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Forum on <cite>France and the Origins of the Second World War</cite>

Participants include John C. Cairns, Michael J. Carley (ed.), William D. Irvine, William R. Keylor, Sally Marks, and Robert J. Young.

Introduction

After I received a review copy of Robert J. Young's synthesis on France and the origins of World War II, I immediately sat down to read it through. Without a doubt, the book is interesting and thought-provoking, as one might expect from such an experienced and talented historian. Although I could not agree with all that I had read, I felt that the book deserved serious attention and that it was worthy of wider discussion. I invited four scholars in the field to offer comments which we have organized as a forum. I have acted as editor and offered my own views on some of the major issues raised by this book. Comments are followed by second thoughts and by Professor Young's reactions. It seems entirely fitting that John C. Cairns, who, as teacher and scholar, has influenced two generations of historians of 20th century France, should lead off the discussion.

Michael J. Carley book review editor H-France _

John C. Cairns:

Not quite twenty years ago, Robert Young published a thoughtful, documented case for reconsidering the condition of France and the role of the French in the breakdown of peace in Europe 1933-1939. He showed that, however badly the story ended, the French state had pursued an informed, rational, coherent policy against the odds. Since that time, an immense literature based on public and private papers has flowed freely, not least in the English language. Major works of scholarship have lent themselves to much of the case Young put forward. But somehow the main current of the French tale seems not to have greatly deviated from the course first opened up by wartime journalism and the earliest of the historical accounts put together half a century ago. Just eight years back, Donald Cameron Watt, for all his superb marshalling of the printed documents and a great mass of scholarly writing in his magisterial general account *How War Came*, entitled the final chapters, "Thunder in London" and "September 3: The British Ultimatum." In his concluding "Afterthoughts," he remarked, "Little more needs to be said of France. The Third Republic was in

its penultimate stage of decay..." (p. 617).

Undiscouraged, Watt's distinguished former student, girt up with his own many expert researches in the archives and a profound knowledge of the particular studies in the field, tries again to make the case, returning this time with a still franker appeal to think about it, to consider the complex evidence relating to this supposedly "decayed" regime and its role in the coming of the war of 1939. This is committed scholarship, as no doubt all excellent scholarship, willy nilly, must be. On the basis of the archival materials out there and the monographs published, Young believes that the "decadence" theme, whether crudely spewed from the inkwells of the pre-war extreme French Right, or carefully refined and dispassionately stated in the works of celebrated historians in our time, say, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle or Eugen Weber, is ill considered, mistaken, and does not fit the facts.

His own principal theme is that of "ambivalence". All through his compact new book is invoked the figure of "the river of French ambivalence" and its confluent streams. Everywhere he sees ambivalent popular opinion, ambivalent parliaments, parties, politicians, cabinets, ambassadors, and generals. Ambivalence about economic policy, about Hitler and the Germans, about the Popular Front, about the nation's wider interests, about potential allies, about the price of past victory and the possibility of having to pay it again (but never, he insists, about what might have to be done, in extremis, to defend the soil of France). The river of ambivalence is his constant metaphor for the nation in its endless dilemmas, apparently confronted by impossibly burdensome tasks in the post-1918 era, indifferently assisted in the task of preserving international order and national security, when not simply abandoned or opposed, by states, big and small, in Europe and beyond, whose essential vital interests were ultimately identical with those of France in the century, but whose peoples or leaders could not, or would not, see it until too late.

Like some, Young suggests that both the clarity of French perception of harsh reality and the quality of intelligence available to its leaders were of a high order. On the other hand, he holds that preserving peace, like waging war, was then, as always, the uncertain province of assessment, forecast, and choice of action, imprecise realms where the play of the contingent and the unforeseen is sovereign and nothing is sure. Perhaps, just perhaps, he shows a shade more understanding of the dilemmas confronting the French, sixty years ago, than of the dilemmas faced by other peoples in the arena - all of them carrying their idols before them, little knowing, as Hans Morgenthau put it, that they met beneath empty skies from which the gods had fled. But then this book is, after all, about France and the states of mind of the French on the morning, more or less, after the unprecedented slaughter of 1914-18.

This is a scholar's book, the book of a dedicated teacher. While making no concessions to beginners, it is addressed specifically to the young who seek to know and who may think they already know. Perhaps that is why one catches in his exposition now and then a characteristic passionate and rhetorical note, somewhat unusual in academic studies ("Take them all, by their millions, and you will never again mistake their genuine abhorrence of war, never again condemn their irresolution...." [p. 119]). In this sense the book is not only an expert guide to the relevant historical literature, but also an impassioned call to eschew easy national caricatures and ancient prejudices inherited from the fiercely engaged past.

This is not the place to pick out and worry certain statements and judgments made in the course of an admirably informed essay. Everyone interested in such a subject naturally brings to the dialogue his own little burden of particular readings and convictions. This reader is grateful for a stimulating, graceful text, a skilled Cicerone on the newer literature, and a strong appeal to reconsider the conflicted nature and awesome situation of the French nation in the age of European dictators. Often marginalized in the historical proceedings, if not condemned and dismissed out of hand (as certain of their principal actors have been, rightly and/or wrongly), the French are entitled to their day in court, too.

Always in the offing, of course, lies the disconcerting "strange defeat" which followed the events and struggles here analysed; and, still more ominously, the immediately ensuing attempted accommodation to a nightmare European order–of which effort this writer's generation seems unlikely ever to obtain a satisfactory clarification and understanding. Moving up to September 1939, one thinks always of the humiliation impending beyond mere defeat, of its preparation and possible explanation, both still so much obscured, even at the end of the century. All that weighs on the problem of France and the origins of the Second World War. But after all the unfavourable reviews of the later Third Republic, it is heartening to hear, as they heard in the summer of 1794, a cry ring out again on behalf of "Justice!" for those of 1938-39 and, as voices

in the Assembly insisted two hundred years ago, "Justice for every man!"

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William D. Irvine:

Ever since's France's dramatic collapse in 1940, few historians have avoided the temptation to view the events of the previous decade through the optic of that calamitous spring. A major military collapse must have, or so the wisdom goes, profound causes. Scholars have disagreed as to exactly what those causes might have been, but for several generations there was a general agreement that late Third Republic France was, somehow, decadent.

Robert Young is having none of that. In this important work of synthesis, he seeks a more nuanced and subtle approach to France and the coming of war in 1939: one which owes little to the traditional formula of decadence. Indeed, Young cannot quite hide his irritation with Duroselle's 1979 volume of the same title, regarding it as a historiographical "set back" (p. 52). Young speaks for a newer, largely non-French, generation of historians for whom words like "conspiracy and treason... incompetence, stupidity, paralysis and degeneration" (p. 49) have little or no analytical utility. Moreover, he notes that much of the traditional indictment of inter-war France is replete with contradictions. France is taxed with having been "complacent" but also with lacking "self confidence". Both fit comfortably under the general umbrella of "decadence", but can France really have been both? If "decadence" does not capture the mood of interwar France, what does? Young suggests "ambivalence", a word which appears on virtually every page of his book.

A key determinant of this ambivalence is the existence of several seemingly contradictory currents of thought held by most French as well as their leaders. One sought peaceful accommodation with Germany, be it republican or Hitlerian. Another sought to restrain the military and territorial ambitions of France's eastern neighbour, both before and after 1933. Different statesmen held closer to one current than the other, but neither pre-occupation was absent from most French leaders between the wars. If French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, is usually associated with the former current he was not, Young reminds us, the naive Germanophile of tenacious legend. Nor was the premier, Raymond Poincare, a single-minded Germanophobe.

The concepts of "hawks" and "doves" to say nothing of the categories of Left and Right yield few clues to French diplomacy. When the moderate socialist Joseph Paul-Boncour attempted simultaneously to grant Germany arms parity and improve relations with the USSR, his policy was apiece with that of his successor, the moderate conservative, Louis Barthou. Much the same could be said of Pierre Laval, Leon Blum, Yvon Delbos and even right down until 1939, Edouard Daladier. If French diplomacy so often seemed to lack clarity it was less because French leaders were irresolute than because they confronted formidable objective obstacles. About all France could be certain of was that Germany was a dangerous potential enemy. Beyond that, nothing was sure and most certainly not the reliability of any of her potential allies. Her eastern allies could be either an asset or a liability depending on where Hitler chose to strike first–something France could not know. Leaving the Franco-Belgium border relatively unfortified made sense only if one could count on the continued support of the Belgians. Whether or not the USSR or Italy would be useful allies depended on the ultimately unpredictable whims of their respective dictators. And either alliance carried a high domestic price tag and, given the sensibilities of Great Britain, a diplomatic one as well.

With hindsight, French military doctrine seems flawed; it appears less so in light of Young's account of the contemporary debates on that subject. Failure to match Nazi Germany's break-neck rearmament seems unwise in retrospect. Given contemporary uncertainly about the timing of a German attack and entirely plausible assumptions about a long term war, the point is less obvious. One might have added, although Young does not, that the decision to send seven French divisions to the Dutch border upon the outbreak of hostilities in the West, might have been a strategic coup, if the Germans had attacked where originally planned. Young does not ignore the structural problems of French politics: the chronic ministerial instability, the difficulty in holding together a parliamentary majority for any foreign or defence policy, the ideological antagonisms and (again) the ambivalence about the regime on the part of most parties of the Left and the Right.

If the years 1932 to 1938 were often chaotic, the last year of peace saw a remarkable resurgence of French self confidence, economic performance and military preparation. The calm and resolution of France in the autumn of 1939 impressed a host of foreign observers. There was little here that presaged the debacle which occurred nine months later. Of course the debacle did happen. A local

breakthrough became a rout. Does the state of pre-war France in any way account for this "strange defeat"? Yes, says Young, but only to a very limited degree. The defeat after all was an *allied* defeat. French armies, well into June, fought rather better than is usually claimed. The behaviour of French politicians in June 1940 was rarely heroic, but far from being a mere continuation of their alleged pre-war spinelessness such conduct was principally a recognition that the war they had planned for was not the war they had been forced to fight.

All of this is elegantly done. A great deal of analysis has been packaged into this slim volume–one notionally destined for undergraduates, but one that will prompt serious reflection by specialists. It will come as no surprise to the readers of Young's earlier works that this one too is beautifully written and skillfully argued. Although presenting a revisionist argument, the tone is never polemical. Given Young's acknowledged mastery of the field, his conclusions carry considerable weight.

So why then do I put down this book with a sense of unease (dare I say ambivalence)? The more so since I am on record as being in general agreement with the book's conclusions. I suppose what I really yearn for are some more palpable villains. As I do, of course, I can already hear Young's gentle admonitions about a-historical simplicity. But the closest we come in this book to a villain is Georges Bonnet, the only individual about whom Young has virtually nothing good to say. There was nothing very ambivalent about Bonnet's conduct at the time of Munich and afterward. Nor was Bonnet exactly an isolated figure. He had a substantial following across the parliamentary spectrum. Young certainly has some pointed things to say about the selfish narrow mindedness of much of the conservative elite. It would have been good to be reminded just how shrill they were during the Munich crisis. Even the more moderate of their number condemned as a diabolical clan seeking to Bolshevise France those few French men and women whose crime it was to believe that national honour and national self interest lay in defending Czechoslovakia. Nothing very ambivalent here. Young generally gives Paul-Boncour high marks for his diplomatic efforts in 1933; one cannot help but wonder what he thinks of his colleague, Anthony Adamthwaite's scathing assessment of him as a foreign minister who "treated the Quai [d'Orsay, the French foreign ministry] as a part time job" (p. 186). Young would probably reply that seeking out villains is easy enough; it is just not what writing history is all about. He could be right.

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William R. Keylor:

Robert Young's *France and the Origins of the Second World War* is a thoughtfully conceived, elegantly written, humane attempt to inject a therapeutic dose of nuance and complexity into a historiographical controversy which has long been marked by simplistic interpretations. Ever since Marc Bloch's *Etrange defaite*, composed in the immediate aftermath of France's military debacle of 1940 and published posthumously after the distinguished historian's martyrdom at the hands of the Gestapo, scholars have searched for the roots of the Third Republic's ignominious demise in the political, social, and economic deficiencies of interwar France. Some of this literature contains a *soupcon* of conspiracy, as in "Pertinax" 's rogue's gallery of "gravediggers" who paved the way for the national catastrophe. The American journalist William Shirer, an eyewitness to the embarrassing capitulation, extended the indictment to engulf the country's governing class in a pungent analysis which uncovered evidence of rot throughout the body politic of the Third Republic. There have already been references to the work of Weber and Duroselle. In his marvellously learned and probing study of France in the 1930s, Weber portrayed an ailing society on its last legs. With an exquisitely symptomatic gesture, the late Duroselle selected the evocative epithet "decadence" as the title for his study of French foreign policy in the 1930s. Robert Soucy's recent work confirms this sombre diagnosis of the patient by asserting that French fascism was not the marginal phenomenon portrayed in earlier studies by Rene Remond and others, but was in fact a mass-based, enormously popular, formidable political force in the 1930s that reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with and contempt for the republican regime.

What all of these studies, and many others that could be cited, share in common is a profound sense of the internal fragility–one might even venture to employ the term "rottenness"– of France's democratic institutions between the two world wars. It is but a brief step from this image of the degenerate France of the 1930s to the humiliated France of 1940 and the submissive, collaborationist France of the Vichy period.

Young is the author of an important study of the relationship between French military strategy and foreign policy in the years before the defeat. He is also the biographer of Louis Barthou, the French statesman who came closer than any other to cobbling together an alliance system which might have kept Hitler's Germany in check.

From these earlier investigations Young has evidently derived a healthy respect for the excruciatingly complex set of dilemmas that confronted the political, military, and economic elites of the Third Republic as they struggled to cope with the German menace between the two world wars. If there is an overall purpose of this book, it is to lay aside once and for all the conventional judgment "that France had it coming, that defeat at the hands of the Nazis was the mark of a lost and morally disoriented people" (p. 152). Young is at pains to demonstrate that interwar France faced a series of choices and challenges that would have severely tested the most resilient, vigorous, dynamic, self-confident of societies. If the Third Republic failed that test, it does not, in Young's view, constitute evidence of decadence, disability, or incapacity. Rather, it suggests the need for a careful reassessment of the potent historical forces which operated on French society between the victory over Germany in 1918 and the defeat by Germany in 1940, and of the ways in which the French elite and the French people responded to them.

Young reminds us that the most critical of these historical forces, which weighed on the French psyche like a mill stone, was the grisly memory of the Great War. The members of the governing class–most of whom had served on the western front and some of whom had been decorated for valour in combat–were obsessed with one overriding objective: to avoid condemning their children to a repetition of the unspeakable experience which had maimed or traumatized them or deprived them of close relatives and friends. In addressing this central issue Young introduces the underlying theme of his book which recurs regularly in every chapter: that of ambivalence. Unwilling to contemplate the twin extremes of preventive war and capitulation, the *dirigeants* of interwar France pondered a lengthy menu of possibilities for solving the national security problem posed by an aggressive, irredentist Germany. The two most attractive options were those of deterrence and conciliation, the familiar dichotomy of the stick and the carrot which tempted foreign policy makers from Briand to Bonnet.

The inability to choose, decisively and unequivocally, between these two alternatives was the first and most important instance of ambivalence which Young identifies as a debilitating influence on those entrusted with the responsibility for French security. But there were many others as well. Embedded in the option of deterrence was the tragic flaw of interwar French foreign policy: in light of economic and demographic disparities, the Third Republic could not hope to deter (or, if need be, defeat) the Third Reich alone. French security desperately depended, as it had in the last war, on the acquisition of reliable allies willing to fight Germany. But which allies? And at what price for France and its vital interests? Young succinctly summarizes the agonizing dilemma faced by the leaders of a bourgeois parliamentary republic as they calculated the costs and benefits of rapprochement with fascist Italy and the USSR. He recalls the oft-forgotten French anxiety about the financial, commercial, and cultural menace of Great Britain and the United States, even as the French government desperately and at times obsequiously solicited support from the two "Anglo-Saxon" powers who had saved France from defeat in the last war and whose vast resources would be essential to victory in the next. He notes that the earnest quest for alliance partners in eastern Europe as an essential counterweight to German power there included the risk that France would be dragged into war with Germany at the wrong time in the wrong place for the wrong reasons.

Young asserts that this continuous crisis of ambivalence carried over into virtually every aspect of French public policy. In the realm of military strategy, the overriding need to prevent precious French resources, territory, and manpower from falling under German control as in the last war dictated the development of the static defense system to which Minister of War Andre Maginot eventually gave his name. But the attendant plan for a lightning sweep across the lightly fortified Belgian frontier to engage the German army beyond the hexagon required mechanized, motorized units and a daring offensive strategy of mobility and flexibility. In the realm of industrial policy, French leaders in the 1930s were torn between the assumption of a long war (which would have required the methodical production of manufactured products and the stockpiling of strategic raw materials) and concern about the immediate threat of a German offensive (which would have required the emergency production of state-of-the-art munitions at the expense of other goods appropriate to a long war of attrition).

By emphasizing that these various options tenuously coexisted throughout the 1930s to tempt the governing elite of the Third Republic, and by focusing on the paralysis of the decision making process caused by its inability to choose among them, Young is much more charitable to Daladier, Paul Reynaud, Maurice Gamelin, et al., than the many commentators who do not hesitate to assign blame for France's ignominious descent into the depths of defeat and collaboration in 1940. His book will not satisfy those who attribute the military collapse to an ideologically motivated reluctance to resurrect the Rus-

sian alliance. Nor will it discover a sympathetic reception among those critics of French defense policy who blame an unimaginative, hidebound high command for the stunning German triumph. In the end, Young expresses a profound sympathy for the precarious situation in which the foreign and defense policy makers found themselves in the waning years of the Third Republic. And he appears to see no neat, simple, alternative policy to the messy, convoluted set of improvisations which resulted from their ambivalence and which was to lead their country to its frightful fate.

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Sally Marks:

Professor Young's new study is indeed welcome, especially as he presents a much more nuanced view than traditional stereotypes. Though he uses the term "ambivalence" to cover a great deal, his approach makes sense in the final analysis. His prose is erratic, but much of it is brilliant and sometimes impassioned, penned by a true lover of France.

Young begins by contrasting enthusiastic victory in World War I with glum defeat in World War II and rightly remarks that matters were not so simple. However, there was no French victory in World War I. Even in 1914, the fact that August and September did not end as May and June of 1940 did owed something to the delaying effect of Belgian resistance and a great deal to Russia's rapid mobilization and early offensive. Thereafter France clung by its fingernails to the edge of the abyss until help arrived–and more help and finally enough help to ensure Allied victory and French survival. But, as French leaders sensed, the price of salvation was loss of true great power status.

Despite France's own desperate wartime efforts, key ingredients in its survival were Russia, Britain and its empire, the United States, and 750,000 of its own overseas troops. In the immediate postwar period, the three powers withdrew to varying degrees while the utility of French forces overseas was much decreased by a combination of war's growing technological complexity, reducing the term of military service from three years to one, not greatly enlarging educational facilities in the colonies, and accepting the 1921-22 Washington conference limits on overdue capital ship construction. This last decision meant that overseas troops from many areas could only be transported to France with the consent or aid of Britain.

Young declares that he writes for students (p. 2) and shrewdly predicts (p. 36) that scholars will criticize his omissions. True indeed, but partly because today's students so lack context, which Young does not always explain sufficiently. He asks (p. 3) whether anyone has failed to hear of the two standard views of why France fell, forgetting that, in the United States, undergraduates routinely enroll in advanced courses without prerequisites and often know nothing of the French collapse or other matters to which he alludes.

Given the space constraints Young faced, it would be churlish to complain of omissions of secondary importance. Still, he might perhaps have made clearer the French tendency to assume that x will be so because it is what France needs. He might also have stressed that the French intended to refight World War I although on the Dyle instead of the Marne, and with their eastern allies replacing or supplementing the USSR. This point clarifies both the strategy of the long war and France's view of its allies. Belgium was to be France's battleground regardless of Belgian views which progressed from reluctance to hostility regarding the 1920 Franco-Belgian military agreement. Poland had long been regarded chiefly as an asset, not a liability, though the Corridor's demise was assumed early on. Somehow, Poland and the Little Entente would achieve unity to meet France's needs. And this view of "the long war" explains why Britain was always the essential ally in terms particularly of its navy, empire, and ties to Wall Street, and why it therefore gained so much leverage.

Perhaps one can survey interwar French policy without mentioning Italy until the mid-1930s, but omission of Britain is distorting. Except for the 1919 Anglo-American guarantee, the book's over brief index does not list Britain under any rubric though in fact it appears in 1936. In actuality, the situation was triangular from 1920 on, and one cannot address France's German problem without including its British problem, which was so often determining and usually constraining as French options were progressively narrowed. Young discusses many constraints on France's policy choices, but he does not fully explore those imposed by the need for allies, especially Britain.

To seek the causes of French defeat, one needs to look not only further back than the Hitlerian era, as Young briefly does, but also beyond France and Germany to the English-speaking countries. Those who controlled French policy from 1918 on were united on the need for the British tie. They disagreed on how to

gain, retain, or enlarge it and on how much to pay for it, but they understood French dependence. This being so, surely a few lines could have been spared to indicate that the 1924 reparations settlement was a crucifixion for France imposed at German urging by Britain together with American financiers. In discussing the Locarno agreements, Young ignores Britain altogether. In fact, France swallowed an unwanted package primarily to gain in its least attractive form the long-desired promise of British aid against German aggression. The price was high: virtual sacrifice of France's eastern allies, Germany's reversion to equality and international respectability, Britain's as arbiter of west-central Europe's destiny. But France paid it for fear that rejection would ensure that Britain would never offer its aid again. For France, the British guarantee was the point of Locarno, but both the Dawes and Locarno agreements shifted the power balance, inhibited treaty enforcement, and facilitated German reinvigoration–all at France's expense.

Thereafter, a largely disarmed Britain increasingly set the outer limits of French policy, pressing for further French disarmament, trying to block Franco-German economic rapprochements, and contributing considerably until 1933 to German resurgence. Then Britain said, "France must arm," as that was cheaper than doing so itself, but the British government continued to constrain French policy, sometimes to the relief of French leaders. In the end, alas, France was right about the war of *longue duree*, but wrong about its own role in it, thanks in part to earlier British pressure.

It is unfair to concentrate on omissions in a book with many strengths, but reviewers also face space constraints. Young's conclusion that French leaders could not bring themselves to choose between clashing imperatives is sensible if not entirely new. This last observation is not a criticism: history need not necessarily be new to be true–or as true as we can make it. Surely Young's carefully nuanced "ambivalences" edge us closer to that elusive truth.

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Michael J. Carley:

It is plain that "ambivalence" is the main thrust of Young's book as "decadence" is for other historians of the Third Republic. "France was at sixes and sevens," Young concludes: "conflicting certainties" led to "ambivalence that occasioned… indecisiveness" (pp. 149-50). There may even have been two Frances (France "multiplied… by two"), rather than the one divided (p. 148). We ought not to seek, writes Young, "to inculpate or exonerate… [but] to explain" (p. 150). All the actors are dead. They cannot defend themselves, and historians need not settle the dead's old scores.

This is all true enough. But William Irvine still put down Young's book "with a sense of unease." In spite of everything, one does hanker after heroes and villains no matter how persuasive Young's plea. Irvine points to the shrill and "selfish narrow mindedness of much of the conservative elite" especially in 1935 and after. Nothing much ambivalent there, he observes. Nor was there ambivalence, as Young notes himself, in the Right's opposition to the Popular Front and a Franco-Soviet alliance, or in the Left's antipathy toward fascism and its response to the riots of the Right on the *Place de la Concorde* in February 1934. This vehemence is no historian's facile hindsight. We miss the "street noise" in this book: the sound of riots and street fighting, the anti-fascist or anti-communist posters plastered on the walls of Paris, the vitriolic, suborned press campaigns, the impassioned calls for action to support Republican Spain, and equally impassioned pleas not to go to war for Czechoslovakia.

Nor was their much ambivalence, in *some* observers' minds, about if and when Herr Hitler would start another war, although Young sometimes observes that "no-one" really knew (pp. 103, 112). But some people thought they knew. In 1935, Winston Churchill and Robert Vansittart, the permanent under secretary at the British Foreign Office, thought Hitler would attack in 1938 at the latest. They were not far wrong. Vansittart had no doubts: we should not be led astray, he said, by the "jack-o-lantern" of placating Nazi Germany. Hitler always promises "jam tomorrow," but tomorrow never comes. There is not *a week* to be lost in rearming against him. Maksim M. Litvinov, the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, harboured no ambivalence about what Hitler would do. So long as Germany is Nazi, said Litvinov *in 1934*, so long will it be a "mad dog that can't be trusted, with whom no agreements can be made, and whose ambition can only be checked by a ring of determined neighbors." Hitler *will* strike somewhere, it's only a question of *where* he will strike first (1935). Georges Mandel shared such views, and pressed hard for a Franco-Soviet alliance: if Richelieu could ally with the Turkish Sultan or the Protestant Princes of Germany, he said, France can now ally with the red tsar Stalin against Nazi Germany. Some of the strongest proponents of cooperation with the USSR against Nazi Germany came from the Right. There *were* heroes in the 1930s, not knights without blemishes, but complicated, fallible men and women, who nevertheless

were certain of the imminent danger and had the courage to say so in a climate where the majority did not want to listen. This was ambivalence of a sort, to be sure.

And why did the majority not want to listen? It is a simple question with a complex answer. William Keylor stresses, inter alia, the widespread French fear of another war and another slaughter house. It was undoubtedly an unspoken assumption of officials and ministers, but it shows up in the official Anglo-French correspondence in terms of war as a conveyor of social revolution and of Soviet and communist influence into Europe. In 1935, one British staff report noted that the Anglo-French could only hope to defeat Nazi Germany in alliance with the USSR, but that in such a war the Soviet would be the main beneficiary. Even the 1937 poster art on the cover of Young's book illustrates the point: a Soviet fist pushes the innocent French Marianne into the crazed Hitler's open jaws. Young himself lays out some of the Right's arguments on the disadvantages of close French relations with the USSR (pp. 67-68). As Irvine points out, France wanted reliable allies, but these same allies also wanted a reliable France. Litvinov worried about the French commitment to "collective security", as much as the French worried about the dependability of the USSR.

Incidently, "decadence" is not just Duroselle's *post facto* characterization of France in the 1930s. One need go no further than the Soviet diplomatic correspondence to and from Paris between 1933 and 1938 to learn of the unhappy state of French affairs. Parliament was a "dirty business," ambassador Charles Alphand told a Soviet interlocutor in 1933, and the press belonged to the highest bidder. "It is not hard to understand the reasons explaining the indecisiveness and trepidation of French policy," explained the Soviet ambassador in Paris in 1936; the government functioned in "an atmosphere of self-doubt, peril, distrust, and hesitation." And France was mesmerized by German power and "virility." Or, at end of 1937, the subsequent Soviet ambassador observed that France was stricken by fear of communism and social revolution. The French fear tomorrow and appear destined to make "a complete capitulation to Hitler and Mussolini.. About Munich Soviet observers said it was a "second Sedan."

After October 1938, France began to recuperate, according to Young and Irvine. Undoubted this was so, but the recuperation was still thin ice when tested in 1940. And France was not ready to pay "whatever it cost" (p. 126) to obtain the only possible alliance that counted in 1939, with the USSR, which could have averted war or assured Nazi destruction if war came anyway. After a flurry of independent thinking in April 1939, the French let the British do the main, unhurried negotiating with the USSR. Daladier, the bull of the Vaucluse, "a bull with snail's horns," instructed his chief negotiator before leaving for negotiations in Moscow in August 1939 *not* to concede Red Army passage across Poland to attack Nazi Germany–an issue, incidently, which was not suddenly raised by Soviet negotiators in Moscow, but which the French had discussed periodically since 1934. Even if the Red Army was incapable of mounting a sustained offensive, so the French thought (though who were they to talk, having themselves no offensive plans against Nazi Germany?), it could still supply Poland, and hold down enemy troops in the east, an important asset in the Anglo-French strategy of the "long war" to wear down Nazi Germany. Without the USSR, the long war strategy was in serious peril.

Sally Marks identifies a lacuna in Young's treatment of the period, that of Anglo-French relations. In the late 1930s the British government would make no significant commitment of ground forces to France: two divisions, and two more later, instead of the nearly sixty during the Great War. When the German offensive started in May 1940, there were only nine divisions in France. Vansittart had frequently warned against leaving France alone to carry the main burden of war on the ground, but his masters would not listen. He warned that Great Britain could be left isolated, as indeed it was in June 1940. Young is right to say that the fall of France was an Allied defeat and an Allied responsibility. And which Allied army did not at first suffer grievous defeats at the hands of Wehrmacht?

One might also note that Poland is another lacuna. Poland fouled the wicket of "collective security" between 1934 and 1939, and was a major obstacle to an Anglo-French agreement with the USSR. Maxime Weygand (French chief of staff), Barthou, Gamelin, and Alexis Leger (secretary general in the French foreign ministry), all said at one time or another between 1933 and 1939 that if Poland would not accept a Franco-Soviet defence agreement, then *tant pis*, tough luck for Poland. But the French government could never bring itself to force Polish compliance or ignore Polish opposition. It did not do so because of fear that an alliance with the USSR would induce Poland to move into the Nazi camp as it appeared at times ready to do. As the French diplomat Robert Coulondre noted, the Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance would win a war against Nazi Germany, but Poland would be crushed by the Red Army, and Soviet influence would extend into central Europe, perhaps into

Germany or even into France itself. Fear of victory in an alliance with the USSR froze the French and British as much as fear of defeat.

So France could not decide what to do and therefore did nothing or not enough to protect its security in the 1930s. Daladier and Reynaud should have stayed in the game, but determination failed them for understandable reasons. Yet indecision was not the only possible outcome, as Young would undoubtedly acknowledge. Great Britain, which was nearly alone in the fight and in a seemingly hopeless military situation in June 1940, should logically have sought terms after the French collapse. Indeed, most of the French expected it to do so, and some British ministers contemplated such an outcome. But Churchill, who had just become prime minister, would not surrender. Only the Channel, guarded by the Royal Navy and Air Force, kept the beast at bay. Just as the French defeat was an Allied defeat, so also was the French predicament, an Allied predicament in 1940 and, mutatis mutandis, during the interwar years. It is true that ambivalence is the prerogative of all thoughtful people (p. 153), as Young reminds us, but in a great crisis one has to cut or run, however daunting the options. And here the actual French decision for capitulation was not the only feasible position, however understandable from certain points of view, it might have been.

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Second Thoughts

John C. Cairns:

Five commentators seem to be in general agreement about the expert character, generosity of view, and agreeable presentation of Robert Young's new book. Naturally all have certain reservations about selection, emphasis, and interpretation. How could it be any other way

This reader still believes this is not the place for detailed argument and counter-argument. But, being drawn in some small distance, he registers sympathy with observations about a certain lack of edge, perhaps, in Young's discussion of major players. In this regard, William Irvine singles out Georges Bonnet–so mercilessly hounded, long ago, by the implacable Lewis Namier–as an exception, being less ambiguously portrayed. Yet, as one may guess, Young wanted chiefly to give all these people their voice, to allude to something like their whole thought rather than to pillory them. And about the profound pacifism of this particular old frontline fighter, exquisitely reluctant to accept a new war he deemed, rightly or wrongly, lost for France before it began, and whose routine manoeuvrings and duplicities became a byword in the literature for, well, French decadence, Young might in fact have said more by way not so much of disapproval as of explanation.

Michael Carley similarly betrays a touch of unease with Young's portrayals of various actors, to the point of invoking the illustrious shades of Robert Vansittart and Winston Churchill. Well, yes, what can one say? Heroes were in short supply. But among all Edouard Daladier's possible sins, surely ordering General Joseph Doumenc not to concede passage for the Red Army does not bulk large, if at all. His brief conversation with Doumenc was marked more by complaint, lassitude, and puzzlement than by instruction. In any event, within weeks of their meeting and with Colonel Jozef Beck, the Polish foreign minister, protesting all the way, Daladier took quite another line.

By contrast, Carley remarks that Young's emphasis (shared by Irvine) on the immediate pre-war "recovery" of France was skating on "thin ice." To this reader, it does seem to be a point of some substance. Reports of certain journalists and visiting dignitaries to the contrary and consideration of the forthcoming military debacle aside, it can be shown that, a great deal of internal disarray existed on the eve and bubbled on through the eight or so months of "phoney war." The state of the polity and the defences of France were something less, one may suggest, than robust health suddenly turned to extreme malady by colossal military accident in May-June 1940.

However, it is not easy to agree with Irvine that the ramshackle "Breda Variant," vainly if not vigorously opposed in the high command, might have turned out to be "a strategic coup" had Hitler, General Erich von Manstein, and others not had second and third thoughts–Cleopatra's nose is not long enough for that. Nor that the illumination which unexpected catastrophe suddenly occasioned France's political class explains their conduct at that moment. The months and years before June were paved with omens and warnings.

But this reader's, and all such, casual remarks in this forum cannot be much else than scattered grapeshot. Inevitably, yes, there are questions about Young's presentation. Whether or not, as Sally Marks asks, he has sufficiently emphasized the role of Locarno and Reparations, or the immense, perhaps crippling, interwar French dependence on Great Britain–this latter the transcendant central reality of French policy, one would think, since Francois Guizot–one may, after all, imagine Young try-

ing properly to distance himself, for the specific purpose of this book, from the London-centred interpretation of his theme which commands the general field of "origins" studies.

And, to make an end, one might just say that, while he has offered a very rich background, perhaps Young has not entirely convincingly told us how so many historical factors conspired to make up the reality of France's role in the coming of the war of 1939 as we variously think we know it. Has he not rather asked us to reflect generously on a broad panorama of problems and possibilities, not just to accept his, or any other, particular optic? To this reader, that would seem in such a study to be a good thing.

William D. Irvine:

Robert Young has argued that the best way to understand inter-war France is to replace "decadence" with "ambivalence." Most of us have expressed a certain uneasiness with the notion of "ambivalence." Yet, none of us, with the partial exception of Michael Carley, is prepared to take up the cudgels in favour of the "decadence" interpretation, and this despite the fact that it is the preferred conceptual framework of such distinguished colleagues as Weber and Duroselle.

On the face of it, therefore, I am inclined to think that Young has won the first round. To be sure, Carley reminds us that "decadence" is hardly the invention of Duroselle; it sounded right to contemporaries as well, most notably, to the Soviets. Parliament was "a dirty business." Perhaps, but one is reminded of Churchill's dictum that parliamentary democracy was the worst system around, except for all the others. France, in the 1930s, may have been "dirty," but arguably not as "dirty" as the USSR at the same time. Whatever advantages authoritarian regimes have with respect to a coherent diplomatic and military policy were not much in evidence in the USSR in the spring of 1941.

Both Sally Marks and Carley invoke the case of Britain. But they are dealing with two different Britains. Marks is talking about "perfidious Albion," insensitive to French security needs in the 1920s and prepared, at best, in the 1930s to "fight to the last Frenchman." Young might have said more on this subject but, assuming Marks is right (and I think she is) it is hard to see how this would have altered his general interpretation. Carley, by contrast, focuses on the Britain of Vansittart and above all Churchill. But were their voices not largely drowned out by the appeasers like Sir Maurice Hankey, Sir Samuel Hoare, Sir Ernle Chatfield, to say nothing of Neville Chamberlain? As a nation, Britain appears to have been, at a minimum, no more inclined to resist Hitler. No fewer British citizens were prepared to cut a deal with Hitler in September 1939 than had been the case with their French counterparts several months earlier. I refer here to the last public opinion poll in Great Britain in September 1939 in which 17 percent of the respondents wanted to open peace negotiations with Nazi Germany compared with 17 percent of the French surveyed in July 1939 who thought that France should not use force to oppose a German seizure of Dantzig. Granted, when all of the self serving memoirs have been digested, it is hard to dispute Carley's point that no French statesman looked very good in June 1940 and Paul Reynaud, even by the most charitable accounts, was no Churchill. Britain, he reminds us, also faced a nearly hopeless situation in the summer of 1940 and "only the Channel ... kept the beast at bay." But that is a mighty big "only." That Britain was an island, and France not, says a lot about the different military outcomes of that summer. The Battle of Britain was a "finest hour" in ways that the Battle of France could not be. But surely we should not lose sight of the fact that Britain fought its battle with a strategic and logistical advantage that her ally had, scant months earlier, not enjoyed.

Carley scores some points with respect to the illusive Soviet alliance. He evokes one of his "heroes" (one of mine too), Georges Mandel. Surely France could learn a lesson from Francis I and his alliance with the Grand Turk. It is worth remembering, however, that in the same debate, Xavier Vallat (and unreconstructed villain if ever there was one) countered that in the sixteenth century the Sultan had not maintained in France a party devoted to replacing the Bible with the Koran. This was an argument that had a resonance going well beyond Vallat's right-wing coteries, all the way through to the Paul Faure wing of the French Socialists. France, like Britain, did not do all it could have done to secure, in Carley's words, "the only possible alliance that counted...." Anti-communism almost certainly had something to do with that. But when Duroselle and Weber condemn the late Third Republic for being decadent, the very least of their reasons is the regime's failure to strike an alliance with the USSR.

William R. Keylor:

I would like to isolate and elaborate on a theme that appears in all five of the contributions to this forum. I am convinced (and it is evident that Robert Young

would agree) that this issue is the central feature of France's security dilemma between the two world wars and, as Young would doubtless put it, a principal source of French policy makers' ambivalence.

John Cairns speaks of a France "indifferently assisted in the task of preserving international order and national security, when not simply abandoned or opposed by states, big and small, in Europe and beyond, whose essential vital interests were ultimately identical with those of France in the century, but whose peoples or leaders could not, or would not, see it until too late."

"About all France could be certain of was that Germany was a dangerous potential enemy," William Irvine observes. "Beyond that, nothing was sure and most certainly not the reliability of any of her potential allies."

Sally Marks reminds us that "there was no French victory in World War I. Even in 1914, the fact that August and September did not end as May and June of 1940 owed something to the delaying effect of Belgian resistance and a great deal to Russia's rapid mobilization and early offensive. Thereafter France clung by her fingernails to the edge of the abyss until help arrived–and more help and finally enough help to ensure Allied victory and French survival."

Even Michael Carley, who is more inclined than any of us to hold France–or should I say certain elements in the French political elite?–primarily responsible for the debacle of 1940, concedes that "Young is right to say that the fall of France was an Allied defeat and an Allied responsibility."

From 1871 to 1890, the Third Republic was relegated to the status of a second-rate power in Europe while the newly formed German Empire enjoyed unchallenged dominance on the continent under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's skilful tutelage. Between 1890 and 1904, France gradually regained her place among the great powers, for one crucial reason: it escaped the diplomatic isolation organized by Bismarck. When the rematch with Germany came in 1914, France would not have to fight alone, as in 1870-71. Marks is entirely correct: France survived the German offensive in 1914 thanks the timely contributions of Britain, Russia, and Belgium. France survived the German offensive of 1918 thanks to the steady support of Britain and the economic and military assistance of the United States.

At the peace conference after the war old Georges Clemenceau, the French premier in 1919, fully understood the one indisputable reality about France's security requirements as his country confronted a postwar Germany industrially superior and half again as populous: without a reliable alliance system to deter or, if necessary, defeat the historic adversary across the Rhine, France was doomed to revert to the second class status that she had occupied in the Bismarckian era. Accordingly, he extracted from Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George–the leaders of the two powers which had saved France from disaster in 1918–an Anglo- American pledge to defend France in the event of unprovoked German aggression. When this commitment evaporated, Clemenceau's successors embarked on the hapless task of devising alternative diplomatic arrangements for the next twenty years. For all the subsequent rhetoric from Charles de Gaulle and others about French *independence*, the defining characteristic of France's role in Europe under the Third Republic was that country's *dependence* on arrangements with other states to preserve its security in light of Germany's economic and demographic superiority. It is the failure of this effort at compensatory alliance-making that serves as the centre piece of Young's study.

All of this has little to do with the decadence of the late Third Republic's political institutions or the rottenness of French society. Of course there was political polarization and ideological conflict. Of course there was ministerial instability and parliamentary corruption. The frock-coated denizens of the Quai d'Orsay who were struggling to fashion a security system that would protect France from German aggression could not help but hear the "street noise" to which Michael Carley alludes (particularly, on 6 February 1934, when it reverberated throughout the *Place de la Concorde* just outside their windows). But there was political polarization, ideological conflict, ministerial instability, and parliamentary corruption before 1914 as well, arguably just as serious and debilitating as in the hollow years of the decadent decade. These disturbances from the realm of *Innenpolitik* did not lead to military defeat in the First World War because, among other reasons, France was part of a formidable and expanding coalition of states which was willing to risk war to prevent the establishment of German hegemony on the continent.

No such coalition existed in the spring of 1940. Great Britain was unprepared militarily and reluctant politically to play the role that it had played in the last war. The United States expressed its disinterest in France's fate. Belgium refused to coordinate military plans with the British and French forces before the German offensive and then capitulated almost without a fight when the

Wehrmacht finally attacked. The USSR signed its separate peace, joined Germany in dividing the spoils in eastern Europe, and supplied Hitler with valuable raw materials during the period of Russo-German collaboration.

Limitations of space prevent me from doing more than raising the question which Young barely considers, but which Carley regards as crucial: did the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact demonstrate that the USSR was simply another unreliable ally who abandoned France in its time of troubles? Or was it the natural consequence (as Carley suggests) of the unrealistic, self-defeating, visceral anti-communism that inhibited French policy makers in the late 1930s from taking the necessary steps to revive the old Franco-Russian alliance which had served France well in the early stages of the Great War?

Sally Marks:

In contrast to William Irvine, I applaud Professor Young's refusal to seek villains as one of the major strengths of an important work. Though my lens is wider-angled and my focus longer-range than Young's, the resultant view is similar: in France in the 1930s among men (and a few women) of power or influence, there were many second- or third-raters, often petty, sometimes venal, too frequently lacking courage or vision, numerous fools and knaves, but few real villains. The same was true of other countries shattered by World War I, the lost peace, financial crises, and then the depression. Britain, which had suffered less, showed similar interwar divisions and social stresses and the same lack of effective leadership in the 1930s with Churchill (and Vansittart) out of power and Neville Chamberlain only the best of a weak bunch. And despite its unloved republic and ugly politics, France never succumbed or approached succumbing to authoritarianism as did a half dozen other European states. Mistakes were made, some by less than admirable men, but the fundamental difficulty lay less in the individuals than in the situation.

In conversation, American historian Stephen Schuker once termed Aristide Briand a villain for signing the Locarno Pact instead of telling the Chamber of Deputies that France was defeated. Though perhaps he was a humbug, Briand was not a villain; he was grasping the sole hope he saw of some security for France. He knew the price but he also had long understood French dependence, which was the underlying problem. French power, especially comparatively (which is what matters), was waning before World War I and much reduced by the war and the failure to enforce the peace. Thereafter its major allies were largely unavailable militarily, but its need of them remained undiminished since Germany's power was only slightly and briefly impacted.

For fifteen years, some French men and women, and most of France's former allies (but few German leaders) misread the power equation. France enjoyed a short artificial preponderance, thanks to the temporary military absence of Germany and Russia, a briefly large army, the Rhineland occupation, reparations coal and five-year economic treaty clauses, the gradualness of Anglo-American diplomatic withdrawal, and Germany's apparent prostration and disarmament. None of this lasted, but it led Britain and the United States (and often Italy) to conclude that France was too strong and Germany too weak. Thus they moved to redress a misread power balance. That left France in an impossible position. A forceful policy of deterrence would mean abandonment by Britain and the United States and standing alone before a fundamentally stronger enemy, but the price of Anglo-American support was accepting their policy of strengthening Germany at France's expense.

Moreover, France's choice of allies was not extensive. Italy and Poland could only be secondary supports; the USSR was not available until the mid-1930s and virtually impossible politically. Further, until too late–May 1940–the two essential allies, Britain and the USSR, were mutually exclusive. The USSR was needed for its army divisions, Britain for its fleet, empire, and links to the United States' resources, but Chamberlain much opposed any Soviet tie. France's choices were ever of this nature between the wars, with its options progressively narrowed as both domestic and international politics severely constrained even its choice of dependencies.

Throughout, France's needs far exceeded its available resources, especially at the core of power, thanks to its demographic, technological, financial, economic, strategic and tactical, political, and naval weaknesses. There were also human weaknesses in its leaders, as elsewhere, but were they decisive? In fact, the late Third Republic was a handsome if increasingly hollow shell, less rotten than crumbling, less wicked than weak. Weakness bears directly on the power equation; whether decadence does is less clear, but France's alleged decadence, which should be studied in a comparative context, seems a simplistic explanation for its failure to solve the insoluble problems besetting it.

In actuality, the fatal combination of Anglo-American attitudes, the difficulties attendant upon any close Soviet tie, and the fact that the challenges facing France outstripped its means and will (both so depleted

in World War I and the lost battle for the peace) ensured that France spent the 1930s, as it had the 1920s, facing impossible choices which could only bring further excruciating dilemmas, not the security it craved. As Young implies, this was the real reason for French ambivalence and inability to choose. That almost obsessive anxiety from the Armistice onward about France's future security which Young so poignantly and rightly describes arose from fundamental comparative weakness, severely constrained dependency, and utterly impossible choices affording neither solutions nor security, a web of circumstances from which there was no escape. Perhaps better leadership could have made some difference, but how much? A less dramatic debacle would still be a defeat. Given these circumstances, there is no need to seek villains to explain a defeat which in retrospect is perhaps less strange than it seemed in 1940.

Michael J. Carley:

Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, and Hankey, the Cabinet secretary, offered the opinion in early 1937 that concessions to Nazi Germany and fascist Italy were a logical reaction to French unreliability and Soviet communism. Indeed, from certain British points of view French unreliability and communism were directly related. After the Popular Front electoral victory and the ensuing strikes, some British observers thought France had gone half-red. The strikes reminded one over-edgy British Lord of the early stages of the Russian revolution. The beginning of the Spanish civil war in July made matters worse. France was reduced to a "negligible factor" in international affairs. In 1936 the British view of France was about the same as that of the Soviet.

It was not just parliament which was a "dirty business," but international relations also. Foreign policy, according to one Foreign Office official in 1936, had to be framed in "unpleasant and immoral... possibilities... without allowing the immorality and treachery... to deflect one from one's course." This was an argument in favour of accommodation with fascist Italy, but it could have been–it was–used to justify cooperation with the USSR. When Cardinal Richelieu lent a hand to the Protestant princes of Germany, there were plenty of huguenots in France none too loyal to the French crown. Mandel's analogy was sound, and he argued strongly against the widespread fear in France that the USSR was bent on stirring up a hotbed of revolution.

Soviet officials went out of their way with assurances. "Hang 'em high, hang 'em all," said Litvinov in effect, when asked what to do about French communists. All he cared about was a military alliance with France. Soviet assurances did no good, and the voices of Mandel and Vansittart, among others, were drowned out, as William Irvine rightly points out, by those who saw the USSR as a fomenter of socialist revolution, a fear increased by the election of the Popular Front and by Soviet support for the Republican government in Spain. The "war-revolution nexus"–as Irvine termed it in his early book on French conservatism in the 1930s–was the spoken and unspoken apprehension of the centre-right majority opposed to a Soviet alliance.

With regard to the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations in August 1939, Red Army passage across Poland was a critical issue. As the French right liked to point out, Germany and the USSR did not share a common border and the Red Army would have to pass over unfriendly Polish territory to aid France. In 1946, Daladier said publicly that the Soviet demand for passage took him completely by surprise. This was untrue. Daladier had anticipated the Soviet demand, as well he might have, since the question was nothing new. For the Soviet government, it was "the cardinal question" without which a serious defence against the Wehrmacht could not be mounted (incidently, a position fully endorsed by the deputy chiefs of staff in London). When P.-E. Naggiar, the French ambassador in Moscow, heard about Daladier's "negative instructions," he told General Doumenc that these "would kill the negotiations." Naggiar cabled in alarm to Paris, and Daladier belatedly sent instructions to put pressure on the Polish government to yield on the passage issue. But General F.-J. Musse, the French military attache, had to be ordered away from holidays in Biarritz, and when he arrived in Warsaw, he defended Polish opposition to Red Army passage more readily than he pressed his government's instructions. These negotiations were bungled from the outset, as Naggiar was quick to observe.

In regard to William Keylor's last question about the meaning of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Soviet government had pressed for better Anglo-Franco-Soviet political relations since 1933 and was spurned repeatedly after early successes for reasons which all commentators and Robert Young have noted. I would also add that throughout most of the inter-war period, not withstanding some lapses, the Soviet government sought political and economic agreements in the west which were consistently rejected by the British and French governments. The most striking examples of this paradigm are the Franco-Soviet conference in 1926-1927 and Anglo-Soviet negotiations in 1935-1936. In August 1939 the Soviet government gave tit-for-tat, and paid a terrible price

for it.

There was an each-for-himself attitude–as Keylor suggests–among the powers of the potential anti-Nazi bloc which is more redolent of decadence than of ambivalence. "The blood of others," said Simone de Beauvoir. The Belgians adhered to neutrality; the British expected the French to carry the burden of ground fighting; the French wanted a war somewhere else, with someone else taking the offensive since they could not. The Poles threatened war for their share of Czech territorial spoils in September 1938. And finally the Russians, in concluding a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, as A. J. P. Taylor noted long ago, did what the Anglo-French had failed to do at Munich. All the powers seemed at times to entertain the "cynical and ignoble idea," as Young puts it (p. 55), that someone else could do the fighting against Nazi Germany. And yet British and French officials feared their countries would be reduced to "second rate powers" if they did not make a stand against Nazi aggression. Here again was ambivalence of a sort.

As for the English Channel, it was good enough to stop the Germans in 1940, but not good enough to stop the Allies in 1944. What made the difference in 1940 was not the Channel per se, though it was a formidable defensive barrier. What made the difference was the determination of the British people, and especially of "the few," to defend their islands, though it was a near run thing. It was precisely that determination, which the French government failed to show in sufficient measure, when the time came to decide: quit or fight on from north Africa, from the fleet, from London, from anywhere.

Robert J. Young:

It is here, I suppose, that the sparks might be expected to fly–were it not for the fact that these comments are both generous and, so I choose to believe, discerning. I appreciate both qualities, as I do the time and effort which their authors have invested in this forum. In particular, I must thank Michael Carley for this initiative, and for the care he has taken to get six of us to the right place, at the right time and, apparently, on the same page.

That said, let me turn directly to one point which has generated a certain amount of debate, namely the surprising–for me–issue of villainy. In the context of interwar France, this is also caught up on the notion of decadence, a notion I want to address separately and subsequently. Here, when it comes to our role as observers, we are working right on the rock face of the historical discipline. And as befits someone who has never managed to pull himself much above ground level, what I have to say will be brief and basic.

I have said in the book that historians are not judges, a principle that would be wholly obvious to all were it not for the frequency with which a good many violate it. Frankly, I am tired of what I privately, and indelicately, call "smart-assed" historians serving up their putative Truth. Usually on platters garnished with the mistakes, the blindness, the ethical shortcomings, and much more, of their historical subjects. There is something patently injudicious about these doubt-free, and essentially unaccountable, indictments; and their effect on me is precisely the opposite of what is intended. Especially when their pumped-up dogmatism tries to float broad interpretations about nations, peoples, or classes. My sense is that the five commentators are not far removed from this, my sentiment. Three suggest that I could have been more critical in my readings of certain French actors–although whether they would agree on which ones is less clear. But of them only Carley seems to believe that my "generosity" may have led to a significant misreading of the evidence–in short, that my sympathy has impaired my understanding.

But there is another facet to this question that I find intriguing. If I am found a little bit wanting on the matter of "edge" as John Cairns puts it–perhaps a little too forgiving when it comes to some of the people under my lens–is it my imagination or is there an underlying reticence about endorsing my sharp and "impassioned" argument for ambivalence as interpretive vehicle? And I pose the question for a reason that is directly associated with my own rudimentary philosophy of history.

Next to the "enfin la verite" school of historical writing, there is another, almost the opposite. It is known for its guarded, "safe," anodyne character, strong on data, limp on interpretive argument–the very opposite of the school of the self-assured. My own view is that while we should not start our reading with a point of view, we should not finish without one. For better or worse, I seem to have succeeded. There is a critical edge here, but it is drawn across the interpreters of history rather than those who lived it. Every commentator seems fully to have understood that argument, and yet.... And yet, beneath the gratefully received attributes of "nuanced," "subtle," and "skillfully argued," behind those moments when I was "right to say," or when what I said was "true enough", there is, is there not?–a perceptible reluctance to subscribe to the case advanced here. If it is not vigorous opposition, it is not quite enthusiastic support. A

little on the ambivalent side, I should think. So William Irvine is right, in conclusion and in prophesy, it is only a "round" in a protracted debate.

That debate, it will be clear by now, centres on the interpretive persuasiveness of "decadence," the notion that interwar France was too run down at the heels–economically, militarily, ideologically, psychologically, morally–to face the expansionist threat represented by Nazi Germany. I argue, and four of the five seem to agree, that this has been too simplistic a view. I particularly appreciate William Keylor's remark that I have offered "a therapeutic dose of nuance and complexity," for those indeed, are the qualities I thought were missing. The word I recruited to wrestle with "decadence" was "ambivalence," a condition which arose from what Sally Marks has acknowledged were "excruciating dilemmas" for the French dirigeants of the 1930s, and which, undeniably, led them to sustained moments of indecisiveness. Like her, I thought this to be a "sensible" conclusion. And still do, particularly upon reading Carley's second commentary. It is here, if I am not mistaken, that he attributes "decadence" to all the powers, great and small, Belgium, Britain, France, Poland, even the USSR. All manifested an "each-for-himself attitude" which is "more redolent of decadence than ambivalence." That may well be true, at least as a description of their "attitude," but universalizing the concept of decadence seems to me to make its application to France even less interpretively useful. So I welcome it.

Only one aspect of the book's argument may be worth reiterating, given the fair and lucid appraisals offered earlier. I have not argued that everyone in interwar France was plagued by uncertainty. Far from it. It was, rather, the constant clash of competing certainties among those who had no doubts about what was coming and how to address it, that produced the indecisiveness among those inclined by temperament and by the responsibilities of office to weigh all the factors, examine all sides of an issue. There were moments in the foregoing commentaries when I felt that my argument was being slightly misshapen by the forceful assurances that such-and-such a group suffered from no doubts at all. Many people were so blessed, but their decisiveness reflected a national spectrum of disagreement. Therein lay the problem of securing consensus and formulating policy among the state's decision-makers.

There is one other matter which merits a word of clarification. In rallying to my cause against the gentle probing of Irvine, Marks has taken my argument a little further than I would like it to go. Neither of us, indeed I suspect none of us, has much use for villainy as interpretive device–however much we are all mindful of admirably qualified individuals. But it seems that one of her main objections comes down to the fact that the French were really not worthy of being called "villains." Rather they, too many of them, were merely "third-raters," "fools and knaves." Not only is this not my conclusion, it is one with which I feel uncomfortable, as I would if the language and the notion that inspired it, were applied to the British, as it too often is, or to Brazilians, or even Canadians.

Elements of the foregoing aside, readers will appreciate how difficult it has been to take exception to this set of generous commentaries. And this certainly does not seem to be the place or the moment to demonstrate my acerbic side, however much I worry that some innocent may conclude I have none. The fact is that we do not appear to be separated by a great interpretive chasm, and the scattered complaints about the need for more on reparations, or British policy, or Poland, or Belgium, are worthy of note but not retort. As is usually the case, more has been left out than has been included, but not always by inadvertence. Irvine thinks that I may have won a round, and Marks that the book might have brought us a little closer to the truth. I would like to think so, but truer still is my hope, as Cairns puts it, that this work will prompt others "to reflect generously on a broad panorama of problems and possibilities."

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