

# Pitfalls of Paramilitarism: The *Croix de Feu*, the *Parti Social Français*, and the French State, 1934-39

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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**Pitfalls of Paramilitarism: The *Croix de Feu*,  
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and the French State, 1934-39**

by  
Sean Kennedy

**ABSTRACT**

*As early as 1933, the French rightist movement, the Croix de Feu, was proclaiming its willingness to threaten the use of force in order to achieve its political goals. However, this strategy proved risky for the French right, which was fragmented. Moreover, compared to its Italian and German counterparts, the French Third Republic dealt with the far right in a more robust manner; the police were reliable and the left-wing Popular Front government banned the Croix de Feu. But the group's leader, Lieutenant-Colonel François de La Rocque, responded by creating a new right-wing group: the Parti Social Français (PSF). The PSF not only resumed many of the Croix de Feu's paramilitary activities, but also blamed rising political violence on the French left, an argument recently used by its predecessor. While continuing to act belligerently, the PSF claimed that the Popular Front sought to repress it and democratic liberties in general, a strategy which helped to demoralize the left and undermine the Popular Front. The Croix de Feu and the PSF did much to exacerbate the crisis of democracy that afflicted France in the late 1930s. Their tactics illustrate how the politics of the street, coupled with exploitation of the rhetoric of democracy, can weaken even long-established parliamentary systems.*

**INTRODUCTION**

In 1933, as the Great Depression took its toll on France and accusations of political corruption spread, Lieutenant-Colonel François de La Rocque, leader of the ultra-nationalist *Croix de Feu* movement, declared in an open letter to the government of the day that, “our moral ascendancy, exerting itself from one end of the country to the other, will regenerate order. If the weakness of the public powers fetters its advent, our vibrant, organized mass will know how to impose it.”<sup>1</sup> This statement highlighted La Rocque’s willingness to threaten to use force in order to achieve his political goals. Adopting such a strategy proved risky for

the French rightist group, however, for compared to its Italian and German counterparts the French Third Republic proved more robust in dealing with the far right. Following the election of the left-wing Popular Front government in 1936 the *Croix de Feu* was banned. But La Rocque responded by creating a new movement: the *Parti Social Français* (PSF). The PSF not only resumed many of the *Croix de Feu*'s paramilitary activities, but also blamed rising political violence on the French left, an argument recently used by its predecessor. While continuing to act in a belligerent manner the PSF claimed that the Popular Front sought to repress it and democratic liberties in general, a propaganda strategy which helped to demoralize the left and undermine the Popular Front. The tactics of the *Croix de Feu* and PSF illustrate how the politics of the street, coupled with exploiting the rhetoric of democracy, can weaken even long-established parliamentary systems.

The role of political violence in facilitating the rise of far-right movements during the interwar years is well known. In Italy the Fascist movement capitalized upon the social upheavals and fear of left-wing revolution extant in the wake of the First World War to capture political power. The *squadristi* formed by Benito Mussolini's supporters provided an outlet for the violence craved by some veterans but the attacks on Socialist organizers and strikers were not anarchic. They were part of an integrated strategy, aimed at demonstrating that the Italian state in its current form could not fend off a revolutionary threat; that only the Fascists could provide the necessary leadership. Violence itself did not suffice to win power for the Fascists; backroom political dealings were also crucial. But it weakened the Socialists and convinced elements of the police, judiciary, and ultimately the political class, that Mussolini and his unruly movement would be valuable partners.<sup>2</sup>

Violence was also crucial to the triumph of the Nazi movement. While the failure of the Beer Hall *Putsch* of 1923 showed Adolf Hitler that a coup was not feasible, the use of massive rallies and confrontations with political opponents in conjunction with electoral activity and negotiation ultimately proved effective. Using tactics pioneered by Josef Goebbels in Berlin, the Nazis would seek out battles with their enemies — above all the communists — by staging demonstrations in working-class areas in the hope of stimulating counter-demonstrations and clashes. Again the aim was to impress potential recruits with the movement's activism, highlight the prevalence of a left-wing threat, and underscore the inability of Germany's democratic state to curtail it. There were some Nazi murder squads that targeted individual left-wing activists but most of the NSDAP's violence was tactical, aimed at winning symbolic victories over its foes to facilitate the conquest of state authority.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to the upheavals of postwar Italy and interwar Germany, France enjoyed much greater stability. While the Third Republic, established amidst the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, always had its foes, the intense social upheaval

that characterized the immediate postwar years in Italy was less severe in France. Nor was France hit as hard by the Great Depression as was Weimar Germany. But the country did experience crises of various sorts, which were accompanied by bouts of political violence. The disturbances were especially serious between 1934 and 1938, a period of economic distress and political polarization; some 50 people lost their lives in various confrontations. While this figure is far lower than the 1,500 people killed by the Italian Fascists between 1919 and 1921, and the three to four hundred who died in clashes between the Nazi Storm Troopers and the Communists, the significance of the violence should not be understated.<sup>4</sup> A march by nationalist and other protest movements on the Chamber of Deputies in Paris on 6 February 1934 led to rioting, 15 deaths, and the resignation of a prime minister. It was the worst violence the capital had experienced since the Commune of 1870-71 and inaugurated a period of growing division between the political left and right. On the left a belief that the 6 February riots were an attempted fascist coup spawned an alliance between the Radical, Socialist, and Communist parties known as the Popular Front. It promised to combat the effects of the Depression and dissolve the 'fascist leagues,' as the ultra-nationalist associations were dubbed. The right was, in turn, galvanized by opposition to the Popular Front. It argued that the latter represented an attempt to spread Bolshevism in France and some of the right's supporters threatened violence to counter such a trend.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its shared and visceral opposition to the Popular Front, the French far right was highly fragmented at this time; older movements such as the *Action Française* co-existed with newer formations such as the *Jeunesses Patriotes* and *Solidarité Française*. Outdistancing them all, however, was the *Croix de Feu*. Formed in 1927, four years later the organization came under the leadership of La Rocque, who worked feverishly at refining its ideology and expanding its membership. He and his colleagues developed a message of 'national reconciliation,' calling upon the French people to transcend their country's historic division between left and right and recreate the *union sacrée* of 1914-1918. The chief obstacles to this process were the corrupt parliamentary system and the forces of Marxism; eliminating them implied the construction of an authoritarian political system, though *Croix de Feu* orators remained vague about this goal. This anti-democratic, ultra-nationalist message was not very different from that espoused by other far-right groups, but the *Croix de Feu* proved able to attract many more supporters than its competitors and had as many as 500,000 members by 1936.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons for the growing prominence of the *Croix de Feu* was the distinctive character of its mass mobilizations. It had engaged in these from its inception but under La Rocque's leadership it developed squads of *dispos* to provide security at meetings and perform special tasks, which sometimes included disrupting opponents' meetings. La Rocque wished to ensure that his supporters remained motivated; at the same time, he tried to reassure the general public — and gain further support — by emphasizing that the *Croix de Feu* was

a disciplined force for order, not a group of subversives. He liked to cite an adage by one of his former superior officers, the colonial administrator Marshal Lyautey, to the effect that his men would “show force in order to avoid having to use it.”<sup>7</sup> While in retrospect such a justification may seem dubious, it impressed a growing number of French citizens in the wake of the February 1934 riots. La Rocque initially hesitated to involve the *Croix de Feu* in those demonstrations for fear of losing control over his supporters. But once committed the movement engaged en masse, while trying to project an image of greater cohesion and discipline compared to the other nationalist leagues. In this it appears to have been successful. While shocked that the police did not hesitate to use force against them — two members were injured by bullets and over 120 received other injuries — the *Croix de Feu* received a good deal of press attention and entered a period of rapid membership growth.<sup>8</sup>

For the remainder of 1934 the Socialist and Communist parties worked to regain the initiative in the streets by staging massive anti-fascist demonstrations. The *Croix de Feu* responded with its own rallies, emphasizing its prowess and independence. When the government tried to impose conditions on the movement’s participation in commemorations for the Battle of the Marne in September, the *Croix de Feu* refused to accept them and organized its own separate parade at Chantilly; motorcades transported supporters there and a column of 12,000 men formed up very rapidly. So frenzied was the political climate that observers such as the American ambassador speculated the parade was a dry run for more dramatic measures. La Rocque seemed to hint at this when he declared that

the current parliamentarism is forfeit. . . . Nothing will be gained without a preliminary cleansing of committees, journalistic and other headquarters where anonymous powers exercise their absolutism over a blind universal suffrage. . . . As for the Croix de Feu movement, its path is clear. . . . The bulk of our fellow citizens are waiting for us to organize, guide, and lead them in order to serve them better.<sup>9</sup>

It seems unlikely, however, that La Rocque ever believed mass demonstrations alone could bring about the collapse of the government; he viewed them as part of a variegated political strategy. In contrast to postwar Italy, where growing numbers of the police and judiciary turned a blind eye to Fascist violence, or the late Weimar Republic, where they became increasingly alienated from the democratic regime, in France during the 1930s the police were more politically reliable.<sup>10</sup> La Rocque seemed aware of this and therefore was mindful of the possibility that his movement might be banned; indeed, a growing number of politicians were demanding just such a measure. While he publicly mocked the idea, within the movement supporters were urged to remain calm if it happened. After some *Croix de Feu* militants attacked the headquarters of the Socialist newspa-

per, *Le Populaire*, La Rocque reiterated warnings to his supporters to avoid “provocations.”<sup>11</sup> But he was also aware of the propagandistic benefits of paramilitarism. Writing in the movement’s newspaper, *Le Flambeau*, he argued that rallies could win over the left-wing rank and file: “in the course of his mobilizations against us [the communist] is doubtless subjugated by our number, but also by our smiling and friendly calmness, our firmness in our ardent mystique; he trembles in union with our popular reflexes.” Mass mobilizations also highlighted the ability of the *Croix de Feu* to counter a revolutionary threat if the Third Republic was unwilling to do so: “if the governments shrink before their essential task, [the *Croix de Feu*] will have to show them the way, or substitute itself for them.”<sup>12</sup>

With these goals in mind, and facing continuous pressure from some members for a more belligerent stance, the *Croix de Feu* continued its paramilitary activities.<sup>13</sup> Over the spring, summer, and fall of 1935, massive rallies were held throughout France and in Algeria, where the movement had established a substantial presence. One parade held at Oued-Smar in June 1935 was attended by 15,000 members and featured the use of aircraft as well. While *Croix de Feu* orators depicted such events as both “virile and gentle,” and stressed that the participants were “neither conspirators nor fascists,” in Algeria the authorities noted that La Rocque threatened to “unleash” the movement, a remark they found very disturbing.<sup>14</sup>

It has been argued that while such rhetoric sounded menacing, in practice La Rocque avoided subversion and discouraged systematic violence. Left-wing accusations that *Croix de Feu* supporters were plotting armed insurrection proved false, while supporters of the Popular Front were themselves involved in provocative demonstrations and engaged in violence against their opponents.<sup>15</sup> But while there is certainly plenty of evidence that left-wing militants contributed to the growing tensions of the 1930s, the *Croix de Feu*’s responsibility for this state of affairs was also considerable. In Algeria, for instance, its militants sought to encourage anti-Semitism among Muslims.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, *Croix de Feu* members carried out motorized expeditions into towns and suburbs known to be sympathetic to the left; this aroused counter-demonstrations and violence often ensued. The most notorious of these incidents occurred in the city of Limoges in November 1935. Local Popular Front supporters viewed the holding of a *Croix de Feu* meeting in the city hall as a provocation and organized a protest led by the city’s socialist mayor. The crowd broke through a police cordon and came face to face with *Croix de Feu* security. Shots rang out; no one died but over a dozen *Croix de Feu* supporters were injured, with similar casualties on the opposing side. In the wake of the event La Rocque insisted it was the demonstrators who had fired first and that his supporters were acting only in self-defense. Be that as it may, it appears that supporters of the *Croix de Feu* also had used firearms.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, paramilitary mobilizations were an important — though perilous — component of the *Croix de Feu*'s strategy to gain support and win power. Unlike Mussolini and Hitler, La Rocque and his colleagues tended to avoid depicting violence as having a regenerative quality and the league's stance appeared more 'defensive' than that of the Nazis or the Italian Fascists. But in functional terms the *Croix de Feu*'s mass rallies and intimations of more drastic action, like those of the German and Italian far right, sought to attract and energize supporters and in the process encourage political upheaval. The problem was that by the fall of 1935 the *Croix de Feu* found it increasingly difficult to portray itself as being more disciplined than the other right-wing leagues; instead it was increasingly regarded as a threat to public order. Crucially, the centrist Radical party, key to the formation of French governments, now joined the Popular Front in calling for the dissolution of the *Croix de Feu* and other groups. The government responded by mobilizing additional police and threatening to arrest La Rocque.<sup>18</sup>

The *Croix de Feu* reacted to these developments with a major shift in tactics. La Rocque created the *Mouvement Social Français des Croix de Feu* in November 1935 as an umbrella for the league and its associated movements. The change in name was intended to emphasize the 'social' mission of the organization. This had been expressed for some time through initiatives such as the operation of soup kitchens but was now intensified. The movement contrasted such benevolent activities, and the "discipline" and "calm" of its supporters, with the violent outlook of its foes. *Le Flambeau* carried accounts of how members of the *Croix de Feu* had suffered assaults at the hands of Popular Front militants.<sup>19</sup> Most dramatically of all, on 6 December 1935 one of the *Croix de Feu*'s leading spokesmen in the Chamber of Deputies, Jean Ybarnégaray, publicly offered a 'mutual disarmament' pact to the left-wing parties — without ever stating that the nationalist leagues were in fact armed. According to one source, the offer was made in the hope that the left would refuse it, thereby discrediting itself and strengthening the *Croix de Feu*'s claim to be the true source for peace and national reconciliation. Instead the offer was accepted. This necessitated an end to the *Croix de Feu*'s paramilitary activities, a decision that led to some bitter criticism from within the movement.<sup>20</sup>

Curbing its paramilitary activities did not save the *Croix de Feu* from dissolution. Various elements of the nationalist leagues continued to engage in violence; members of the *Action Française* assaulted Léon Blum, leader of the Socialist party, in February 1936, putting him in hospital. For the left this meant that all of the leagues had to be disbanded. Accordingly, following a heated election campaign, which culminated in the triumph of the Popular Front, the nationalist associations, including the *Croix de Feu*, were dissolved.<sup>21</sup> But this was not the end of the story. Though the *Croix de Feu* had failed in its effort to thwart the Popular Front and win power, its espousal of paramilitarism certainly had attract-

ed supporters. And while the rallies and motorized expeditions into left-wing territory made the organization controversial, the league's efforts to turn the tables on the left, by making the Socialists and Communists appear unruly, were canny, if for the time being unsuccessful. Immediately following the dissolution La Rocque created the PSF to continue the work of the *Croix de Feu*, and initially the new movement adopted a similar repertoire of tactics. Though this course of action caused troubles for the PSF, it also helped to undermine the Popular Front government.

The victory of the Popular Front was accompanied by considerable political turmoil. In the summer and fall of 1936, a combination of working-class frustration at the impact of the Great Depression and jubilation at the victory of the left, led to a massive wave of labor unrest; the government recorded 12,142 strikes involving 1.83 million workers in the month of June alone.<sup>22</sup> Fears of a Communist-inspired revolution, while overblown, were widespread on the political right. In the Chamber of Deputies conservative parliamentarians accused Léon Blum's new government of being a stalking horse for the Soviet Union. More extreme foes of the French left decided to resort to conspiracy and terror. Even before the Popular Front took power dissident members of the Action Française movement formed the *Organisation Secrète d'Action Révolutionnaire Nationale* (OSARN), nicknamed the Cagoule, which sought to overthrow the Republic in a coup d'état and establish an authoritarian regime. While the actual size of the Cagoule has been estimated at perhaps 2,000 members, it had contacts with senior military officers, garnered considerable financial backing, and received support from foreign powers, notably Fascist Italy and General Franco's Spanish Nationalists.<sup>23</sup>

The Cagoule did not achieve its goal but it did wreak considerable havoc. It procured firearms, grenades, and munitions in substantial quantities. Cagoule members carried out assassinations on French soil, the best-known of which were the killings of the Italian anti-Fascist exiles Carlo and Nello Rosselli in June 1937. Later that same year the organization bombed at a French airport two airplanes intended for the Spanish Republicans. They also set off explosives at the headquarters of two major business organizations in Paris in the hopes of implicating the Communists and encouraging an atmosphere conducive to a right-wing coup; the explosions killed two policemen. However, the group's plans to launch a coup on 15-16 November 1937 fizzled; French police had already begun arresting and questioning *cagouleurs* two months earlier and the conspiracy was broken by the end of the year, though in January 1938 a cache of arms uncovered in the Parisian district of Villejuif exploded, killing 14 people.<sup>24</sup> Though ultimately a failure, the Cagoule conspiracy showed how precarious the situation in France was and how far elements of the extreme right were prepared to go.

In creating the PSF La Rocque chose a different path from that of the *cagouleurs*, by seeking to spread authoritarian, nationalist values in France



through the electoral process rather than by armed conspiracy. In numerical terms his project met with great success; thousands of former *Croix de Feu* supporters flocked to the new party, which also attracted a huge number of new recruits; by 1938, the PSF may have had as many as 1.2 million members.<sup>25</sup> But some former *Croix de Feu* members and PSF supporters opposed what they saw as La Rocque's timidity and aligned themselves with the Cagoule. In doing so they severed their ties with their former leader, who for his part warned his supporters against associating with subversives.<sup>26</sup> That said, in 1936-37 the PSF's conduct remained incendiary and some of its members engaged in political violence. La Rocque had whipped up anti-leftist hysteria during the 1936 election campaign by claiming that the Communists were planning an armed revolution.<sup>27</sup> Following the Popular Front victory he and his lieutenants initially cautioned against violence but as tensions mounted in the fall of 1936 La Rocque began to intimate that 'defensive' actions might be necessary in order to halt left-wing subversion. Speaking at a September 1936 rally, for instance, he declared that "certain directives given to the *Croix de Feu*, notably those which prescribe not to respond to provocations, are no longer valid."<sup>28</sup>

Given the turbulent political atmosphere, such remarks likely encouraged some militants to take matters into their own hands. In Paris about 10,000 people, many of them *ex-Croix de Feu* as well as supporters of other dissolved leagues, fought with the police at the Place d'Étoile on 5 July 1936, injuring over 100 officers. That same month *Croix de Feu*/PSF supporters briefly took over government offices in the department of the Puy-de-Dôme, while in November right-wing militants 'pre-emptively' occupied factories in Troyes and Dijon.<sup>29</sup> In the department of Oran in Algeria PSF supporters were charged with procuring and distributing arms.<sup>30</sup> These various incidents were the result of local initiatives rather than central party planning; accusations from the PSF's foes that it was planning a coup were unfounded. But as two police investigators put it, while there was little evidence of a central campaign of subversion, the PSF's behavior was such that rumours to this effect could seem plausible.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the PSF leadership did have a plan to capitalize upon the political violence in order to brand the left as the true fomenters of disorder. While the *Croix de Feu* had already tried something along these lines, with the Popular Front now in power a rather different approach was required, something which Edmond Barrachin, director of the PSF's political bureau, quickly grasped. He argued that the PSF now had to present itself as a defender of the Republic against left-wing violence. To this end he recommended it organize a rally in defence of the republican regime. This action would enrage the PSF's opponents, who had claimed this role for themselves by holding anti-fascist demonstrations. Moreover, it would "have an effect on the average voter, who believes only what is said and repeated to him firmly."<sup>32</sup> Barrachin's cynical tone suggests that the PSF's contempt for democracy was as strong as the *Croix de Feu*'s had been but his argument for a shift in tactics by claiming the party was a bastion of the Third

Republic was subsequently used to considerable effect.

The first real opportunity to employ this approach came on 2 October 1936, when Paris's prefect of police banned a previously scheduled PSF rally on the grounds that the Communists had threatened to disrupt it. La Rocque was enraged when he learned that the prefect would not ban a Communist rally scheduled for two days later, even though the PSF had indicated it would stage a counter-demonstration. Accordingly, the party turned out in force on 4 October, with between 15,000 and 20,000 militants protesting at the Communist gathering. PSF members threw stones at buses taking people into the stadium and clashed with the large police force assigned to protect the meeting, injuring 30 officers. In return over 1,100 PSF militants were arrested and 11 were charged, two for carrying firearms and one for having an offensive weapon — a dog-leash, something which the party later used to ridicule the 'justice' of the Blum government.<sup>33</sup> Then, on 8 October police raided the PSF's offices as well as the residences of La Rocque and other leading members. They were accused of reconstituting the banned *Croix de Feu* and of "provoking an illegal assembly . . . with felonious intent."<sup>34</sup>

Resorting to political violence had thus brought the threat of a second dissolution upon the PSF. La Rocque and his supporters, however, tried to turn the tables on the Popular Front, comparing the actions of the left-wing government to those of the Soviet *Cheka* and declaring that, in charging the PSF, "republican liberties" were being put on trial.<sup>35</sup> Like the *Croix de Feu*, the PSF press drew attention to attacks on its members by left-wing militants, two of which were fatal. When the nine-year-old son of a PSF member was killed by other youths, as he attempted to sell tombola tickets for a Catholic charity in a working-class neighbourhood, *Le Flambeau* concluded that the incident was the fault of the adults who had implanted hatred in the children's minds and of the propaganda of the Popular Front that encouraged it.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the PSF constantly accused the government of destroying the freedom of assembly, contending that while its meetings were banned from public places on the grounds that they would provoke clashes, the left-wing parties suffered from no such restrictions.<sup>37</sup> The party also instructed members of the EVP (*Équipes Volantes de Propagande*), the successors to the *dispos*, to report all assaults by political opponents to the authorities and ensure that they were photographed, either in bed or with their bandages.<sup>38</sup>

Faced with the threat of dissolution and seeking to expand further its support base, the PSF had thus tried to position itself as a moderate party committed to the Third Republic, desirous only of preserving order within the context of democratic liberties. It is therefore worth noting that many PSF supporters remained quite belligerent at this time. In October 1936, party militants in Béziers met opposing demonstrators with phials of sulphurous gas. In December, the authorities observed that PSF rallies and forays into working-class suburbs

continued to exacerbate tensions. Characterized by “an air of quasi-military preparations,” they “caused a growing nervousness among the population of the Paris suburbs which consider them as provocations.” In a similar vein the administration in Algeria reported that local PSF militants persisted in organizing motorized expeditions and rallies. A few individual militants went much further; in the department of the Gironde a Socialist municipal councillor was reportedly shot and killed by a PSF member.<sup>39</sup>

The ongoing clashes, and the wave of right-wing accusations that it was seeking to impose a socialist dictatorship upon France, were troubling for the Popular Front government and especially its leader Léon Blum, a man often judged as being scrupulously committed to democratic legality.<sup>40</sup> The ‘Clichy Incident’ of March 1937 brought things to a head. This tragedy occurred when Popular Front supporters organized a counter-demonstration after learning that the PSF had scheduled a family film screening in the Parisian suburb of Clichy. In some respects their approach was problematic; they used notices for the rally printed on government paper and signed by the local mayor, a Socialist, though they also planned a marching route intended to avoid the cinema and called in 400 police to ensure order. But most demonstrators refused to follow the prescribed route and instead confronted the police; it appears that the arrival of police reinforcements further heightened the tension. Ironically, it was only after the PSF members had been safely evacuated from the theatre that the violence began. The situation deteriorated rapidly and by the time the mayhem had ended five demonstrators had been shot dead; another subsequently died from her wounds. Scores of police and other demonstrators had been injured.<sup>41</sup>

The PSF stressed the responsibility of the government and the left for what happened. *Le Flambeau* emphasized the peaceful nature of the PSF meeting, contrasting it with the belligerence of the Communists and Socialists. In the Chamber of Deputies, Jean Ybarnégary insisted that while the Popular Front government claimed to be democratic, it persecuted the PSF while letting the Communists carry out violent subversion.<sup>42</sup> Reactions to these claims varied. Some key politicians — including leading Radicals who were growing disillusioned with the Popular Front — voiced concerns about the freedom of assembly. The US embassy was more equivocal, observing that “Clichy . . . is in the heart of the Communist quarters and, though the Parti Social Français were well within their rights in holding a meeting, duly authorized, anywhere that suited their purpose, the whole affair savoured of ‘bearding the lion in his den.’”<sup>43</sup> As for the general public, while its overall mood is hard to characterize, it seems that a growing portion of opinion felt that *both* the PSF and PCF posed a serious threat to public order.<sup>44</sup>

Blum’s government soon charged the PSF with reconstituting an outlawed organization by virtue of its paramilitary activities; if found guilty La Rocque and his followers might have faced a second dissolution.<sup>45</sup> But this measure

could not undo the damage caused by the 'Clichy Incident.' The fact that a left-wing government had repressed a demonstration directed against the PSF was profoundly demoralizing and exacerbated divisions within an increasingly fragmented Popular Front coalition. The member parties already differed strongly over such issues as how to deal with the Spanish Civil War and how far to pursue social and economic reforms. But Clichy aggravated the situation. Blum contemplated resigning and had to be talked out of it, though he would do so a few months later, after the French Senate rejected his request for decree powers to prevent capital flight. Conservative elements of the Radical party, who were already suspicious of the Socialists and especially the Communists, now argued that order had to be restored. At the other end of the spectrum the Communist Party accused Blum of repressing the working class.<sup>46</sup> While the PSF could not have predicted that its decision to screen a film at a theatre in Clichy would have such consequences, that decision had flowed from a larger strategy of attempting to discredit the Popular Front, and in this regard La Rocque and his colleagues had an impact.

After the fall of the Blum government the political climate in France gradually shifted toward the right. This was particularly evident after the Radical leader Édouard Daladier became prime minister in April 1938; he went on to undo some of the Popular Front's reforms and repressed an attempted general strike in late November of that year. While the trade union movement and the left were weakened, right-wing fears of a revolution were dispelled, leading to an easing of tensions and a decline in political violence.<sup>47</sup> As for the PSF, though its leaders had been tried and found guilty of reconstituting the *Croix de Feu*, their penalties were restricted to fines. The party also benefited from an amnesty law passed in July 1937, which dropped many charges of political violence over the preceding year.<sup>48</sup> While there were still instances of the PSF disrupting rallies held by pacifists and some of its right-wing rivals, paramilitarism became less central to its activities.<sup>49</sup> This does not mean the party had moderated in ideological terms, however. La Rocque now called for the creation of an *État Social Français*, suggesting that he intended to remake France in the PSF's authoritarian image. It also appears that the movement became more anti-Semitic during the late 1930s, though some scholars emphasize that La Rocque's views on this issue were restrained in comparison to those of his rivals.<sup>50</sup> In any event, in a context where political violence in France was declining and the state remained robust, menacing incursions were less appealing as a strategy.

## CONCLUSION

What conclusions, then, can be drawn from considering the actions of the *Croix de Feu* and PSF on the one hand, and the responses of French governments on the other? With respect to the former it provides an illuminating example of how far-right movements can use democratic principles against their opponents,

in spite of their disdain for such principles. Paramilitarism was always a high-risk strategy for the *Croix de Feu* and PSF. While it drew attention to their cause and attracted people who feared the left and thirsted for action, it also threatened to undermine their efforts to present themselves as a force for order. Moreover, it brought about the dissolution of the *Croix de Feu* and threatened to do the same for the PSF. But despite these pitfalls, La Rocque and his followers became increasingly adept at turning the tables on their opponents. In the era of the *Croix de Feu* they countered anti-fascist demonstrations with efforts to present the left as the true subversives. Following the creation of the PSF they sought to depict the Popular Front government as bent upon suppressing democratic liberties, even though La Rocque's authoritarian stance suggests that, given the opportunity, he would have been intolerant of political opposition. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the PSF brought down the Blum government but its provocations helped to bring about the Clichy episode, which significantly weakened the Popular Front's cohesion.

For the French state, dealing with the *Croix de Feu* and the PSF necessitated striking a delicate balance between preserving order and ensuring freedom of association. This was a dilemma that could not be resolved by policing measures alone; the broader political context had to be favorable if democracy was to be preserved. In Weimar Germany the police made efforts to curtail Nazi violence through such measures as banning the Storm Troopers, but in a situation where economic conditions were dire and hostility to democracy was growing within the police forces and the conservative elite, that measure had little effect.<sup>51</sup> In Britain, the Public Order Act of 1936, intended to restrict the activities of the British Union of Fascists, also probably had only limited impact, but given the relative weakness of the BUF and the greater stability of the parliamentary system in the United Kingdom, the stakes were not as high.<sup>52</sup> Interwar France presented an intermediate case; the democratic system was more entrenched than it was in Germany but compared to Britain the far right was stronger and so was the degree of polarization.

Ultimately French governments had mixed success in their efforts to preserve democratic freedoms while also containing the far right. Some historians have criticized the dissolution of the *Croix de Feu* and subsequently putting the PSF on trial as unjust and repressive.<sup>53</sup> Such a conclusion is contestable. When it dissolved the *Croix de Feu*, the Blum government had allowed La Rocque to channel his political ambitions into a legal political party. The PSF's combative proclivities gave the authorities grounds to charge its leaders for reconstituting the *Croix de Feu*. Moreover, measures such as the 1937 amnesty illustrate that subsequent governments sought to manage La Rocque's party rather than outlaw it. Nevertheless, the legal actions against the *Croix de Feu* and the PSF aroused great bitterness among many elements of the French right and helped set a precedent for banning political movements. Following the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the

outbreak of the Second World War, for example, the Daladier government outlawed the Communist Party — a measure that La Rocque and the PSF had long demanded — even before it had formally embraced an antiwar stance in support of the Soviet Union's new policy of cooperation with Hitler.<sup>54</sup> This testifies to the intensity of the political crisis that afflicted the democratic Third Republic during the 1930s, a crisis which the *Croix de Feu* and PSF had done much to exacerbate and the French state could manage only to a degree.

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### Endnotes

1. *Le Flambeau*, October 1933 (emphasis in original).
2. Adrian Lyttelton, "Fascism and Violence in Post-War Italy: Political Strategy and Social Conflict," in Wolfgang Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld, eds., *Social Protest, Violence and Terror in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe* (London: Macmillan 1982), pp. 257-75; see also the chapter by Jens Petersen, "Violence in Italian Fascism, 1919-1925," in the same volume.
3. Peter H. Merkl, "Approaches to Political Violence: The Stormtroopers, 1925-1933," in Mommsen and Hirschfeld, eds., *Social Protest, Violence and Terror*, pp. 367-83. See also Richard Bessel, "Violence as Propaganda: The Role of the Storm Troopers in the Rise of National Socialism," in Thomas Childers, ed., *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 131-46.
4. Kevin Passmore, "Boy Scouting for Grown-Ups? Paramilitarism in the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français," *French History* 19, no. 2 (1995), p. 530. I am indebted to this article for several insights, though my focus and conclusions differ somewhat from those of the author.
5. On the scale of violence in Paris, see Danielle Tartakowsky, *Les Manifestations de rue en France 1918-1968* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997), p. 304; for a succinct overview of this period, see Julian Jackson, "1940 and the Crisis of Interwar Democracy," in Martin S. Alexander, ed., *French History Since Napoleon* (London: Arnold, 1999), pp. 224-36.
6. Further information about the movement is available in Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), chapters 1-3.
7. Archives of the Paris Prefecture of Police (hereafter APP) B/a 1901, reports, 4, 31 March 1931; Weng Ting-Lung, "L'Historique et la doctrine du Parti Social Français" (thèse de droit, Université de Nice, 1970), pp. 22-23; Gareth Howlett, "The Croix de Feu, the Parti Social Français and Colonel de La Rocque" (DPhil, Oxford University, 1985), pp. 109-10; Philippe Machefer, "Les Croix de Feu devant l'Allemagne," in *La France et l'Allemagne* (Paris: Éditions du CRNS, 1980), pp. 119-20; and *Le Flambeau*, April 1930, March 1931, June 1932, December 1933.
8. Paul Chopine, *Six ans chez les Croix de Feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), pp. 106-08; John Rymell, "Militants and Militancy in the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français: Patterns of Political Experience on the French Far Right (1933-1939)," (PhD, University of East Anglia, 1990), p. 196; Jacques Nobécourt, *Le Colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946, ou les pièges du nationalisme chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), pp. 262-63; and on the encounter with the police, see the following reports by *Croix de Feu* sections in *Centre d'Histoire de l'Europe au Vingtième Siècle* (hereafter CHEVS) LR2, file III.B.1, reports of the 9th section, 12 February, 25th section, 15

- February 1934, 50th section, 13 February 1934, 55th section, n.d. On the demeanor of the *Croix de Feu* in comparison to the other leagues, see Chambre des Députés, *Rapport fait au nom de la commission d'enquête chargée de rechercher les causes et les origines des événements du 6 février 1934* (Paris: n.p., n.d.), annexes, vol.1, no.3383, pp. 52-53, pp. 100-03, general commission report.
9. Antoine Prost, "Les Manifestations du 12 février en province," in Jean Bouvier, ed., *La France en mouvement 1934-1938* (Seyssell: Champ Vallon, 1986), pp. 12-30; and United States National Archives (hereafter USNA) RG59 851.00/1365, report by Strauss, 9 October 1934; *Le Flambeau*, September 1934.
  10. Lyttelton, "Fascism and Violence in Post-War Italy," p. 261; Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), pp. 271-73; on the French police and judiciary, see Robert Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères's Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture, 1929-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 161; and for a recent case study highlighting the limits of police power in the 1930s, see Simon Kitson, "Police and Politics in Marseille, 1936-8," *European History Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2007), pp. 81-108.
  11. Archives Départementales du (hereafter AD) Gard 1M 715, commissaire spécial (Nîmes), 3 December 1934; Archives Nationales (hereafter AN) 451AP [fonds de La Rocque, carton] 81, "Circulaire urgent," 11 January 1935; and *Le Flambeau*, 20 April 1935.
  12. *Le Flambeau*, 1 February, 6 April 1935, cited in Passmore, "Boy Scouting for Grown-Ups?" pp. 536-37.
  13. For evidence of such pressure from below, see AN F7 13241, reports, 17, 28 June, 24 July, and 26 August 1935.
  14. *Le Flambeau*, 22 June 1935; Passmore, "Boy Scouting for Grown-Ups?" pp. 545-46; and Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM) 1K 26, prefect (Algiers) to governor general of Algeria, 13 June 1935.
  15. On this point see Albert Kéchichian, *Les Croix de Feu à l'âge des fascismes* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2006), pp. 196-197, pp. 214-218. For an instance of a false accusation of storing weapons, see AN F7 14817, minister of interior, 29 August 1935, commissaire de police mobile, 31 August 1935.
  16. CAOM 1K 26, commissaire de police (Affreville), 30 September 1935.
  17. Weng, "L'Histoire et la doctrine," pp. 50-51; Passmore, "Boy-Scouting for Grown-Ups?" pp. 548-49; Rymell, "Militants and Militancy," pp. 198-99, 212; and Nobécourt, *Colonel de La Rocque*, pp. 327-28 notes that the local *Croix de Feu* leader had forbade the carrying of arms.
  18. On the attitude of the Radical Party, see Serge Berstein, *Histoire du parti radical* (Paris: Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1982), vol.2, pp. 392-96; and Peter Larmour, *The French Radical Party in the 1930s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 174-75; and on government measures against La Rocque, see USNA RG 59 851.00/1462, report by Dawson, 3 December 1935.
  19. AN 451AP 81, "Statuts du Mouvement Social Français des Croix de Feu," n.d.; *Le Flambeau*, 12, 19 October, 23, 30 November 1935; and CHEVS LR2 file IV.A., magazine, *La dissolution des Croix de Feu?* (Paris: Publications LP, December 1935).
  20. USNA RG59 851.00/1462, report by Dawson, 3 December 1935; RG59 851.00/1470, attaché's report, 16 December 1936; RG59 851.00/1475, report by Strauss, January 1936; and for criticism of Ybarnégaray's actions, see AD Aisne 1M20, prefect, 4 February 1936.
  21. Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 8-10.
  22. Serge Wolikow, *Le Front Populaire en France* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1996), p. 149.

23. Recent studies of the Cagoule include Joel Blatt, "The Cagoule Plot, 1936-1937," in Kenneth Mouré and Martin Alexander, eds., *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918-1962* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 86-104; and D.L.L. Parry, "Counter-Revolution by Conspiracy, 1935-37," in Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett, eds., *The Right in France: From Revolution to Le Pen*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 161-81.
24. Blatt, "Cagoule Plot," pp. 91-95; and Parry, "Counter-Revolution by Conspiracy," pp. 164-67.
25. Jean-Paul Thomas, "Les Effectifs du Parti Social Français," *Vingtième siècle* 62 (1999), pp. 71-72.
26. Nobécourt, *Colonel de La Rocque*, pp. 548-56.
27. For accusations from La Rocque about plans for a Communist uprising, see APP B/a "Ligues/Croix de Feu," directeur des renseignements généraux, 25 February 1936.
28. Archives de Paris (hereafter AP) dossier 212/69/1, article 155, "Note sur les renseignements donnés aux délégués par M. Ottavi du comité directeur Croix de Feu," n.d.; CAOM F405, sûreté départementale, 18 September 1936.
29. AN BB18 3048/2, directeur de la police judiciaire, 6 July 1936; AD Hérault 1M 1119, minister of interior, 11 September 1936; and AD Aube SC15 656, chef d'escadron, 24 November 1936, commandant (Nogent-sur-Seine), 27 November 1936.
30. AN BB18 3048/2, procureur de la république (Oran), 14 September, 15 October 1936; CAOM 3CAB 25, procureur général (Oran), 7 July 1937; and Francis Koerner, "L'Extrême Droite en Oranie (1936-1940)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 20 (1973), pp. 569-78.
31. For an example of a false accusation, see AN F7 14817, commissaire divisionnaire (Rennes), 19 October 1936; for conclusions of the police, see AN BB18 3048/2, commissaire divisionnaire, 1 October 1936, and AN F7 14817, inspecteur de police mobile, 17 October 1936.
32. AP 212/69/1, article 152, search of PSF headquarters; seal no. 2, Danner to Varin, 22 September 1936; and seal no. 19, Edmond Barrachin, "Point de vue personnel sur la position politique du part à ce jour et l'attitude qu'il lui convient d'adopter dans les circonstances présents," n.d.
33. *Le Flambeau*, 10 October 1936; Howlett, "Croix de Feu," pp. 223-24; and Kenneth Bourne and D.C. Watt, eds., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, Part II, Series F, Vol. 22, doc. 88, pp. 349-50, Clerk to Eden, 30 January 1937, suggests that 1,400 were arrested.
34. USNA RG59 851.00/1664, report by Bullitt, 14 April 1937.
35. *Le Flambeau*, 10 October 1936; and AD Gard 1M 715, prefect of Var, 20 January 1937.
36. *Le Flambeau*, 3, 17, 24 October 1936, 6 March, 1 May 1937.
37. APP B/a 1952, reports, 25, 26 September 1936; AN F7 12820, report, 23 March 1937; *L'Heure française*, 23 January 1937; and AN F7 12819, report, 6 February 1937.
38. AD Nord 68J 104, "Instructions générales à suivre en cas d'agression," n.d.
39. AD Hérault 1M 1119, subprefect (Beziers), 10 October 1936; AD Yvelines 4M2 66, prefect, 24 December 1936; CAOM B3 327, arrondissement de Philippeville, 10 November 1936; and Passmore, "Boy Scouting for Grown-Ups?" p. 529.
40. See, for instance, the assessment by Jackson in *Popular Front in France*, pp. 53-61.
41. AN F7 13985, report on Clichy incident, 25 March 1937; for a detailed analysis, see Simon Kitson, "The Police and the Clichy Massacre, 1937," in Richard Bessel and Clive Emsley, eds., *Patterns of Provocation: Police and Public Disorder* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 29-40; and also Howlett, "Croix de Feu," pp. 240-41; and Rymell, "Militants and Militancy," pp. 201-02.
42. *Le Flambeau*, 20, 27 March 1937.
43. *Le Flambeau*, 27 March 1937; USNA RG59 851.00/1662, "Political Riots at Clichy," March 1937; and AN F7 13985, report on Clichy, 25 March 1937. See also Philippe Machefer, "La



- Fusillade de Clichy,” in *Presse et politique: actes du colloque de Nanterre* (mars 1973) (Houilles: CEREP, 1973), pp. 1-25.
44. See, for example, AD Marne 30M 144, commissaire spécial (Reims), 19 March 1937.
  45. AN BB18 3048/2, procureur de la République, 5 April 1937.
  46. Jackson, *Popular Front in France*, p. 273; Wolikow, *Front Populaire*, p. 246; and Tartakowsky, *Manifestations de rue*, p. 426.
  47. On the break-up of the Popular Front and the shift to the right, see Jackson, “1940 and the Crisis of Interwar Democracy,” pp. 231-36.
  48. USNA RG 59 851.00/1760, report by Wilson, 27 December 1937; and Bourne and Watt, eds., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* vol. 23, doc. 28, p. 102, Phipps to Eden, 24 January 1938.
  49. AD Gard 1M 715, prefect, 27 January 1938; and Passmore, “Boy Scouting for Grown-Ups?” pp. 554-56.
  50. For a discussion of the *État Social Français*, see *Le Petit Journal* (the PSF’s daily, acquired in the summer of 1937), 12 September 1937; for the growth of antisemitism in the PSF, see Richard Millman, *La Question juive entre les deux guerres: Liges de droite et antisémitisme en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992), pp. 258-65; for an opposing view, see Michel Winock, “Retour sur le fascisme français: La Rocque et les Croix-de-Feu,” *Vingtième siècle* 90 (2006), pp. 14-17.
  51. Evans, *Coming of the Third Reich*, pp. 274-75.
  52. Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts to the National Front*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 81-87.
  53. This is the view developed in Nobécourt, *Colonel de La Rocque*, pp. 410-11, 447-48, and 471-83.
  54. Jackson, “1940 and the Crisis of Interwar Democracy,” p. 236.