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Robert J. Young, *An Uncertain Idea of France: Essays and Reminiscence on the Third Republic*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. x + 261 pp. \$66.95 U.S. ISBN 0-8204-7481-9.

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*An Uncertain Idea of France* is a collection of previously published journal articles and book chapters by Robert J. Young, a pre-eminent historian of modern France. In his numerous publications over the past three decades, Young has distinguished himself by his passion and subtlety, his enduring enthusiasm for archival research and, not least, his elegant prose. A self-declared admirer of France's Third Republic, he also has a mission: to coax and even beseech readers to view the regime and its servants with sympathy—a mission rooted in the conviction that “the Republic's record is better than its reputation” (p. 261). The collection thus offers a welcome opportunity to trace the evolution of Young's scholarship on France over the years and to reflect on his contribution.

The book's ten chapters are divided into four thematic sections, each of which represents a chronological phase in Young's scholarly interests. Each section includes a short preface in which Young provides a personal and historiographical *mise en contexte* for the chapters that follow.

Part one, entitled “Origins,” contains two chapters on inter-war French military strategy, a subject Young explored more fully in his first and arguably most influential book, *In Command of France*.<sup>[1]</sup> In the book, Young defended France's political and military leaders during the 1930s against charges that they were feckless cowards, incapable of responding effectively to the external dangers facing the country. Contrary to numerous accounts, many of which were written in the heat of defeat, French soldiers, statesmen and diplomats were very much “in command of France” as they struggled with purpose and persistence—and some success—to prepare for the possibility of a European war. For Young, the defeat of 1940 was not a sign of decadence or the inevitable and justified result of deep-seated political and social rot, but more the product of short-term military miscalculations.

Reflecting this interpretation, chapter one, first published in 1972, argues that inter-war French military doctrine was more coherent and sound than is often thought. Focusing on three aspects (cover, materiel, and the two-stage war), Young explains that French military planners foresaw a lengthy war in which industrial might would ultimately be decisive, much as in 1914–18. This time, however, the French army would wage war more effectively, protecting France's territorial integrity and avoiding premature offensives. The second article (1978) elaborates on the two-stage war, which now becomes the principle of a long war (*une guerre de longue durée*). Expecting a future conflict to be a lengthy, gruelling ordeal demanding the mobilisation of national resources on a massive scale, French planners faced the problem of Germany's demographic and industrial superiority. Their answer was to find allies to redress the imbalance. And, as Young insists, the indispensable ally was Britain, whose global resource base would be invaluable in a long war. But if the pursuit of a British alliance characterized inter-war French policy, it also posed a dilemma for French leaders. The reluctance of the British before 1939 to commit themselves to France, which was partly based on suspicion of French motives, pushed Paris into making concessions to Nazi Germany—concessions that weakened France's strategic position. Young is quick to point out, however, that the pursuit of a British alliance is evidence not of a craven dependence on London, but of the ability of the French to assess the strategic situation in realistic terms. Thus, he argues, in betting on a long war, the French basically got it right—as the course of

World War II would demonstrate. And while it is true that the French lost their war in 1940, Germany, in banking on a quick victory in attacking France, took a huge gamble, one that was arguably far riskier than France's gamble on a long war. In the end, France emerges from Young's article as simply less lucky than Germany.

Part two of the book, entitled "Progressions," consists of three articles published during the 1980s in which Young continued to explore France's political and military preparations for war. Chapter three (1981) examines the danger, raised repeatedly by French military strategists between the wars, of an *attaque brusquée* or sudden German attack. Young treats this danger as a myth since it was clear that, for most of the period, Germany lacked the means to do so. Nevertheless, as he argues, in a domestic and international political context that favoured significant disarmament, the French military fostered a "fear myth" among politicians and the public as a means of resisting deep cuts in military budgets. While one might question the political wisdom, not to mention morality, of the military's manipulation of fears, Young presents the myth as evidence of the resolve and dynamism of the French military and of the Third Republic more generally.

Myth is also the subject of chapter five (1987), which discusses the use and abuse of the fear of attack from the air before 1939. More clearly than in chapter three, Young shows that the making of military policy during the 1930s developed in a larger political context in which public perceptions and fears played an important part. The airplane appeared to embody not only the promise of technological progress, but also the apocalyptic potential of future war as fleets of bomber aircraft rained unprecedented devastation on cities and their civilian populations. This potential was exploited by various interest groups to serve their own ends. For "disarmers," nightmare scenarios added visual punch to their argument that man had to destroy the weapons of war before they destroyed him. For "rearmers," the air menace confirmed the need for France to construct a powerful air force with its own strategic bombing capacity, in order either to destroy German cities or to deter the Germans from unleashing the *Luftwaffe* on French cities. But whatever the precise case being made, this exploitation of the air menace kept the "spectre of aerial destruction" (p. 119) firmly before the public, with debilitating effects on France's will to resist Germany—effects evident during the 1938 Czech crisis.

Chapter four (1985) shifts attention from the domestic political aspects of French military planning to the problems of assessing the intentions of potential enemies. While the French recognized that Germany's heated preparations for war created a situation of mounting "economic disorder," they were less certain about how Hitler would respond. Would economic difficulties force the Nazi regime to scale back its rearmament effort and adopt more peaceful policies or would they propel Hitler towards war, as Germany sought to quench its thirst for resources through territorial conquest? At an even more basic level was the issue of Hitler's sanity. As Young writes: "Hitler, master designer, talented opportunist, deranged, or drunk? A madman who sometimes acted rationally, or an actor who sometimes feigned madness?" (p. 101). The point, of course, is that the French could never be sure of who—or what—they were dealing with. This inherent uncertainty, in turn, helps to explain the "ambivalence and indecision" of France's response to Nazi Germany (and to Fascist Italy) (p. 101). In drawing attention to ambivalence, Young introduces the organizing theme of a future book on pre-war French diplomacy and military policy.<sup>[2]</sup> Here, however, he is content to suggest that, given the impregnable fog surrounding Hitler's intentions, French political and military leaders deserve a more favourable hearing than they often receive.

Part three, "New Beginnings," is made up of two chapters on Louis Barthou, a leading Third Republic politician and the subject of a biography by Young.<sup>[3]</sup> Following a preface which recounts Young's efforts to track down an elusive "Jacqueline," who figured in Barthou's will, chapter six (1991) examines the links between Barthou's political career and his cultural activities, both as a writer and patron of the Arts. Rather than inhabiting separate spheres, politics and culture were intimately linked for Barthou,

who belonged to the “generation of bruised child-patriots” that had experienced the humiliation of France’s defeat in 1870-1871, and who thereafter devoted their lives to “a kind of patriotic atonement” (p. 149). This circumstance entailed not only strengthening France’s diplomatic and military position in Europe, but also ensuring that French civilisation shone both at home and abroad. Indeed, for Barthou the patriotic role of artists was as important as that of statesmen, diplomats and soldiers.

Chapter seven (1992) focuses more closely on Barthou’s foreign policy, particularly its underlying principles. Challenging the caricature of Barthou as a “blinkered, right-wing idéologue” and visceral Germanophobe, Young insists that pragmatism and prudence defined the former’s foreign policy (p. 170). These traits, moreover, were rooted in Barthou’s instinctive centrism, which together with republicanism and patriotism infused his approach to politics in general. Hostile to all forms of extremism and dogmatism, Barthou consistently pursued a moderate policy, which during the early 1930s translated into efforts to steer a middle course for France between the two extremes of Soviet communism and German Nazism, using the one to balance against the other. While Young clearly admires this balancing act, it would prove increasingly precarious during the 1930s as the French came under increased pressure to choose one or the other. Unfortunately, Barthou’s assassination in October 1934 makes it impossible to know which choice, if any, he would have made.

The fourth and final section, entitled “Another Start,” is comprised of three chapters, which reflect Young’s most recent work on France’s image abroad.[4] In chapter eight (1998), Young studies the French Foreign Ministry’s propaganda efforts in the United States between the wars. At the beginning of the period, anti-French sentiment was fairly widespread among Americans, a situation that began to change in the early 1930s. Although aware that several factors account for this “reversal in fortunes” (p. 202), Young insists that French propaganda played a leading role. And not just any propaganda. From the outset, Quai officials conceived of propaganda in terms of information as opposed to disinformation—information that celebrated French civilisation and that was aimed at both a mass and especially elite audience. The following two chapters discuss the image of France conveyed in the American Press. Focusing on 1939-1940, in chapter nine (2002), Young shows that the four major newspapers examined (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*) all projected a positive image of wartime France, one that contrasts sharply with the image of decadence that became popular after the defeat. For American journalists (and presumably their audience back home), who had observed France at close hand, the débâcle came as a “shock” and as something “inexplicable.” This sense of shock is worth recalling, Young maintains, because it undermines the claim that the defeat was inevitable—that something was profoundly wrong with France. Young adopts a similar demarche in chapter ten (2002), which investigates American newspaper reporting during the first half of the 1920s. Once again the emphasis is on the positive nature of reports, which portrayed a country and people hard at work rebuilding after four years of war. Although in the preface to the section Young admits that not everyone will agree on the usefulness of press reports as an accurate reflection of reality during the 1920s (or 1939-1940 for that matter), he does believe that this reporting points to just “how remarkable [France’s post-war] recovery was” (p. 250). And, not surprisingly, he suggests that this recovery throws further doubt on the notion of French decadence.

Two noteworthy points emerge from this résumé of *An Uncertain Idea of France*. The first is the influence of Young’s work on the historiography of the inter-war Third Republic. His articles, book chapters and books have helped to shape the scholarly agenda. On a host of topics—the nature of French military strategy and doctrine[5], the policies of individual French leaders[6], the role of Britain[7], the performance of intelligence services[8], France’s military record in 1940[9]—scholars have followed in his footsteps. The second point concerns the theme that unifies his work over the years: the defence of the Third Republic and its servants. For Young, the defeat of 1940 has biased our views of both; fairness demands a more balanced, which is to say more sympathetic treatment. As he writes in the conclusion, “Historians may mock them [the French], and—with impunity—question their ability, their

integrity, their courage, but I found them to be a cohort of exceptional achievers, worthy of respect. And through them, so the Republic they served" (p. 260).

While the diversity and significance of Young's scholarly contribution is not in doubt, his interpretative framework can be questioned. His repeated use of decadence as a foil arguably made more sense during the 1970s and even 1980s than it does now. True, the thesis of a morally corrupt France between the wars still occasionally rears its head.<sup>[10]</sup> Yet, in what amounts to a testimony to Young's impact, an important body of scholarship now exists, based on extensive archival digging, which directly challenges the notion of decadence.<sup>[11]</sup> Given this scholarship, it is worth asking whether decadence has not become something of a straw man. Indeed, one might suggest that accusations of decadence have always possessed more than a hint of exaggeration—a result, as Peter Jackson recently pointed out, of the political motives behind them.<sup>[12]</sup> In any case, to show that inter-war French leaders were not cringing cowards nowadays appears to be too easy a task, which raises the question of how to assess the Third Republic. As a standard, decadence arguably sets the bar too low. On the whole, French statesmen, soldiers, and diplomats were competent, committed, and intelligent people, but this does not mean that they are beyond criticism. Surely, both as a group and as individuals, they possessed their share of prejudices that coloured and even blinkered their understanding of the world around them. Equally to the point, Young's emphasis on the qualities of France's ruling and administrative classes risks downplaying the larger context in which these men (and a very few women) operated. By themselves, the best of intentions or the clearest of visions are not enough if political and institutional structures, for example, hamper the translation of policy principles into concrete measures. To take the case of the long war strategy, while its broad principles might have been sound, the efforts to prepare France's armed forces, its economy, or its population for such a war fell short of what the strategy appeared to require. In identifying and attempting to account for these shortcomings, one implicitly, if not explicitly, criticizes French leaders for not accomplishing more. But such criticisms are neither inherently unfair nor equivalent to dismissing the inter-war Third Republic as decadent.

In the end, one's overall view of inter-war France—and of the Third Republic in general—is perhaps largely a matter of choice. In the prefaces to parts one and two of the book, Young claims that it is the evidence he found in his researches that pointed him in the interpretative direction he took. Truth, in short, won out. But here Young surely engages in a little false naïveté. It is a cliché, but a useful one nevertheless, that the historian's choice of subject and argument is the product of more than an objective sifting of evidence. The historian's experiences, sentiments, preferences and prejudices act on his or her choices in both conscious and less conscious ways. If Young's choices are clear, it is worth noting that others have made different ones. For example, in investigating the treatment of marginalised groups such as colonial subjects, women and immigrants, or the development of the social sciences, various scholars have painted a far less attractive portrait of the inter-war Third Republic than does Young.<sup>[13]</sup> To be sure, in focusing on the Republic's darker aspects, this scholarship can be labelled as one-sided, but perhaps no more so than its opposite. Interestingly, this more critical scholarship appears to take as its standard of assessment the question not of whether inter-war France was decadent, but of whether the Third Republic lived up to its self-proclaimed ideals. Often enough the answer was no. In addition to being the standard that the Republic set for itself, comparing words with deeds has the advantage of underscoring the attractive force of the Republic's principles. In holding the Third Republic to its ideals, its critics testify to the powerful appeal of inter-war France and of what it stood for. Much the same might be said today of another great Republic.

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## NOTES

[1] *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[2] *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

[3] *Power and Pleasure: Louis Barthou and the Third French Republic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

[4] And is the subject of his most recent book. See *Marketing Marianne: French Propaganda in America, 1900-1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

[5] For example, see Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France, 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Eugenia C. Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996); Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe: The Dilemmas of French Impotence, 1918-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Robert A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1985).

[6] Thibault Tellier, *Paul Reynaud (1878-1966): un indépendant en politique* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); John F.V. Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Elisabeth du Réau, *Edouard Daladier, 1884-1970* (Paris: Fayard, 1993); and Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[7] Martin S. Alexander and William J. Philpott, eds., *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002); Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); and Nicolas Rostow, *Anglo-French Relations, 1934-36* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

[8] Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Martin S. Alexander, "Did the 2e Bureau Work? The Role of French Intelligence in French Defence Policy and Strategy, 1919-1939," *Intelligence and National Security* 6 (1991): 293-333; and Douglas Porch, "French Military Intelligence and the Fall of France, 1930-1940," *Intelligence and National Security* 4 (1989): 28-58.

[9] Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); and Maurice Vaisse, ed., *Mai-Juin 1940: défaite française, victoire allemande, sous l'oeil des historiens étrangers* (Paris: Autrement, 2000).

[10] For a recent example, see Benjamin F. Martin, *France in 1938* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

[11] See, for example, May, *Strange Victory*; Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*; du Réau, *Edouard Daladier*; Alexander, *The Republic in Danger*; and Robert Frank[enstein], *Le Prix du réarmement français (1935-1939)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982). For a useful discussion of some of this literature, see Peter Jackson, "Recent Journeys Along the Road Back to France, 1940," *Historical Journal* 39 (1996): 497-510.

[12] See his H-France posting of February 22, 2005.

[13] Examples include Martin Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars: Imperialism, Politics and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Sian Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); and William H. Schneider, *Quality and Quantity: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999).

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