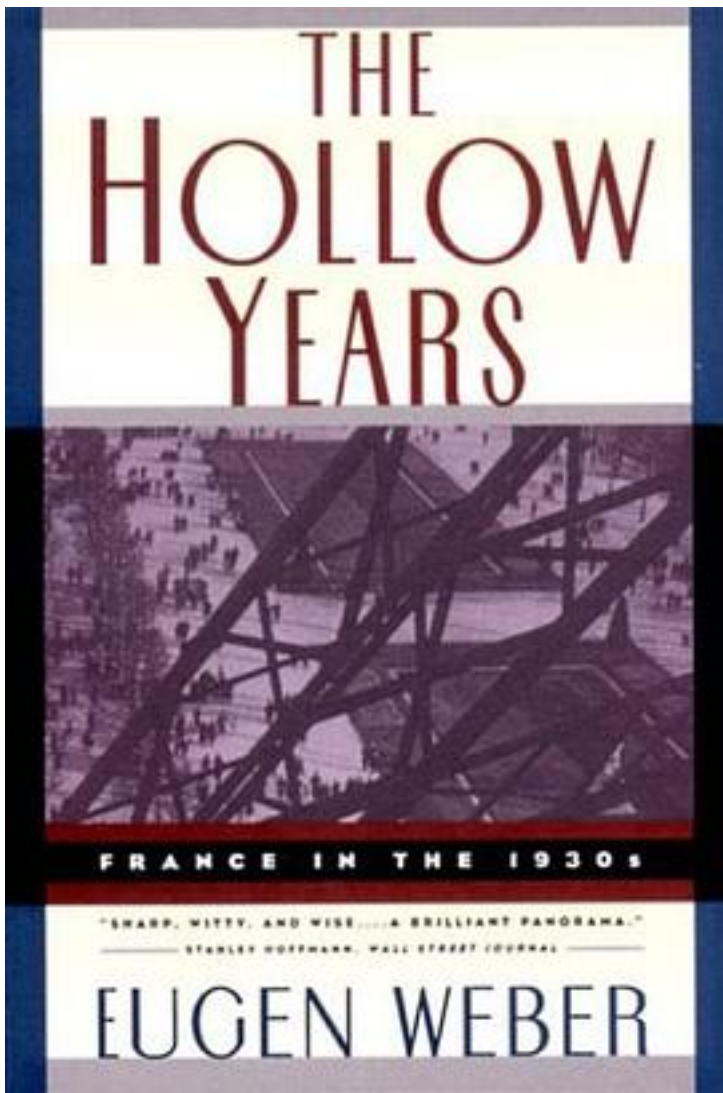


The Hollow Years



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Caught between the memory of a brutal war won at frightful cost and fear of another cataclysm, France in the 1930s suffered a failure of nerve. "The common sight of wheelchairs, crutches, empty sleeves dangling loosely or tucked into a jacket, had left the French with their fill of combat." Except against each other. Brilliantly chronicled here by a master historian, the 1930s could neither solve insoluble problems nor escape from them. It was not all bad, at least not at first. The First World War had paved the way for millions, men and women alike, out of farm or domestic service into more satisfying employment; more services now catered to middle- and working-class folk. There were fewer servants but more labor-saving devices; social legislation, modern conveniences, greater leisure, made life a little better. Yet publicity and press bred baffled aspirations, and change proved as threatening as inertia. The French entered the modern age kicking and screaming against its discomforts. When depression struck a brittle economy, new claimants to jobs outside the home saw meager wages dwindle like those of other workers. Some turned to prostitution to make ends meet or, in the Indian summer of French Catholicism, to God. The government tried deflation, which only made things worse. Competitive intellectual preening grew more vapid, competitive political aspersions more scurrilous. The general public grumbled, tightened belts, struck, rioted, and, when all else failed, rounded on immigrants: "unwanted strangers, intruders, parasites, speaking in strange accents and cooking with strange smells."

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