

Jean-Yves Le Naour, *L'affaire Malvy: Le Dreyfus de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Hachette Littératures, 2007, 378 p.

Len Smith,

Department of History, Oberlin College

Democracy at war can mobilize both the best and the worst in human nature, simultaneously. As Pierre Renouvin showed long ago in *Les Formes du gouvernement de guerre* (1927), France fought the Great War as a democracy. The trials of that conflict shook French democratic institutions, but did not break them, at least not until well after 1918. Nothing showed the resilience of republican France more than multiple crises of 1917, at the front and in the interior. Yet the crises of 1917 did not necessarily bring out the best in democratic practice in France, at various political registers. The sovereign people, in and out of uniform, made difficult choices. Striking workers demanded “peace,” yet returned easily enough to factories when granted inflationary wage increases. Citizen-soldiers mutinied by the thousands, yet assented to the arbitrary selection according to dubious criteria of a small number of “leaders,” to suffer the full brunt of military justice, including the firing squad. High politics in France remobilized primarily *after* the rest of French society had made the agonized decision to win or at least not lose the war. And high politics in 1917 would prove a rough game in the country that, after all, had given the world the guillotine. Remobilized political authority, like remobilized military authority, would require victims.

Le Naour has written a sympathetic account of one of the more prominent political victims of 1917, Louis-Jean Malvy, minister of the interior from 1914-1917. There was, to be sure, much to admire about Malvy and much to condemn about his treatment in the latter stages of the war. A pillar of the center-left in the Radical Party, Malvy came to the Ministry of the Interior following the election of the spring of 1914. When war came the following August, he made the critical decision *not* to arrest the “agitators” listed on Carnet B. Few except his later nemesis Georges Clemenceau and the extreme Right objected at the time, and historical opinion has most definitely endorsed Malvy on the issue. Thereafter, in keeping with the stated spirit of the Union sacrée, Malvy opted for a policy of “*liberté surveillée*” (p.102), meaning a light repressive hand with the unionists and potential antiwar activists as the national war effort intensified in the years thereafter.

While Le Naour presents a specific interpretation of the meaning of Malvy’s political undoing in 1917, there is little disagreement as to the facts of the case. In the summer of 1917, French politics brutalized, as the institutional superstructure rededicated itself to unambiguous victory without negotiations. This ultimately resulted in the ascendancy of Clemenceau and the *jusqu’au boutistes*. Malvy himself left office at the end of August 1917, in the wake of the sordid affair of German subsidies to the *Bonnet Rouge*

newspaper, and the even more sordid affair of alleged German spy Mata Hari. Yet once Clemenceau came to power in November, merely casting Malvy to the sidelines was not enough. As the adage of the day had it, because Clemenceau needed enemies, he found them. The French army needed a certain number of victims after the 1917 mutinies, to demonstrate a semblance of conventional military authority. Clemenceau likewise needed heads, to demonstrate that the French nation now had clear and effective leadership. On dubious legal grounds, the Senate proclaimed itself a high court, and tried Malvy for the absurd crime of turning plans for the ill-fated Chemin des Dames offensive over to the Germans. While this proved too much even for the heated political climate of the time, the “judges” convicted Malvy of the charge of having “méconnu, violé et trahi les intérêts de sa charge (p.247)” while minister of the interior, and expelled from him from French territory for five years. Like other targeted foes such as Joseph Caillaux, Malvy would return to the political scene, with the victory of the *cartel des gauches*. Yet he would remain a marked man by the nationalist Right down to his death in near obscurity in 1949.

As per Le Naour’s subtitle, Malvy became a martyr, “the Dreyfus of the Great War.” To Le Naour, Malvy’s real “crime” was taking the Union sacrée at its word, as a coalition to defend not just the nation, but the Republic. In so doing, he played into the hands of the Right, which in the crises of 1917 made clear that it did not see the two as one and the same. Indeed, the Malvy affair, as Le Naour put it, “révèle la vraie nature de l’Union sacrée, une expression forgée par un homme de droit [President Raymond Poincaré] qui symbolise une politique au service du nationalisme et qui désarme inévitablement la gauche (pp.341-42).” Malvy thus proved yet another tragic victim of a tragic war.

Yet considering Malvy as the Dreyfus of the Great War implies a certain partisan position concerning the issues at hand. There is nothing wrong with this, yet I wonder whether more critical distance is possible some ninety years later. The person of Captain Alfred Dreyfus swiftly became all but incidental to the great drama that unfolded around him. The same could not be said of Malvy, a political figure who continued to play a political game whose rules and stakes had changed radically in a short period of time. At least as told by Le Naour, Malvy seems at some level to have welcomed the Senate trial, as a means of defending a certain idea of the integrity of the Republic. As he pleaded on 19 July 1918: “Je ne suis pas devant le Sénat mais devant une cour de justice ; je ne suis pas devant des parlementaires mais devant des juges (p.241).”

Yet how could so seasoned a politician make such a statement by that time? To this reviewer, Malvy’s “crime” seems not of a juridical nature, rather of grievously miscalculating the political situation in which he sought to operate. The conservatism of the Senate was no secret, nor that Clemenceau himself had come from that body. Clemenceau’s return to power articulated and drove in a particularly brutal direction the desire of the national community to prevail in the conflict. Malvy, it seems, stubbornly continued to live in the world of the Third Republic before 1914, in which (the Dreyfus Affair aside) a collection of more or less amiable men ruled from a broadly defined Republican center. This was one form of democracy. Clemenceau’s wartime government was another.

Any American writing at the beginning of the 21st century must be all too aware that democracies can do cruel things in the name of the people, with the people’s consent.

Democracy in crisis is not necessarily about fairness or justice, even as it remains democracy. The political viciousness of Clemenceau and the Action française do not surprise today's readers. Yet their persecution of the hapless Malvy was not unpopular, nor, I suspect, was its symbolism lost on the French national community. What strikes me as interesting today about "l'affaire Malvy" is not how it can be told through familiar categories of martyr and villain, but how it reveals the broader structures and perils of wartime government. As Renouvin reminded us: "It is one of the characteristics of the warlike spirit that, even when it sees clearly, it banishes the critical sense."¹

¹ Pierre Renouvin, *The Forms of War Government in France*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1927, p. 157.