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Martin S. Alexander, William J. Philpott, eds. *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars.* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiii + 231 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-75453-5.

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A Battle of Wits?

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As the editors explain in their introduction, entitled "Choppy Channel Waters: The Crests and Troughs of Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars," "this volume seeks to fill a gap by presenting new research on the defence relationship [between Britain and France], focusing on the era between the two world wars (1919-1939)" (p. 1). The collection of essays covers the Royal Navy and the Marine Nationale (Anthony Clayton); the disarmament process, 1925-1934 (Andrew Webster); the Italian threat, 1935-38 (Reynolds M. Salerno); the making of the Anglo-French alliance, 1938-39 (Talbot Imlay); intelligence (Peter Jackson and Joe Maiolo); the Near East, 1936-40 (Martin Thomas); economic co-ordination, 1937-40 (Martin S. Alexander); and the Supreme War Council, 1939-40 (William J. Philpott).

Yet the "gap" is not self-evident, especially for those who are familiar with other books in the same series, Studies in Military and Strategic History.[1] The general editor himself, Michael Dockrill, has written a book on *British Establishment Perspectives on France, 1936-40* and Richard Davis recently wrote extensively on the Ethiopian and Rhineland Crises in *Anglo-French Relations before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis.*[2] P. M. H. Bell, who wrote the preface to *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars*, has written extensively on the period himself.[3] But of course, as Bell puts it in his opening lines, "Relations between Britain and France are a subject of never-failing fascination for historians" (p. vii), and since the thirst for knowledge in this field is inexhaustible (at least in Britain and France), there is indeed a permanent "gap" to be filled.

To anyone at all familiar with names like Darlan or Oran (Mers el-K=bir)–as, it can be supposed, must be the case for most readers of the book–relations between the British Royal Navy and the French Marine Nationale are, of course, one of the minefields of the subject. Clayton has the difficult task of ascertaining the long-term reasons why, as he so forcefully explains, "HMS *Hood*, which had in November 1939 sailed so proudly under Admiral Gensoul [guarding the Channel], was to open fire on the *Dunkerque* and her admiral seven months later [at Oran (Mers el-K=bir)]" (p. 43). Not discounting "Darlan's complex personality" (p. 36), Clayton mainly indicts the gen-

eral climate of opinion in pre-war Britain:

"If any summary of all these events is possible, perhaps one point emerges: Anglo-French naval relations were a microcosm of wider Anglo-French relations at the time and since. The capacity of two great nations with essentially common interests nevertheless to misunderstand each other seemed endless. In these misunderstandings the insularity of the British, clinging to an illusion that in some way Britain had a moral authority to rise above, and arbitrate between, continental European nations, was more often to blame." (p. 44)

As squaring-the-circle exercises go, finding a common ground on disarmament between two powers, one essentially maritime and the other essentially land, was hard to beat. Webster argues that, feeling secure from the threat of a land invasion, the British insisted that the reduction of land forces (i.e., primarily French land forces, before German remilitarization) would be the best token of the victors' good will and commitment to peace, while the French insisted that a guarantee of their security (which Britain refused to give so long as France did not reduce its army) was a precondition for disarming. To make things even more complicated, the other victors of 1918, the United States, Japan, and Italy, also had their own axes to grind in international negotiations on disarmament. Once more, the author of that section concludes that:

"[t]he endless technical disputes throughout these years were insoluble until the underlying political issues had been addressed.... The possibility of joint action–through a compromise security-disarmament regime which could have been driven through at Geneva regardless of German objections–was lost in the fierce arguments that ensued. Despite all the hopes it engendered, the disarmament process did far more harm than good to Anglo-French relations between the wars." (p. 66)

The same impossible convergence is examined by Salerno, who insists on the fundamental differences in the attitudes adopted by Britain and France towards Italy, at bottom because by 1938 (in contrast to 1935, when both believed that Italy could be befriended) the two countries had made a different diagnosis of the situation. The French assessment, being as usual the more pessimistic one, was vindicated by events–but critics of France would point out that this may well have been a self-fulfilling prophecy: "The British believed that the Fascist leaders [of Italy] could be conciliated, detached from Hitler and persuaded to mollify Germany's ambitions, whereas the French perceived a permanently antagonistic foreign policy on the part of the Italians and an unassailable link between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany" (p. 72). Salerno concludes from his study of the years 1935-1938 that the joint staff conversations of 1938 predictably had no result. Consequently, "the profound Anglo-French conflict over an appropriate Mediterranean strategy crippled British and French efforts throughout 1938-1940 to respond to the Axis menace in a co-ordinated fashion" (p. 87).

These last few months before the war broke out are the theme of Imlay's chapter: how was the Alliance restored? Imlay correctly points out (though these things are not easily quantified) that most commentators only attribute a secondary role to France in the gradual resumption of Anglo-French belligerence after Munich. The conventional turning point is, of course, Chamberlain's final realization, after March 1939 and the invasion of "Bohemia-Moravia," that Hitler could not be trusted. In contrast, Imlay argues that the French were the first to react, almost immediately after Munich:

"France decided independently of Britain to resist future German expansion because French planners concluded that they had no choice. To allow Germany to gain control of Central and Eastern Europe would only shift the balance of power further to France's disadvantage.... [Britain's] military contribution–present and projected–could not alone compensate for France's weakness vis-=-vis Germany. Indeed, it was precisely this weakness that forced French planners to renew their commitment to an eastern front." (p. 100)

At the same time, Imlay sees a very skilful ploy–manipulation, in fact–on the part of the diplomats and chiefs of staff in Paris (aided by some of their counterparts in London), as the French suggested that they were irresolute, and that they might well yield to Germany if they felt that Britain would not support them in a new war on the Continent. Imlay maintains that it was, therefore, not in March but in February 1939 that the British about-face took place–largely because of France's action, overt or covert. Imlay therefore ends on a definitely "revisionist" note: "The French decision, taken without a guarantee of British support, indicates that Britain's influence on French strategy can be overstated. Contrary to much of the existing literature, the answer to the question of 'how war came' in September 1939 is to be found at least as much in Paris as in London–and perhaps more" (p. 113).

In the next chapter, devoted to intelligence, Jackson and Maiolo fully concur with the idea of French manipu-

lation:[4]

"The tactic succeeded brilliantly–despite SIS misgivings. French information concerning German ground- and air-offensive intentions in the west corresponded with the disinformation emanating from the Abwehr and was received with great alarm by civilian decision-makers in London. Lord Halifax became convinced that war with Germany was imminent [in January 1939]. He advised the foreign policy sub-committee of the Cabinet that Britain needed to revise its continental policy to prevent Germany from overrunning Holland and Belgium and establishing air bases within easy striking distance of England. The only way this could be accomplished was to enter into the close military relationship with France that British policy had steadfastly refused to consider since 1919." (p. 144)

Unsurprisingly, their narrative is one of British authorities politely rejecting all French offers of intelligence cooperation until "the British commitment to France" (p. 146) in the early months of 1939, the turning-point as they see it being the visit of high-ranking French Intelligence officers to SIS and MI5 in London on 30 January 1939. "From this meeting," they argue, "emerged perhaps the first major effort to co-ordinate French and British secret-intelligence operations in Europe since 1919" (p. 146). In this, of course, the authors agree with Imlay's chronology of events after Munich. Indirectly, they also support Imlay's thesis that the French impressed on Chamberlain and the appeasers in the Government the "fact" that German preparations for war (in the East, the West, or both) made the policy of appeasement no longer tenable. Jackson and Maiolo rightly remind their readers of a fundamental truism of Anglo-French relations between the wars: "Britain's policy towards France was determined by its policy towards Germany" (p. 149). Thus when the British government finally became convinced that Germany could not be appeased, the only alternative was, in Churchill's words, to "thank God for the French Army" and resume the alliance of 1914-18, including the exchange of secret information, like partial knowledge of the Enigma machine.

It seems to be in the nature of this series that the books should have no maps, and this is much to be deplored if one is to intelligently follow the discussion in Thomas's extremely dense chapter on the Near East, 1936-40. Not all readers (least of all this reviewer) are familiar with, to cite only one example, "Alexandretta, a pocket of coastal territory then in north-west Syria" (p. 169), a region of significant importance in Franco-Turkish relations which receives a lot of Thomas's attention because of Turkey's role in British and French security in the Near East. To paraphrase Jackson and Maiolo quoted above, Britain's (and France's) policy towards Turkey was determined by their policy towards Italy. Thomas reminds us of "British and French anxiety to keep Italy neutral" (p. 177) as late as May 1940, and he has no patience with Anglo-French joint action in the Near East, especially after the declaration of war:

"[T]he round of tripartite planning conferences [with Turkey] between October 1939 and June 1940 gradually lost credibility. Frustration with the requirement to keep Italy neutral, the failure to deliver major arms supplies to the Turks, disagreement over the Salonika bridgehead and the fantasy of an easy knock-out blow against Soviet oil installations all suggest that allied strategic planning in the Near East was at variance with the most salient fact of the "phoney war" period; namely, that the conflict with Germany in the west would decide everything." (p. 178)

Alexander also avers that the Jackson and Maiolo thesis on intelligence is applicable to economic cooperation, noting "anxiety among British ministers and officials still trusting in appeasement, that excessively firm, detailed strategic arrangements with France might embolden a government in Paris to a hard-line stance capable of provoking Germany to start a war" (p. 193). It is well known that economic warfare was supposed by the Allies to be the key weapon–Chamberlain and his friends spoke of Britain's "fourth arm of defence" (p. 202)–in their armory; one would therefore have expected strong preparations and complementary planning for the best use of common resources. In fact, on the industrial front, Alexander shows that coal was the only real success story in the pre-war arrangements–the irony being that in case France had not been eliminated by June 1940, Britain would have had to face difficult choices in its allocation of coal between its own requirements and the promise of substantial deliveries made to France in September 1939. In contrast, there were no agreements on oil (which of course turned out to be a key fuel in the Second World War) or on raw materials, including strategic ones. On food, especially food purchases and shipping from overseas, important agreements existed, but naturally they were not really put to the test.

As far as rationalizing the production of war equipment was concerned, small progress was made in the shared construction of tanks, but none in aircraft manufacture. The great difficulty was how to apportion the

cost of the war, especially as both countries were always thinking of how best to keep their world status as major trading nations–in rivalry with the United States–after the war was won. Hence Lord Vansittart's apposite remark in 1939 (though in the event it found its vindication in France): "the Treasury worry too much about how we shall live five years hence, not whether we shall be alive one year hence" (p. 190). We are back to the "thank God for the French Army" syndrome. As the French ambassador complained, "Nobody in London thought that a knock-out blow could be delivered by the Wehrmacht against France and Belgium" (p. 205). But there was worse, since it seems that even in France "Gamelin was shocked to realize how few politicians feared any sort of military crisis arising in the initial defensive phase of the war" (p. 205).

In other words, there was no real sense of urgency on either side of the Channel in cooperating economically, even after Poland had been eliminated, thus allowing the Germans to concentrate all their strength in the West. Taking the analogy of "two athletes preparing for a team event," Alexander suggests that in the economic field Britain and France "had prepared as two individuals rather than as partners in a genuine team effort" (p. 205). He concludes that "Britain and France had parallel, albeit partially co-ordinated, war economies by 10 May 1940–not an integrated Allied war economy" (p. 206).

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the attempt at defining a common grand strategy, with Philpott attributing to the chief of the French defense staff, General Gamelin, during the Munich crisis, the idea of a revival of the Allied Supreme War Council as established in 1917. Chamberlain rejected the idea, which Daladier had passed on to him, in November 1938, only then to yield to General Spears's call in February 1939 favoring the revival. The real talks on the constitution of such a council–whatever the final name would be (Inter-allied Military Committee, in the event)–took place in July and August 1939, with the "negotiations overtaken by events" (p. 216), notably the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 28.

Philpott confirms the impression conveyed in Alexander's contribution that there was little sense of urgency in economic matters, even after the actual declaration of war: "Potentially contentious issues, such as the general examination of the manpower and material resources of the two Allied nations proposed by the chairman of the Anglo-French Co-ordinating Committee, Jean Monnet, would in general not be put on the agenda until the two Prime Ministers had had the opportunity for informal discussion on the matter" (p. 220). Even worse, considering the cataclysm that was to come, nothing was done in the way of preparing joint contingency plans in case the enemy attacked in the West. Philpott's quotation from the diary of Sir Edmund Ironside, Chief of the Imperial Staff, recording the meeting of March 28, 1940 (six weeks before the German offensive), speaks for itself:

"The Supreme War Council was far better than I expected. These old rus= politicians like Chamberlain have a strategy their own and he certainly had a good one this time. He started off with a ninety minutes' monologue upon the general situation, apologizing every now and then for taking so long. He took all the thunder out of Reynaud's mouth and left him gasping with no electric power left. All the "projects" that Reynaud had to bring forward, Chamberlain took away. It was most masterly and very well done. Little Reynaud sat there with his head nodding in a sort of "tik," understanding it all for he speaks English very well, and having to have it translated all over again for the benefit of others. He was for all the world like a little marmoset.... The new Air Minister, Laurent d'Eynac ... and Vuillemin, his Service Chief, were asleep.... Darlan, the French Admiral, smoked his pipe all the time and drew pictures on his bit of paper.... The whole War Council took in all five and a half hours and it was conducted completely from beginning to end by Chamberlain and Reynaud. Nobody else said a single word. A battle of wits, and I am quite sure that Chamberlain won." (p. 220)

So, Philpott's conclusion can only be extremely severe. He goes further than B=darida's indictment of mentalities, arguing that the format of the institution itself–inherited from the First World War–is to blame for its paralysis: "Innovations which might have tempered the influence of the prime ministers and allowed a more united and dynamic prosecution of the war effort, such as a higher military committee and a permanent secretariat, were never tried, as they were not present in the 1917-18 organization, and they threatened vested interests" (p. 222).[5]

Many collections of essays are of a disparate nature, with little to connect them apart from the fact that they come from papers given at the same conference, or that the authors are friends and colleagues of the editor. Such is not the case here, where the familiar motif of constant bungling and double-talk in pre-war Anglo-French relations is renewed by novel insights into who was really calling the tune after Munich. That the connecting thread

is a depressing one is, of course, not the fault of the authors.

The editors are to be congratulated for having gathered such a brilliant team in an attempt to fill the "gaps" left in our knowledge of the subject. That some of the gaps have been filled in some of the chapters is beyond dispute–but equally beyond dispute is the fact that many more thoroughly researched books like this will be needed if all the gaps are ever to be reasonably filled.[6]

Full of information, devoid of jargon, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* should naturally be on the shelves of all university libraries, though undergraduates should be warned that owing to poor proofreading the spellings are not always reliable.[7]

Notes

[1]. Among the titles which are directly or indirectly relevant for Anglo-French relations, 1919-1940, one may cite: Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Sea Power and Strategy between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, in association with Kings College, London, 2000); Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill, eds, *Anglo-French Relations, 1898-1998: From Fashoda to Jospin* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), in which Philpott contributes "The Supreme War Council and the Allied War Effort, 1939-1940," pp. 109-125; G. A. H. Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars: A Reappraisal of Rearmament* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Carolyn J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference: A Study in International History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Joseph A. Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939: A Study in Appeasement and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1998); and Elspeth Y. O'Riordan, *Britain and the Ruhr Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, in association with Kings College, London, 2001).

[2]. Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France, 1936-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

[3]. P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain, 1940-1994: The Long Separation* (London and New York: Longman, 1997). See discussion in H-Diplo review on: =<`http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=13346937610979$>$.`

[4]. The French word used in such cases, *intox* (short for *intoxication*), is if anything even more evocative.

[5]. Cf. Fran=ois B=darida, "La rupture franco-britannique de 1940: le Conseil supr=me interalli= de l'invasion = la d=faite de la France," *Vingti=me si=cle* 25 (1990).

[6]. The copious end-of-chapter notes show that the various authors have a "state-of-the-art" knowledge of the literature on their subjects, and much use has been been made of unpublished–and fascinating–material at the Public Record Office, Kew (London) and the Service historique de l'arm=e de terre, Vincennes (Paris).

[7]. There are many misprints in English, e.g. "vital importanc" (p. 195); "Air Minster" (p. 220); and "prime minsters" (p. 222). Moreover, the proofreader seems to have a very poor command of French. The last chapter has many French names and words with serious misspellings, like "Comit= Militiare" on page 214 and repeated twice on page 215; "passivit=e" (p. 222); and "franco-brittanique" (p. 226).

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