

textual analysis of the very structures of religious identity and authority—to other instances of religious violence around the world today.

Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective

Abdications. By Ivan Ermakoff. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. 440p. \$99.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper.
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—Ioannis D. Evrigenis, *Tufts University*

“Why would a group legitimize its own subservience and, in doing so, abdicate its capacity for self-preservation?” is the question asked at the start of *Ruling Oneself Out* (p. xi). Focusing on the Center Party’s vote for the enabling act of March 1933, which gave Hitler the right to amend the Weimar constitution, and on the Vichy parliament’s vote to grant full powers to Marshal Philippe Pétain in 1940, Ivan Ermakoff studies how these decisions looked to the actors themselves, and finds that the pervasive uncertainty that characterized the situation leading up to each vote, and the actors’ tendency to look to their peers for guidance, complicate monocausal accounts of groups marching to their death. Many prevalent attempts to explain these seemingly inexplicable collective actions tend to emphasize coercion, miscalculation, and collusion. Each of these explanations has its merits, and some are more persuasive than others. Yet each has its problems. Coercion, for example, which is the most compelling explanation of the lot, might lead one to expect those threatened to submit, yet fear just as often causes consolidation and vigorous collective resistance to the challenger.

Ermakoff uses a creative mix of sources (archival material, documentary evidence, memoirs) and methods (formal theory, quantitative and hermeneutic analysis), and offers a thought-provoking glimpse into the ways in which the thresholds of individual actors took shape in response to their reference groups and the signals issued by party leaders, and other prominent actors, leading up to their collective alignment. These sources reveal the complexity of the situation on the ground, in 1933 Berlin and 1940 Vichy; the multitude of considerations pulling actors in different directions; and the general uncertainty that accompanied every grave decision. That these decisions were collective and bound by the party and parliamentary setting, rules, and procedures, as well as the sense of accountability to constituents, peers, and the nation at large, made them all the more challenging.

Ermakoff succeeds in conveying the ambivalence and confusion felt by many of these representatives as they were about to make decisions that we know to have had far-reaching consequences. At times such as those, one hopes that others similarly situated could have provided some type of guidance—what to do or what to avoid, and why. When those others are as perplexed as oneself, however, one’s attention turns to prominent actors. These actors,

who are already the focus of attention under normal circumstances, understandably acquire an added, special significance. Their experience, oversight of the party, and dealings with representatives and members from across the ranks, as well as their interaction with other party leaders, and, most importantly, with the challenger, renders them natural sources of vital information. Their utterances and even silence become the “key to consensus formation and political alignment” (p. xxi).

Placing this much emphasis on the role of prominent actors might give the impression that this is a simple, top-down account of political agency, yet one of the major strengths of Ermakoff’s approach is that he reverses this point of view and presents the effects of these prominent actors’ stances from the vantage point of those affected by them. From that perspective, Ermakoff challenges the three prevailing alternative explanations of such “collective abdications,” and demonstrates successfully that the dynamics on which he focuses ought to supplement any full account of what happened in those cases (e.g., p. 70). Yet as his narrative progresses, one is left with the increasing sense that the deputies’ contemporary explanations are thinly veiled attempts to justify what was hard to justify, by engaging in a very common practice: hiding behind others or inside large numbers. Later accounts, whether memoirs or testimonies before honor juries (p. 335), are even more suspect. As post–World War II Germany and France struggled to rehabilitate their political environments, evidence of collaboration with or facilitation of the Nazis and the Vichy government entailed serious reputational and political costs. One would expect interested parties, under such circumstances, to try to shift the blame for their decisions.

At the outset, Ermakoff proposes a distinction between abdication and surrender (p. xi). This distinction is crucial to his argument because it paves the way for a challenge to the strongest counterargument, that centered on coercion. His German protagonists make it clear that the mounting violent acts perpetrated by Nazi thugs were a factor, but not the only factor, in their decision to vote for the enabling act. But what about the effects of the longer-term threat of civil war, of events such as the Reichstag fire, and of the constant presence of uniformed individuals inside and outside the meeting halls? In the case of Vichy, the German occupation complicates the matter even further. If it is true that in 1933 Hitler had power in all but name (p. 75), and that whatever happened in 1940 Vichy was ultimately irrelevant, in what sense can one consider these acts abdications, rather than, effectively, surrenders? As in Hobbes’s famous Aristotelian example of the man at stormy sea who can choose to lighten the load of his boat or sink with it, strictly speaking the actors in each case had a choice between voting for and against. But did they really? The Social Democrats resisted and voted against the act, and so one might point to them as an example of the alternative. Yet the reasons that placed them in opposition to Hitler go further

back than Ermakoff's narrative, rendering their calculus very different from the Center Party's. Similarly, there was room for miscalculation, given that German parties had voted for enabling acts in the past. Even though the March 1933 act went beyond any prior ones, it looks different as part of a longer, gradual process than it does when considered in isolation.

These two cases are very dissimilar—in addition to the obvious difference of the German occupation of France, for example, it is important to note that Pétain is not a challenger in the same sense as Hitler. They are also exceptional in more ways than one. As a class of actions, parliamentary votes in favor of emergency powers are peculiar in that they are one-shot legitimizing acts that pave the way toward conditions that go against the very essence of the regime that made them possible. Their symbolic significance, therefore, is great, even if the cases themselves are unusual. As examples of hopeful parliamentary democracies gone horribly wrong, interwar Germany and France stand as grave reminders of the perils of wishful thinking, and *Ruling Oneself Out* offers an unsettling view of how deep down the responsibility for them extends.

Response to Ioannis D. Evrigenis's review of *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdications*

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— Ivan Ermakoff

In a book written more than four hundred years ago (*Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, 1548), La Boétie conveyed his astonishment about people “acquiescing to their own servitude.” *Ruling Oneself Out* restates the problem: why do groups legitimize the prospect of their political incapacity and, by way of consequence, the possibility of their servitude? I address this question by considering two parliamentary decisions of crucial historical significance: the parliamentary surrenders of constitutional authority in Germany (March 1933) and in France (July 1940). These events have paradigmatic value because they are clear-cut cases of collective abdications and because they lend themselves to explanations that seem as obvious as they are commonsensical. People abdicate because they face coercive pressures. They abdicate because they misjudge the consequences of their action. Or they abdicate because their ideology predisposes them to do so.

Depending on the event under consideration, these claims have different variants. Evrigenis lists several of them. As *Ruling Oneself Out* demonstrates, their factual validity is dubious. For instance, the Germans' occupying the northern part of France appears to have no significant and clear-cut impact on the July 1940 vote whether we take into account indicators of direct exposure to German rule (pp. 80–83, 172–173, Tables 9 & 17) or whether we consider how often parliamentarians mention this factor in their accounts (pp. 290, 292). Similarly, the claim that in

March 1933 “there was room for miscalculation, given that German parties had voted for enabling acts in the past”—a fact to which I refer on p. 41—loses its substance when we start investigating actors' strategic assessments at the time (pp. 39–41, 96–99, 256–260).

The broader problem here is one of specificity. These generic explanations remain incomplete. The coercion argument does not account for groups resisting coercive pressures. The miscalculation argument obfuscates actors' awareness of the stakes. As for the argument in terms of ideological predispositions, it ignores the extent of actors' uncertainty. The way out of these limitations lies in a detailed analysis of how, in these highly challenging situations, actors relate to those whom they define as peers, how they form their beliefs regarding these peers, and how these beliefs affect their own behaviors. This requires delving into the subjective make-up of the processes at play. In doing so, *Ruling Oneself Out* specifies the conditions of possibility of different explanatory scenarios, and elaborates the micro analytics of this class of decisions.

This analytical inquiry, which combines quantitative analyses and game theoretical insights, builds on a close attention to primary historical sources. Clearly, as Evrigenis observes, actors have an incentive to justify themselves. The point of this research, however, is to systematically sift cues revealing—often without actors' awareness—subjective assessments of the situation as well as rules of decision. For this purpose, I reconstruct the temporality of collective processes and elaborate the hermeneutics of these decisions (Part IV). Further, I assess motivational claims in light of the timing of personal accounts (contemporary versus retrospective), their formal structures (narratives versus “synchronic” accounts) as well as the behavioral stance of their authors (pp. 126–128, 256–270, 286–293, Appendix A). Informed by these validity checks, the argument about collective alignment draws on observations that prove congruent irrespective of actors' vested interest in self-justification.

As these few remarks make clear, the units of analysis in this framework are individuals and groups, not historical cases. By definition, March 1933 and July 1940 are exceptional and “irreducibly singular” (xviii) events. In their exceptional character lies their heuristic significance. These events magnify processes that have broad relevance for understanding the dynamics of situations in which a group of people faces a critical decision—a decision which they know will impact their collective fate and bind the future.

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This book may be read from two complementary and enlightening perspectives: as a history of political thought