

Epilogue

What does the distressing stance of some members of the League during the Vichy regime say about the history of the League itself? One answer might be: nothing. These individuals, however shocking their behavior, were a distinct minority within the League and, strictly speaking, a minority within the prewar minority. An organization as large of the League would inevitably attract a few rogues, and their presence, however regrettable, says nothing important about the League itself. Yet, although the League certainly did attract rogue elements, these men were not the kind of leaguer who might have been casually associated with the organization for its electoral utility—as might have been true, say, for Marcel Déat or Pierre Laval. They had been members of its Central Committee, presidents of important departmental federations, frequently wrote in the *Cahiers*, and were outspoken at League congresses. Emery might have represented a minority within the prewar League, but it was not such a small minority as that, witness the fact that he carried fully 40 percent of the delegates at its 1935 congress. They were in fact some of the most high-profile members of the association.

It is also possible to suggest that however central these men may have been to the life of the League they nonetheless were individuals who never internalized its principles, were in it for the “wrong” reasons, and simply did not belong in the same company as a Victor Basch. At one level this is incontestably true. But the issue is more complex than that. The man with the single most appalling record under Vichy and into the postwar years, Challaye, was also in many ways an incontestably excellent leaguer. His stance on the Painlevé affair and the Moscow trials was far more principled than that of his fellow Central Committee members. His arguments against French colonization today read as far closer to League principles than those of his principal antagonist Maurice Viollette. It was Challaye who in 1924 wanted to keep League sections from involving themselves in the elections; ten years later it was he who insisted that

the League publish the names of all of its parliamentarians, just at the moment, in the wake of the Stavisky scandal, when that list could prove most embarrassing. Of course he was largely motivated by his suspicion of and hostility to the dominant role being played in the League by politicians. But this was entirely consistent with League principles—if not League practice. In retrospect it is easy enough to suggest that Challaye's protest about Grumbach's presence in Louis Barthou's foreign ministry was motivated largely by his dislike of Jews in general and Grumbach in particular. Yet he was surely not wrong to insist that long-standing League principles dictated a greater detachment from the corridors of power, especially when it involved a government that the League so vocally detested. Challaye's attacks on the Soviet Union at the time of the Moscow trials involved some personal contradictions and were driven by ulterior motives. But with respect to both form and substance, he was not wrong and closer to the League's oft-stated values than were his colleagues in the majority. Not least of the ironies of Félicien Challaye is that his stance on Algerian independence in the 1950s and 1960s was far more progressive than that of his fellow veterans on the Central Committee, Paul Rivet, Albert Bayet, and Maurice Viollette—all by any other standard far more honorable men, but, at the time, stubborn defenders of *L'Algérie française*.¹

Perhaps Elie Reynier best exemplifies the many contradictions within the League. It is hard to imagine a more contemptible letter than the one Reynier chose to write upon resigning from the League. It was right out of Challaye's more despicable writings. But he, too, much like Challaye, was a model leaguer. However dubious his reasons for resigning from the League in 1938, it is hard to dispute that his earlier resignation from the League over the *affaire des fiches* was utterly principled. In the interwar years he, more than any other federal president, exposed the League's hypocrisy on the question of women's suffrage and pounded home the message that his sections ought to cease doing things that were not part of the League's mandate. And however close he may have been to Challaye in 1938, his conduct under Vichy was above reproach, and he returned with distinction to the League in the postwar years.

It might also be argued that what some leaguers said and did under Vichy speaks more to the momentary disorientation of men literally stunned by the defeat than it does to their basic League commitment. This might explain the momentary aberrations of Théodore Ruysen. And certainly one can find almost nothing in Château's prewar writings that prefigure his virulent, although typically circumscribed, attacks on the democratic republic. More often than not, though, Challaye, Bergery, and Emery being the clearest

examples, their Vichy stance was but a continuation—albeit an accelerated one—of their prewar position. To be sure, views held in the late 1930s were an imperfect predictor of post-1940 attitudes. Although he agreed upon just about everything with his prewar comrade, Georges Michon could not follow Francis Delaisi into collaboration.

The apparent paradox of individuals being both principled leaguers and savagely anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi collaborators can, to some degree, be resolved if one abandons the comfortable assumption that the Revolution (and by extension, the counterrevolution) is a “bloc” or that Vichy can be effectively summarized as “the revenge of the anti-Dreyfusards.” As Simon Epstein has recently brilliantly demonstrated, the Dreyfusard tradition, of which the League chose to be the living embodiment, was a good deal more complex. One could be both an anti-Semite and a Dreyfusard. Colonel Picquart personally had little use for Jews; he risked his career for Alfred Dreyfus simply because he thought him to be innocent. The subsequent political evolution of Dreyfusards defied prediction. There is no political evolution, no matter how tortuous, that one could not assign to at least one Dreyfusard. In 1898 Georges Valois was an anarchist, a philo-Semite, and a Dreyfusard. By 1906 he had joined the Action Française and become a virulent anti-Semite. In 1925 he founded the ephemeral but explicitly fascist *Faisceau*. By the 1930s he was back on the fringes of the Left (and indeed on the fringes of the League!). He fought in the Resistance and died in Bergen-Belsen.² Others took different routes and, as Epstein clearly shows, many of them played a leading role in the Vichy regime.

The French Left (much like the French Right) was a complex and confusing phenomenon, drawing on different and conflicting traditions, guided by ambiguous signposts. The French Revolution, with its notion of “fraternity” could inform integral pacifists, just as the Jacobin tradition could justify Republican ultrapatriotism. Partisans of liberal democracy could cite the First Republic but so too could, and did, those who sought a more authoritarian regime. The French revolutionary tradition could be of equal comfort to anti-Semites and to philo-Semites.

But the League ought to have been spared these confusions. It was not—or was not supposed to have been—merely another formation of the Left. Its guiding principle was not the various and conflicting traditions of the French Left but the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Declaration is a remarkably lucid document. And the League founded in 1898 did not choose that document at random. It provided the League with a clear doctrine as to what it could and should do. Granted, the Declaration was not without its shortcomings. It

was of no help at all on the vexed question of war and peace and not much more useful with respect to the best way to organize society and the economy. But those were—and remain—essentially political questions. What the Declaration did contain was more than enough to be getting on with. So although the range of issues it could address would have been restricted, had the League stuck exclusively to the Declaration it might have achieved a great deal more than it did. The list is long. Armed only with the Declaration, the League could have championed the cause of women's suffrage, it would have denounced the *affaire des fiches* for the scandal it was, it would have challenged the discriminatory legislation against religious congregations, and it would have championed the cause of a free press and not permitted itself to embrace the patent self-interest of left-wing newspapers nor to subscribe to the demagogic rhetoric about the state's need to restrict free expression. Its position on the Moscow trials would have made no difference to the outcome, but it would have been an honorable one and not a disgraceful one. It would not have permitted so many of its members to treat the League as a patronage machine, thus rendering more plausible its entirely admirable call for a less corrupt Republic. Absent patronage, the League might have been less willing to permit politicians to use it as an electoral springboard and to be less enamored of the number of cabinet ministers upon whose help it could call.

Of course the League would have paid a price for this. A League of this kind would not have had 180,000 members. Nor so many ministers in any given cabinet. It is possible, although not certain, that this might have hampered its activity in the one thing it incontestably did so well—the defense of victims of injustice. But this is not obvious either. A smaller League would have had fewer resources but would not have had to squander its time and energy on the multitude of inappropriate cases with which it was deluged. Fewer League ministers might have produced fewer positive outcomes in the case of questions of injustice—although this point is not certain either. On the other hand, had the League not seemed like just another left-wing pressure group, its interventions might have been taken more seriously, even by conservative ministers. And certainly, had there been fewer League ministers, so much of the League's energies would not have been taken up with debates about their political conduct. Liberated from the need to debate the ratification of the interallied accords, proposed changes in the electoral laws, the merits of compulsory automobile insurance, the internal regulations of the *Rassemblement Populaire*, the origins of World War I, the conduct of French foreign policy in the late 1930s—all issues over which it could exercise little influence—the League would have been free to

concentrate its energies on those issues upon which it could have some effect. Its interventions would have been that much more effective because of the accrued moral authority of being something other than an “intergroup” of the Left.

The League did not choose this route, a fact that dissidents in the first decade of the twentieth century deplored and that League leaders in the late 1930s increasingly regretted. Its reasons for so doing are entirely understandable but also perfectly regrettable. What went wrong? To some degree the League was victim of the entirely ambiguous legacy of the Dreyfus affair. At one level, this was just the case of one army officer wrongly and illegally convicted of a crime he did not commit. Charles Péguy was not altogether wrong in arguing that the successful outcome of the case did not authorize the winners to launch attacks on the army and the church. But the League could counter that the Dreyfus affair brought to light other problems in French society, notably the presence of reactionary elements in the army and the church whose *ralliement* to the democratic Republic was, at best, half-hearted. Moreover, if Captain Dreyfus was a victim of injustice, were the many members of the French working class not also condemned by an economic system to a life of misery? If the illegal imprisonment of one innocent man were a crime, what about the death of literally millions of equally innocent men in utterly unnecessary wars? There was a compelling logic at work here, so compelling that the League seems not to have noticed—or only late in the game and inconsistently—that this same logic stood in an uncomfortable relationship with their mission of defending the rights of individuals. If defense of the democratic regime became paramount, issues like the voting rights of women, freedom of association, or freedom of the press might have to be sacrificed. If issues of war and peace became paramount, the victims of Hitler or Stalin (depending upon where one stood on that issue) would have to be ignored.

Moreover, by virtue of becoming the League’s constant reference point, the Dreyfus affair effectively blinded League leaders to the sectarian nature of their conduct. Almost by definition, the League founded to defend Captain Dreyfus was above politics and therefore above reproach. It glorified and exaggerated its role in the affair.³ But it was also highly selective in what it appropriated from the history of the affair. Clemenceau and Picquart had played a decisive role in the liberation of Dreyfus but were not leaguers and thus subject to consistent attacks. Painlevé and Herriot, far less central to the liberation of Dreyfus, were League members and therefore, at least in the eyes of League leaders, above reproach.

Nothing whatsoever distinguishes Emile Guerry’s defense of Stalin from Félicien Challaye’s defense of Hitler (unless one takes into account the fact that

the victims of Stalin in 1936–37 were far more numerous than the victims of Hitler in 1938.) Both evoked the killings in the French Revolution as a justification. At some point someone in the League ought to have pointed out that judicial murders—whether committed by Jacobins, Stalin, or Hitler—were all overt violations of the rights of man, did not justify one another, and ought to be condemned out of hand. No one did. Victor Basch took great pleasure in citing Article 35 of the Jacobin Declaration of the Rights of Man, to the effect that when the government violates the liberties of the people, insurrection was a duty. But so, too, did Colonel Charles des Isnards of the virulently antiparliamentary Jeunesses Patriotes. At some point, someone ought to have pointed out that in a democratic regime the ballot box, and not the street, was the appropriate vehicle for protest. But no one ever did—unless one counts Basch's rather lame retractions in 1935. That Basch was a convinced democrat is beyond dispute, as is the fact that he took his rhetoric far less seriously than did other more authoritarian elements in the League. The point, though, is that it was often the same rhetoric. What the Vichy experience so strikingly reveals is the degree to which people who fundamentally shared little in common could have for so long remained in the same organization by virtue of sharing the same demagogic discourse.

World War II very nearly destroyed the League. Its archives had been seized by the Germans and disappeared for over half a century. Its headquarters had been devastated, and its office equipment stolen. Death, natural or otherwise, took much of its prewar leadership as too did the collaborationist activities of many prominent leaguers. Until the 1950s, the League was always on the verge of bankruptcy, headed off (just barely) by some important donations, an interest-free loan by the CGT, and by renting out part of its building. Whereas the prewar League had more than forty permanent employees, in 1960 it had only four.⁴ Of course they now had far less work to do. In 1929 (a fairly typical year), the League received over 17,000 letters and dealt with more than 6,000 cases of injustice; in 1963 the relevant figures were 1,136 and 126, respectively.⁵ The *Cahiers*, greatly reduced in size, now appeared only at irregular intervals. But the critical problem faced by the League (and the source of its financial woes) was its inability either to attract new members or to persuade more than a tiny fraction of its prewar members to renew their interest in the League. In 1950 the League would, rather sadly, hold up the federation of the Marne as an exemplar because its membership stood at 44 percent of its prewar total.⁶ But the Marne was a very exceptional case. The federation of the Charente-Maritime, the largest in the prewar years, virtually ceased to exist after 1945. At the initiative of the Freemasons

(who had been its founders at the beginning of the century) it was slowly reestablished in the early 1950s. But it never came close to its prewar size. In 1936 this Federation had some 8,000 members in 103 sections. In 1960 it had only 200 members in 4 sections. By the 1950s the League had succeeded in reestablishing about a fifth of its prewar sections, but they were now much smaller. Overall membership in an organization that had once counted 180,000 adherents, was probably no higher than 7,000 in 1950 and 10,000 fourteen years later.⁷ In short, twenty years after the end of World War II, the League had far fewer members than it had enjoyed in 1900, two years after its foundation.

What explains the precipitous decline of the League? World War II and the Occupation were certainly factors, although they mostly accelerated a decline evident in the late 1930s. But the war does not explain everything. The Socialist party was every bit as divided in the late 1930s as was the League (and for the same reasons); it was even more compromised under Vichy. Yet it emerged in 1945 with an additional 100,000 members.⁸ But there was always something artificial about the League's huge membership. For much of its history its militants often treated the League as a comfortable (and inexpensive) political club. Faced with the social and political crises of the mid-1930s, unprecedented numbers of Frenchmen were politically mobilized. The Socialist party increased fivefold; the Communists tenfold. But at precisely this moment, League membership began to decline. Some of those who left, Radicals for the most part, believed that the League had fallen into the hands of the Socialists and Communists; many Socialists did not see the point in simultaneously belonging to two organizations that seemed to be doing roughly the same things. To the degree that the League's activity seemed increasingly to involve the conduct of French foreign policy, those who felt strongly about the matter found what was now the largest political party a more useful vehicle for their activity. After 1945, Radicalism, the political home of so many of the original leaguers, quickly lost its political influence. The dominant party on the left became the Communists. League membership was open to Communists, and some did enter the League (Madeleine Rebérioux being the obvious example). But few postwar Communists, unlike Radicals and Socialists, would have had the experience of joint membership in the League.

Nor was the Dreyfusard tradition, the great rallying cry (albeit to a decreasing degree) of the prewar League as effective after the war. By the 1950s there were relatively few French who had directly experienced the "affaire." League president Daniel Meyer's 1960 feud with the editors of *Le Petit Labrousse* over its minor misrepresentation of the League's role in the affair had a quaintly

antiquarian quality to it, which would not have been the case in, say, 1924.⁹ A far more immediate memory was that of the Occupation, which the League could not really exploit. It could, and did, stress the role in the Resistance of some of its leaders, but this was an issue upon which it could hardly linger without exposing the overt collaboration of others. The clerical menace that had fueled League discourse for decades was an increasingly marginal issue by the 1950s. Pacifism, a potent theme after the great carnage of 1914–18, had far more ambivalent connotations in the post-World War II period, associated as it was with appeasement and collaboration.

What is striking is the extreme bitterness and disillusionment of many pre-war militants. Lucien Cancouët was atypical of many League leaders in that he came from a very poor working-class background and was an autodidact, something he never let anyone forget. Nonetheless, he was an active member of the section of the fourteenth arrondissement for twenty years and president for at least seven.¹⁰ Militant pacifist, he intervened no fewer than fifty times at League congresses in the 1930s.¹¹ After the war, all he cared to remember about the League was that it “never detached itself from politics and was at times an electoral springboard for ambitious politicians.” The League was “as feeble and almost as sectarian as were the [political] parties.” He listed his League activities as one of the “errors” in his life. “The League absorbed a good part of my activities and I wasted my time there.”¹²

Finally, the League had been the quintessential example of the political culture of the Third Republic. The section, whatever else it represented, offered rural and small-town Frenchmen an opportunity for sociability. Every couple of months one could gather with a group of like-minded friends and talk politics. The issues they kicked around were often local ones, but it was comforting to know that there were people in Paris who would take note. Citizens of a tiny village could discuss the larger national political issues, debate the exact terms of a motion that would ultimately be published by the *Cahiers*, and leave with the feeling that they had some input into the conduct of national affairs. Every once in a while one might expect some more or less important Parisian to address the section on some major question, leaving everyone with the feeling, or at least the illusion, of being part of a broader and more important political community. Once a year, section members could hop on a bus to the departmental capital to attend a federal congress, where they might rub shoulders with the inevitably present deputies and perhaps get to exchange a few words with a Basch, a Guernut, or a Kahn. For keener section members there was almost always a case of injustice to which they could devote their energies.

All of this counted for less in the increasingly urban world of the 1950s. A talented orator coming from Paris had once offered a rare escape from rural isolation. Now it meant leaving the house to hear a discourse one could pick up any night of the week on television. A greatly expanded social service sector reduced both the need and the opportunities for the informal social work activity of the League. The difficulties of civil servants, once the object of much of the League's action, were now taken in hand by the increasingly professional labor unions.¹³

To what extent can the League's uneven record in its first fifty years be attributed to factors unique to France? Was there something uniquely *French* about the League's history? The question addresses itself to those who believe that the French intellectual tradition is significantly bereft of the values of the Whig tradition or Anglo-Saxon liberalism. One way to answer it would be to briefly compare the League to its nearest counterpart, the ACLU.

At its foundation in 1920 the ACLU was directly inspired by the League. But in critical respects it has always been a very different organization, operating in a dramatically different context. Although, like the League, the ACLU has always been on the Left, it is, and always has been, far less immersed in day-to-day politics than its French counterpart. Sitting members of Congress or of the Cabinet have never played a preponderant role on the ACLU's directing organs. Leaders of the House and Senate Democrats, to say nothing of Cabinet members of Democratic administration, are rarely if ever high-profile leaders of the ACLU. It is hard to imagine being able to draw together a congressional ACLU caucus large enough to include the majority of congressional Democrats. Whatever the personal political preferences of ACLU members, the organization enjoys a far greater detachment from electoral politics.

Directly related is the fact that the ACLU is, in proportionate terms, a far smaller organization than the League. Forty years after its foundation the ACLU had only 45,000 members. Today it has fewer than 300,000 members. Taking into account the huge population difference between France and the United States, a comparably sized League would have had at most 40,000 members at its peak rather than 180,000. The ACLU is smaller, at least in part, because few Americans join it in the hopes of belonging to a powerful patronage machine, finding a convenient surrogate for active membership in the Democratic Party, or escaping from small-town isolation.

Finally, the respective political cultures differ. There is no real French equivalent to the Federalist Papers, just as there is no American equivalent of the Jacobin tradition. The slogan: "the republic in danger" has no resonance in

American life. Americans do worry at times about the erosion of civil liberties, but few take seriously the proposition that the democratic regime may collapse. But then Americans have lived since the foundation of the Republic under the same political regime and more or less the same Constitution. Crassly opportunist though the cry of "republic in danger" might have been in the early twentieth century, the French were haunted, in ways Americans were not, by the fact that two previous republics had been overthrown by two different Bonapartes and that for over eighty years no regime survived for two decades. The temptation to invoke political expediency to justify selective application of civil libertarian principles was correspondingly greater in the League.

Nonetheless, there are instructive parallels between the two organizations. The ACLU was no less blind to the realities of the Soviet Union in the 1930s than its French counterpart.¹⁴ During World War II, stunned by the Nazi-Soviet pact, the ACLU faltered on the rights of American Communists, and summarily expelled Elizabeth Gurley Flynn from its ranks for no better reason than her political opinions.¹⁵ It took a very equivocal stance on the unconstitutional internment of Japanese Americans.¹⁶ In the 1940s and early 1950s, a period one historian of the ACLU has dubbed "The Era of Expediency,"¹⁷ the ACLU's position on the McCarthyite witch hunts was at best ambivalent. While doing everything to distance itself from Communism, the ACLU did condemn, correctly, the House Un-American Activities Committee as "the chief threat to civil liberties."¹⁸ At the same time, however, the ACLU, or more accurately some branches thereof, were prepared to cooperate with both the House Un-American Activities Committee and the FBI, in the latter case passing on information about Communists in their ranks.¹⁹

In critical respects, however, the best test of the ACLU's dedication to principles came in the spring of 1977. In that year, Frank Collins, leader of the National Socialist Party of America, a frankly neo-Nazi party, announced its plans to organize a march in Skokie, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Collins did not choose that suburb at random; it was predominantly Jewish and was home to a substantial number of survivors of the Holocaust. Local authorities promptly banned the march. At the request of Collins, the ACLU actively defended his party's constitutional right to free assembly. The decision prompted outrage within the ACLU and a wave of very public resignations.²⁰ The protests were both understandable (given the significant Jewish membership in the ACLU) and somewhat puzzling. After all, the ACLU's stance on Skokie was hardly without precedent. In the 1960s the ACLU had routinely defended the civil liberties of American Nazis. Its then leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, rarely went

anywhere without a list of local ACLU sections upon whom he could count to defend him from the persistent obstruction of local authorities. Moreover, in those years the ACLU took considerable pride in its defense of Rockwell because it reinforced its claim to be disinterested protectors of civil liberties for everyone, including the most offensive. So what had changed by 1977? The answer would appear to be that the composition of the ACLU had undergone some important modifications. From 45,000 members in 1960, it had expanded to 275,000 in 1977. Most of the newcomers had joined the ACLU in the wake of the civil rights struggles in the South and the draft resistance battles of the early 1970s. Many of the new members joined as left-wing activists rather than civil libertarians. On those issues, civil liberties and progressive politics more or less coincided; on Skokie, by contrast, they did not.²¹ In this respect the ACLU was not different than the League; in both cases a significant influx of new members spoke to the changing political climate rather than to an increased dedication to human rights.

The Skokie case would in time become part of the legend of the ACLU.²² In some respects it functioned much like the officers of Lâon did for the League. American critics of the ACLU contend that Skokie was a token action intended to “counter arguments that the organization was obsessed with helping criminals and leftists.”²³ The League’s critics in France said similar things about its defense of the officers of Laôn, but they had a better case. Not only was Pressensé’s defense of the officers motivated by tactical political calculations, but the conduct of the officers was innocuous compared to that of Frank Collins and his followers. What both the ACLU and the League had in common was the certainty that any attempt to apply their principles evenhandedly would come under assault from the Left—including a Left within their ranks. In 1976 at Camp Pendleton, California, a group of black marines attacked white marines who allegedly belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. In the subsequent investigation, both groups were treated in ways that violated their constitutional rights. The local chapter of the ACLU chose to defend both groups despite the strenuous objection of the parent Southern California board and the usually allied National Lawyer’s Guild who found it guilty of “poisonous evenhandedness.”²⁴ The charge of poisonous evenhandedness is reminiscent of the charge of “false liberalism” so often levied by charter members of the League.

In essence, then, the same tensions between left-wing (or “progressive”) politics and civil libertarian principles were present within both the ACLU and the League. On this issue, it might be argued that the League in its first forty years suffers by comparison with the ACLU in its last forty. But they were different

years. In the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s the record of the ACLU was not dramatically different from that of the League.

Both the League and its American counterpart would prove, at times, incapable of abiding by the liberal principles to which they subscribed. It is important to acknowledge, however, that those very liberal principles are notoriously demanding, precisely because there is no guarantee that they will yield a desirable (or “progressive”) outcome. Most liberals take it as an article of faith that in the long run they will. But it *is* an article of “faith,” and the long run is a very long time. “Liberty with all its risks” is an easy slogan in the abstract, but in concrete terms the risks can at times seem overwhelming. The enduring image of the League is not, therefore, only the various ways in which it failed to live up to its mandate. Equally worth remembering is the little schoolteacher who rode a bus for 600 miles to passionately plead the cause of an innocent man.