

## DISCUSSION BOOKS

General Editors :

*Richard Wilson, D.Litt., and A. J. J. Ratcliff, M.A.*

## THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

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*by*  
DOROTHY M. PICKLES



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## PREFACE

THIS book is written primarily for the student of politics who has no specialist knowledge and, in particular, no working acquaintance with the French political system. It is not intended to provide anything like a complete picture, either of the institutions or of the practice of government in France, but merely to give the average student of affairs enough of the background to enable him to follow French politics without bewilderment, and to interpret the French attitude to current problems with sympathetic understanding. Its aim, therefore, is threefold : firstly, to outline the main principles of the Constitution and those attitudes of mind which underlie the formal Constitution and which go to make up the nation's political personality ; secondly, to enable the reader to recognize the real political tendencies in France and to relate them correctly to the numerous political groups which give expression to them ; and thirdly, to sketch briefly the sequence of events which forms the immediate background of the political scene.

To attempt such an introduction to French politics in a small book of this kind has clearly meant rigorous selection of material, and has therefore necessarily involved omissions, too sweeping generalizations, and much oversimplification throughout, for all of which I can only apologize.

I should like to express my gratitude to Professor

## PREFACE

R. H. Soltau of the American University of Beirut, and to Professor P. Vaucher of the University of London, both of whom were kind enough to read the manuscript and to give me their criticism and advice ; and to Mr. W. J. B. Crotch, M.A., for his assistance in the revision of the text and the proofs.

DOROTHY M. PICKLES.

LONDON, *June* 1938.

# CONTENTS

## PART I

### THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN FRANCE

#### I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING . . . . . 11

The essential unity of France—State and Church in the seventeenth century—the significance of literature in the development of the national spirit—the eighteenth century ideal of civilization—the nineteenth century and the concept of France's mission—the importance of the French Revolution—the implications of popular sovereignty in present-day France—the importance of the Dreyfus case—education and the Church—education and the Republic—the citizen against the State—economic individualism and the peasant heritage—is France Radical ?

#### II. THE WORKING OF THE CONSTITUTION . . . 37

Apparent simplicity of the Constitution—complexity of political issues—Chamber and Senate—the President—weakness of the Government as against the Chamber—ministerial weakness and ministerial power—changes of Government in Great Britain and France—the personal factors involved—Commissions and *interpellations*—legislation by decree—the electoral system and the importance of the second ballot—the problem of reform.

#### III. THE POLITICAL PARTIES . . . . . 59

Complexity of French party organizations—the name and the thing—Royalism and Fascism, the *Action Française* and the Fascist leagues—the Right, industrial



## CONTENTS

feudalism, Catholicism, Alsatian autonomism—the Centre, difficulty of definition, essential Conservatism—the Left—the party of past and future Ministers—the Radicals—the differences between Radicals and Socialists—the contradictions of Radicalism—its appeal—Socialism, the relation between the party and the trade unions—Socialism in France and in Great Britain—Socialists and Communists—the change in Communist policy—the future of the Left.

## PART II

### FRENCH POLITICS SINCE THE WAR

#### IV. FOREIGN POLICY . . . . . 93

Influence of the war—invasion and the frontier problem—the domination of foreign policy in post-war politics—the attitude of Right and Left to the problem of security—interaction of French and British foreign policy—the failure of the League and the rise of Hitler—Franco-Italian rapprochement and the Abyssinian war—the Franco-Russian pact—France's attitude to the Spanish Civil War—the rape of Austria and the dependence of France on Great Britain.

#### V. INTERNAL POLICY . . . . . 116

The Left and the problem of finance—the importance of the riots of the 6th of February 1934—the Radicals and the National Government—the formation of the Popular Front—nature of the agreement between the Left parties.

#### VI. THE POPULAR FRONT EXPERIMENT . . . . 135

The programme; political, international, and economic policies—the formation of the first Popular Front Government—the significance of the stay-in strikes—the economic and social legislation of 1936—the National Wheat Board—the reform of the Bank of France—nationalization of the armaments industries—the "pause"—differences between the Popular Front

## CONTENTS

parties—the fall of the second Popular Front Government—contradictions and difficulties of the economic programme.

APPENDIX I. FLUCTUATIONS OF GROUPS IN THE CHAMBER SINCE THE WAR . . .	170
APPENDIX II. CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT IN FRANCE AND GREAT BRITAIN SINCE THE WAR . . . . .	172
APPENDIX III. GUIDE TO FURTHER READING . . .	174
INDEX . . . . .	176



# THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

## PART I

### THE BACKGROUND OF MODERN FRANCE

#### CHAPTER I

#### THE HISTORICAL SETTING

In a world in which property and interests know no frontiers, nations can henceforth represent only those ideas which our will and our courage have kept alive, a way of thinking, a way of living, which men who speak the same language, who live under the same sky and have lived through the same history have discovered through the centuries. From now onwards, to live for one's country can only mean to live for these ideas. To interests we owe nothing, for the soil we call France we can do nothing. But we owe everything to these ideas, and their survival can owe everything to us. The only legitimate imperialism is that of reason.

JEAN GUÉHENNO,  
*Jeunesse de la France.*

MODERN France may be said to begin with the establishment of the Third Republic just over half a century ago. The preceding century had seen many different forms of government. The absolute monarchy of the *ancien régime* was succeeded by Republic, Empire, more or less constitutional Monarchy, and again by Revolution, Republic, and Empire, so that many people in France did not expect the Third Republic to be any

## THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

more permanent than the others. That it has survived so long is perhaps largely due to the fact that it has remained what Thiers said it was at the time of its formation, "the form of government which divides us least." Certainly it has always encountered opposition, and although, up to the present time, the Republican element, the spirit of 1789, has been in the ascendant, there is even yet no certainty that it will be finally triumphant. To-day, no less than in 1789, the Revolution is a living issue in France, its principles stand for an attitude of mind, a philosophy of life, which all Frenchmen do not unquestioningly accept.

Yet France is a country which, though politically divided, is in many respects peculiarly united, and this unity of outlook gives to her social and economic institutions a stability and continuity which provide a powerful counterweight to her political instability. It is a commonplace that the history of all countries must be continuous, in the sense that, however violent the superficial changes may be, it is as impossible for a country as for an individual to make a complete break with the past. But it is perhaps more important to emphasize this fact in the case of France than in that of countries like Great Britain, where there have not been violent breaks with the past, tending to obscure the underlying continuity. There is, among Frenchmen, a much more self-conscious intellectual unity of outlook than among Englishmen. France, that is to say, represents for most Frenchmen, above all, a certain way of life, a certain intellectual approach to political and economic problems, rather than a concrete territory to which they belong, or an explicit dominion which they exercise over other peoples.

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING

This is not to say that there is not a very profound link between Frenchmen and the soil of France. Indeed, some writers have gone so far as to attribute to Frenchmen a quite special attachment to the geographical entity of France.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Frenchmen do not, as a rule, travel much abroad has been explained, for example, as being largely due to the conscious inculcation of the idea that "France is specially favoured by Nature," to the conviction that in a world bounded by French frontiers, and whose centre is Paris, the Frenchman can find all the beauty and variety he needs. Indeed the passionate attachment of the French to the soil of France has been put forward as the explanation of "the bitter hatred of France against the German intruder." This close connection between feeling for the soil and love of country, it is said, "has always determined the national consciousness of France."

That there are elements of truth in this view cannot be denied. France is primarily a people of peasants "tied to the ancient inheritance of the soil," and the Frenchman remains to-day very deeply attached to "the earth which nourishes him." But these geographical explanations of the French sentiment of unity are at best vague, mystical, and in any case unprovable generalizations. The historical explanation provides much firmer ground, for the French national consciousness has undoubtedly been profoundly affected by France's historical development. France to-day cannot be really understood without some attempt to assess the lasting contributions of the France of yesterday to her psychological and intellectual make-up. More than

<sup>1</sup> v. Curtius. *The Civilization of France*, 1932, and Gaultier, *L'Ame française*, 1936.

## THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

many countries whose political history has had superficially more continuity, France is the legatee, or the victim, of her "living past."

It has been said that "the history of France begins with submission to Rome." Certainly Rome has had a profound influence on French civilization. At a time when the rest of Europe was in a state of chaos and disunion, when Italy and Germany were not even names, France and Great Britain alone, thanks very largely to the early civilizing influence of Rome, entered the modern period with a real national unity. Whatever France may owe to her Gallic strain—and a great deal has been claimed for it—she undoubtedly owes to Rome, not only her language, but the cultural ideals which have been dominant throughout most of her history. To the centralizing and organizing achievements of Rome she owes her early emergence as an independent political entity, with conscious concepts of statehood and a settled government. The culmination of the national unity first fostered by Rome was reached in the seventeenth century, under the monarchy of Louis XIV., and was characterized by what are still to-day two of the strongest elements in French civilization, namely, the centralization of the political power and the prestige enjoyed by the national literature.

This strong tendency to centralization may have been due, as the German writer, Dr. Curtius, has suggested, to the influence of Rome, which gave to France the impulse to unity that has existed throughout her history, not less under the Third Republic than under the Monarchy. Or it may be, as it is in the view of another writer, Julien Benda, the result of a conscious will to unity which is a fundamental characteristic of

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING

the French people, finding its expression through the vigour of the hereditary monarchy and the organizing powers of royal Ministers like Richelieu, Colbert, and finally, Napoleon. Again, it may have resulted from a combination of these factors with the continual presence of an external threat to French national unity. It is important to remember, when one reflects on the degree of decentralization existing in England at a time when France was an absolute monarchy whose local life was dominated by the national agents, the *intendants*, that Britain is an island whose last invasion was in 1066. France, on the other hand, has five land frontiers, and has been throughout her history repeatedly invaded and always subject to the danger of invasion. If the French nation were to survive, it needed, more than any other people, a strong national authority, able to mobilize the country's forces rapidly in case of emergency.

The need for a strong central authority explains, at least in part, the reluctance of the French State to allow other loyalties to compete with the citizen's primary allegiance to the State. The problem, as we shall see, still exists under the Republic, and it existed in the seventeenth century under the Monarchy. For the religious struggles of that century may justifiably be regarded as expressing, more than anything else, the royal desire for unchallenged supremacy. The Catholic religion, although historically associated with France, has always seemed a potential danger to the supremacy of the French State, since it acknowledges a head of the Church outside France and exercising considerable influence on temporal affairs. The Gallican controversy in the seventeenth century can be reduced briefly to this question: was Louis XIV. to be the



## THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

national head of the French Catholic Church, or was he always to fear the competition of allegiance to an alien Pope? The persecution of the Protestants, and of the less known, mystical, Quietist movement, can similarly be regarded as the opposition of the absolute State to the principle of individualism, of "contingent anarchy," which, as Bernard Shaw plainly saw, is inherent in Protestantism. Once admit the establishment of a personal relationship involving ultimate values with a Being outside all control by the State, and the door is open to eventual rebellion against the State. The inevitable alliance between the Monarchy and the Church, which alone could save the former from such dangers, could not fail to lead later, equally inevitably, to the association of Catholicism and reaction in the minds of those who strove to substitute, for absolute Monarchy based on the privilege of nobility and clergy, the democratic State. Thus Louis XIV. prepared the ground, and later autocratic rulers continued the work, for the struggle between clericalism and anti-clericalism which is still a vital factor in French political life.

The official encouragement of literature by Louis XIV., together with the acknowledged greatness of the literature of that time, led to the strengthening of the link between nationalism and literature and between literature and politics. The sixteenth century had seen the emergence of the conscious ideal of a French literature independent of antiquity. The battle between the old ideas and the new was continued in the seventeenth century, the age whose literature is perhaps the best example of the combination of the national genius with a judicious imitation of Greece and Rome. From the seventeenth century onwards, France possessed not only a literature