France, a history

Citoyen, citoyenne

The History of Modern France: From the

Revolution to the Present Day. By Jonathan

Fenby. Simon and Schuster; 536 pages; £25

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RANCE breathes its history, and en-

graves the past on its landscape. No

French town is complete without an Ave-

nue Charles de Gaulle. The boulevards

and train stationsofParis—the Gare d’Aus-

terlitz, Avenue de la Grande Armée—recall

great battles waged and won. In speeches

modern politicians draw on France’s past

glories in a way that British leaders, say,

might feel was an uncomfortable expres-

sion ofnational vanity. So it is always use-

ful to take a fresh look at how history

shapesthe country’spoliticstoday.

Jonathan Fenby, The Economist’s corre-

spondentin Parisin the early1980s, isa vet-

eran and affectionate observer of France,

and a biographerofde Gaulle. In his latest

book, he takes the long view, recounting

the country’s modern history, starting in

1789 and endingwith the Charlie Hebdo ter-

roristattacksofJanuarythisyear. The bulk

of the book is a well-told narrative

account, and so valuable primarily as a

textofreference. Buthe isathisbest when

he teases out the tensions between the re-

publican unifying ideal and the enduring

divisions that periodically emerge to chal-

lenge the French nation.

MrFenbymarshalsevidence to suggest

that the republican tradition, celebrated in

so many French national rituals, is less

deeplyrooted than iscommonlyassumed.

In doingso, he leanson an idea formulated

by Sudhir Hazareesingh, an Oxford schol-

ar, that France is an “unfinished republic”.

The secular republic, with its impulse to

centralise, standardise and unify, has al-

ways collided with the fractious forces of

rebellion, pittingsecularistsagainst Catho-

lic traditionalists, Jacobins against royal-

ists, left against right. For all its revolution-

ary mythology, the author writes, the

nation has never “fully digested that heri-

tage because ithasneverwanted to shed its

other, more conservative character.”

The myth of continual progress from

the revolution onwards masks a bloody,

disrupted history: 1830, 1848, 1871, 1940,

1968. Republican insurrectionistsoften em-

braced repression and conservatism. After

the overthrowofthe Orléansmonarchy in

1848, it was a republican government that

sent in the troops against the June revolt,

resulting in some 10,000 dead or injured.

“Society was cut in two,” wrote Aléxis de

Tocqueville. “Those who had nothing un-

ited in common envy; those who had any-

thingunited in common terror.”

Indeed, Mr Fenby argues that in some

ways national unity is a historical excep-

tion: underde Gaulle afterliberation from

Nazi occupation or during fleeting mo-

ments such as the post-Charlie Hebdo re-

publican marches. Such experiences, he

suggests, are “rare and bred by shock”.

More often, he writes, division, disillusion

and conservatism impede constructive

compromise. Even the unity expressed on

the streets after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist

attacksfell apartbecause ofa feeling in the

country’s banlieues, or suburban housing

estates, that freedom of expression and

French secular principles—entrenched to

contain the influence of the Catholic

church—were a licence foroffendingIslam.

Perhaps inevitably, after this gallop

through more than two centuries of his-

tory, the section on the past 20 years feels

rushed and a bit jumpy. Rioting that took

place in 1997, forexample, mergesinto riot-

ing in 2005, as ifthe banlieues were alight,

on and off, all the time. A more analytical

texton the same period, and on which this

new book directly draws, is the updated

version ofMrFenby’sown previouswork,

“On the Brink”. It was first published in

1998, butstill ringstrue today.