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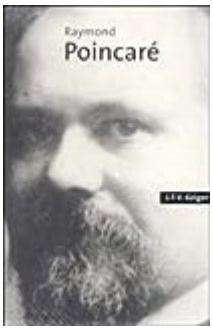

J. F. V. Keiger. *Raymond Poincar&#233.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x + 413 pp. $64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-57387-0.

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Raymond Poincar&#233

On a March afternoon in 1929, Raymond Poincare–sixty-eight years old, former President of the Republic, three-time prime minister–returned from the Senate chamber, picked up a spade, dug a hole in his garden and tearfully buried his beloved cat "Gris-Gris", who had died in his wife's arms that morning. It turns out that Poincare had a lifelong passion for animals. This little episode illustrates one of the surprising achievements of John Keiger's new biography: his ability to present Poincare as a far more complex man than most of us, I suspect, ever imagined him to be.

And complex he was. Devoted to his parents and the joys of family life, Raymond Poincare remained a bachelor until he was forty-four. When he finally did marry, it was to a forty-six year old divorcee who could provide him with companionship but never an heir. A compulsive workaholic, he found time to lavish attention on his niece Lysie, to the extent that his horrified wife destroyed Lysie's letters to "Roncle" and tipped off the girl's parents so as to terminate this intense friendship. Enjoying a public reputation as a man of integrity, Poincare backed away from moral choices as readily as any Third Republic politico. Reserved and brusque in demeanour, he craved approval and popular acclaim. A frugal provincial lawyer who knew the value of money, he pleaded pro bono actions and during his presidency spent a huge amount out of his own pocket on poor relief. The public knew him for his forceful and decisive approach to Germany after the war, but the fact of the matter is that his foreign policy was cautious and hesitant.

Keiger follows Poincare from his happy childhood in Lorraine through his student days in Paris (double degrees in law and letters) to the start of his legal career and his political debut as a promising young deputy with the moderate republicans (while still living at home with his parents!). The author is very good at tracing the shifting alignments in republican politics as he chronicles the stages of Poincare's rise, from his first ministerial post (education) to his status as a "regular" in the cabinet shuffles of the 1890s. Keiger emphasizes Poincare's prudence as he climbed the political ladder–a caution well illustrated by his evasive conduct during the Dreyfus affair, when he became a *dreyfusard* only after it was politically safe to do so. Finance minister at thirty-three, senator at

forty-three, prime minister at fifty-one, president at fifty-two–Poincare seemed to have reached the summit of his political career by 1913. Yet the main period of his historical importance was still to come.

Keiger's account of Poincare's role in the July crisis of 1914 is the best chapter in the book. He demonstrates beyond challenge how important Poincare was in shaping France's responses to fast-breaking events. In doing so, he is at pains to explode the myth of *Poincare-la-guerre*–the accusation, which the German foreign office helped to spread, that Poincare worked to ensure that the July crisis resulted in war. Step by step, Keiger shows Poincare's caution and level-headedness throughout the crisis. Historian Luigi Albertini attributed French moderation to Premier Rene Viviani, whom he contrasted with the supposedly bellicose Poincare. But Keiger proves that several of the "reasonable" telegrams dispatched under Viviani's name were actually drafted by Poincare, who was obliged to intervene when his feeble prime minister proved unable to conduct French policy. The author also shows that once Poincare accepted that events had made a general war inevitable, his overriding aim was to make it evident that France was fighting a defensive war. His goal here was not only to make certain that Britain would come to the aid of a blameless France; above all he wanted to ensure that the nation entered the war as a united people pledged to a *union sacree* for the duration of the struggle.

As head of state, Poincare worked with such limited power as he had to preserve national unity throughout the war. Afterwards, he believed he had done as much as anyone to assure the eventual victory. For that reason he was green with envy at the popular postwar adulation that passed him by in favour of Georges Clemenceau, whom he had been compelled to call to the premiership in 1917. The two men, of course, disliked each other intensely. Poincare grudgingly acknowledged Clemenceau's leadership qualities, but he bitterly complained of the Tiger's casual approach to the peace conference. Clemenceau's offhand and personal approach to negotiations (a trait he shared with British prime minister David Lloyd George) shocked Poincare, the quintessential *homme de dossiers*. In May 1919, he briefly contemplated resignation as a protest against the emerging treaty, even if this was more talk than serious intention. "Profoundly unhappy" (p. 262), he finally accepted Versailles–though, as Keiger stresses, from the start he worried about the possibilities of enforcement.

Poincare's most important historical role came after his departure from the Elysee, when, in 1922, President Alexandre Millerand called on him to form a new government to deal with the German problem. Over the next two years, Poincare garnered much domestic approval for his hardline approach to Germany at the cost of gaining a reputation outside of France as a punctilious and vengeful "enforcer." Within a few months of his arrival at Matignon, Poincare took the decision to resort to force to convince the Germans that they had no choice but to comply with the reparations provisions of the treaty. The outcome was the occupation of the Ruhr.

Keiger shows how difficult it was for Poincare to reach this decision, for he genuinely wanted to maintain a common front with Britain. Although his abrasive personal manner did not smooth the way (to the foreign secretary, Lord Curzon, he was "a demented schoolmaster" and "that horrid little man"), Poincare faced a tough problem: French security required a British alliance, but London's price–revision of reparations plus tacit renunciation of enforcement of the treaty–was simply too high. Moreover, the British erred in not realizing (or caring?) that their lack of support for France's position sent a clear signal to Berlin that the German government could get away with non-compliance. Thus, Britain's postwar policy on European recovery, which many historians still present as sophisticated and forward-looking, actually made a Franco-German showdown inevitable. Although the author recognizes this point (p. 297), he might well have given it more weight.

On the other hand, Keiger argues convincingly that *Poincare-la-Ruhr* was not the simplistic repo man of legend. Like other economically literate politicians (in those days not, admittedly, a large group), Poincare accepted that the way forward lay in the "commercialization" of Germany's reparations obligation–i.e. having the German government raise the money by issuing long-term bonds in New York and London. This strategy would create the financial conditions for the shift of real purchasing power from Germany to the Allies (which was the essence of the famous "transfer problem"). But commercialization would also bring into being the political conditions which would make it harder for Germany to default: i.e., all those Anglo-Saxon bondholders would be more formidable guardians of German compliance than any number of French infantry regiments. The problem was that a balanced budget in Berlin was a prerequisite for the success of any *international* bond flotation, but no German government would increase taxes as long as it believed it could evade paying reparations.

Thus a strong case can be made for Poincare's decision to use force to dispel German illusions and to transform Germany's misnamed *Erfullungspolitik*, or (bogus) treaty fulfilment, into the real thing. The question at issue is therefore *how* he carried out that decision. Keiger to some extent accepts the earlier conclusions of American historians Charles Maier, Sally Marks, Stephen Schuker, and Marc Trachtenberg on the cautious and piecemeal nature of the French invasion. But he nevertheless concludes that "Poincare had achieved a political victory" in the battle of the Ruhr (p. 303). Really? Was it not just a *succes d'estime* which momentarily masked the fact that French policy had reached a dead end?

French firmness had indeed caused Berlin to back down, but once the feel-good glow dissipated, what was the permanent result? Poincare personally botched the opportunity to put Franco-German relations on a "compliance" footing when he refused to follow up German prime minister Gustav Stresemann's overtures for bilateral negotiations. Why did he do this? Keiger quotes Poincare's inane answer: "[Direct] discussions with Germany would [have] upset England" (p. 305). This, of course, is no answer at all: the British had spent the whole of the past year being "upset" by the German policy of "that horrid little man"! The author argues that Poincare refused to deal directly with Berlin because "he preferred to make way for the great settlement which would encompass reparations, inter-Allied debt and Anglo-American loans to Europe" (p. 305). He bases this interpretation on a passage in Maier's *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* which depicts Poincare as wanting to avoid French isolation by accepting American mediation. Perhaps. But after ten months of unilateral action, was it not a little late to start worrying about "isolation"?

The fact of the matter is that what Poincare got from the Ruhr invasion ("internationalization" of the reparations question via two committees of financial experts) was something he almost certainly could have obtained by diplomacy alone (recall the U.S. secretary of state's proposal to this effect in December 1922). The result of internationalization, the Dawes plan of 1924, might be presented as a preliminary step towards commercialization of reparations. But that scheme, combined with the French exchange-rate crisis of 1924, also demonstrated how little the Ruhr "victory" actually meant. After a year of turmoil, treaty enforcement was dead, and France was more dependent than ever on British and American support. In short, although the author in the end concedes that France's "fundamental objectives on security and finance" were not achieved by the "political victory over Germany in the Ruhr" (p. 310), he is too gentle in his assessment of Poincare's inability to exploit politically the situation which the use of force had created. At the very least he might have addressed Trachtenberg's far more critical judgement and not just relegated it to a citation.

The general election of May 1924 drove Poincare from office, but he returned within two years after new bear raids on the franc had put paid to the *Cartel des gauches*. Now Poincare played his second important historical role by ending the monetary crisis and stabilizing the franc in 1926-28. Here the key debate was between "revaluation" v. "stabilization." Pegging the franc at its prewar exchange rate (i.e., "revaluation") was the natural choice for someone from Poincare's bourgeois background: anything less would be an assault on his class and the legal spoliation of holders of government paper. But a return to the *franc germinal* would saddle France with a tremendously over-valued currency in terms of international price levels, thus requiring a huge deflation in domestic prices, including the price of labour. Quite apart from the political fallout such a policy would generate, "revaluation" was bound to impose severe adjustment costs on the real economy via declining export sales and rising unemployment. Keiger does a good job of summarizing this dilemma (pp. 324-7) in an account which concentrates on how much Poincare hankered after revaluation as "the right thing to do", but which also explains (though perhaps too briefly) the influences leading him to choose stabilization instead.

Someone once said of Aristide Briand, oft times prime minister and foreign minister (whose indifference to "the files" was legendary), that "he knows nothing, but understands everything." Could the opposite be said of Poincare? At times it seems so. Poincare was a details man, and he possessed the contempt of the hard worker for the *beau parleur*. As such he had the qualities of his defects. This judgement accords with Keiger's view that Poincare's historical uniqueness lies in precisely how well he exemplified the political culture of his time. It is, however, going rather too far to add that Poincare was thus "the hero of normalcy and moderation" (p. 344).

Given this book's many virtues, it is annoying to have to add that the work is flawed by inadequate copyediting, not to be expected from a press like Cambridge U.P. There are annoying repetitive passages (e.g., pp. 57 & 299) and instances of carelessness, such as the finance minister "Frederique" Francois- Marsal (p. 269). *He* should be Frederic. But the copyediting prize has to go to the author's analysis of French fiscal policy in 1924,

when Poincare pushed through a whacking income tax increase which targeted high-income earners. Keiger explains that this step "enhanced the regressivity [sic] of the tax system by taxing predominantly the wealthy while sparing the middle classes" (p. 307). It makes you wonder what progressive taxation would look like!

These are cavils, however, for Keiger's life of Poincare deserves to become required reading for all Third Republic specialists and all diplomatic historians of the period (and let me add that a reasonably priced paperback edition would be welcome). It has an obvious advantage over Pierre Miquel's older biography in that it incorporates many of the findings of the "new international history" of the 1920s. And because Poincare played a significant role in French politics for four decades, the book also provides an excellent introduction to the political questions which dominated the central years of the Third Republic. In short, this biographical study will be useful to a range of readers from experienced scholars to advanced undergraduates. That in itself is no mean achievement.

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