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RECENT JOURNEYS ALONG THE ROAD BACK TO FRANCE, 1940

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I

Understanding the swift collapse of the Third Republic continues to present an irresistible challenge for students of French history. Explanations for the ‘Strange Defeat’ have evolved considerably over the past 55 years. From the aftermath of the Battle of France through to the early 1970s most attempts to explain the fall of France identified a profound malaise in French society which rendered the leadership and institutions of the Third Republic incapable of rising to the challenge posed by a resurgent Germany. The predominant view was that the Republic had been rotten at its core. The civilian and military leadership of pre-war France, along with the deeply flawed security policies that they pursued, were products of this endemic moral decay. Consequently, the military disaster and subsequent political collapse were the inevitable culmination of a long process of decline. Theories of decline and decay are nothing new in French political culture. Indeed the concept of *décadence* has been a constant in French political rhetoric at least since France’s defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1870. In the highly charged atmosphere which prevailed in France after the liberation of 1944–45, the image of a decadent Third Republic was seized upon by Gaullists as a useful foil with which to juxtapose ‘France Reborn’.¹ Examples of this characterization abound. Raymond Aron, perhaps the most lastingly influential political philosopher of post-war France, recalled that he had ‘lived through the 1930s in the despair of French decline’.² For André Beaufre, France’s foremost military thinker, 1940 was ‘but the last step in an inevitable decline’.³ This view, which interprets French strategy and diplomacy of the 1930s in light of the defeat and collaboration which followed, went largely unchallenged for nearly 20 years.⁴

Two of the earliest historians to question this interpretation and to argue for a more balanced assessment of French policy during the 1930s were Anglo-Saxon scholars John Cairns and Geoffrey Warner.⁵ In a thoughtful and stimulating essay Cairns suggested that the fall of France should be interpreted as a European, rather than a strictly French, military defeat. In a judicious reconsideration of the role of Pierre Laval Warner stressed that France’s decline during the inter-war period forced French

¹ Robert Aron, *France reborn: the history of the liberation, June 1944–May 1945*, translated by Humphrey Hane (New York, 1964).

² Cited in Tony Judt, ‘“We have discovered history”: Defeat, resistance and the intellectuals in France’, in Michael Geyer and John W. Boyer (eds.), *Resistance against the Third Reich, 1933–1990* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 214–42.

³ André Beaufre, *1940: The fall of France* (New York, 1968), p. 213.

⁴ The most resolute formulation of this contemporaneous view is perhaps that of Pertinax (André Giraud), *Les fossoyeurs. Défaite militaire de la France, armistice, contre-révolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1943).

⁵ John Cairns, ‘Along the road back to France 1940’, *American Historical Review*, III (April 1959), 583–603 and Geoffrey Warner, *Pierre Laval and the eclipse of France* (London, 1968).

statesmen to make a number of difficult choices. The gradual opening of the French diplomatic and military archives, beginning in the 1970s, gave impetus to further revisionism. North American scholars Robert Young and Jeffery Gunsburg produced monographs based on extensive archival research which stressed the powerful restraints placed on French strategic planners during this period.⁶ The combination of German demographic and industrial superiority, British unwillingness to support France and the debilitating effects of the international economic crisis placed severe restrictions on French policy. Although these themes were advanced in a more cautious manner by French historians Jacques Néré and Pierre Le Goyet,⁷ the historiography *inside* France was revolutionized by the proceedings of two conferences held in Paris in 1975 and published in 1978 as *Edouard Daladier, chef du gouvernement, 1938–1939* and *La France et les Français, 1938–1939*.⁸ The general picture that emerges from these two volumes is that of a government which displayed a great deal more energy and resolve in preparing the nation for war than had hitherto been acknowledged and that of a population which had gradually come to accept the prospect of another war with Germany. Subsequent studies by Robert Frankenstein, Robert Doughty, Maurice Vaïsse and Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac have further strengthened the revisionist case.⁹ Frankenstein demonstrates that the governments of Léon Blum in 1936–1937 and Edouard Daladier of 1938–39 devoted enormous resources to rearmament. Robert Doughty stresses that, rather than the culmination of the moral failures of French society during the 1930s, the military defeat was the product of errors in judgement by the French high command at every level. Maurice Vaïsse has identified the beginnings of an impressive recovery as war approached but judges that this turnaround was ‘trop tardif’. In a massively researched two volume study, Crémieux-Brilhac argues that the image of French defeatism must be nuanced and that morale on most levels of French society was surprisingly good at the outbreak of war. It was the insidious effects of the *drôle de guerre* during the winter of 1939 and the spring of 1940 which eroded support for the war effort in France.¹⁰

Yet there are also impressive studies based on extensive archival research which interpret French policy within a theoretical framework of *décadence*. Pierre Rocolle and Piotr Wandycz identify a fundamental lack of will among both political and military

⁶ Robert J. Young, *In Command of France: French foreign policy and military planning, 1933–1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978) and Jeffery Gunsburg, *Divided and conquered: the French high command and the defeat of the West, 1940* (Westport, 1979).

⁷ Jacques Néré, *The foreign policy of France, 1919–1945* (London, 1975) and Pierre Le Goyet, *Le mystère gamelin* (Paris, 1975). Colonel le Goyet has since reversed field somewhat to produce a strident condemnation of French policy during the Sudetenland Crisis of 1938 in *Munich, ‘un traquenard’? Pouvait-on et devait-on fait la guerre en 1938?* (Paris, 1988).

⁸ ‘France sous le gouvernement Daladier, d’avril 1938 à septembre 1939’, Colloque, Paris, 1975. Published as *Edouard Daladier, chef du gouvernement* and *La France et les Français en 1938–1939*, René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (eds.), (Paris, 1977 and 1978 respectively).

⁹ Robert Frankenstein, *Le prix du réarmement français, 1935–1939* (Paris, 1982); Robert Doughty, *The seeds of disaster: the development of French army doctrine, 1919–1939* (Hamden, 1985); idem, *The breaking point: Sedan and the fall of France, June 1940* (Hamden, 1990); Maurice Vaïsse and Jean Doise, *Diplomatie et outil militaire, 1871–1991* (2nd edn, Paris, 1991) and Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les français de l’an 40*, 2 vols: Vol. I, *La guerre: Oui ou non?* Vol. II, *Ouvriers et soldats* (Paris, 1990).

¹⁰ A more detailed (but also more narrowly focused) treatment of French politics during the ‘Phoney War’ which reaches many of the same conclusions is Hans-Jürgen Heimsoeth’s *Der zusammenbruch der dritten Französischen Republik* (Bonn, 1990).

chiefs as the central cause of the defeat.¹¹ Yvon Lacaze and Anthony Adamthwaite stress the paralysing effects of the bitter left-right divide in France during the 1930s.¹² Lacaze argues that these ideological fissures, which at times threatened to tear France apart, combined with a profound and enduring opposition to war at every level of French society to remove all prospects for national unity before the German threat. Adamthwaite asserts that the threat of internal upheaval was foremost in the minds of French leaders and led them to pursue a policy of appeasement toward Germany at the expense of France's strategic interests in eastern Europe. The conviction that France's civilian and military leadership surrendered to drift and indecision is at the very centre of the major study of French foreign policy by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, which is suggestively entitled *La décadence*.¹³ In the most comprehensive formulation of the Gaullist interpretation, Duroselle identifies a lack of effective leadership as the chief factor in France's decline and eventual collapse. Indeed, reading *La décadence*, one is left with the impression that, rather than more manpower or a larger industrial base, what France really needed during this period was a Clemenceau or a de Gaulle. Without a true leader, France stumbled down the path to war beset with self-doubt and riven by ideological conflict.¹⁴

And so the debate continues. One side continues to point to 'internal' factors (poor leadership and a lack of national cohesion) when explaining the failures of French policy, while the other emphasises the central importance of 'external' factors (France's inferior strategic position, the attitude of Britain and the economic crisis).¹⁵ Such a distinction between internal and external approaches is admittedly artificial and, to an extent, unfair. Historians who stress French *décadence* do not ignore the importance of Germany's strategic advantages or the impact of the depression. Nor do revisionist scholars discount the rifts in French society. But this distinction does help to explain why the former tend to view the revisionist case as far too deterministic while the latter argue that monocausal theories of moral decay actually explain very little. Since 1992 a number of monographs have appeared which renew the intensity of this debate. Nicole Jordan, Martin Alexander, Elisabeth Du Réau and Richard Vinen have published books based on research in French archives. Robert Frank (formerly Frankenstein) has produced a wide-ranging synthesis of his work on French financial, foreign and defence policy over the past twenty years.

¹¹ Pierre Rocolle, *La guerre de 1940: les illusions* (Paris, 1990) and Piotr Wandycz, *The twilight of French eastern alliances* (Princeton 1988). Less strident proponents of this interpretation are Henry Dutaillly, *Les problèmes de l'armée de terre française, 1935-1939* (Paris, 1980) and Ladislav Myszyrowicz, *Autopsie d'une défaite: origines de l'effondrement militaire français de 1940* (Berne, 1973).

¹² Yvon Lacaze, *L'opinion publique française et la crise de Munich* (Berne, 1991); idem, *La France et Munich* (Paris, 1993) and Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the coming of the Second World War* (London, 1977).

¹³ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La décadence: la politique étrangère de la France, 1932-1939* (Paris, 1979).

¹⁴ For two general studies of France during the 1930s which have appeared recently and which emphasise themes of decadence and decay see Serge Bernstein, *La France des années trente* (Paris, 1988) and Eugen Weber, *The hollow years: France in the 1930s* (New York, 1994).

¹⁵ This approach to understanding the debate must not be confused with the 'innen' versus 'ausen' controversy which divides students of Nazi social, economic and foreign policy.

II

Nicole Jordan's *The popular front and central Europe: the dilemmas of French impotence, 1918–1940*, focuses on the collapse of France's eastern alliance system and examines the relationship between this collapse and the *débâcle* of 1940. Although its title suggests a study of France and central Europe during the inter-war period, the book focuses on the years from 1934 to 1940. The central argument advanced throughout is that the French alliance system was undermined by a military strategy that was based on fighting a 'cut-price war on the peripheries'. This meant that, in contrast to 1914–18, the decisive battles of the next war would take place in Belgium or, better yet, in the east. The tragic flaw in this strategy was that the French general staff failed to understand the strategic importance of central and eastern Europe. The high command was unwilling to make the commitment in men and material necessary to cement the various states in this region into a viable *barrière de l'est*. Jordan goes even further to argue that French acquiescence in the German remilitarization of the Rhineland, to the annexation of Austria and to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia was part of a general scheme to channel the tide of German aggression eastward – away from the Franco–German frontier. She asserts that this 'tragic reluctance to shed French blood again in self-defence' (p. 4), was at the heart of a shortsighted policy which 'redounded with full force against France itself in 1940' (p. 49). Because it attributes a certain coherence, however cynical, to French foreign policy and military planning, this book has been well received. Yet, although this study appears to be based on sound research, serious flaws emerge when Jordan's arguments are considered closely against the archival record.

The strength of *The popular front and central Europe* is its careful analysis of the tortured diplomatic and commercial relations between France and the Little Entente states of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia during the mid-1930s. Beginning in 1935 Germany mounted a sustained effort to gain economic control of the Danubian basin through crude clearing arrangements and the barter of armaments for raw materials. Lacking sufficient markets for their exports and desperate to refurbish armed forces that were critically lacking in modern material, both Yugoslavia and Romania were vulnerable to the pull of the German industrial juggernaut. By combining this leverage with the threat of force the Reich was able to break up the Little Entente and isolate Czechoslovakia – thereby laying the groundwork for the territorial annexations of 1938–39. Jordan makes extensive use of the archives of the foreign ministry and the published *Documents diplomatiques Français* in taking up and developing questions originally raised in studies of economic diplomacy in eastern Europe by Georges Soutou, David Kaiser and Philippe Marguerat.¹⁶ She demonstrates that officials within the French foreign ministry recognized at an early stage the threat that German economic penetration of eastern Europe posed to France's strategic interests. The spring and summer of 1936 are characterized as a period of 'initial clarity and resolve'. (p. 145) The Quai d'Orsay proposed to combat the spread of German influence by increasing French purchases of the foodstuffs and raw materials from the Balkans and by providing these states with armaments that they would otherwise be forced to

¹⁶ Georges Soutou, 'L'impérialisme du pauvre. La politique économique du gouvernement français en Europe Centrale et Orientale de 1918 et 1919. Essai d'interprétation', *Relations internationales*, vii (1976), 216–39; David Kaiser, *Economic diplomacy and the origins of the Second World War* (New York, 1981) and Philippe Marguerat, *Le troisième reich et le pétrole roumain, 1938–1940* (Geneva, 1977).

obtain from Germany. France, however, was unable to 'deliver the goods' in the form of either favourable commercial agreements or substantial shipments of arms. Consequently, efforts to transform the Little Entente into an anti-German coalition failed. The key reason for this failure, according to Jordan, was shortsightedness on the part of both the ministry of commerce and the army general staff. Both refused to acknowledge the importance of preventing German domination of the Danubian basin. The ministry of commerce refused to subordinate French economic interests to political considerations while the military actually requisitioned armaments that had been earmarked for Yugoslavia and Romania for its own rearmament effort. This shortsightedness is linked to the larger theme that the high command failed to think in grand strategic terms.

At the heart of this interpretation is the familiar argument that, had French decision makers only had the nerve to make war with Germany either during the Rhineland crisis of 1936 or during the Sudetenland crisis of 1938, the disasters of 1940 could have been avoided. According to Jordan, the chief architect of the French collapse was General Maurice Gamelin, chief of staff for national defence and commander-in-chief designate of France's armed forces. Gamelin's overriding priority was to avoid having to fight on the Franco-German frontier. His 'attachment to a cut-price war on the peripheries... in effect made it impossible to fight at all' (p. 301). Throughout this study, the sinister intentions of Gamelin and the general staff are juxtaposed with the vain efforts of Léon Blum to halt the retreat in the east and to salvage the alliances with the states in this region. Blum was leader of the Socialist party and premier of France first from June 1936 to June 1937, then again briefly during March–April of 1938. While premier, Blum made frequent declarations of his government's commitment to France's eastern allies. Jordan attaches great importance to these affirmations of good faith and judges that this policy of fidelity was undermined by the blindness and cynicism of Gamelin and the general staff. The fate of France was thus sealed.

This Manichean view of French policy, with Gamelin, the general staff and the forces of darkness in one corner and Blum, a few foreign ministry officials and all that is virtuous in the other, is simplistic and misleading. It is based on an inadequate knowledge of the capabilities of France's armed forces. The argument that France should have made war over the Rhineland or Czechoslovakia rests on the assumption that its army and air force were capable of mobilizing and waging war effectively. But the mid to late 1930s were years of crisis for France's land and air forces. Severe cutbacks in defence expenditure between 1932 and 1935, combined with the inability of France's armaments industry to cope with the meagre orders for equipment placed by the military during this period, had left the army desperately short of modern equipment. The situation was so bad that the army's field manoeuvres for 1935 had been cancelled due to equipment shortages and a lack of funds. The air force was in no better shape. In the spring of 1936 less than one-half of France's 205 bombers were fully operational and desperate shortages of reserves and of spare parts limited the effectiveness of even these aircraft.¹⁷ The situation had not improved when war loomed once again during the summer of 1938. The armaments industry had been completely swamped by the massive rearmament programme introduced by the Popular Front in late 1936. The resulting backlogs set the army modernization programme back by as much as two years. The renovation of the active army remained confined to its

¹⁷ France, Ministère de la Défense, Service Historique de l'Armée de l'Air, Series 2B, Carton no. 8, 'Organisation, stationnement des unités de l'aviation lourde de défense', May 1936.

preliminary stages due to chronic delays in the delivery of all types of material from weapons to armoured cars. The result was that by late summer 1938 only one of three envisaged light mechanized divisions was operational while a planned heavy armoured division was nowhere near ready.¹⁸ The air force was in even worse condition. The reorganization of the aircraft industry in 1936–37 had resulted in a complete breakdown in production. In September of 1938 the *Armée de l'Air* possessed less than fifty modern fighters and no modern bombers. The best French bomber was the Bloch 210 which had been designed in the late 1920s and was more than a generation behind German bombers in technical terms. Most French bombers, in fact, were constructed of wood and canvas rather than the steel and stressed aluminum used in the construction of the latest German aircraft. The upshot of all of this was that France's armed forces were in no shape to plan a serious invasion of western Germany. Nor could they spare the material needed to arm the allies in eastern and central Europe. It was military weakness, rather than any cynical intention to channel the German tide eastward, which pre-occupied the French high command during this period.

In fact the expectation was that Germany would expand eastward without any prompting from French policy. The assumption within the army general staff had long been that Germany would move first in the east in order to secure the raw materials necessary to wage war against the West.¹⁹ From the French perspective, the construction of a credible eastern front depended on co-operation between Poland and Czechoslovakia. But efforts to induce the two most powerful of the eastern European 'successor states' to forge a military alliance had failed utterly. Mutual animosity, fuelled by the bitter dispute over the Teschen region, blinded the statesmen of both sides to the larger threat posed by German revisionism. Neither the Poles nor the Czechoslovaks were willing to set their differences aside and commit to a broad anti-Germany front. Gamelin is judged culpable for this failure by Jordan. He 'complacently assumed' that the German menace would eventually propel Poland and Czechoslovakia toward staff talks and was relatively unconcerned with the state of an eastern front (p. 92). This charge is unfounded. Gamelin worked consistently through the 1930s to bring about a rapprochement between the Polish and Czechoslovak general staffs. In Gamelin's personal papers there is a dossier with nearly thirty letters back and forth from Gamelin to General Louis Faucher, chief of the French military mission in Czechoslovakia. A constant theme in this correspondence is the importance of co-operation between the Czechoslovaks and the Poles. Gamelin urged Faucher repeatedly to impress upon Czechoslovak decision makers the importance of closer diplomatic and military ties with Poland.²⁰ Far from being complacent, Gamelin was preoccupied with this question.

There is a final indictment of Gamelin in Jordan's penultimate chapter which is entitled 'The great eastern crises and the fall of France'. Attempting to explain why France went to war in 1939 over Poland rather than in 1938 over Czechoslovakia, Jordan adopts a tortured line of reasoning which culminates in the charge that Gamelin (and presumably the rest of the general staff) was angling all along for a

¹⁸ There is an excellent survey of the state of the French army at the time of the Munich Crisis in the French parliamentary archives: France, Archives de l'Assemblée Nationale, Seizième Législature, Commission de l'Armée, 'Contrôle des fabrications d'armement: rapport de M. Camille Fernand-Laurent', 25 October 1938.

¹⁹ France, Ministère de la Défense, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre [hereafter SHAT], 7N 2638-2, 'Note sur les projets allemands en Europe Centrale', 18 August 1935.

²⁰ SHAT, *Fonds gamelin*, 1K 224-7 (supplémentaire), 'Tchécoslovaquie'.

negotiated peace with Germany. In keeping with the general thrust of the interpretation offered throughout, the argument begins with the observation that 'The German threat to Poland' offered France 'the unexpected boon of a war in the east' (p. 294). This is a very serious charge. Yet there is no explanation of why a German threat to Czechoslovakia eleven months previously did not also constitute a similar 'boon'. Instead Jordan stresses the importance of 'the ever-present possibility of negotiations with Germany' to French policy and argues that 'anticipation of negotiations with Germany accompanied Gamelin's continuing commitment to Poland in late August of 1939'. The primary reason that Gamelin advised the government to mobilize, according to Jordan, was that doing so would 'enhance [France's] position in negotiations' (p. 295). The only evidence presented to support this assertion is a transcript of a declaration made by Gamelin at the Riom trial in the aftermath of the defeat. Here Gamelin submitted that his priorities in requesting mobilization had been to secure the Franco-German frontier and to put France in as strong a position as possible should the crisis be settled by negotiation.

When Gamelin's written statement at Riom is placed in context, however, its meaning changes significantly. The Riom proceedings were Vichy inspired 'witch trials'. In such an atmosphere it was hardly in Gamelin's interests to give the impression that he had pressed a warlike policy on the government or that he had been opposed to any prospect for a negotiated settlement. Hence his submission is hardly compelling evidence that neither he nor the general staff were serious about prosecuting the war with Germany to its conclusion. To make a persuasive case would require citing evidence that Gamelin or other high ranking military officials advocated negotiations with Germany either in the months preceding the outbreak of hostilities or during the 'Phoney War'. No such evidence is provided.

Jordan's rejection of the conventional view that French strategic planning anticipated a long war is also problematical. It is argued that the central thrust of French planning was for a *guerre d'ailleurs* in which victory would be purchased with 'the blood of others' (p. 302). The contention that the French high command preferred to fight the next war outside of France (with the soldiery of Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia or Belgium doing the bulk of the fighting and dying) is absolutely correct. But the argument that French planners did not envisage a long war flies in the face of a mountain of archival evidence. In particular, Jordan has evidently failed to consult the documentary record left behind by the inter-ministerial organ charged with co-ordinating civilian and military planning for the next war. The archives of the *Secrétariat Générale* of the *Conseil Supérieure de la Défense Nationale* comprise over six hundred cartons burgeoning with detailed planning for the mobilization of industry and labour, for the acquisition of raw materials and for preparing against the effects of economic warfare. This source, which has been available for consultation for the past fifteen years, is vital to any understanding of French strategic planning.²¹ Perusal of even a healthy sampling of this material leaves no doubt whatsoever that French grand strategy was committed to an extended conflict in which Allied economic strength would provide a decisive long-term advantage over the Axis states.²²

In sum, while *The Popular Front and central Europe* offers a well-informed and compelling analysis of the obstacles facing French external policy toward east-central

²¹ This collection is held in series 2N and 6N of the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre.

²² It is worth noting that French military doctrine complemented this vision of the next war entirely. The army planned to fight the kind of highly structured methodical battles characteristic of a long war of attrition.

Europe, its central theme, that this policy was undermined by a myopic military strategy, is neither new nor convincing.

A diametrically opposed interpretation is advanced by Martin Alexander in *The Republic in danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the politics of French defence 1935–1940*. Using a wealth of documentation from French, British, Belgian and American archives, Alexander largely succeeds in making his case for ‘a favourable reinterpretation of the much maligned General Gamelin’. The focus of this study is less on Gamelin’s role as commander in chief of the armies that lost the battle of France than on the role played by Gamelin in the struggle to rearm during his tenure as France’s senior military official from 1935 to 1940. Extensive use of hitherto rarely consulted parliamentary archives sheds new light on the complexity of the problems the defence establishment faced in its effort to rearm. The struggle to obtain the necessary credits, the limited capacity of the French armaments industry and the resulting bottlenecks and lengthy delays in the delivery of matériel all raised havoc with the army’s timetable for modernization. Of particular interest is Alexander’s use of the records of the Chamber *Commission du Commerce et de l’Industrie* and the *Commission du Travail* to demonstrate how rearmament was hamstrung by a chronic shortage of skilled labour. Drawing heavily on the work of Robert Frankenstein, Alexander considers the debilitating time lag between the implementation of the ambitious rearmament programme of autumn 1936 and the recovery of French armaments production in the spring of 1939 from the perspective of the military.

This book is particularly valuable for its illumination of the relationship between strategy on the one hand and political, economic and financial imperatives on the other. A new perspective on French appeasement emerges from Alexander’s analysis of the relationship between the progress of rearmament and the evolution of policy. Detailed intelligence about both the pace and nature of German rearmament reinforced Gamelin’s determination to press forward with plans to motorize French infantry and to create mechanized divisions capable of countering a breakthrough by German armour. But chronic delays in these re-equipment programmes undermined military effectiveness at the same time that Germany was rearming at an unprecedented pace. Alexander demonstrates that these concerns were a key factor in the cautious attitude of Gamelin and the rest of the military leadership during crises over the Rhineland in 1936 and Czechoslovakia in 1938. Even by the summer of 1939 only seven of twenty active infantry divisions had been motorized, and only two mechanized divisions had been fully constituted. Alexander also demolishes the more simplistic charges of stupidity and blindness which have dogged Gamelin since the *débâcle* of 1940. It is clearly established that Gamelin understood the importance of armour and mobility in modern war and lobbied hard for the creation of a heavy armoured division in 1938 and 1939. Compelling evidence is presented that the French high command possessed a sound understanding of German plans for a war of movement and that adjustments were undertaken after the fall of Poland to counter this operational doctrine. Also persuasive is Alexander’s discussion of the question of the *armée de métier*. Aggressive lobbying for a mechanized professional strike force by de Gaulle and Paul Reynaud actually hampered Gamelin’s efforts to construct large armoured formations by arousing the suspicions of politicians inimical to advancing credits towards what was perceived to be weaponry for offensive warfare.

Less compelling is Alexander’s analysis of the relationship between Gamelin and the political leadership of the Third Republic. Primary responsibility for the disaster of 1940 is attributed to the political institutions of the *République des camarades*. Alexander’s

assessment of the role of Edouard Daladier, minister of national defence and premier for much of this period, is a case in point. Daladier is labelled a 'political waverer' whose performance at the rue St. Dominique deteriorated over the course of time. Daladier's inadequacies presumably made Gamelin's task that much more difficult. But the question of Daladier's incompetence is never rigorously examined. The premier's most serious transgression seems to have been his disagreements with Gamelin over certain questions. The evidence used to support this case, moreover, comes primarily from Gamelin's memoirs and from the *Journal de marche* kept by his personal cabinet during the 'phoney war'. The activity of the various parliamentary commissions during the *drôle de guerre* also comes under heavy fire. Alexander cites the complaints of various divisional and regional commanders that official inspections by various parliamentary officials were proving an immense distraction. There is no discussion, however, of how these visits compromised the efficiency of France's armed forces. Political involvement in military affairs has come to be accepted in modern democratic states. Alexander's argument that this involvement profoundly compromised France's capacity to wage war may well have some merit, but ultimately remains unproven. These relative quibbles should not detract from the many and obvious strengths of this study. Alexander has made a major contribution to our understanding not only of the 'politics of rearmament', but also of the policy of appeasement as pursued by France before the Second World War.

Like *The Republic in danger*, Elisabeth Du Réau's *Edouard Daladier, 1880-1970* is an essentially sympathetic reinterpretation of a key member of the civil-military leadership of the later Third Republic. Daladier was one of the most powerful men in France during the 1930s. He was premier three times and held important portfolios in the governments of Edouard Herriot, Joseph Paul-Boncour, Léon Blum and Camille Chautemps. Daladier's chief legacy, however, has been his role in the events of 1938 and 1939. Daladier was one of the 'Men of Munich' and a co-author of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia. It was Daladier's government that, eleven months later, led France into a war which was to end in catastrophe the following June. Consequently, Daladier has been widely vilified, both in popular memory and in the historiography, as a weak man, a vacillator, one of the 'gravediggers' of France whose incompetent leadership brought ruin and enduring shame to the *patrie*. Professor Du Réau's exhaustively researched and meticulous study demonstrates that these characterizations are vastly overdrawn. Daladier was a personification of the middle class success story which was so central to the social and political mythology of the Third Republic. The son of a baker who rose to prominence (like so many of his contemporaries) on the strength of an outstanding academic career, Daladier made his political fortune with the radical party (the party of middle class France) during the inter-war period. A distinguished record as a soldier in the trenches of the First World War and a reputation for honesty and hard work propelled Daladier toward the leadership of the radical party and the premiership of France.

Although Daladier was premier from January to October of 1933 and again in January of 1934, the focus of this study are the years 1936 to 1940. Daladier's role in the origins of the Popular Front and the elections of 1936 receives careful scrutiny as does his activity as minister of national defence in the first government of Léon Blum. Du Réau outlines the pivotal role Daladier played in both the conception and implementation of the rearmament programme in the summer of 1936. The strongest sections of this book are those which examine Daladier's third government from April 1938 to the outbreak of war. Professor Du Réau has carefully pieced together the mass

of information received by the premier during the spring and summer of 1938 to construct an authoritative account of Daladier's perspective during the Munich crisis. Daladier, like Gamelin and the army and air force general staffs, was pre-occupied with France's military inferiority. He was convinced that France was neither militarily nor psychologically prepared to undertake war with Germany in 1938 and felt compelled to go to Munich. But he was no proponent of peace at any price. Daladier was *Munichois* out of necessity rather than inclination. He considered the Munich agreement 'un court répit' (p. 294) in which military preparations must be intensified. Du Réau demonstrates how the moral and material rearmament of France became the overriding priority of the Daladier government. The unprecedented use of extra-parliamentary decree laws, the modification of many of the social programmes implemented by the Popular Front and the crushing of the labour movement in 1938–39, were all part of the effort to prepare for war. These measures achieved impressive results. Industrial production recovered, the financial situation improved dramatically and popular opinion appeared to shift behind a *politique de fermeté* towards further German or Italian aggression. Du Réau links these improvements in the internal situation to the evolution of French policy from appeasement to war. The result is a comprehensive analysis of the French decision for war which is much more persuasive than that offered in *The Popular Front and central Europe*. A number of enduring myths about Daladier's position during the final months of peace are dispatched at the same time. Stressing the premier's insistence on a policy of firmness toward Italy and Germany, Du Réau underlines the distinction between Daladier and his foreign minister Georges Bonnet, which has too often been blurred by historians.

Daladier's activity as premier and war minister in 1933, conversely, received only passing consideration. This is probably because there is relatively little material pertaining to this period in his voluminous personal papers. But this *lacunae* seems odd, given that this period witnessed the accession of the Nazi party to power in Germany and coincided with the ongoing negotiations of the disarmament conference at Geneva. One is inclined to judge that this is a case where a dearth of material is instructive in its own right. A. J. P. Taylor has warned that, 'all politicians have selective memories; and this is most true of politicians who originally practised as historians'.²³ Daladier was trained as a professional historian. Although his papers are extensive and constitute an invaluable source for the historian seeking to understand French policy on the eve of war, they were compiled with the intention of writing a Churchillesque history of the coming of war. The fact that there is precious little material pertaining to such an eventful epoch suggests that he intended to play down the importance of the earlier period. This is significant because it was during this period that civil-military relations in France reached their inter-ward nadir. There was open warfare between Daladier and the *Conseil Supérieur de Guerre* over cuts in military spending and over a proposed reduction of the size of the army. While Daladier's government was imposing these measures on the French military, the Nazi government was consolidating its hold on power and laying the foundations for unlimited rearmament. Germany thus gained a decisive headstart on France in the race to rearm. The mutual mistrust between civilian and soldier which this affair generated never healed completely. It was a central ingredient in the profound pessimism that gripped much of the general staff for the remainder of the 1930s. Unfortunately, there is no real analysis of Daladier's role in these events in this biography.

²³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The struggle for mastery in Europe*, Pbk. edn (Oxford, 1971), p. 569.

Professor Du Réau is also reluctant to advance any over-arching conclusions about Daladier's performance as a leader. The tension between the contemporaneous image of the 'bull of the Vaucluse' and his post-1940 reputation as a 'waverer' is never resolved. It is difficult to condemn this caution however. Moments of uncertainty, and even of self-doubt, should perhaps be expected from the man charged with the monumental task of preparing democratic France for the rigours of total war with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. More disappointing is Du Réau's apparent unwillingness to take a clear position on the debate over French defeatism on the eve of war. Did the energetic series of reforms undertaken by the Daladier government during the final months of peace point the way to a possible 'republican renewal'?²⁴ Or, conversely, did the crushing of the labour movement undermine national unity and function as a prelude to defeat and the authoritarianism of Vichy? Professor Du Réau's biography of Daladier leaves these questions unanswered.

In *The politics of French business, 1936-1945*, Richard Vinet examines the attitudes of France's business elites through the tumultuous period between the accession to power of the Popular Front and the liberation of France. This is a thought-provoking study which challenges many existing assumptions about the relationship between big business and the republican and Vichy regimes. Vinet argues that the French *patronat* was not anti-republican before the fall of France and did not support the Vichy government. He also rejects the thesis that business leaders used the political climate that prevailed under the German occupation and Vichy to exact revenge on labour for the concessions that had been made during the Popular Front era.

In making his case Vinet stresses the importance of the period between the end of the Popular Front and the fall of France which he rightly characterizes as a 'lowland between peaks of scholarly interest' (p. 4). Forced by the threat of social unrest and industrial chaos to make concessions to labour in June of 1936, big business leaders immediately set about undermining the Matignon accords. The worsening of the international situation in the summer of 1936 provided the *patronat* with an opportunity to restore its authority. In an effort to stimulate the economy and boost armaments production the Daladier government shifted its policies sharply to the right. It rolled back much of the social legislation of the Popular Front – in particular the forty hour working week. It then combined with industrialists in the harsh suppression of the general strike that ensued on 30 November 1938. The success of the *patronat* in its struggle with organized labour was further consolidated by the government's repression and eventual dissolution of the communist party in 1939. Hence, Vinet argues, by 1940 the owners of big business had achieved their objectives and were no longer thinking in terms of *revanche*. The role of the *patronat* in the great defeat is also reinterpreted. Vinet rejects the traditional view that industrialists refused to make the sacrifices necessary to mobilize the French economy for war. He admits that there was opposition to economic mobilisation from business leaders but asserts that 'the assumption that there were always sinister political motives behind this hostility is naive' (p. 88). Vinet argues that there were strong nationalist and anti-German traditions within the *patronat* which made it 'especially prone to support the war effort' (p. 92). He points out that, while the *patronat* undoubtedly desired to maintain as much as possible a 'business as usual' atmosphere, 'opposition to a certain kind of war economy did not necessarily entail opposition to the war' (p. 90). The difficulties

²⁴ This is the argument advanced by J. K. Munholland in 'Between the Popular Front and Vichy: The decree laws of the Daladier Ministry, 1938-1940', *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* (Lawrence, 1986), p. 288.

experienced in industrial mobilization were due more to the excessive faith, shared by politicians as well as business leaders, in the ability of the liberal economies of Britain and France to overcome the command economy of Germany in a long war of attrition. This faith prevented ministers such as Paul Reynaud and Raoul Dautry from taking drastic measures to impose a war economy on the big business community. Vinen goes further to attack the notion that big business formed one of the pillars of the Vichy regime. He argues that most of the *patronat* opposed the economic reforms introduced under Vichy. He stresses the importance of the division of interests between heavy industry located primarily in the north-east and the smaller, declining industries based in the south, whose leaders were most enthusiastic about reorganizing the French economy along corporatist lines. Most heavy industrialists were indifferent, or even hostile, to the Pétain regime's *Charte du Travail*. Once business leaders realized that the nazi European order was doomed, they began distancing themselves from the Vichy government. Some industrialists, in fact, sought ties with labour and resistance movements.

Although Vinen has made extensive use of the archives of various French business organizations, the Paris and Lyon Chambers of Commerce and the archives of several of the biggest French firms, his scope is so wide-ranging that his arguments are frequently based on insufficient evidence. In particular the assertion that 'industry had achieved its social aims before the fall of France' (p. 222) remains unproven. The same is true of the contention that 'major industrialists became even more fervently anti-German in the period leading up to the war' (pp. 92–93). Also troubling is the downplaying of the immense profits industrialists earned by intensifying production for the German war effort. This does not suggest determined opposition to either German occupiers or Vichy collaborators. In sum, however, this wide-ranging reassessment of France's business leadership is a welcome addition to the historiography. It will doubtless stimulate more work in a field which has been relatively neglected in the recent boom in studies of the Vichy period.

In *La hantise du déclin: la France, 1920–1960: finances, défense et identité nationale*, Robert Frank has produced a brilliant survey of the interrelationships between financial, defence and foreign policy in France since the First World War. Although there is little in the way of new research in this book, Professor Frank has provided a superb synthesis of his own work (to date) with the latest scholarship in the field. The objective of *La hantise du déclin* is to analyse France's difficult transition to middle power status – in the author's words to 'Décrire quelques-unes des difficultés de la France à s'adapter à la "médiocrité", au sens étymologique du mot' (p. 282). In doing so, Frank focuses on a number of contradictions that emerged in French national policy during the 1930s and places them within the context of the period from 1920 to 1960. He argues that these contradictions emerged, because French policy makers failed to perceive the true extent of French decline. The problem, according to Frank, was not that France's leadership lacked the *will* to fulfil France's obligations as a great power. It was instead that France lacked the *means* to pursue policies that had been formulated in an era of artificial French predominance in Europe. This line of reasoning is not new. What is novel is Frank's focus on the time lag (the *décalage* or the *discordance*) between actual decline and perceptions of decline. This is an intriguing approach which in some ways stands the traditional view, which tends to conclude that policy makers were obsessed and even paralysed by the rhetoric of French decline, on its head.

To illustrate his case Frank points to the unwillingness of policy-makers to abandon the *franc Poincaré* of the late 1920s during the 1930s. Resistance to devaluation seemed

to be vindicated by France's relative prosperity during the early months of the world economic crisis. In this sense the strong franc functioned as a financial Maginot Line which sheltered France from the vagaries of the world-wide economic crisis. This misguided perception endured even after the depression began to ravage the French economy. Successive governments clung to deflationary policies which placed budgetary equilibrium above all other objectives. While the other western powers devalued their currencies, France remained a deflationary island in the world economy with an overvalued currency and a constantly shrinking national budget. This made it that much harder to meet the challenge of a resurgent Germany. Budgetary orthodoxy was in direct contradiction with the initial efforts to rearm undertaken in 1934–35. This is one of the contradictions explored by Frank.

A second is the incongruity between a 'pacifisme profondément enraciné' (p. 83) and a growing awareness of the need to rearm before the German threat. The horrors of 1914–18 had rendered another war 'impensable' in France while, across the Rhine, the nazis were at work militarizing German society from top to bottom. Fear of war competed with fear of the German threat. This dilemma crystallized under the Popular Front. Although the Popular Front's election slogan proclaimed 'paix, pain et liberté', the government of Léon Blum implemented the largest peacetime rearmament programme in French history. In early 1937, as the combination of social reform and rearmament strained the nation's finances to the limit, Blum imposed the 'pause' on the social programmes but not on rearmament. The nationalization of the armaments industry, which had been conceived as a means of moralizing this industry, in practice had the effect of rationalizing weapons production in order to construct a larger and more effective military machine. Yet, according to Frank, this contradiction was more apparent than real. The Blum government was rearming in order to negotiate a lasting understanding with Germany from a position of strength. Ideological fissures combined with powerful opposition to war at every level of French society to rule out a policy of resistance to German aggression. The result was France's capitulation at Munich. Frank is in entire agreement with both Alexander and Du Réau that France was neither psychologically nor militarily prepared for war with Germany at this stage. Fear of German domination had not yet overcome France's internal divisions or revulsion at the prospect of war.

These conditions prevailed until late 1938. Like Du Réau, Frank emphasizes the importance of a 'sursaut nationale' in 1938–39. Financial and industrial recovery coincided with a 'redressement psychologique' (a popular willingness to accept the risks of war with Germany) to underpin an increasingly confident and assertive foreign policy. These trends culminated in the decision to make war with Germany. At the heart of this turnaround was the recovery of the French economy. By overturning much of the work of the Popular Front, Daladier and Reynaud regained the confidence of investors and prepared the way for the return of nearly 26 billion francs worth of investment. This permitted the government to finance massive increases in rearmament expenditure through government loans rather than taxation. The problem was that Reynaud's policy, based as it was on the 'confiance des capitaux', forced the Daladier government to adhere to the principles of economic liberalism – even in wartime. Reynaud maintained that financial strength would be crucial in the long war which lay ahead and resisted pressure to finance unlimited rearmament at home and major purchases of military equipment in the United States. The result was another contradiction. 'Le franc,' Frank contends, 'fut mieux défendu que la France'. Dissecting this contradiction, Frank links Reynaud's 'politique du magot' with the

'pacifism viscéral de la France, hérité du carnage du 1914-18, toujours vigoureux, même après la début des hostilités'. Haunted by the bloodletting of the First War, France's civilian leadership hoped to defeat Germany on the strength of Allied economic superiority rather than force of arms on the battlefield. Hitler, unfortunately, refused to play by these rules.

Professor Frank asks big questions in this study. Under consideration is the dialectic between the 'forces profondes' at work in the background (the decline of France's demographic and industrial base and the strength of pacifist sentiment) and the evolution of events (the depression and the rise of Nazi Germany for example) in the foreground. Attributing decisive importance to one or the other of these influences is a formidable challenge. A good example of this is Frank's analysis of the 'sursaut' of 1938-39. On one level he sees this recovery as product of the reforms introduced by Daladier and Reynaud, which had triumphed in the 'bataille politique et sociale intérieure, engagée au moment de la crise sudète' (p. 47). But he also suggests that the recovery 'vint "d'en bas" et ne fut pas le résultat d'une politique élaborée "en Haut"' (p. 89). Was government policy shaping popular attitudes toward war or was public sentiment determining government policy? If Frank is unable to answer all of the questions raised in this stimulating monograph, this in no way detracts from its importance. He has shown how many of the contradictions in French financial, economic and defence policy during this period stemmed from France's general difficulty in adjusting to its rapid decline as a world power. He has also presented a well-written and compelling argument for the integration of financial history into the study of social, political, diplomatic and military history.

III

Taken together these studies point the way toward a more comprehensive understanding of the origins of the 'Strange Defeat' of 1940. Nicole Jordan illuminates the frustrations that French foreign ministry officials experienced in attempting to combat the spread of German economic and political influence in central and eastern Europe. Martin Alexander has stressed the relationship between the excruciatingly slow initial stages of rearmament and the pessimistic assessments that military chiefs formulated of the strategic situation. Elisabeth Du Réau and Robert Frank have both underlined the massive resources that France committed to rearmament and the extent to which preparations for war came to override all other considerations in the making of national policy. What is perhaps most interesting is the importance that Alexander, Du Réau, Frank and Richard Vinen attribute to the final 11 months of peace. By exploring the links between industrial and financial recovery and France's move from peace to war, these scholars have shown how international and domestic imperatives interacted with one another to influence the making of French policy. This trend toward a fusion of the 'internal' and 'external' approaches discussed at the beginning of this review provides a much richer understanding of French strategy and diplomacy on the eve of war.