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Croix de Feu

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An extreme-right movement, the Croix de Feu was a prominent political phenomenon in interwar France. Its core identity was its commitment to maintaining in the realm of politics what it claimed to be the spirit of the Great War soldiers.

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From Association to Political Movement

The Croix de Feu was founded in 1927 by [Maurice d'Hartoy \(1892-1981\)](#), an extreme-right veteran and writer. At its inception, it was nothing but a tiny [association](#) with highly restrictive membership conditions: only decorated frontline combatants were accepted. This elitism directly reflected a desire to cultivate the warrior spirit that had made the victory possible. A year after their inception, the Croix de Feu had gathered only 500 members. The takeover of the association by Lieutenant Colonel [François de La Rocque \(1885-1946\)](#) in 1931 proved a turning point. Within a few years, La Rocque transformed the Croix de Feu into a political organization by gradually opening its ranks. First, all veterans were eligible to participate, and soon, anyone who simply shared the movement's values was permitted to join. By 1933, the Croix de Feu thus numbered over 100,000.

Ideology and Mode of Action

Nationalism and xenophobia were at the core of the Croix de Feu's ideology, but the movement never publicly expressed **antisemitism**. Despite its claim to be carrying on the legacy of the soldiers of the Great War, the Croix de Feu did not share the deep **pacifism** professed by the survivors of the conflict. Moreover, the proportion of veterans within its ranks dropped dramatically as it became a mass movement, and the Croix de Feu never attracted more than 1 percent of all the veterans of the Great War. On the other hand, their stringent anti-communism and their rejection of any notion of class struggle directly echoed the inter-classist stance of the veterans. Anti-parliamentarianism was another key feature of their ideology, along with a strong distrust of the political establishment. In their view, politicians were nothing more than wartime shirkers.

Perhaps more than by its ideology, the Croix de Feu was characterized by a political style that colored the whole range of their activities. In this respect, it stood close to many extreme-right groups in the interwar period. La Rocque equipped the Croix de Feu with a **paramilitary** organization (*Les Dispos*). In the thirties, several thousand men were thus ready to be mobilized at all times for potentially violent street action. Rallies, marches, flags, badges, military salutes and political **propaganda** were part and parcel of the movement's identity.

From the Croix de Feu to the Parti Social Français

The Croix de Feu obviously benefited from the troubled context of the thirties, but also from the decline of the more traditional Action Française, which was condemned by the Vatican in 1926. The economic crisis triggered social and political discontent. The many political and financial scandals that erupted in the same years added to the distrust of the political institutions of the Third Republic.

The violent demonstrations led by extremist movements in Paris on 6 February 1934 proved the acme of the political agitation. On this occasion, La Rocque declined to commit 2,000 of his troops to an attempt to storm the House of Deputies. This refusal provoked a strong rejection of the Croix de Feu by the fascists and other extreme-right leagues. It clearly showed that the anti-parliamentarianism of the Croix de Feu did not equate to an opposition to the republican nature of the regime itself. Rather, they called for reforms that would lead the republic in a more authoritarian direction.

The events of February 1934 and the lack of any substantial political reform thereafter proved beneficial to their movement: It gathered 200,000 new members and went on growing. In June 1936, though, the newly elected left-wing government of the Popular Front banned all political leagues and paramilitary groups, including the Croix de Feu. Consequently, La Rocque created a political party. The French Social Party quickly became the first mass party in French history, with 500,000 members. The outbreak of the Second World War, however, prevented any electoral translation of this new phenomenon.

Conclusion

While the question of whether the Croix de Feu represented **fascism** *à la française* has been the subject of heated historiographical debates, this semantic controversy now seems to have fallen out of fashion. Beyond the question of whether or not the Croix de Feu can be labelled as fascist, there is little doubt that many aspects of their political identity evidence a strong porosity with the ideological context that allowed for the emergence of fascism in Europe. Any assessment of this political phenomenon should nevertheless not overlook the fact the French Social Party did not support the Vichy regime because of its antisemitic and defeatist character.

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