Between Justice and Politics: The Ligue des droits de l’homme, 1898-1945

Roundtable Review

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5 October 2007
William Irvine is a master historian; any subject he chooses to address will be examined with brio, elegance, clarity and wit, and any assertions he makes will be grounded on intensive and careful research.

His new book, so forcefully and accurately titled, offers us a fascinating portrait, judicious and balanced, of a uniquely French institution, both profoundly admirable and profoundly flawed. The closest American parallel, which he discusses carefully, pinpointing a few similarities and significant differences, is the American Civil Liberties Union.

Irvine was able to research this book, the first full-length study of the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* (henceforth LDH) since 1927, because the archives of the LDH, after dramatic peregrinations, found their way back to France from Moscow, and finally became available to scholars in 2002.

The LDH, founded at the peak of the Dreyfus Affair in 1898, and initially focused on the defense of Captain Dreyfus, became the largest and most influential civil rights organization in the world. The first 42 years of the LDH’s history were played out against the background of the French Third Republic, and Irvine has a remarkable ability to render that regime’s immensely complicated history clear to a 21st century Anglophone readership. Without this background the reader might be lost, finding the LDH incomprehensibly strange, almost extraterrestrial.

The LDH’s energy was undeniable, the range of its concerns and the number of cases its local sections addressed extraordinary (as many as 20,000 cases annually, with roughly one in twenty deemed to have enough merit to be sent up to Paris). Irvine has a wonderful gift for choosing the apt illustrative detail, for example, the section in Maçon once weighted equally two resolutions, one dealing with the separation of church and state, the other with postage rates for local newspapers.

Irvine remarks convincingly, “It is hard to imagine that any organization as large as the League was ever as openly and as transparently democratic.” He documents carefully its origins, growth, and structure, the basic unit being the local section, with a Central

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1 That is still a significant number, and each was examined with great care and patience. “There can be no doubt about the merits of many of the cases the League chose to pursue.” (p. 123.)

2 Irvine, p. 17.
Committee, mostly composed of Parisians, as the governing body. He examines the social and religious background of its membership³, and its gender ratio (a low percentage of women members)⁴.

A constant theme of League discourse was that its ideal of justice would be tarnished if it involved itself in “partisan issues.” Irvine demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that this so frequently articulated assertion was for the most part “patently untrue.”⁵ All throughout its history, politics simply could not be excised from the League’s concerns and debates. Over the years there were periodic pleas from individual members to concentrate on the League’s original mandate – defending the rights of man and the citizen - and not get involved in politics. Those pleas were almost totally ignored.

Beginning in the 1920s, the general political position of the LDF moved leftward, but even after 1935, when the 3rd International lifted the ban on Parti communiste français members from joining, there is little evidence, despite conservative accusations, that Communists ever infiltrated the LDH. Indeed, the (misnamed) Radical Party, which traditionally was the dominant political grouping in the LDH, at least until the 1930s, when the socialist party (SFIO) gained influence, was “at ease with a rhetoric that went far beyond anything [its leadership] ever intended to do.”⁶ The revolutionary rhetoric, the attack on the “puissances d’argent,” for example, of the LDH was always a sort of mask, though some of its membership appeared to have taken it seriously.

There is a tragic and painful paradox within the interwar history of the LDH, which Irvine addresses with tact and skill, namely that a significant minority of its membership, including some of its ablest and most articulate leaders, began in the 1920s to inject a hint of anti-Semitism into their rhetoric. In the 1930s they began to advocate fascist methods and developed an admiration, if reluctant, for the fascist states surround an increasingly embattled Third Republic. After the Fall of France in May-June 1940, a number of them collaborated with the Vichy Regime.⁷ Irvine documents this mysterious and painful

³ Largely middle class and professional, with a significantly higher percentage of Protestants, Jews, and Freemasons than in the French population at large.

⁴ As is well known, women did not get the vote in France until 1944. Irvine is brilliant on the LDH’s ambivalence regarding women’s suffrage, which technically they supported. Regarding how to implement it, by 1925 they actually retreated from positions they had taken in 1909! (p. 84.) The extraordinary hesitation to advocate such an obviously just reform was largely due to the perceived “clerical peril.” (p 89). If women got the vote, they would cast their ballots following the instructions of their priests.

⁵ Irvine, p. 20. Almost from its inception, the League was “deeply enmeshed in the day-to-day politics of France.” (p. 52.)

⁶ Irvine, p. 43.

⁷ To be sure a number of former members of the LDH, banned by the occupation authorities after the fall of France in 1940, joined the resistance. That is not the slightest bit surprising, nor is the courage and dignity manifested by the league President, Victor Basch, who was murdered by the Vichy milice in 1944.
“deviation” superbly, but it is very difficult to explain.

The paradox of an important minority within an organization dedicated to human rights able, for example, to offer a “startlingly benign assessment of Nazi Germany,”\(^8\) leads me to my first question for Professor Irvine. Can he examine the roots of this paradox more thoroughly, whether in a second edition or a separate article? One clue could be to look at the intellectuals, and here I refer readers of H-Diplo to a brilliant work of intellectual history by Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave*, sub-titled “French Literature under the Threat of War.”\(^9\)

All of Hollier’s principal characters, the intellectuals from the generation of the 1930s, were reacting, in complex and convoluted ways, to the rise of fascism and more generally totalitarianism in that decade. Hollier documents a “totalitarian desire” among the intellectuals. I wonder if that desire spread to the LDH, part of a sinister, defeatist climate of opinion.

The other panelists, will, of course, examine different aspects of Irvine’s remarkable book. (For example, I hope that the complex and difficult issue of press freedom, and the LDH’s deliberate and rather distasteful ignoring of that liberty in the 1930s, which I do not have space to discuss here, will be addressed by my colleagues.)

I would like to close with a request and a question.

First the request: I hope very much William Irvine will consider a second volume, building upon his excellent “Epilogue,” and carry the history of the LDH down to the present day. Even though its post-1945 membership has been much smaller than its 180,000 peak in 1933, it remains very active in promoting human rights, and not just within France, as a look at its website will demonstrate.

My question, to become pertinent, needs a little background. In April 1958, four of France’s leading intellectuals – André Malraux, Roger Martin du Gard, François Mauriac, and Jean-Paul Sartre, signed a “Solemn Petition to the President of the [Fourth] Republic. They were protesting against the seizure of Henri Alleg’s, *The Question*, the powerful and moving, and today still profoundly pertinent\(^10\), account of the torture Henri Alleg endured in Algiers in the hands of General Jacques Massu’s paratroopers, half a century ago.

\(^8\) Irvine, p. 150.


The four intellectuals, three of them Nobel Prize winners (though Sartre formally refused his award in 1964), asked that the facts reported by Alleg be publicly and impartially disclosed, and they:

“—call on the Administration, in the name of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, to condemn unequivocally the use of torture, which brings shame to the cause that it supposedly serves.

“—and call on all Frenchmen to join us in signing this ‘personal petition’ and in sending it to the League for the Rights of Man...”

I ask Professor Irvine why in 1958 these four great writers chose the much weakened and smaller LDH for this purpose, and whether the archives indicate how many French men (and women) added their names to this “personal petition”. My personal hope would be many thousands, more than the four thousand who signed the “Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority,” of October 1967, the single most influential petition of our Vietnam era. But I am ready to be disappointed.

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11 The petition was reprinted on the front page of l’Humanité, April 17, 1958, and in translation in the 1958 American edition of The Question (New York: George Braziller), p. 123. I have used this translation.