

THE
THIRD
REPUBLIC
OF
FRANCE



THE FIRST PHASE 1871-1894

GUY CHAPMAN

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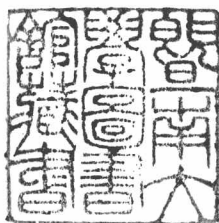
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THE THIRD REPUBLIC OF FRANCE

THE FIRST PHASE 1871-1894

BY
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PREFACE

IN the preface to his selection of extracts from the Greek and Latin historians, Dr. M. I. Finley reminded us that 'history in its root sense means inquiry'. All historical writing is, or ought to be, directed to the elucidation of a problem. It is in a way a high-class *roman policier*. It is comparatively simple if it is limited to a short period or an incident from which nothing came. But an inquest on the body of a society is more difficult than an inquest on a human being. Evidence of substance is hard to collect, harder to verify and harder still to interpret. The problem to which this history is directed is the discovery and dissection of the events in France that led to the defeat and downfall of the Third French Republic in 1940.

This is not a straightforward narrative history of France over seventy years, though that will come later. It is neither economic nor political nor social history, but all three are drawn on. It attempts an explanation by synthesis. In every country, in every society, there are new things and old things. Renan said that nothing that happened in his day was unrelated to the Revolution. But one must go back further. Anyone who has studied *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* by Marc Bloch, published thirty years ago, will know how deep are the roots. My friend and partner, the late Hamish Miles, drew from M. André Maurois the story of how he contested the rights of his local villagers to fish certain waters on his land, which is in the Dordogne. The village deputation said that they had the right. 'From whom did you get it?' asked M. Maurois. 'The English gave it to us', they cried. By the year 1500 the English had gone for ever, but the rights they had granted remained. Writing soon after the war of 1914-18 the great geographer, Vidal de la Blache, wrote: '*Le régime politique actuel met en jeu, non seulement des passions et des intérêts, mais des réminiscences plus ou moins défigurées, des préjugés, des légendes.*'

It appears to me that in this dark epoch, the nineteenth century, in spite of more abundant evidence (it may not be reliable) than ever existed before (it may never exist again: the telephone is an enemy to the historian), we are faced by problems of historical writing that did not appear when the powers could dismiss a gang of Diggers with a few smacks over the buttocks with the flat of the sword, or reduce Levellers with a touch of decimation. Such minor incidents are unimportant

except to those seeking justification for later rebellion. But it is impossible to conceive pure political history after 1848.

The impact of demos on the structure and behaviour of national assemblies and politicians is fundamental to an understanding of the history of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. The democratic drive towards levelling has had consequences which were foreseen and dreaded by even the most liberal of English statesmen. In France it was different. For whereas the English politicians kept control of the electorate as the suffrage was widened in stages, the French lost it by their impetuosity in 1848. With universal suffrage, democracy had arrived, and as Léon Blum told his followers it was universal suffrage and not parliamentary government which was the insignia of a democratic country.

The great changes which have taken and are taking place in countries regarded half a century ago as mature and stable have not come initially from outside pressures. They have been due to failures to solve internal problems, which in the end have led to failure to prepare against external enemies. '*Les pays sont comme les fruits. Les vers sont toujours à l'intérieur.*' But the worms started often long ago.

It is for this reason that I have found myself driven back to periods far earlier than 1870. War and peace alternate; régimes come and go, but, as the historian of Vergigny has shown, even after an error has been amended, it returns.

In his *Ancien Régime*, published in 1856, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: 'When I reflect on this nation in itself, I find that it is more extraordinary than any of the events in its history . . . the most brilliant and the most dangerous of the nations of Europe, and most by nature apt to become turn by turn an object of admiration, of hatred, of pity, of terror, but never of indifference.' It was a saying in the eighteenth century that no war could happen in Europe without the French. In the twentieth, French governments were to be seen evading their responsibilities, deserting their allies and finally succumbing. Explanation of this behaviour has tempted a number of publicists and historians, and these are ready enough to inculcate individual politicians, journalists, industrialists, bankers and soldiers. If these responsible men were *fainéants*, how was it they arrived in their positions of responsibility? 'A nation with responsible parliamentary government is not the victim but the author of its government's blunders, and if it seeks to transfer the responsibility to politicians and the party system, or to some other scapegoat, it is guilty of the lie in the soul.' How came it that France,

which has produced so many stout-hearted leaders to support a heroic soldiery, gave itself a series of governments which prepared its collapse in sixty days? The answer to the question is many-sided, and, in some aspects, of great age. A body may die of one stroke, but usually it expires through a number of small ills. It is these I propose to examine.

Guy Chapman

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Introduction

France in the Eighteen-Seventies

(i)

In the year of the Paris Exhibition, 1867, monarchs, princes and lesser folk had thronged the City of Light, admired, as many Frenchmen did not, the new boulevards and palaces and churches which had risen at Haussmann's command, and had been fascinated by the high-stepping horses, the shining landaus and cabriolets and the elegance and luxury of the costumes, as the pageant of high society passed up and down the Champs Elysées. Europe had applauded and laughed at the musical comedies concocted by Offenbach, Meilhac and Halévy, *La Belle Hélène*, *Barbe-Bleue*, *La Vie Parisienne* and *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein*. All Europe, says M. Daniel Halévy, had been tickled by the froth and glitter of France: but it was England that Europe copied.¹

Of the serious and sober France that lay beyond the city's ramparts Europe had scarcely caught a glimpse. In 1870 German officers on reading captured correspondence expressed their amazement that French men and women showed love, affection, faith and loyalty to each other: French novelists, dramatists and journalists had shown only treachery, deceit and frivolity.² A few Englishmen who had visited the Exhibition had presented to their government a thoughtful report which stressed the alarming fact that the industrialists of Western Europe, including those of France, were rapidly overhauling England and in some directions had already outclassed English methods.

From the point of view of the foreigner, the French were an enigma. What was France? Was there one? Or two? Or several? Did the frequent changes of régime since 1789 — eleven constitutions were promulgated between 1791 and 1875 — betoken deep fissures in French society; or were these constitutions no more than modifications in the light of circumstances? Were the unmistakable cleavages between Legitimists, Imperialists, Constitutional Monarchists and Republicans deep or superficial? Or did the variations between these loyalties cover an undisclosed, undiagnosed malady? Were the passions roused by the revolutions significant of a permanent hostility between the privileged

**Showing Gouvernement boundaries of 1789
and contemporary Department boundaries**

**Showing Gouvernement boundaries of 1789
and contemporary Department boundaries**

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or possessing groups and the poor and unprivileged? Or was it a conflict between town and country? Again, were there, as a writer at the end of the century was to distinguish, two Frances, the Black and the Red, clerical and socialist, or perhaps spiritual and materialist?

An observant foreigner might have found some of the answers as he travelled the country, might have discovered, as elsewhere, the variations from the common pattern in France, and even more the contrast with other countries of north-western Europe. If he was an Englishman, he could not escape the fact that the area of forest-land in France was prodigious as compared with England. In England most of the forest-land had been neglected; many chases and woodlands were no more than names on the map. In France great blocks of oak and beech and fir survived in the Woevre and the Argonne, on the slopes of the Vosges, the forests of Fontainebleau, of Orléans, of Compiègne, of Othe, the *bocages* of lower Normandy and Vendée, the woods of Cher and Nièvre, the massed pines between the Pointe de Grave and the Adour. The country was still untamed. In 1876 twelve wild boars rushed through the main street of Bernay at midday, spreading dismay. There were still two or three thousand wolves in the Central Massif.

Another aspect as he roved from north to south would be the attitude to work. After he passed the Loire he would notice a change in the rhythm. In the north, production, whether agricultural or industrial, would be rational, calculated to an economic end. As he reached the south he would find the rhythm changing. It was not that men worked less hard; indeed they often worked longer, tilling poor soil near some village which had added '*le-chétif*' to its name. But except in the commercial vineyards, methods were traditional: time counted for less, and methods were still perhaps half a century behind those of Flanders, Artois and Picardy. One fragment of evidence, the workman's blouse, common in the north, had not yet become habitual south of the centre. In Brittany and south of the Sologne, probably — one cannot be sure — the old regional costumes were still being worn.³

For another thing, the distinction between the industrial and agricultural worker was not yet clear. Here and there the *préfets* in their departmental reports to the Minister of the Interior⁴ (their date is 1872, but they were not published, and then only in *précis*, till 1875) say that the distinction is more apparent than in the past, that the agricultural force is declining, while the urban is increasing, and that men are now choosing industry where the rewards are higher: but the evidence is not universal. Even in Paris, owing to the lengthy dead seasons, many

workers returned to the farms they came from. The salient feature of the reports is the absence of large-scale industry in most departments: the préfet of Seine-et-Marne could mention no more than the well-known faïence factory at Montéreau and a paper-mill; he of Finistère the Brest arsenal and one linen company; of Corrèze only the government arms factory at Tulle; of Var only the naval dockyards at Toulon. Of the active industrial population, a fifth was concentrated round Paris, while nearly a third of all heavy workers, coal and metals, were to be found in four of the eighty-seven departments, Seine, Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Loire.

So far only the preliminaries for expansion had been carried out, the lay-out of the main lines, the partial improvement of waterways and roads, the telegraph and cheap postal facilities. The railways had not opened up the country, but were constructed to serve industrial areas already in existence. The northern half of the country above the Nantes-Geneva line had far the greater share. The south as yet remained as it always had been, its back turned to the capital. Many towns, former centres of industry, bustling provincial capitals, had averted their eyes from the new world, had renounced the struggle and relapsed into crystallised hierarchies, indifferent to the growth of more active communities. There is Rennes, capital of Ille-et-Vilaine, with a tradition of hostility to the capital since the days of Le Chalotais and the Duc d'Aguillon. 'In this antique city,' wrote André Siegfried, 'the *noblesse* of Upper Brittany . . . finds the aristocratic atmosphere that suits it. The sons of the family do their law training, army officers discover a brilliant garrison. The boulevard de Sévigné, the rue de Paris, form the nucleus of a miniature faubourg Saint-Germain, in which the *noblesse* lives in isolation, remote. The upper bourgeoisie of tradition, another aristocracy, today [i.e. 1910] almost extinct, scarcely mixes more. . . . And the religious atmosphere of the West, the piercing sound of bells morning and evening, the preoccupation with the affairs of the Church weigh like an obsession on even its adversaries . . . they invade the whole circumambient air.'⁵ Rennes, remarked Taine, is a city of enormous piety and enormous squalor.⁶

Or there is Poitiers, the fief of Monsignor Pie, that redoubtable Legitimist prelate, dictator to a society of *bien-pensants* without brains or energy, who dress their domestic servants in the costumes of the eighteenth century. Grass grows in the streets; the lamps are extinguished soon after dark. 'Thirty-eight religious houses in a single town, and the Jesuits' boarding-school has 750 pupils', comments Taine in

1864. At Ste Radegonde's shrine miracles are known: a leprous woman was cured — and died three days later. The University is the public enemy: woe betide any priest⁵ that dares to become Rector; he is ostracised. Toulouse possesses sixty-four religious houses;⁶ its area is exactly that fixed by Raymond VII in 1229. There is Montauban with its blood-red buildings, once a cloth town, now in decay, where, wrote Arsène Dumont, the main occupation is waiting for dead-men's shoes.⁷ So far these and other cities and regions have scarcely been touched by the nineteenth century. Many communes had no horizon beyond the market town, itself remote from the provincial capital. Their sky-line was limited and they imagined nothing beyond it.

'The ignorance of the French peasantry is difficult to believe when you do not know them, and still more when you know them well, because their intelligence and tact seem incompatible with ignorance. . . . [The rustic's] ignorance is incredible. He does not really know what the word *France* means. During the war many patriotic Frenchmen were indignant at the conduct of the peasantry, at their indifference to the invasion of Alsace and Lorraine. . . . You tell them that the war has ended in the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. This conveys no distinct idea to their minds — why should they make sacrifices for the people of Alsace who were always foreigners to them?'⁸

Their interests were local, their policies the same, *querelles de clocher*. Many were illiterate. In 1875, 20% of newly-wed husbands and 31% of young wives were officially recorded as such. In 1872 the préfet of Gironde, the wealthiest department of the south-west, stated that 55% of those over twenty were unable to read or write, 86% of those over forty: in 1876, the figure of 57% of those over six is given for Indre-et-Loire. Most of those who lived in the frontier departments scarcely understood French. Basque, Catalan, Breton, Flemish, Walloon, Alsatian, Savoyard, Italian might be their language, but everywhere there were used dialects and dialect words, so deformed over years that neighbouring valleys had difficulty in communicating. The Marquis de Vogüé noted that at the end of the Second Empire the peasant of the Vivarais did not know who sat on the throne of France. Of 1894 Bodley records that there were peasants in the French Alps who thought Napoleon III still reigned.⁹

Yet in spite of illiteracy and ignorance, the people themselves were intelligent. 'You go to Saint-Cloud, and you find there a population which has never heard of *Tartuffe*! . . . Molière is not read by the peasants, for the good reason that they either cannot read or have not

the time. Neither is he read by the workers: and the recent studies which we have been able to make of the Tuesday audiences at the Comédie-Française, have revealed to us that the ladies of the upper classes resemble in this respect the women of the people: they don't know Molière. The only difference between them is that when by chance they see him staged, the women of the people listen with all their heart, understand, laugh and are delighted, while the others purse up their mouths, affect to have no interest in these antiques and talk to their neighbour about clothes.¹⁰

In the country, in spite of revolutions and social upheaval, in many parts the local landowner still ruled. The Vendéen squire could speak of '*mes gars!*' and the village labourer — the worst paid in France — would say '*Je suis de la sujétion de M. le vicomte*'.¹¹ M. de Tusseau in the hard years of 1871 and 1872 distributed bread to the poor and gave them money. 'Later, even after his fortune began to decline, he would send over to the café after mass for the small change and throw it from the steps of the church to the destitute and the children.'¹²

Elsewhere control might reside in the local doctor or the innkeeper, even in the lay school-teacher, possibly a positivist, believing that most problems could be solved by the discovery of a formula: he might be a freemason, a member of Jean Macé's Ligue d'Enseignement. In the west, in the Vannetais, or in Léon dominated by the Chapter of the Cathedral of St Pol, clerical influence was strong enough to defeat even the noble landowners.

Only a few years before the defeat of 1870, Taine, who as an army examiner was touring France, wrote: 'I come back again and again to the same conclusion that France is a democracy of well controlled peasants, with a narrow parsimonious bourgeoisie, and ill-paid public servants who wait for promotion and grow no roots.'¹³ True as this might be for Guéret, or Le Puy, Bar-le-Duc or Mont-de-Marsan, it is too sweeping. There were regions and towns which Taine had not visited and social groups he had not entered. There were brains in unconsidered towns, Commentry, Tourcoing, Pont-à-Mousson, Longwy. What was ripening there would appear in the next half-century.

(ii)

In the nineteenth century, in which every social group is fluid and changing under economic pressures, the divisions in society are blurred. The hierarchy of French society had been much modified after 1789 by

the changes in the régimes. In 1789 there had been thirty-seven *ducs et pairs*, fifteen *ducs*, *non pairs* and sixteen *ducs à brevets*. There had then arrived the creations of the First Empire, followed by those of the Restoration. Louis-Philippe had been a fairly modest creator: only two dukes. Napoleon III had restrained himself to no more than four. This, however, did not prevent usurpation of titles by the ambitious. The distinguished genealogist, the Baron de Woelmont,¹⁴ declared in 1919 that of 989 marquises of that date, 645 could show no justification for the use of the title.

In any case the French *noblesse* was an astonishing imbroglio. Its origins, extractions and affiliations could be traced only by an expert, and between two great houses even a Charlus would flinch from giving one *duc et pair* precedence over another, so complex were the considerations. According to Chateaubriand, the aristocracy had three ages, that of ability, that of privilege and that of vanity. By 1871 the third age was well on its way, and though they would not believe it, the last patent of nobility had been granted.

Those who in 1871 looked forward to the re-establishment of the monarchy were those whose names and titles recur through French history, whose origins go back to long before 1400, and are of the darkest obscurity, names such as La Rochefoucauld, Crussol, Rocheschouart, Harcourt. These remained nominally loyal to the Bourbons and to the Church. But the generation of the late nineteenth century differed markedly from their ancestors. Before the Revolution the *noblesse* was woven into the fabric of society: in the great mansions of the Faubourg all classes met: noble and artisan jostled shoulders as they passed in the courtyards. In that aristocracy there had been, even in its egotism and ineptitude, a vitality, a lack of self-consciousness, a freedom of mind, some taste in art, letters and life. These had died, as they had died in England. By the eighteen-fifties the privileged *noblesse* had surrendered to the Church and took its code of conduct from its spiritual directors. Monsignor Dupanloup and Father Didon led it the way it should go. That section of the VII arrondissement which lies between the south bank of the Seine, the rue des Saints-Pères, Saint-François Xavier and the Avenue de la Bourdonnais, is the Faubourg. Here, when it was in Paris, lived the *gratin*, the 'upper ten', possibly a thousand individuals. 'The dominant idea in the *gratin*', wrote Madame de Clermont-Tonnerre, herself a Gramont, 'is the certainty of a superiority which subsists in spite of an appearance to the contrary. The families of the *gratin* are all linked to each other and form a compact

mass.¹⁵ Distinguished by its arrogance, its meanness and its lack of hospitality, the *gratin* existed largely to reproduce itself and to maintain the positions to which it believed itself entitled. In these interests its men did not disdain to ally themselves with wealthy *roturiers*. 'The Polignac family lives on champagne, sewing-machines and the *Petit Journal*', it was remarked, with a glance at its alliances with Pommery, Singer and Dupuy. In the cause, foreigners, even Jews, were, if not welcomed, admitted, Rothschild, Haber, Ephrussi, Bischoffsheim, Mirès, Heine.

This taunt could not be cast at Sosthène de la Rochefoucauld, Duc de Bisaccia, presently to succeed to the title of Doudeauville, *duc et pair*, Grandee of Spain, President of the Jockey Club, member of the National Assembly and of the Chamber of Deputies from 1871 to 1898, married to a Polignac, wealthy landowner with estates in Seine-et-Marne, Seine-et-Oise, Oise, Sarthe and Charente, not to mention Sicily. 'He married twice and being forbidden by his religion, had no adventures. His personality, as distinct as possible from that of an intellectual, filled to perfection the duties to which he had been born, that is to represent the party of monarchy with all possible ostentation, to have many children, all handsome, all well-dowered, well-married and highly procreative. . . . In the Chamber he did not speak: he represented. To represent with such strength, one must from the beginning have a high idea of one's person and rights.'¹⁶ The duke's parliamentary interventions, it is true, were rather by way of interruption than oratory.

In contrast, there were members of the *noblesse* who, while valuing the monarchy as a strong component of the social structure, put the Church before the throne. Of these the most outstanding were the Comte Alfred de Falloux of the older generation, author of the Education Law of 1850, and, of the younger, Comte Albert de Mun and the Marquis de la Tour du Pin. Falloux, 'who was Legitimist by birth and education, [he had retired to the country after the July Revolution] and, if you like, by taste, at bottom served only the Church. He had no confidence in the victory of Legitimacy and through the thickets of our resolutions sought a way to bring the Catholic religion back to power.'¹⁷ Adviser to the Right, counsellor to the younger enthusiasts, Falloux straddled the gulf between the Legitimists and Orleanists and nourished the minds of those who would one day espouse the policy of Leo XIII, of the Ralliement. Nevertheless he failed to close the gap between the Church and the Orleanists. For the latter were Liberals, who looked on the Church as an organ of the State, sceptics who rejected a blind Ultramontanism, followers of, or at least affected by,