

Millington, Chris: *From Victory to Vichy. Veterans in Interwar France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2012. ISBN: 978-0719085505; 256 pp.

**Rezensiert von:** Jessica Wardhaugh, Department of French Studies, Warwick University  
Email:

6.4 million French soldiers returned home after the First World War: approximately 3 million of them would join a veterans' association. These associations were a stridently influential presence in inter-war France, with many of their members claiming a voice in national life and craving political representation. Chris Millington's monograph offers a detailed and nuanced study of two of the most significant examples: the right-wing Union Nationale des Combattants (UNC) and the more centre-left Union Fédéral (UF). Tracing their ideas, aspirations, and influence through archival documents and more particularly the press, Millington offers a richly detailed portrait of two movements that exercised an indisputable political impact at a time of crisis and instability.

The title of the book suggests a linear trajectory from Victory to Vichy. The reader might indeed logically assume that the veterans not only prepared a path towards Vichy's National Revolution but also marched along it with considerable conviction. And certainly, Millington's particular focus on the right-wing UNC is intended to counter Antoine Prost's earlier insistence on veteran movements as safeguards of democracy — although without seeking to rival the latter's more comprehensive approach.<sup>1</sup> Millington, for instance, draws attention to the periodic closeness between the UNC and the extra-parliamentary leagues of the extreme right, notably the highly influential Croix de Feu (which had itself originated as a veterans' movement). He urges us not to underestimate the violence of the UNC's rhetorical diatribes, which castigated the parliamentary republic, the idle chatter of its deputies, and the destabilizing qualities of its foreigners and Jews with equal contempt. Similarly, he charts how even the more centrist UF — which initially welcomed the anti-fascist Pop-

ular Front government as promising much-needed democratic renewal — was to become disillusioned with the faltering left, and edge insistently towards demands for more radical state reform. Millington clearly demonstrates that by the late 1930s both the UF and the UNC were endorsing the proposal of a 'government of public safety', and approving the premier Edouard Daladier's decision to govern without parliament.

Behind the eye-catching title, however, Millington's contentions are more cautious. Although tracing the ebb of the UNC and UF into Vichy's Legion Française des Combattants — which included leaders from both organizations — he also asserts that 'it would be a mistake to judge Vichy as the culmination of the veterans' authoritarian designs and discourse.' (p. 221) Having played up the importance of the veterans' angry rhetoric, he then guards against its straightforward interpretation, pointing to the lack of information on its assimilation by 'ordinary' citizens. Indeed, he is consistently at pains to suggest the variety of attitudes encompassed within both associations — which, after all, represented 850,000 and 900,000 members respectively. Likewise, and in response to the recent shift away from classification in the evolving debate on French fascism<sup>2</sup>, Millington is somewhat reticent about ascribing to his subjects a collective identity or single definition, 'whether this be democratic, authoritarian or otherwise.' (p. 132). The political attitudes of war veterans were, as he clearly reveals, fluid, eclectic, and constantly shifting. The title of the book thus rather militates against an approach that deliberately eschews both essentialism and also historical inevitability.

Millington's nuanced perspective has many advantages. Not least are the merits of providing a genuinely wide-ranging analysis of the ideas and influences of these two organizations, and acknowledging the importance

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française, 1914–39*, 3 vols, Paris 1977.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Laurent Kestel, 'L'engagement de Bertrand de Jouvenel au Parti Populaire Français, 1936–38: Intellectuel de parti et entrepreneur politique', *French Historical Studies* 30, pp. 105–125; and Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927–45*, Montreal 2007, especially p. 10.

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of contingency in determining their political behaviour. After all, the veterans' associations were by no means the only groups to experience a rapid evolution of rhetoric and ideology in response to the unfolding crisis of the 1930s — and in this sense, the study of these associations adds valuable detail to our understanding of the more general rightward drift in politics and public opinion in interwar France. Yet the tendency to over-emphasize complexity is also problematic, dulling our sense of the veterans' political importance and the overall clarity of the argument. Millington, for example, bases his assertions of the movements' shifting identity on the diversity of individual variation and opinion. And yet individual trajectories are almost absent from this study: those individuals mentioned by name are almost invariably leaders, and we do not hear the voices of the 'ordinary members' to whom he accords such theoretical importance. Equally, Millington's particular emphasis on press sources leads to a privileging of rhetoric over action, somewhat ironic in the light of the veterans' own railing against parliamentary deputies for 'trembling over the magic of words' (p. 121). He acknowledges, for example, the importance of street politics for the Jeunes de l'Union Nationale des Combattants, yet offers few details on what this entailed. Clearly, symbolic and physical battles were important — even essential — for these movements, and a fuller consideration of the physical and spatial dimensions of their politics would add valuably to this analysis. It is also a pity also that the only illustration is that on the front cover.

This is, however, an important study, and, in its particular focus on the more right-wing UNC, a useful counterpart to Antoine Prost's influential work. Despite its avowed refusal to categorize these movements or ascribe them definitive identities, the book does, in fact, offer a valuable analysis of veteran mentalities, and its publication in a 'cultures of war' series is thus particularly apt. Indeed, the book will also be of special interest to those researching cultural demobilization — which, as Millington amply demonstrates, could be a dangerously uneven process.

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