

Introduction

The *Ligue des droits de l'homme* (League of the Rights of Man) was founded in Paris in June 1898. It took its title from the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man of August 1789. What prompted its foundation was the growing concern about the unjust and illegal conviction for treason of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. But the League long outlived the Dreyfus affair and became, in its first forty years, the largest and most influential civil liberties organization in the world. The closest North American equivalent was the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), founded in 1920 and modeled in part after the League. But the League was different from the ACLU in several ways. It was a much larger organization. The League had 8,000 members within two years of its foundation, 80,000 within ten years. At its peak in 1933, it had 180,000 members organized in nearly 2,500 sections. By comparison, thirty years after its foundation the ACLU had barely 9,000 members, 45,000 in 1960, and at its largest in the early 1970s, hardly more than the League, in a nation with a population one-seventh that of the United States, had enjoyed in the early 1930s.¹ Moreover, in the first half of the twentieth century, the League carried far more political clout than the ACLU ever would. In the 1988 presidential contest, George Bush Sr. would make much of the fact that his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis was "a card carrying member of the ACLU" and therefore on the extreme left of his party. French conservatives were no more charitably disposed to the League but rarely made an issue out of the League membership of their opponents because it would have been difficult to find, at least by the interwar years, a prominent left-wing politician who did not belong (or had not belonged) to the League.

Despite its prominent role in French political life in the first half of the twentieth century, the last history of the League, very much an insider account, dates from 1927.² Until recently, an important reason for the relative historical neglect of the League has been a paucity of archival sources. Although the various house

organs of the League, both national and local, provide particularly rich documentation, its archives disappeared in 1940. Anticipating a German invasion of Paris, the League began to pack up its copious archives in June 1940 with the intent of shipping them to safety. Before it could do so, the invading Germans captured them. In 1941 these archives, along with several others, were shipped to Germany where, in 1945 they were, in turn, captured by the Soviet armies. Shipped to Moscow, they became part of a separate and entirely secret “western” section of the Soviet archives. Only in 1991, in the last weeks of the Soviet Union, was their existence finally revealed. There followed a decade of protracted negotiations between the French and Russian governments concerning the eventual repatriation of the archives. Agreement was reached in 2000, and in February 2001 the archives were returned to the *Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine* in Nanterre. Cataloguing the archives was completed by 2002, at which point they were opened to scholars.

Even before the opening of the archives, the history of the League attracted the attention of a growing number of scholars in France and abroad. This reflects the fact that the League, albeit far smaller than it was in the early decades of the twentieth century, remains an active and vital part of French public life to this day. Moreover, French historians, many of them associated with today’s League, tend to view the League as one of the few redeeming features of a Third French Republic that met an inglorious end in June 1940. As a result, much of the existing literature on the pre-1940 League has a “memorializing” quality; as the American historian, Wendy Perry, has noted, the League has become one of the classic *lieux des mémoires*, reverential signposts on the history of France.³ The League was present at all the finest moments of France from 1898 until 1945. Courageous defenders of Dreyfus, tenacious advocates for victims of arbitrary justice during World War I, the “conscience of democracy” during the heyday of the Third Republic, central architects of the Popular Front to save France from the fascist menace in the 1930s, and finally, victims of a murderous Vichy regime—so goes the heroic version of the League. The subtitle of a recent biography of Victor Basch, fourth president of the League and one of the most admirable figures in French history, is entitled “From the Dreyfus Affair to the crimes of the Milice”—the Milice being the Vichy militia that cruelly murdered Basch and his wife in 1944.⁴

Recent writings on the League have not been, for all that, uncritical.⁵ Scholars have paid close attention to the internal divisions within the League, to its relative insensitivity to “the other”⁶ and above all to the speciousness of its claim to have been above politics. All acknowledge that the League had a substantial

representation in parliament and that politicians played an important role in the directing circles of the League. But few choose to examine carefully who those League politicians were, perhaps because it would turn up some unexpected names: Gaston Doumergue, Marcel Déat, and Pierre Laval, to say nothing of virtually all the corrupt deputies and senators implicated in the notorious Stavisky affair. Passing mention is made of the intestine feuding within the League occasioned by the ministerial conduct of some of its high-profile ministers, Paul Painlevé in the 1920s and Edouard Herriot in the 1930s. These “*affaires*” seemed to involve ministerial conduct that conflicted with the League’s principles. But rarely is there any discussion of the frequent deliberations of the League’s Central Committee, which involved purely partisan and narrowly political issues with only the most tenuous connections to the defense of human rights: the wisdom of Socialist participation in post-1924 governments, the ratification of the interallied accords on war debts, and the merits of proposed changes to the electoral system. All acknowledge, and rather applaud, the League’s efforts to obtain a more expansive definition of the rights of man. But few note that some of the partisans of this broader definition wanted the 1789 declaration scrapped altogether. The broader definition of the rights of man expanded the type of issues the League could address, but because of the openly political motives behind this expanded vision it also narrowed them. Causes that might have awkward political consequences such as women’s suffrage, rights of religious congregations, and an unequivocal defense of the free press were discreetly off-limits to the League and its subsequent historians.

The League claimed to be “the conscience of democracy.” The distinguished historian, Madeleine Rebérioux, also one of the most prominent leaders of the postwar League, has perceptively noted that in time the League became instead the “guardian” (*vigie*) of democracy, by which she means the defenders of a sclerotic parliamentary regime.⁷ She does not mention that many members of the League, and not the least of them, were given to excoriating that very regime in terms that, with respect to form and sometimes to substance, resembled its fascist enemies. The divisions within the League caused by World War I gave rise to a powerful pacifist minority. The origins of that minority currently have been carefully explored; less so its behavior in the post-Hitler years. Rebérioux notes that those in the League who, after 1933, called for a firmer stance against Hitler “found themselves accused of wanting ‘a war for the Jews’.”⁸ She neglects to mention that those charges came from within the ranks of League leaders, some of whom by the late 1930s shied neither from an overt defense of the Nazi regime nor from

explicitly anti-Semitic slurs. Moreover, there is almost total silence on the role played by a number of prominent members of the League in defending the Vichy government and its policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany. One of the tragic ironies in its history is that at the very moment when Basch and his wife were being cruelly murdered by Vichy thugs, prominent members of the prewar League were openly defending the Vichy regime.

Rebérioux also raises the question of why, at a time when *la vie associative* was in its infancy, the League should have attracted such a large membership.⁹ She offers no real answer to this pertinent question and chooses not to reflect on the possibilities that occurred to contemporary leaguers, that is, for many of its members the League was primarily one or more of the following: an inexpensive political club, the French equivalent of a Rotary club or civic improvement society, an inexpensive form of insurance, or a well-connected patronage network. Above all, no historians are prepared to recognize that there is something problematic about being both a defender of civil liberties and a committed member of the political Left.

This study does not pretend to be an exhaustive history of the League and the prominent role it played in almost all aspects of French society and politics in the first half of the twentieth century. It is, instead, a sustained critical essay probing one, and arguably *the*, central issue faced by the League: its attempt to balance its dedication to civil liberties and its commitment to left-wing politics. Precisely because the League was one of the more admirable institutions of Third Republic France it deserves to be approached with a degree of critical detachment, recognizing both its real strengths but also acknowledging its serious, and at times, fatal flaws.