

John Hellman, *The Knight-Monks of Vichy France: Uriage, 1940-1945*, second edition (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1997).

Founded in the summer of 1940 by Captain Pierre Dunoyer de Segonzac, a charismatic leader and devout Catholic who had commanded a tank squadron during the Battle of France, the École National des Cadres d'Uriage was intended to train the future leaders of the nation. As is the case with a host of institutions and individuals linked to the Vichy regime, the significance of its activities has become the subject of considerable debate. One of the foremost interpreters of Uriage, Bernard Comte (in *Une Utopie Combattante: L'École des cadres d'Uriage, 1940-1942* [Paris 1991]), sees the school as a paradox. While an institution of Vichy, it was also a *foyer* of rebellion; while its ethos was elitist, it hoped to use education to serve the cause of a wider "communitarian revolution"; and while a critic of liberal democracy, its criticisms were rooted in a desire to make this system more "human" and "organic."

John Hellman is having none of this. In his book *The Knight-Monks of Vichy France* Uriage is characterized as "the most innovative and prestigious think-tank of the National Revolution."<sup>9</sup> To be sure, the quintessential "Pétainism" of the school has been emphasized by others, notably Bernard-Henri Lévy in his *L'Idéologie française* (1981). But whereas Lévy has been widely criticised for his lack of scholarly rigour, Hellman's work is based on a thorough analysis of archival and printed sources. The author's copious endnotes attest to a profound understanding of the arguments of Comte and other adherents to what he dubs the "official" school of Uriage historiography.

In the core chapters of the book Hellman analyzes the personnel and influence of Uriage. The former were often prominent, while the latter was extensive. Among the instructors at the school were the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (the subject of an earlier study by Hellman) and Hubert Beuve-Méry, who later became the founding editor of the prestigious daily *Le Monde*. Among those who passed through the school were Jean-Marie Domenach, a successor to Mounier as editor of the progressive Catholic journal *Esprit*. These men and their fellow "knight-monks" participated in a community whose ideas were expressed first in the Uriage house organ *Jeunesse...France!* and then for a time in the magazine *Marche*, which was intended to reach a wider public. The Uriage "experience" was also replicated in regional leadership training schools. By 1942 it ran the first — and, as it turned out, the last — of its six-month training courses, a testament to Segonzac's wish for the school to have a formative impact on the leaders of France.

It is generally agreed that short or long, training sessions at Uriage were

very intense, and Hellman is particularly good at conveying the ethos of the school. While its charter said little about Vichy's National Revolution, its elitist communitarianism was unabashedly anti-Republican. Talk of embracing all social classes remained mostly that; few proletarians and even fewer peasants passed through. Far from being closet democrats, the instructors of Uriage saw little wrong with authoritarianism. Beuve-Méry was impressed by the organization of youth in Salazar's Portugal, and even the practices of the Hitler Youth were seen to have some redeeming features by Uriage instructors, despite their ambivalence towards the German occupiers. While ideas were important to the knight-monks, Uriage disdained "intellectualism" and placed a premium on developing virility through physical training. Segonzac wanted his instructors to be "philosopher-king in fighting trim." (84) Given the monastic flavour of the school, it is not surprising that its female secretaries were viewed with suspicion, and were not very well treated; one later recalled how the men's physical activities entitled them to meat rations, while the women had to do without. Thus, in Hellman's view, the school which is sometimes described as a source of rebellion within Vichy seems to have often been at best indifferent to the titanic struggle against fascism that was going on: "From the high battlements of the Château the men of Uriage cast their gaze all the way back to the Middle Ages, making it perilously easy to overlook the dirty business of war at their very feet." (157)

Ultimately, of course, the impact of war could not be ignored. After the return of Pierre Laval as head of the government in April 1942 and the German occupation of all of France following the Allied landings in North America later that same year, Segonzac and his comrades adopted a more Resistance-oriented stance. Yet even as they did so they continued to invoke their loyalty to Marshal Pétain. In January 1943 the school was shut down, and its personnel went underground: Segonzac eventually led troops in battle against the Nazis once more. But Hellman maintains that the men of Uriage had not revised their fundamental views, and were above all consumed by a desire to shape post-war France.

As the postwar careers of Beuve-Méry and others demonstrate, the former knight-monks were quite successful in this. They were also adept at "managing memory," highlighting their Resistance credentials while obscuring the extent of their involvement in Vichy. So, too, of course, was François Mitterrand. Indeed, it was the parallels between these two cases that prompted this second edition. In a new epilogue, Hellman takes these parallels further, describing how the former Socialist president's reactionary Catholic background led him to embrace anti-Republican ideas and movements in the 1930s and be anti-German

but *Pétainiste* in the 1940s. The epilogue also discusses other revelations relating to World War Two — such as the assertion that the famed Resistance leader Jean Moulin was a Soviet agent — giving rise to controversy in present-day France. Here the connection with Uriage is more tenuous, though the case studies themselves are absorbing.

Given the outlook of men like Mitterand and the knight-monks under Vichy, it is natural to wonder about the extent to which that regime's National Revolution was adumbrated — though not made inevitable — by ideological developments during the interwar years. Hellman addresses this issue in his introduction, unequivocally stating that Catholic intellectuals such as Mounier and Catholic organizations such as the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne encouraged “high-minded and self-righteous alternatives to the ‘self-indulgent’ individualism of Republican France.” (6) Indeed, the author goes back to the pre-World War I era in this matter, indicting Catholic thinkers such as Charles Péguy, Jacques Maritain, and Paul Claudel on similar counts. But as one reads on it becomes apparent that the situation is far from straightforward. Hellman emphasizes that Catholicism was a complex tradition which included both a meliorist (but not necessarily democratic) Social Catholic tendency as well as the reactionary nationalism associated with the Action Française. Thinkers in both traditions were on the reading list for Uriage's six-month course.

Hellman also documents several networks of individuals who were united by their disdain for the Republic but not by Catholic convictions. For instance, during the 1930s René de Naurois, Uriage's chaplain, had for a time been associated with the Frontist movement of Gaston Bergery. Bergery was a former member of the anti-clerical Radical party, and a prominent example of France's interwar “dissident left” — a number of whom eventually developed authoritarian critiques of the Republic and became supporters of Vichy. During the war he even defended Uriage from its critics, though his ideal vision of the school's mission entailed much less of a Christian ethos than did Segonzac's. Nevertheless, this episode clearly demonstrates that if the Catholic tradition could provide a powerful critique of liberal democracy, part of its strength derived from its ability to come to terms with other critics of the system, even if members of the church hierarchy were not comfortable with such accommodations. For these and other insights in the Uriage “experience,” scholars of twentieth-century France will long be indebted to John Hellman's expert analysis.

Sean Kennedy  
University of New Brunswick