

Jacques Nobecourt. *Le Colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946, ou les Pièges du Nationalisme Chrétien.* Paris: Fayard, 1996. 1194 pp. 250 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-213-59687-7.



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Lieutenant-colonel François de La Rocque, leader of the *Croix de feu* and *Parti social français* (PSF), has been the subject of much controversy, being described alternately as a fascist or a precursor of Gaullism. Jacques Nobecourt makes his position clear from the start, endorsing René Remond's 1952 thesis that La Rocque in fact discouraged the development of fascism in France by winning the allegiance of those who might have otherwise embarked upon such a course. With a vast array of material at his disposal gathered from various French and foreign archives, he now elaborates upon this point in great detail, arguing that La Rocque developed a political movement which emphasized civic and social responsibility while opposing both National Socialism and Marxism-Leninism. The author also seeks to demonstrate how the bitter political conflict of the time, with its concomitant misrepresentations and slanders, created an inaccurate image of La Rocque which persists to this day.

Born in 1885 in Lorient, La Rocque continued his family's tradition of military service, spending much of his career in North Africa, where he was influenced by Marshal Louis Hubert Lyautey. The legacy of these years was not entirely positive; it included malaria and severe leg wounds sustained in 1916, both of which plagued him for the rest of his life. At the end of his convalescence for

these injuries, La Rocque decided not to return to North Africa, which perturbed Lyautey, and instead secured a transfer to the Western Front, where he fought with distinction. He subsequently served in Poland (1921-23) and then in Morocco during the Rif war (1925-26). These experiences strengthened his anticommunism, but also led to frustrations and disappointments in career advancement. Discouraged with a perceived lack of progress in his career, upset by the death of his eldest son Hugues in 1927—three of his children would eventually predecease him—he retired and was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in 1928.

La Rocque began a civilian career, but he was also interested in public life. He renewed his ties with Lyautey and joined a variety of pressure groups, including the *Croix de feu*, a veteran's association founded by Maurice d'Hartoy in 1927 with the support of the perfume magnate and right-wing activist François Coty. By 1932, La Rocque was in command, moving the association away from what the author sees as a heritage characterized by "*tous les germes d'une mentalité fasciste virtuelle*" (p. 177). Instead, he substituted the conception of a "Christian civilisation" characterised by revamped political structures and national defence but also by social reform. This programme was, the author maintains, of Social Catholic rather than fascist inspiration. La Rocque wanted French

society to be shaped by *la profession organisée*, in which the state would direct collaboration between the various segments of the economy, themselves organized into unions in the context of regional decentralisation. His nationalism was detached from totalitarianism as well the monarchism of his father and brothers. In fact, Nobecourt argues, the slogan "*Travail, Famille, Patrie*," adopted by the PSF and later appropriated by the Vichy regime, was derived from the 1848 Constitution.

So how did the leader of *Croix de feu* come to be regarded as a fascist? Nobecourt admits that his organisation could appear intimidating, but maintains that its intentions were not subversive. Its behaviour during and after the 6 February 1934 riots on the *Place de la Concorde*, he argues, was generally circumspect and guided by Lyautey's maxim: show force in order to avoid using it. Those with a taste for violence soon found themselves rebuked and/or expelled. While conceding that its mobilizations in 1934-35 did sometimes provoke the left, Nobecourt argues that the emerging Popular Front let emotions get the better of judgement and constructed a picture of La Rocque which did not fit reality. J.-M. Hermann, a journalist for the Socialist *Le Populaire* at the time, later told Nobecourt that the *Croix de feu* leader's aristocratic heritage and military background made him an inviting target for left-wing propaganda. His determination to maintain the independence of his association also ensured the enmity of groups such as the *Action française*. In Nobecourt's view, then, La Rocque's attempt to construct a third way between left and right resulted in persecution from both.

Thus, although by early 1936 La Rocque was emphasizing the movement's social orientation rather than its paramilitary potential, with an eye towards transforming it into a political party and thus fully embracing republican legality, the transition from *Croix de feu* to PSF was forced upon him by Leon Blum's Popular Front government. Nobecourt thereafter documents in detail and with indignation the measures taken against the new party by the Popular Front. The right was no less hostile. La Rocque would have nothing to do with conspiratorial right-wing groups such as the *Cagoule*. Attempts to incorporate his movement into more traditional political alliances, such as the Liberty Front launched by former French communist Jacques Doriot, also came to nothing. According to Nobecourt, La Rocque believed that the Liberty Front would only further polarize French politics and encourage more cohesion on the part of the Popular Front. The author concludes that in refusing the alliance, La Rocque helped avert the possibility of a civil war and

a drift of his followers into potentially fascist organizations. He places less emphasis on La Rocque's conviction that his party was the natural leader of the opposition to the Popular Front. Nevertheless, this latter position may have been a contributing factor to the conflict with traditional and extremist nationalists alike, as evidence in the PSF's newspaper, *Le Flambeau*, tends to suggest. In any case, La Rocque's position resulted in a coordinated smear campaign against him in 1937, based on an accusation that he had been funded by former premier Andre Tardieu.

The author believes that, not only did La Rocque survive these convergent assaults of the left and right, but that on the eve of war the PSF was thriving, with three million members and formidable electoral prospects. In August 1939, its leader believed that his analysis of international affairs had been vindicated by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Like much of the French right, La Rocque had bitterly opposed the Popular Front's call for the strengthening of Franco-Soviet relations, and in this context he had alluded to the danger of Nazi-Soviet collusion. Nobecourt, however, presents him as being more consistent than he actually was by failing to point out that in the spring of 1939 La Rocque had admitted the possibility of French economic cooperation with the USSR.

During the *drole de guerre* La Rocque was equally hostile to Nazi Germany and the USSR. Under Vichy, he ordered the PSF to support Petain, but he also expressed reservations about the government's collaboration with Germany. La Rocque even gathered intelligence for the British, although he refused to align with the Gaullists. As in the past, his attempts to pursue an independent course resulted in persecution from both sides: in March 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo, spending the remainder of the war in German prisons. After the Liberation, he was detained by the Gaullist authorities while the PSF was banned. La Rocque died on 28 April 1946, his legal standing still not regularized.

This overview cannot do justice to the wealth of information which Nobecourt provides, in 1,100 pages of text and notes about La Rocque, his associates, followers, and opponents. He also acknowledges that La Rocque could misrepresent his foes: in 1937, for instance, he accused the Freemasons of coordinating the left and right-wing attacks against him. In spite of such nuances, though, the author too often appears to give his subject the benefit of the doubt. It is true that La Rocque espoused a third way between communism and capitalism, and that such ideas cannot automatically be equated with fascism. But

to suggest, as Nobecourt does in his final remarks, that La Rocque never impugned “*la democratie comme systeme de gouvernement ni la Republique comme regime*” (p. 966) goes too far. The leader of the PSF might have been republican in so far as he was not a monarchist; but the sort of republic he envisioned would have been highly authoritarian.

In a 1942 brochure entitled *France d'aujourd'hui, France de demain*, destined for PSF cadres rather than for public consumption, La Rocque remarked that if the elections initially planned for 1940 had brought the movement to power, its first concern would have been to transform French institutions “*suivant des methodes supprimant le vice du parlementarisme*.” Interestingly, despite his clandestine activities against the Nazi occupation, he also expressed respect for the social solidarity inspired by the Nazi government among its soldiers and citizens, even while he disapproved of its “pagan” ethos and biological anti-Semitism. He preferred cultural assimilation, which did not prevent him from strongly denouncing immigrants whom he felt abused French generosity, a position which was hardly unique at the time. Finally, while Nobecourt sometimes debates other participants in this historiographical controversy, notably Robert Soucy, he does not address Kevin Passmore’s analysis of *Croix*

de feu ideology.[1] Nor does the author comment on William Irvine’s observation that in 1938-39 the PSF lost momentum as the Popular Front collapsed and the Daladier government moved to the right.[2] Nevertheless, Nobecourt’s provocative arguments make this biography an interesting study. It will be indispensable to scholars of twentieth-century France, not only for its exhaustive treatment of its subject, but also for its insights into the dynamics of French politics in the 1930s and 1940s.

Notes:

[1]. Kevin Passmore, “The Croix de Feu: Bonapartism, National Populism or Fascism”, *French History* 9:1 (1995): pp. 67-92. While Nobecourt may not have had access to this article, Passmore’s views are also developed in his 1992 Ph.D. dissertation, which is cited in Nobecourt’s bibliography.

[2]. William D. Irvine, “Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu,” *Journal of Modern History* 63:2 (1991): pp. 271-295.

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