

Writers into Intellectuals, Culture into Politics: Grappling with History in the NRF, 1920-1940.

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Writers into Intellectuals, Culture into Politics: Grappling with History in the *NRF*, 1920-1940

Martyn CORNICK

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1It is now commonplace to view the end of the Great War in 1918 as representing the beginnings of a new world order. The human losses, the vanished empires, the Bolshevik revolution and its lasting consequences, the collapse of the intellectual certainties of the pre-war order, all ensured the irruption of History and Politics into cultural spaces within the European public sphere. The politicisation of cultural spaces was inevitable, given that purveyors of culture—writers and intellectuals—were themselves exposed to the opposing magnetic poles of ideological attraction.

2In France, as Jean-François Sirinelli has shown, as soon as the war ended debate on these matters was stimulated by opposing manifestos, the most memorable of which was the declaration signed in July 1919 by dozens of conservative intellectuals grouped around the Parti de l'Intelligence. These nationalists appealed for the reassertion of traditional, if not supremacist, Western values. These values, however, would no longer be shared by all. The year 1919 also saw the reappearance of the monthly review, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, the *NRF*, already well on the way to becoming an institution in its own right. Despite internal disputes surrounding its position relative to the Parti de l'Intelligence, the review would almost immediately be marked out in contradistinction to nationalist movements and reviews. The *NRF* stood at a major intersection in the French public sphere where a number of influential networks converged. These included politics, especially but not exclusively the intellectual and cultural hinterlands of the Radical and Socialist parties; the world of education, with its own crossovers and intersections, including the Education Ministry, teachers, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, university professors and students—all amounting, in Albert Thibaudet's phrase, to the *République des professeurs*; and, finally, the world of publishing and the press. Its position among these networks, especially later in the 1930s, would be further affected by the creation of other intellectual-led bodies and groupings, such as the communist-backed Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, the Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes, and so on.

3What this contribution aims to do is to give a flavour of how a review such as the *NRF*, thought of traditionally as a *literary-cultural* review, could and did react authoritatively to *political* issues of great historical import. There is an underlying historical process at work here, hinted at in the title, whereby writers became intellectuals in the sense that they evolved—not necessarily universally, it is important to insist—from individualist writers, into intellectuals with collective agendas, intellectuals who recognisably and self-consciously acted within the politicised cultural-institutional framework specific to the French Third Republic to which we have alluded. In short, the *NRF*, despite, and later because of, the efforts of its editor Jean Paulhan, was itself exposed to the opposing magnetic poles of ideological attraction.

4We should briefly explain further why it was that the *NRF* rapidly grew into a powerful institution. First, since its foundation in 1908-1909, the *NRF* stood in

opposition to other, more established, cultural institutions, most notably the Académie Française and its associated networks, as well as a range of other cultural critics and commentators. As the Dutch scholar Maaike Koffeman has shown in a recent study, what distinguished the *NRF* was its eclecticism, its openness of spirit, its mission to draw simultaneously upon two French cultural traditions: the classical and the modern.

5Second, in part through the impact of André Gide's work prior to the First World War, and in part through the creation of the Gallimard publishing house, the review helped to fulfil writers' aspirations toward public success. Moreover, outside France, as I have discussed elsewhere (Cornick, "*La Nouvelle Revue française* de Jean Paulhan et le modernisme"), the *NRF* came by default to be viewed as at once the arbiter and the epitome of a European literary-cultural 'modernism', although it must be admitted that in a French context this is a problematic term. For instance Jason Harding, in his survey of English inter-war cultural politics and reviews, reveals how T. S. Eliot conceived *The Criterion* using the *NRF* as a model; the Argentine monthly *Sur* was also distinctly inspired by the aspect and composition of the *NRF*.

6Thirdly (and, for our purposes here, most importantly), the political dimension to the institutional status of the *NRF* derives from the constant presence of three of the most prominent figures of the French republican intelligentsia. These are Julien Benda, famous for the debates stimulated by the *NRF*'s serialisation of his book *La Trahison des clercs* in 1927; the professor and critic Albert Thibaudet; and Alain (Emile-Auguste Chartier), so-called philosopher of Third Republic radicalism. Their target audience was, largely, the educational world, one of the principal groups of subscribers. A teacher himself, Alain, "the First Intellectual," according to his most recent biographer Thierry Leterre, was a survivor from the glory days of radicalism around 1900: he extolled the virtues of secularism, defended the little man against political combines, and moralised positively about the benefits of French citizenship. Alain's presence in the *NRF* helped to determine the position the review in the centre of the political spectrum (see Cornick, "Juste milieu, extrême milieu? La critique politique de *La Nouvelle Revue française* dans les années 1930"). Jean Grenier, himself a *lycée* philosophy teacher and (from 1930) tutor in Algiers of Albert Camus, teased Paulhan in his letters about this aspect of the review. Even Jean Paulhan himself, prior to his employment by Gallimard, had worked as an official at the Education Ministry; later, as editor of the *NRF*, he was often consulted regarding honours to be bestowed by the State (see Planté). In this way, therefore, the *NRF* contributed to the mediation of the "trickle-down" hierarchical dissemination of intellectual power in France, a process analysed by Régis Debray in his book *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France*. The point is that the *NRF* did not just publish serialised novels, short stories, or pages of criticism. It engaged in, responded to, and even fomented debates that arose directly from contemporary and international politics.

7The approach here is necessarily a simple one since there is insufficient space to examine all the issues treated by the *NRF* throughout the inter-war period. To understand the significance of some of the sustained political concerns of the *NRF*, we shall look at an important article by each of three different figures and contextualise them. These are, from December 1930, Jean Schlumberger on Franco-German relations; the second, from September 1931, D. S. Mirsky on his conversion to Marxism; and finally, Armand Petitjean, from April 1938, on France's political uncertainties and identity crisis in the face of threatened war.

The problem of Germany

8Schlumberger's article "D'un certain manque d'imagination" appeared in December 1930, at a critical juncture in the history of inter-war Franco-German relations. To understand this fully we should first examine the context.

9To begin with, victory over Germany in 1918 triggered a resurgence of nationalism in France, led by the Parti de l'intelligence and the Action Française. There was a sense that the victory should not be squandered, and that the sacrifice of so many should not be in vain. These sentiments, sometimes expressed with great bitterness, translated into a lack of self-confidence that can be traced right through to the Fall of France. While the Poincaré government staunchly resisted rapprochement, and even occupied the Ruhr in 1923, a handful of intellectuals in France and Germany acted to promote rapprochement. From as early as 1920, principally at the home of the industrialist Mayrisch family at Colpach, in Luxembourg, Gide and his associates befriended *German* intellectual figures—including Ernst-Robert Curtius, the Mann brothers (Thomas and Heinrich), and the economist Walter Rathenau (see Gide's *Journal* and Maria Van Rhyselberghe's "Cahiers de la Petite Dame"). Their discussions gave rise to a series of important and widely-reported articles by Gide and Jacques Rivière, published in the *NRF*, stressing the imperative of rapprochement, and insisting that intellectuals should *initiate* this rapprochement (see especially, by Gide, "Les rapports intellectuels entre la France et l'Allemagne", *NRF*, November 1921, and, by Rivière, "Note sur un événement politique", *NRF*, May 1921; "Les dangers d'une politique conséquente", *NRF*, July 1922; and "Pour une entente économique avec l'Allemagne", *NRF*, May 1923). This stance of the *NRF* provoked a backlash, orchestrated mainly by the nationalist journalist Henri Béraud, from a constellation of conservative provincial papers, which, seeing it as part of the Parisian avant-garde, attacked the review for its "obstinate tendency [...] to promote intellectual and economic rapprochement with the Boche". It was even suggested that the name should be changed to the *Nouvelle Revue Pro-Allemande* (see Béraud 82).

10With the advantage of hindsight these early efforts of the *NRF* appear fully justified, because after the elections of May 1924, Prime Minister Édouard Herriot

strove to place government policy toward Germany on the same congenial footing as intellectual relations. In a key speech given in January 1925, Herriot claimed that his greatest desire was “to see the creation one day of a United States of Europe. In the great institution that is the League of Nations, I see the first manifestation of these United States” (Soulié 207-9). This speech heralded the détente of the Briand era. Thereafter, the *NRF* was closely involved in the creation of a Comité d’Information Franco-Allemand, through the participation of Jean Schlumberger and Pierre Viénot, a diplomat, linked by marriage to the Mayrisch family (L’Huillier 29-37). It was the steady rise of National Socialism, however, especially in the years 1928-29, that clouded relations between France and Germany. The “inflexible” Versailles Treaty was analysed as being at the heart of the problem, at least according to Albert Thibaudet (*NRF*, August 1928, 261-70). The Young Plan, drafted in early 1929, rescheduled German reparation payments and stipulated that France should withdraw from the Ruhr by mid-1930 (Poidevin and Bariéty 273-6). Finally, Hitler scored a propaganda victory when he claimed that reparations would enslave Germany for generations to come: this had the effect of weakening the Weimar Republic. The election of a further 107 Nazis to the Reichstag on 14 September 1930 at last spurred a number of concerned German intellectuals into action: Gérald Bauer, Alfred Kerr and Heinrich Mann granted interviews to the widely circulated weekly *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* during November 1930. This sequence of events brought the *NRF* directly into the fray.

11Two of Gide’s closest friends, Roger Martin du Gard and Jean Schlumberger, were keen for the *NRF* to respond. “Like you, I believe it is very important that the *NRF* should adopt a position,” Martin du Gard told Schlumberger (Martin du Gard 118-9). Martin du Gard was intrigued by contemporary politics and, incidentally, at this time increasingly drawn to the *NRF*’s left-leaning rival *Europe*. He wrote to Paulhan to prepare the ground, and his letter shows very clearly how he conceived their role:

I cannot stop thinking about Jean’s article. [...] I want to be certain that he realises the full importance of his gesture. At this moment, [...] an article on Franco-German relations and on the revision of the Versailles Treaty [...] will have a *considerable* impact in Germany, coming from the *NRF*. Its impact will no doubt go beyond intellectual circles. Jean will be considered the spokesman of the *NRF* group, and even as *representing all French intellectuals*. Over there he will play the role that the Mann brothers play for us French. [I’m] delighted that someone among us has the courage to speak out. But this essay, which risks being seen there as something of a manifesto of French intellectuals, must be *impeccable*, its expression carefully weighed, purged of any possible misunderstanding. [...] To repeat, it engages all of us. It’s a very timely gesture, yet its consequences are grave, it seems to me. I would want to be sure that our modest Jean realises all this; and that on behalf of us all, he performs a *magisterial* act. (119; my translation).

12 Paulhan had no choice but to accept that the *NRF* would be making a momentous gesture by publishing this statement. Thus on 1 December 1930, the *NRF* carried Schlumberger's text, "On a Certain Lack of Imagination", as the leading article ("D'un certain manque d'imagination", *NRF*, December 1930, 757-71; an English translation exists in O'Brien (ed.), 298-310; quotes are from the latter).

13 Schlumberger, aware of Paulhan's aversion to the expression of direct political discourse in the *NRF*, struck a pose in the French moralist tradition. His commentary, which is oblique and certainly does not resemble a "manifesto", is interspersed by a dialogue between two interlocutors designed to add depth, and to anticipate objections to his argument. The implications of hasty political action and panic reaction on the part of the public had to be carefully contemplated, because war remained a threat. One central premise was that France had failed to adapt to a world where everything was changing. If peace was illusory, it had at last to be faced that this was the fault of the Versailles Treaty. The central point was that there was a difference between *peace* and *peace-treaties*: a choice had to be made between them, and such a choice was crucial to understanding how Europe had become a dangerous place because nations were attached to each other like mountaineers; should one of them fall, the result could be catastrophic. Moreover France, in common with other countries, was lacking self-confidence. He shared Thomas Mann's belief that each nation was suffering from what Freud had called an "inferiority complex". Europe was in extreme peril because it was afraid of the unknown, and France, which ought to be a pathfinder, remained introverted. In sum, France was too reluctant to adapt to the post-war world while technological advances were making it ever more dangerous to delay strategic decisions. A new sense of realism was long overdue because in spite of the illusory concessions France had made over the previous decade, Europe was poised on the brink of disaster, as Schlumberger's two interlocutors argued:

"Between an excessively strong America and a frightening Asia, we shall have to work hard to pull out of things at all. All our squabbles become laughable indeed between those two gaping jaws. Anyhow, ten years is something in the life of a civilisation whose very existence is at stake."

"We certainly paid dearly for them."

"Peace is not cheap". (307-8)

- 1 Jean Paulhan, however, remained unconvinced, believing that a literary review was the wrong place for [...](#)

14 Schlumberger's article met with praise, and provoked further extensive debates which wore on into the 1930s. Martin du Gard believed that the text, "placed as the leading article, and re-read attentively, made a *profound impression* on me;

I'm sure it has made an impact" (Martin du Gard 142).¹ The article certainly did make an impression. Ramon Fernandez, another of the *NRF*'s regular contributors increasingly drawn to ideological matters, responded directly to Schlumberger (*NRF*, January 1931, 113-22), thus keeping the matter alive in the review, and a good number of French and German intellectuals launched into lengthy debates at the Paris-based Union pour la Vérité which eventually merited publication as a separate volume entitled *Problèmes franco-allemands d'après-guerre*. Among the participants at these debates were Raymond Aron, Benjamin Crémieux, Georges Demartial, Ramon Fernandez, Jean Guéhenno, Jules Isaac, Jacques Kayser and the diplomat Pierre Viénot, as well as several German writers and academics. In short, Schlumberger's intervention signalled that a turning point had been reached: contemporary events had forced intellectuals, the *NRF* and the nation to confront the realities of Nazism, the ideological force which would henceforward drive the Franco-German relationship.

Legitimising fellow-travelling? The case of Prince Mirsky

15 André Gide's support for the Soviet Union, his journey there and his subsequent recantation, are well documented (e.g. Maurer 1983). But Gide's apparently sudden *engagement* did not become public news until extracts from his *Journal* were published in the *NRF* during the summer of 1932. Before this, in the issue for September 1931, the review printed Prince Dimitri S. Mirsky's "Histoire d'une émancipation" (for the English translation, 'The Story of a Liberation', see Smith 1989, 358-67; quotations are from this source). What makes this text so arresting are the character of its author and his connections with the *NRF* group. The conviction of Mirsky's argument, and the forcefulness of the message he conveyed, cannot have failed to make an impression on his readers.

- 2 Bernard Goethuysen to Paulhan, unpublished letter dated 9 September 1934 (Fonds Paulhan, IMEC), in (...)

16 Dimitri Mirsky was an aristocrat and former officer, who, after the collapse of the White Army, fled into exile. Via Athens, he found his way to London, and, in 1922, was engaged by Sir Bernard Pares to teach at the School of Slavonic Studies. Mirsky was based in London for 10 years, and, according to the superb biography by G. S. Smith, he "achieved greater international eminence than any other *émigré* Russian literary intellectual of his time" (Smith 2000, xiii). He did so mainly by supplementing his academic income with his pen. He wrote many journal articles on Russian literature and society, and completed several books, including his highly acclaimed *History of Russian Literature*, published in 1927. When he was not teaching, Mirsky travelled extensively in France. We should briefly examine his connections with the *NRF* group. These began with the

décades de Pontigny, ten-day gatherings of European intellectuals held each summer at Paul Desjardins' property in Burgundy. Mirsky first attended in 1923 when the exiled Russian philosopher, Leon Shestov, was in attendance (Chaubet 115). He gained further access to the group in Paris through his acquaintance with the English classical scholar, Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928), who introduced him to Schlumberger, Jacques Rivière, and Charles du Bos, as well as the exiled Russian writer Alexei Remizov (Smith 1995). Still more important were his contacts with the Marxist philosopher and critic, Bernard Groethuysen, and his communist partner Alix Guillain: indeed, they met at the Mayrisch house at Bormes, in the south of France, just before the article appeared (Van Rhysselberghe, vol. 2, 157). Groethuysen's influence on writers such as Gide and Malraux is well-documented, but despite both the moving portrait left by Paulhan himself (*Mort de Groethuysen à Luxembourg*) and the intellectual biography by Grosse Kracht, he has remained a rather shadowy figure. As far as his political influence is concerned, from an unpublished letter we know that he persuaded his close friend Jean Paulhan to publish documents on the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, including a message from Gide which would prove to be highly controversial.²

17From his unpublished letters to Dorothy Galton (Sir Bernard Pares' secretary at the School of Slavonic Studies), it is clear that in June 1931 Mirsky was already preparing to publish his "over-intellectual" article in the *NRF*, "of all places", as he put it (British Library Mss. Add 49530). At this time Mirsky was preparing his return to the Soviet Union, having learned in July from the Soviet embassy in London that his citizenship had been restored. In the *NRF* article, Mirsky began his *autocritique* by talking of the "intellectual emigration" from Russia, which, he claimed, had been completely sterile, unlike the powerful counter-revolutionary ideas which had flourished after the French Revolution. He hinted at what was to come when he wrote: "Any émigré intellectual who wants to remain alive must either lose his nationality or accept the revolution in one way or another" (359). Mirsky set out how it had gradually emerged that an extreme form of Russian nationalism would not now displace Bolshevism. In 1926, he had set up an anti-émigré, but non-communist, journal called *Versty*: "What we proclaimed was Russia the unique and eternal; she had temporarily assumed the guise of a Bolshevik USSR, but this was no more than a momentary avatar. It was in the Soviet (but not communist!) poets and novelists that eternal Russia dwelt" (362). For Mirsky this could all be reduced to a transitional phase whose impact was only compounded by the defeat of Trotskyism and the inception of the planned economy, both in 1929.

18"Other forces [...] pushed us towards the socialist motherland", he continued. The Revolution having destroyed his class, and exile having stripped him of all class privilege, he was able to see the capitalist world "from below". Thus the English General Strike of 1926 had led Mirsky to believe that he was "on the other side of the barricade": "the bourgeoisie was *my* enemy just as much as it was that of the worker" (363). Two further transforming influences came, this time, from

the USSR: first, his discovery of Soviet literature, principally through Fadeev's novel *Ragrom* (in English, *The Rout*), a "magisterial study of communist ethics and psychology" (364). Secondly, his studies of history were fundamental, especially through his reading of the Marxist historian Pokrowski (e.g. Pokrowski, 1929); the discovery of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* had also been crucial. Mirsky's "liberation" was completed when an English publisher asked him for a biography of Lenin. The process of reading Lenin was, admitted Mirsky, "the most important and fruitful of my life" (366). Herein lie the relevance and topicality of Mirsky's account of his conversion to Soviet communism:

It so happened that the months when I was 'discovering' Lenin were decisive months in the history of the world, months that saw the triumphant completion of the first-year of the Five-Year Plan and the great agrarian revolution in the Russian countryside, months that also witnessed the end of American prosperity and the beginning of the world crisis of capitalism. Thus, as I advanced in my understanding of Leninism, history was proclaiming ever more persistently the truth of the communist prognosis and that the decisive hour was approaching (367).

19It was Lenin who made Mirsky into a Marxist. The former prince ended his abjuration of the past by quoting Mayakovsky: "I open each new volume of Marx / Like opening the shutters of a room" (367).

20Today, it is, of course, painful to read these words. Following the logic of his desire to serve his country, Mirsky had to return to the Soviet Union, which he did in 1932. He continued his writing career in Moscow, publishing in 1935 an intriguing critique entitled *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain*, which drew this favourable notice from George Orwell:

It is a terribly malignant but very able book, and in a distorted way it performs a remarkable feat of synthesis. It is the archetype of Marxist literary criticism. And when you read it you understand – though this, of course, is not what the author intends – why Fascism arose, and why even a quite intelligent outsider can be taken in by the vulgar lie, now so popular, that "Communism and Fascism are the same thing" (Orwell 291).

21But Mirsky's return would seal his fate. For all that he abjured his own past, the Stalinist state would not forget it. In 1937 he was arrested (a fact noted in the *NRF* for September that year), interrogated, and sent to the Gulag (G. S. Smith bases his authoritative account on secret police files in Moscow), where he died in 1939 from the cold, broken health and exhaustion. From our perspective today, Mirsky's fate represents a painful if all-too-familiar personal tragedy in the context of Stalin's Great Terror. In September 1931, however, he knew his article had made a "quite a sensation" (Smith 2000 199). Within the *NRF* group, and above all for

André Gide, who was already meditating the publication of his pro-Soviet sentiments, it must have appeared to legitimise fellow-travelling.

22The turning point of 1930-31 is a crucial one in the intellectual history of the inter-war period. The perceived failure of the Versailles Treaty and the corresponding rise of Hitler in Germany introduced an increasing sense of menace, which seemed, nonetheless, to be counterbalanced by simultaneous developments in Soviet Russia. No wonder, then, that intellectuals, particularly in republican France, should be attracted by what appeared to many as a new social experiment, an experiment which, after all, might represent the “Postscript to the Enlightenment”, to borrow David Caute’s felicitous phrase on the phenomenon of fellow-travelling (Caute chapter 7).

[In Defence of the Republic](#)

23We shall move toward our conclusion by jumping forward a few years. The riots of 6th February 1934 triggered another intellectual-led movement, whose aim this time was to unite a range of political and cultural actors in a Rassemblement Populaire, finally elected in May 1936 as the Popular Front. We rejoin the story in March 1938, when the left-wing Popular Front coalition of Radicals, Socialists and Communists, undermined by vested interests in parliament and business, had gone into full decline.

24The impotence of the French political system and class was glaringly illustrated by the Anschluss, when Hitler, with his shrewd sense of timing, began the annexation of Austria at a moment when France had no government, owing to Camille Chautemps’ resignation on 10 March 1938. At the same time, Paulhan sent a circular to various *NRF* contributors requesting their explanations of general disillusion with the Popular Front; Paulhan went so far as to affirm that the latter “had ended in a complete fiasco” (Kohn-Etiemble 157). Yet the inclusion of a short essay in the issue for April 1938 signalled a change of direction whereby the *NRF* would henceforth adopt a much more robust political outlook.

- 3 The author is preparing an edition of the hitherto unpublished correspondence between Petitjean and [...](#)

25Now at the height of his authority, Paulhan had engaged Armand Petitjean, born in 1913, to write reviews and to assist in the preparation of the “Bulletin” rubric, instituted in early 1937. By 1938, aged merely 25, Petitjean had become one of Paulhan’s preferred commentators. He spoke for a younger generation of writers and intellectuals who, having been born on the eve of the Great War, were only now coming to the fore. Throughout their correspondence, including during the immediate post-war period³, Petitjean’s article “Dictature de la France” (*NRF*, April 1938, 663-5) is seen by both writers as a marker for the adoption of a clear patriotic stance, a defence of the true interests of France.

26 In this article, using impassioned language, Petitjean self-consciously underlined the importance of the historical moment, explicitly in the context of the “miserable peace of 1919”: France was “threatened as never before in history” (663). Through the efforts of Briand and Giraudoux, France’s image abroad had been saved from the “egotism of our bourgeoisie, the futility of our intellectuals, the barbarism of our nationalists”. No people were as badly represented by their politics, their literature and their capital, as the French people. Neither did Petitjean's barbs spare the Army: despite its reputation as the “best army in the world” (663), it had no heart and was disconnected from reality. “Let us now confront the reality of 1938 head-on”, insisted Petitjean, and he listed how the French people had effectively been abandoned by almost all its politicians and institutions. This amounted, in sum, to a profound identity crisis.

27 “Now we have had enough”, continued Petitjean; he was one of several million young Frenchmen ready for mobilisation. Here Petitjean would be as good as his word, for in his periods of military service, mobilisation in September 1938, and finally in his combat experience in the Battle of France, he served his country with great tenacity, and was severely wounded in May 1940. The second part of his article outlined some desiderata:

We do not want to die for nothing, for lack of preparation. We want to return to the energetic and warlike aspect of our country; to the great Jacobin tradition that made war on behalf of the Nation, by it, and with it, in its entirety. [...] We want Union, total Union: and we beseech the communists to declare that their country of first allegiance is France, of which I have no doubt that they will be the first and best soldiers. [...] We want cannons for France and aircraft for France: and a national government.

28 In short, concluded Petitjean, “we want the dictatorship of France over the French”.

29 In the months to come, it seemed that in some quarters Petitjean’s appeal had been heeded. The communist novelist and poet, Louis Aragon, and Jacques Duclos, secretary of the French Communist Party, reassured their large audience of intellectuals at a public meeting held in June 1938 (entitled “Les droits de l’intelligence”) that they had the true interests of France at heart. Julien Benda too, in commentaries for the *NRF* during the summer of 1938, followed suit, seeing the communists as among the nation’s few true patriots now able and willing to defend the legacies of the French Revolution. After all, as Daniel Brower has shown, the communists had certain claims to be the inheritors of the Jacobins. Moreover in September 1938, Petitjean returned to his theme in a more substantial essay entitled “Après l’après-guerre” (*NRF*, September 1938, 478-88).

30 “Where are we?” demanded Petitjean, observing that outwardly at least,

according to many siren voices, France was “at the lowest ebb in our history” (478). Despite the negative analysis of the nay-sayers and would-be Cassandras of a supposedly imminent phase of “decadence”, Petitjean refused to believe that a civilisation such as the French, if it were truly decaying, would spend so long as it was meditating on the causes and effects of the whole process. As for the Popular Front, Petitjean did not see it as a complete fiasco because it had shown, for all the recent disillusionment, that France was still capable of social change, even if certain sectors of society had done their utmost to interfere with, if not overturn, the results:

With the arrival of the Popular Front, the section of our population which had hitherto been excluded from national life suddenly had access to it, only for another section of society (which had for some decades already enjoyed inclusion in national life) to act in ways totally contrary to the country’s interests (481).

31 Moving on to consider what France’s role and identity were in the post-war world, Petitjean could not agree with Jacques Rivière’s Gallocentric affirmation (in the latter’s editorial introduction to the *NRF*, relaunched in 1919) that French “intelligence” was the best in the world; it was, indeed, time to admit that there had been a “worrying poverty of general ideas” in France. For all this, “if anything, we are still one of the few European countries to have a great future ahead, ‘living space’, oxygen in our ideas, a country not hidebound by territorial boundaries or by those of its soul” (481).

32 For Petitjean, recognising and facing reality were paramount. He detected a widespread failure of “representation”, as he put it, which he ascribed principally to the “middlemen” (his word is “les intermediaries”) throughout the whole range of French society: commercial travellers, non-commissioned officers, lawyers, literary critics, bankers, French agents abroad, and parliamentary *députés*. Above all, Petitjean, like his editor Paulhan, could not tolerate the defeatism that seemed so prevalent in his country during those months, and he reaffirmed his conviction that through Jacobin patriotism the French people might find renewed faith in themselves. Despite the shortcomings of many intellectuals and their ideas, Petitjean could detect signs which, nevertheless, were encouraging. He placed faith in the youth movements which had sprung up (he referred to the “mouvement jociste” which had gained 400,000 recruits that year), and was reassured by several manifestations of cultural renewal and creativity, particularly in the domains of the theatre and historiography (488). In his conclusion, Petitjean called upon his readers, and through them the greater population, to recognise their duty to participate fully in the community and in France’s collective interests:

The post-war period [i.e. the years after 1919] is well and truly dead. It is up to us to prevent ourselves from perishing as well. We must abandon sterile principles in order to live and to build. We must also

strive to prevent the exchange of our own [republican] principles for brute words from abroad [i.e. racist and fascist discourse imported from Germany and Italy].

Those who are leaving for their holidays to draw nourishment, once more, from the French landscape, should not forget that in 1938, belonging to French society is neither a right, nor a fact that goes without saying: it is our primary duty (488).

33Petitjean's language suited the sense of urgency and menace which had begun to preoccupy many in the late summer of 1938, a sense he himself reflected, after his mobilisation in early September, in his letters to Paulhan. When the Munich conference convened in the last days of that month, the leaders of France and Britain attempted one last time to appease Hitler's expansionist ambitions: the result was the Munich Accord which, in the short term, appeared to have bought "peace in our time", albeit at the expense of the Czechs, who were abandoned to their fate. Although public opinion in France expressed great relief at this outcome, such stark capitulation to Nazi expansionism seemed intolerable at the *NRF*. Thus, a few weeks later, in its November 1938 issue, the *NRF* adopted a clear anti-appeasement position, placing it firmly in the antifascist camp (for an analysis, see Cornick 1995 chapter 7).

34Thus began an inexorable slide into war. In the *NRF*, Charles Péguy, killed in the first few weeks of war in September 1914, and whose ghost hovered over France during these fateful months, was celebrated in the July 1939 issue of the *NRF* as a patriotic talisman, as though to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the French Revolution. Indeed, Petitjean spent much of his time before his mobilisation in September 1939 preparing a new review for his own generation to succeed Péguy's *Cahiers de la quinzaine*. Much of Petitjean's correspondence with Paulhan between October 1938 and September 1939 is taken up with matters relating to the production of what was referred to as "les *Nouveaux Cahiers de la Quinzaine*", and which, eventually, appeared under the title *Le Courrier de Paris et de la Province*. Only one issue, "no. 0", appeared; Claude Roy reviewed it in the *NRF* for October 1939. Albeit too late, then, the Daladier government would turn out to be one of the most effective of the late Third Republic.

35In this short survey, we have striven to show that in the areas of Franco-German relations, pro-Soviet fellow-travelling, and, finally, in discussions of French political identity during the increasingly fraught months leading to the outbreak of war, the *NRF* gained a position as a leading, if not the leading, political-cultural institution in France. It was respected and listened to abroad, and exercised considerable influence in Germany as the Weimar Republic declined in the late 1920s, overwhelmed by the rise of national-socialism. Such was the impact of the *NRF* abroad that when the review published disobliging comments on the Mussolini regime, it was banned in Italy. Indeed, so important had it become that in late 1940, the Nazis, preferring it to the conservative *Revue des deux mondes*,

insisted upon its resurrection, with the specific purpose of enabling writers to publish their work and, eventually, to proselytise on behalf of Collaboration, both in and with what would be a very different New European Order.

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Notes

[1](#) Jean Paulhan, however, remained unconvinced, believing that a literary review was the wrong place for such pronouncements: "the problem with political articles published by *Europe* or the *NRF*, it seems to me, is that they tend to talk about anything except their subject" (Paulhan to Martin du Gard, Fonds Roger Martin du Gard [Département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris], vol. 118, letter dated 24 December 1930).

[2](#) Bernard Goethuysen to Paulhan, unpublished letter dated 9 September 1934 (Fonds Paulhan, IMEC), in which he offered to liaise with J. E. Pouterman, a communist with access to the complete transcript of the Congress; the proposal was to translate extracts with help from Goethuysen's companion Alix Guillain.

These selected texts appeared in the *NRF* for November 1934 (721-50).

3 The author is preparing an edition of the hitherto unpublished correspondence between Petitjean and Jean Paulhan. Petitjean promoted the development of youth during the Occupation, and wrote articles for the collaborationist *NRF* under the editorship of Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, as well as the Vichy review *Idées*. For this he was blacklisted in September 1944 by the Comité national des écrivains. Paulhan was unstinting in his efforts to have his name removed.

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Auteur

[Martyn CORNICK](#)

University of Birmingham

Martyn Cornick is Professor of French Cultural History and Head of the Department of French Studies in the University of Birmingham. He has published widely on French intellectual history, especially on Jean Paulhan and the status of the *Nouvelle Revue française*. His most recent studies have focused on the *NRF* and the Orient, and on Jean Paulhan as a “modernist” editor. He is completing the edition of the correspondence between Paulhan and Armand Petitjean.

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