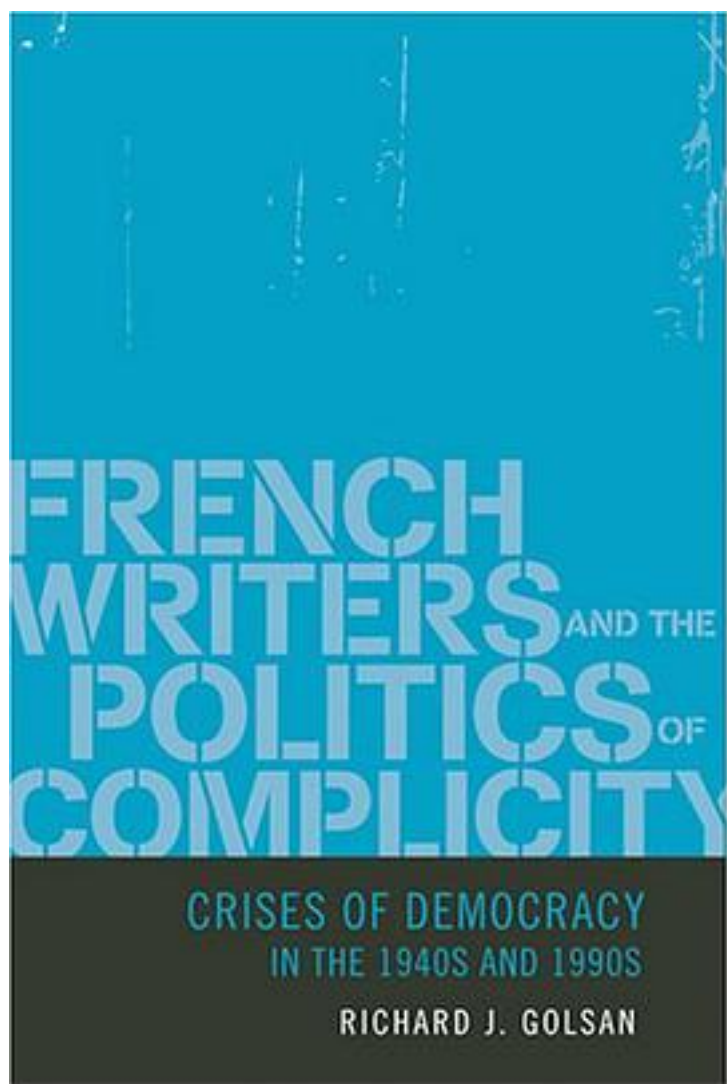


French Writers and the Politics of Complicity



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Focusing on the political commitments of three French writers who collaborated with the Vichy Regime and Nazi Germany during World War II, and on those of three leading French intellectuals of the 1990s whose misplaced political idealism led them to support xenophobic, authoritarian regimes and dangerous historical revisionisms, Richard J. Golsan reexamines the notion of political commitment or engagement in two difficult periods in modern French history. Discussing the fiction, essays, and journalism of Henry de Montherlant, Jean Giono, and Alphonse de Chateaubriant, Golsan explores the complexity of artistic and intellectual collaboration during the German Occupation. He demonstrates that, in this context, complicity with political evil often derived from "nonpolitical" motives including sexual orientation, antimodern aesthetics, and dangerously skewed religious beliefs. Turning to the post-cold war era of the 1990s, Golsan examines the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut's support for Croatian independence, the "mediologist" Régis Debray's pro-Serb stance during the bombing of Kosovo, and the historian Stéphane Courtois's revisionist comparison of Nazi and Communist crimes during the 1997 debate surrounding the publication of *The Black Book of Communism*. In these three cases, laudable motives-and misguided historical comparisons with Vichy, Nazism, and the Occupation period that marked the political and intellectual discourses of France in the 1990s-resulted, paradoxically, in antidemocratic engagements profoundly at odds with the original motivations behind these intellectuals' commitments. In each of these case studies, political complicity derives from a combination of passions and ideals-whether positive or negative, emotional or intellectual-as well as a desire to make the present conform to a particular and generally skewed vision of the past. The full implications of these involvements are neither fully grasped nor understood by their authors, either through lack of objectivity, rationality, or imagination or through willful ignorance. The results are always unfortunate and often disastrous. Considered together, these six intellectuals serve as sobering reminders that political commitments are never as simple or straightforward as they seem and that admirable motives for political involvement can have dangerous and destructive consequences in historical practice.

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