

# 6 February 1934 Crisis

Subjects: Others

Contributor: HandWiki Li

The 6 February 1934 crisis was an anti-parliamentarist street demonstration in Paris organized by multiple far-right leagues that culminated in a riot on the Place de la Concorde, near the seat of the French National Assembly. The police shot and killed 15 demonstrators. It was one of the major political crises during the Third Republic (1870–1940). Frenchmen on the left feared it was an attempt to organize a fascist coup d'état. According to historian Joel Colton, "The consensus among scholars is that there was no concerted or unified design to seize power and that the leagues lacked the coherence, unity, or leadership to accomplish such an end." As a result of the actions of that day, several anti-fascist organisations were created, such as the Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes, in an attempt to thwart the rise of fascism in France. After World War II, several historians, among them Serge Bernstein, argued that while some leagues had been indisputably pushing for a coup, François de La Rocque had, in fact, turned in a liberal direction, toward a respect for constitutional order. However, if the lack of coordination among the fascist leagues undermined the idea of a fascist conspiracy, the fascist actions on 6 February were an uncoordinated but violent attempt to overthrow the Cartel des gauches government elected in 1932. Édouard Daladier, who was president of the Council of Ministers, replaced Camille Chautemps on 27 January 1934 because of accusations of corruption (including the Stavisky Affair). Daladier, who had been a popular figure, was nonetheless forced to resign on 7 February. He was replaced by the conservative Gaston Doumergue as head of the government; this was the first time during the tenure of the Third Republic a government fell because of pressures from the street.

Keywords: fascism ; constitutional ; corruption

---

## 1. The 1930s Crisis and the Stavisky Affair

France was affected in 1931, somewhat later than other Western countries, by the 1929 Great Depression, which had been triggered by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 ("Black Tuesday"). The economic and social crisis particularly affected the middle classes, traditional supporters of the Republic (in particular of the Radical-Socialist Party). Parliamentary instability followed, with five governments between May 1932 and January 1934, which fueled the anti-parliamentarist movement.<sup>[1]</sup>

The latter took advantage also of a succession of political and financial scandals, such as the Marthe Hanau Affair (she had used her political supporters to attract, with her newspaper *La Gazette du Franc*, the savings of the *petite bourgeoisie*); the Oustric Affair (the criminal bankruptcy of banker Albert Oustric provoked the fall of André Tardieu's government in 1930, because of the involvement of the Minister of Justice); and, finally, the immediate cause of the 6 February 1934 demonstrations, the Stavisky Affair.

This new scandal, which involved Bayonne's *Crédit municipal* bank, exploded in December 1933. The embezzler Alexandre Stavisky, known as *le beau Sasha* ("Handsome Sasha") was linked to several Radical deputies, including a minister of Camille Chautemps's government. The press later revealed that Stavisky had benefited from a 19-month postponement of his trial because the public prosecutor was Chautemps' brother-in-law. On 8 January 1934, Alexandre Stavisky was found dead. According to the police report, he had committed suicide, a conclusion that provoked general disbelief. According to the right wing, Chautemps had had him assassinated to keep him from revealing any secrets. The press then started a political campaign against alleged governmental corruption, while the far right demonstrated. At the end of the month, after the revelation of yet another scandal, Chautemps resigned. Édouard Daladier, another leader of the Radical-Socialist Party, succeeded him on 27 January 1934.

Since 9 January, thirteen demonstrations had already taken place in Paris. While the parliamentary right was trying to use the affair to replace the left-wing majority elected during the 1932 elections, the far right took advantage of its traditional themes: antisemitism, xenophobia (Stavisky was a naturalized Ukrainian Jew), hostility toward Freemasonry (Camille Chautemps was a Masonic dignitary), and anti-parliamentarism. As historian Serge Bernstein emphasized, the Stavisky Affair was exceptional neither in its seriousness nor in the personalities put on trial, but in the right wing's determination to

use the opportunity to make a left-wing government resign. In this aim, it could take advantage of the fact that the Radical-Socialists did not have an absolute majority in the National Assembly and thus the government was weak and an alternative coalition might be formed by the parties to the right.

However, it was the dismissal of the police prefect Jean Chiappe that ultimately provoked the massive demonstrations of 6 February. Chiappe, a fervent anticommunist, was accused of double standards, lenient towards the street agitation of the far-right (demonstrations, riots, attacks against the few left-wing students in the Quartier Latin by the monarchist *Camelots du Roy*, the youth organization of the *Action Française*, etc.). According to the left wing, Chiappe's dismissal was due to his involvement in the Stavisky Affair while the right wing denounced the result of negotiations with the Radical-Socialists: the departure of Chiappe would have been exchanged for support for Daladier's new government.

## 2. The Night of 6 February 1934

### 2.1. Forces Present

Right-wing anti-parliamentary leagues had been the main activists during the January 1934 demonstrations. Although these leagues were not a new phenomenon (the old *Ligue des Patriotes* ("Patriot League") had been founded by Paul Déroulède in 1882), they played an important role following World War I, in particular when the left wing was in power, as it had been since the 1932 legislative elections.<sup>[2]</sup> The leagues differed in their goals, but were united in their hatred of the ruling Radical-Socialist party.

- *Action Française*. Among the most important right-wing leagues present on 6 February, the oldest one was the royalist *Ligue d'Action Française*. Founded in 1905 by Charles Maurras, it was composed of 60,000 members whose stated goal was to overthrow the Third Republic, in order to restore the Bourbon monarchy and thus revert to the status quo of before the 1848 Revolution. Action Française stood for a royal restoration, but this specific goal served as a rallying point for a wider series of extreme ideas, appealing to hardline Catholics, nationalists and anti-democrats viscerally opposed to the secular, internationalist and parliamentary form of republicanism associated with the Radical-Socialists and the Radicals. Although no longer a major mobilised political force, it had great prestige among the rest of the French right and had succeeded in spreading its extreme ideas to other conservative traditions. The actual street agitation associated with Action Française was largely carried out by its youth wing, the *Camelots du Roy*, which had much influence in the student movement, and was prone to street brawls with left-wing students in the Latin Quarter.
- The *Jeunesses Patriotes* ("Patriot Youth") had been founded by Pierre Taittinger, deputy of Paris, in 1924. With 90,000 members, including 1,500 "elites", it claimed the legacy of the *Ligue des Patriotes*. Their main point of difference from Action Française was that they did not seek to abolish the republic and restore the monarchy; their chief goal was to end the forty year dominance of Radical-Socialists and Radicals in government, giving the republic a more Catholic and authoritarian direction. The *Jeunesses Patriotes* had close links with mainstream right-wing politicians, notably the main party of the religious right, the *Fédération Républicaine*, and boasted several of the capital's municipal councillors in their ranks.
- *Solidarité Française* ("French Solidarity"), founded in 1933 by the Bonapartist deputy and perfume magnate François Coty, had no precise political aims and few members.
- *Francisme* and others. Marcel Bucard's *Francisme* had adopted all the elements of the fascist ideology, while the *Fédération des contribuables* ("Taxpayers federation") shared its political aims with the other leagues.
- The *Croix-de-feu*. The *Croix-de-feu* had been created in 1926 as a World War I veterans association. The most important league by membership numbers, it had extended its recruitment in 1931 to other categories of the population under Colonel de la Rocque's leadership. Like the other leagues, they also had "combat" and "self-defense" groups, called "*dispos*". Although many on the left wing accused it of having become a fascist movement, especially after the crisis, historians now categorise it as a populist social-Catholic protest movement, and that La Rocque's reluctance to order his protesters to join with the other leagues in directly attacking parliament was a key reason for the riots' failure to escalate into a regime change.<sup>[3]</sup>
- *Veterans' associations*. The veterans' associations which had taken part in the January demonstrations also took to the streets on 6 February. The most important, the *Union nationale des combattants* (UNC), directed by a Parisian municipal councillor whose ideas were close to the right wing, counted 900,000 members.
- Finally, a sign of the complexity of the situation and the general exasperation of the population, also present were elements associated with the French Communist Party (PCF), including its veterans' association, the *Association républicaine des anciens combattants* (ARAC).<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2.2. The Riots

On the night of 6 February, the leagues, which had gathered in different places in Paris, all converged on Place de la Concorde, located in front of the Bourbon Palace, but on the other side of the Seine river. The police and guards managed to defend the strategic bridge of the Concorde, despite being the target of all sorts of projectiles. Some rioters were armed, and the police fired on the crowd. Disturbances lasted until 2:30 AM. 16 people were killed and 2,000 injured, most of them members of the *Action Française*.

Far-right organisations had the most important role in the riots; most of the UNC veterans avoided the Place de la Concorde, creating some incidents near the Elysée palace, the president's residence. However, Communists belonging to the rival left-wing veterans' organization ARAC may have been involved; one public notice afterward condemned the governing centre-left coalition (known as the *Cartel des gauches*) for having shot unarmed veterans who shouted "Down with the thieves, long live France!".

While on the right side of the Seine (north, on the Place de la Concorde), the policemen's charges contained the rioters with difficulty, the *Croix-de-feu* had chosen to demonstrate in the south. The Palais Bourbon, seat of the National Assembly, is much more difficult to defend on this side, but the *Croix-de-feu* limited themselves to surrounding the building without any major incident before dispersing. Because of this attitude, they earned the pejorative nickname of *Froides Queues* in the far-right press. Contrary to the other leagues which were intent on overthrowing the Republic, it thus seemed that Colonel de la Rocque finally decided to respect the legality of the republican (unlike the *Action Française*) and parliamentary (unlike the Jeunesses Patriotes) regime.

In the National Assembly, the right wing attempted to take advantage of the riots to push the *Cartel des gauches* government to resign. The left wing, however, rallied around president of the Council Édouard Daladier. The session was ended after blows were exchanged between left and right-wing deputies.

## 3. Consequences of the Riots

### 3.1. Daladier's Resignation and the Formation of a National Union Government

During the night, Daladier took the first measures to obtain the re-establishment of public order. He did not exclude the possibility of declaring a state of emergency, although he finally decided against it. However, the next day the judiciary and the police resisted his directives. Moreover, most of his ministers and his party withdrew their support. Thus, Daladier finally chose to resign. This was the first time during the Third Republic that a government had to resign because of pressure from the streets.

The crisis was finally resolved with the formation of a new government under the direction of former president of the Republic (1924–31) Gaston Doumergue, a right-wing Radical Republican who was ostensibly the only figure acceptable to both the far-right leagues and to the centrist parliamentary parties. Labelled a "National Union government", in reality it was a government containing all political traditions but excluding the Socialist and Communist parties. It included the most important figures of the parliamentary right wing, among them the Liberal André Tardieu, Radical Louis Barthou, and social-Catholic Louis Marin, although also included were several members of the centre-left (the Radical-Socialist and similar smaller parties), plus War Minister Philippe Pétain, who would later lead the collaborationist Vichy regime during World War II.

### 3.2. Toward the Union of the Left Wing

Following 6 February, the left was convinced that a fascist putsch had taken place, and that it had been temporarily blocked. The importance of the anti-parliamentarist activity of far-right leagues was undeniable. Some of them, such as the *Francisque*, had copied all of their characteristics from the Italian *Fascio* leagues which had marched on Rome in 1922, thus leading to the imposition of the fascist regime. Although historian Serge Bernstein has showed that Colonel de la Rocque had probably been convinced of the necessity of respecting constitutional legality, this was not true of all members of his *Croix-de-feu* movement, which also shared, at least superficially, some characteristics of the fascist leagues, in particular their militarism and fascination for parades.

On 9 February 1934, a socialist and communist counter-demonstration took place while Daladier was being replaced by Doumergue. Nine people were killed during incidents with the police forces. On 12 February the CGT trade union (reformist, with loose links to the Socialist Party) and the CGTU (revolutionary, and linked to the communist party) decided to call for a one-day general strike, while the SFIO socialist party and the communist party decided to call for a separate demonstration. However, at the initiative of the popular base of these movements, the demonstrations finally united

themselves into one. Thus, this day marked a first tentative union between the socialists and the communists. It had at its core the anti-fascism shared by both Marxist parties; a union had been opposed since the 1920 Tours Congress split, but this new rapprochement led to the 1936 Popular Front (consisting of radicals and socialists and supported without participation in the government by the Communist party). This antifascist union was in line with *Joseph Stalin*'s directives to the Comintern, which had asked the European communist parties to ally with other left-wing parties, including social-democrats and socialists, in order to block the contagion of fascist and anti-communist regimes in Europe.<sup>[5]</sup>

Furthermore, several anti-fascist organizations were created in the wake of the riots, such as the *Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes* (Watchfulness Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals, created in March 1934) which included philosopher Alain, ethnologist Paul Rivet and physicist Paul Langevin. The anarchist movement also took part in many antifascist actions.

### 3.3. The Right Wing's Radicalization

Following the crisis, the parliamentary right also began to get closer to the counter-revolutionary far right. Several of its leaders would lose all trust in parliamentary institutions. Daniel Halévy, a French historian of Jewish descent, publicly declared that following 6 February 1934 he was now a "man of the extreme right". Although he personally abhorred Italian fascism or German national socialism, he went on to support the Pétain regime in Vichy.<sup>[6]</sup> The radicalization of the right wing would accelerate after the election of the Popular Front in 1936 and the Spanish Civil War (1936–39).

The American journalist John Gunther wrote in 1940 that the *Croix-de-feu* "could easily have captured the Chamber of Deputies. But [de la Rocque] held his men back. 'France wasn't ready,' he explained". It was possible, Gunther said, that "like Hitler, he hopes to gain power by legal means."<sup>[7]</sup> In the view of the far right, 6 February represented a failed opportunity to overthrow the Republic, which only presented itself again in 1940 following the balance had been tipped by the étrange *défaite* (Marc Bloch) or "divine surprise" (Charles Maurras), that is the 1940 defeat during the Battle of France against Germany. This deception prompted several far-right members to radicalize themselves, turning toward fascism, national-socialism or the wartime Vichy regime.

Despite the fears of the left, the 6 February crisis was not a fascist conspiracy. The far-right leagues were not united enough and most of them lacked any specific objectives. However, their violent methods, their paramilitary appearances, their cult of leadership, etc., explained why they have often been associated with fascism. Beyond these appearances, however, and their will to see the parliamentary regime replaced by an authoritarian regime, historians René Rémond and Serge Bernstein do not consider that they had a real fascist project. Opposing this view, other historians, such as Michel Dobry or Zeev Sternhell, considered them as being fully fascist leagues. Brian Jenkins claimed it was pointless to look for a fascist essence in France and preferred to make comparisons which led, according to him, to a clear convergence between Italian fascism and the majority of the French leagues, in particular the *Action Française* (in other words, Jenkins considers fascism an Italian historic phenomenon, and though a fascist-like movement existed in France, it should not be called "fascist" as that name should be reserved for Benito Mussolini's movement).<sup>[8][9]</sup>

---

## References

1. William D. Irvine, . French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation of France in the 1930s (1979)
2. William D. Irvine, French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation of France in the 1930s (1979) pp. 98–126.
3. William D. Irvine, "Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu." *Journal of Modern History* 63.2 (1991): 271–295. online <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2938485>
4. Chris Millington, "February 6, 1934: The Veterans' Riot." *French Historical Studies* 33.4 (2010): 545–572.
5. Julian Jackson. *A The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–38* (1988) pp. 17–52.
6. See, inter alia, Mark Hulliung *Citizens and citoyens: republicans and liberals in America and France* (2002) at p. 158
7. Gunther, John (1940). *Inside Europe*. Harper & Brothers. pp. 205–206.  
<https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.149663/2015.149663.Inside-Europe#page/n227/mode/2up>.
8. Brian Jenkins, "The six fevrier 1934 and the 'Survival' of the French Republic." *French history* 20.3 (2006): 333–351.
9. Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France 1932–1936* (2002)

