

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eugen Weber. *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. xii + 352 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-03671-8.

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Eugen Weber has given us a well-documented but pessimistic portrait of France in the 1930s. He relies on a large variety of primary sources to recapture the mood of the era. His choice of photographs is excellent. *The Hollow Years* is well written and easy to follow, even for those not well versed in French history.

Many authors have tried to understand the defeat of 1940 by scrutinizing the 1930s. Older works, especially in France, have been polemical. They blamed the Left or the Communists, or they denounced a decadent and venal Republic for plunging France, ill-prepared, into an unnecessary war. Others, like Marc Bloch in his wrenching account *L'Etrange défaite*, and in William Shirer's *The Collapse of the Third Republic*, have outlined various factors leading up to the defeat of 1940.

The debate continues. Most recently, Anthony Adamthwaite in *Grandeur & Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe 1914-1940* has argued that 1940 was above all a military defeat. He notes that the tragedy of these years actually went back to the early 1920s, when France lacked the will to exploit the victory of 1918. While Adamthwaite concentrates on foreign policy, some of his arguments are similar to Weber's, though they would disagree on at least one point. Adamthwaite comments that "Crisis, not decline or decadence, best defines France's predicament.... A crisis of confidence" (p. 231). Weber would say "decadence" was the main cause of French defeat.

In his article "Le Desastre de 1940" in *Etudes sur la France de 1939 a nos jours*, Stanley Hoffmann opined that historians should examine the mentality of the French people in the 1930s to comprehend better the causes of defeat in 1940. Weber's *The Hollow Years* may be the answer to Hoffmann's entreaty. Weber's book tries to recapture the French mood by looking at the fears, beliefs, prejudices, and behavior of French people in the 1930s. Weber tells us that his book is about "among other things, above other things...the inexorable march to war of a society that was, and yet was not, helpless to affect its fate"

(p. 6).

J.-B. Duroselle, among others, emphasized the lingering and negative impact of the Great War in his *La Décadence* and *L'Abîme*. Weber picks up the same thread. According to the author, the 1930s actually started in August 1914: the memory of the Great War was very much alive in the 1930s. But people remembered not the victory, not the heroism of the French *poilu*, but the butchery, the trauma of losing a husband or a son or sons. Physical and psychological wounds were deeply embedded in the consciousness of the French people. War was a horror to be avoided at all cost. Patriotism was dead. It had died in the trenches (p. 17).

Fear of war, Weber notes, made the French forget that force or the threat of force could stop German aggression. "One thing no one bothered to pretend was that force existed to be used" (p. 244). The army embraced a defensive strategy and "soldiers forgot that attack at times could be the best defense" (p. 244). Army leaders did not trust the morale of their troops and the troops did not trust the competence of their generals. When war was declared, the French sat and waited for the Germans to take the initiative.

The Hollow Years is about more than pacifism or defeatism. Throughout the book, Weber presents numerous testimonies to illustrate how the 1930s were "increasingly morose, ill at ease" (p. 6). Every event, every crisis, every development of the decade deepened that mood and eventually paralyzed the nation.

Pessimism was fed by the Great Depression, which came to France later than elsewhere, but lasted longer. Weber mentions that unemployment, based on official figures, was lower than elsewhere due to the demographic crisis and that "few men who were less than fifty experienced the demeaning sense of long-term uselessness that so many felt in the British Isles" (p. 35). Yet the author reminds us that the French were affected by loss of jobs, declining income, bankruptcy, and other by-products of the depression. Governments concen-

trated on defending the franc and balancing the budget, which increased hardship and delayed recovery. People imitated the government by tightening their belts, further depressing demand for manufactured goods. “The spirit of Thomas Malthus ruled over the land” (p. 54). Economists blamed the depression on too many machines and overproduction!

Politicians further contributed to the unsettled atmosphere of the decade. Weber considers them to have been ineffective: “What seems more striking is how extraordinarily difficult the governors made government, and how tenuous. Their time and energy drained in endless jockeying and parliamentary maneuvers, political figures found less opportunity to address issues that clamored for attention...” (p. 113). Governments of the Left were no more successful than governments of the Right in solving the country’s problems. Scandals were never ending. People lost faith in government and the state. Instead, they went on strikes and demonstrated or brawled in the streets to proclaim their discontents. In the end, troubled citizens blamed and scorned their political representatives, while “[t]he representatives in public blamed each other, [but] in private disparaged the electorate they wooed” (p. 112).

“The problems of the nation might have looked clearer if the nation had been more clearly one” (p. 113). *The Hollow Years* recounts the deep divisions in French society. Modernizers opposed traditionalists, technocrats offended individualists, Catholics battled anti-clericals and each other, and Leftists fought the Right and among themselves. These divisions played out in politics, in economics, in religion. Internal affairs dictated responses to foreign crises. The Popular Front government’s reaction to the Spanish civil war (July 1936) provides an illustration: “Would the Left coalition in Paris lend aid to the Left coalition threatened by Franco’s rebels? Of course. And then, no” (p. 166).

According to the author, newspapers became carriers of disorder and anxiety (p. 131). The Parisian press was corrupt and “readers had no way of knowing whether facts had been distorted, suppressed, even invented...” (p. 130). Books, films, and articles played upon the xenophobia and anti-Semitism always latent in France. It was easier to blame foreigners and Jews for all the nation’s woes than to face up to hard and complex verities. Stories about scandals and bankruptcies sold more newspapers. Anti-Americanism was also popular. People took refuge in detective stories and exoticism.

Women had little to cheer about. Weber points out the difficulties professional women experienced: “Wel-

comed during and after the war, tolerated as times got harder, by 1934 and 1935 women found themselves brutally sidelined or expelled with a minimum of formalities or excuses” (p. 83). For most women, housework was hindered by the lack of such modern conveniences as refrigerators, washing machines, or good stoves, compliments of the inefficiency and backward mentality of French industry. While acknowledging some progress in the legal status of women, Weber affirms that women were still considered “second-class workers, second-class citizens” (p. 84). The vote was beyond their reach.

Other aspects of French life depicted in *The Hollow Years* reinforce the sense of confusion and disorder that seemed to reign in the country. As Weber recounts his sorrowful tale of the thirties, the reader looks to the author’s view of the 1940 defeat. Was it all inevitable, preordained, because of the fear and divisions so aptly described in the book? Weber tells us that 1940 was a military defeat, but “political decadence—failure of thought and policy—must also bear some responsibility for military defeat” (p. 246). Weber also blames the Phony War: “The conclusion is hard to avoid that the long months of inaction...sapped what resolution there had been and prepared the rout to come” (p. 272). However, the scenario of defeat was not preordained. Weber strongly believes that men and women “are not *objects* of history—playthings of tides, currents, laws that they can’t deflect. They are responsible *subjects*: actors who write and rewrite their script while moving from one decision to the next or, failing to decide, resign the script to others” (p. 6). The French were, theoretically, masters of their destiny.

Weber concludes that “The French of the 1930s would not, could not decide. They allowed others to forge their destiny and had to pay for this abdication” (p. 6). Weber does not tell us clearly what it is the French could not decide. Is the reader to infer that the French could not decide whether to stand up to Hitler or not? Certainly the Phony War would provide a case in point for Weber’s argument: France declared war, but refrained from fighting until attacked. But in other instances, France did choose. Contrary to Weber’s inference, France chose peace at all costs to avoid a repetition of 1914. Ultimately, that choice was wrong, but it was a choice nevertheless. Adamthwaite in *Grandeur and Misery* has argued that France chose to deal with Hitler through “diplomacy—in other words, appeasement. The objective was a European settlement negotiated from strength....But, the hope was that, with perseverance and German goodwill, a satisfactory compromise could be negotiated quickly—avoiding war and a ruinous arms race” (p. 209).

Weber does not specify what alternative course of action the French could have pursued to stop German aggression. Should they have marched in 1936 to stop the remilitarization of the Rhineland? Should they have gone to the defense of Czechoslovakia in 1938? Weber says that the *anti-Munichois*, those who opposed the “lickspittle policy” of capitulation, “thought less of fighting Germans than of calling Hitler’s bluff. Rightly persuaded that the dictator could have been faced in 1936, they thought that a challenge in 1938 would have the same effect. They did not stop to consider that France in 1938 was relatively much weaker not only in armaments but in manpower...” (p. 177). Is the reader to conclude that France missed its chance in 1936 and that by 1938, it was too late?

The tone of *The Hollow Years* is not one of sympathy. Maybe none is due. “Personal commitment, responsibility, creativity, honor alone offered a little hope amidst growing despair. Not placing blame on foreigners, politicians, capitalists, or collectivists. But that only became clearer after 1940, and even then to far from all” (p. 236). France ignored the admonitions of those who advocated resistance to fascism. While agreeing with the author that one has to accept the consequences of one’s action or inaction and that people, not institutions, make history, a reader might wonder whether there was really anyone of integrity and courage left in France in the 1930s. *The Hollow Years* does mention that some people were patriots and saw fascism for the evil that it was. Yet, those individuals are almost absent from Weber’s story. Is it

because they had little impact on their compatriots?

Weber has harsh words for the France of the 1930s: “a developed country in an advanced stage of decay” (p. 7). French democracy fares no better. France “was ruled, as Athens was, by the will of little people and of middling people, and by the demagogues they elected; it was taught by the Sophists, whom Plato had denounced; it was hobbled less by the unimaginative self-confidence of the Spartans than by moral laziness and fear” (p. 5). Given this perspective, a reader might almost applaud the fact that the Third Republic did not survive 1940. Yet, that same reader may want to consider, as Adamthwaite did, that for all of its weaknesses, France was still an island of democracy in a sea of dictatorship and totalitarian regimes.

Weber’s book is well worth reading. It provides vivid descriptions of everyday life sometimes forgotten in the midst of foreign crises and high politics, and leaves one wanting to know more about many of the individuals and groups that lived during this fateful decade. One also wishes for Weber to pick up the story in a new book and show how some of the creative trends described in *The Hollow Years* blossomed in the forties and thereafter, and assisted with the postwar recovery. The subject has been covered before, but Weber would surely bring us interesting and challenging insights.

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