of balance. While Irvine makes reference to the good done by the League, fewer than ten pages of the book (pp. 121-31) deal directly with its admirable achievements, such as defending First World War deserters and wrongly-convicted individuals. "The League from Below" is the only chapter to explore the organization's quotidian battles for civil liberties, and more than half of it focuses on the "outlandish cases" (p. 121), such as squabbles over tobacco licenses or boating accidents, that never should have been submitted for review. Should readers go to this book to learn about the League's human rights work, they will likely be disappointed. Colonialism receives fewer than two pages (pp. 144-145) of sustained discussion, despite the League's work in Algeria, Indochina, and across French Africa that often challenged colonial policies on indigenous justice and basic freedoms. To be fair, Irvine does not claim to have written a definitive history of the League. But spending more space on leaguers' actual struggles for civil liberties would take nothing away from the book's provocative central claims; indeed, doing so would make more profound his conclusions about what the League "ought" to have been doing instead of debating national politics.

Because of the book's focus, some readers will surely find Irvine entirely too hard on the League, its members, and, indeed, the Left itself. The word "hypocritical" does not appear in the book, but it certainly could describe much of what Irvine finds in his unrelentingly scrupulous analysis of the divide between leaguers' principles and their actions. But Irvine does not level criticism haphazardly: throughout, he is careful to judge leaguers' positions on issues with meticulous reference to their own stated values. He ultimately makes a compelling case that, had the League stayed out of politics and stuck only to issues directly relevant to civil liberties, it would likely have been a more effective, if smaller, advocate for justice (here, he makes fruitful comparisons with the American Civil Liberties Union). Yet he also acknowledges that, in an era of profound political divisions, living purely by liberal principles is "notoriously demanding" (p. 224).

Authoritative and thought provoking, *Between Justice and Politics* should be essential reading for scholars of the Third Republic and will certainly shape future debate about the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme. And, with torture, wire-tapping, and secret military tribunals very much in the news today, Irvine's cautionary tale about politicizing civil liberties offers lessons instructive to us all.

J. P. Daughton Stanford University daughton@stanford.edu

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