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Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. x + 366pp. Appendix, tables, bibliography, and index. \$91.42 (hb). ISBN 0-19-926122-9.

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Writing virtually contemporaneously, Marc Bloch provided the canonical dissection of the French defeat of 1940 in his *Strange Defeat*.<sup>[1]</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, one of the deans of French diplomatic history during the twentieth century, characterized French policies during the 1930s as "decadence."<sup>[2]</sup> Recently, however, the image of the dowdy dowager Marianne, the symbol of the Third Republic, has received a certain refurbishing. Ernest May, for example, found the defeat far from inevitable in his *Strange Victory*.<sup>[3]</sup> Positing a French recovery after 1938, William Irvine asserted, "(b)ut it was not decadence that led to 1940; it is 1940 that has led us to view the late Third Republic as decadent."<sup>[4]</sup> However, in *Facing the Second World War*, Talbot Imlay argues that things were worse than even Marc Bloch imagined. Imlay bluntly concludes that France failed while Great Britain passed "the test of war" from 1938-1940.

Imlay challenges the existing scholarship for the period from 1938-1940 in three ways. First, he criticizes its "narrow focus," with most interpretations based on an "inadequate empirical base" (pp. 2-3). Second, he criticizes a "periodization" emphasizing the approach of war from 1938 until September 1939 while neglecting the so-called "phony war" between September 1939 and the massive German assault of May 1940. Imlay works backwards from the phony war as a means to highlight certain prewar trends. Third, he proposes "the first comprehensive and comparative assessment of how two democratic countries, France and Britain, met the test of modern war" (p. 6). Modeling himself on recent scholarship of World War I, Imlay offers a "broader" assessment of how France and Britain responded to the "test of war." He divides his book around the themes of "the strategic, domestic political, and political-economic" (p. 3). Although he focuses on preparations for war and the initial wartime experience, he clearly intends his conclusions to have relevance for the French defeat and narrow British survival in 1940.

How does Imlay support his argument that France failed the test of war in terms of strategy, domestic politics, and economic mobilization? He concludes that intense political polarization exerted a negative impact on each area. Strategically, France relied on a long war to bring victory through the mobilization of French and British resources and the limitation of those of Germany. It was assumed that time was on the Allies' side. After Munich, and especially after Hitler took over the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, French leaders realized the crucial importance of an eastern front and attempted to win the Soviet Union to their side. The Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 23, 1939 dashed these hopes.

In late 1938, Edouard Daladier broke with the Popular Front and moved his Radical Party into a coalition of the Center-Right and Right. In Imlay's telling, Daladier was a politician in a multi-party system that required constant attention to one's political majority. On the far Left, the French Communist Party condemned Munich as "a 'diplomatic Sedan'" and harshly criticized Daladier (p. 138). The issue of war and peace bitterly divided the Socialist Party. Léon Blum and his followers concluded that there was something even worse than war and Paul Faure's faction affirmed pacifist and strongly anti-communist sentiments. Similar discord existed in Daladier's own Radical Party, with Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet's followers supportive of a general French retreat in Europe because of their

country's diminished power. A strong current of anti-communism also ran through the Radicals. With the Left divided and weakened, Daladier turned towards the Right, where he found only conditional approval for confronting Nazi Germany.

Disagreeing with one strand of current historiography, Imlay doubts that a *redressement* occurred in France in 1938-1939, but he does note a certain stiffening of resolve on the Right in the Daladier/Gamelin decision to resist Germany. Nevertheless, Imlay emphasizes serious limits on the degree of support by the French Right for war with Nazi Germany with many favoring preparations only in hope of "detering" rather than fighting a war. Viscerally anti-Communist, much of the French Right countenanced French approaches towards a Soviet tie only with hesitation. In Imlay's words, "[h]ostility towards the Soviet Union was only muted, not transmuted" (p. 164). After the Hitler-Stalin Pact and as the phony war lengthened, growing numbers on the Right mixed pacifism and anti-communism, preferring an "anti-communist" war against the Soviet Union rather than an "anti-fascist" war (p.180).

Differing with another recent historiographical trend, Imlay questions the success of French rearmament. Praise of Raoul Dautry, the Minister of Armament and the man often lauded for preparing the French economy for war, Imlay claims, "has been overdrawn" (p. 286) as "France lacked the economic structure needed for a long war" (p. 293). According to Imlay, the culprit was the Daladier/Reynaud choice of laissez-faire economics. As he crushed a general strike in November 1938 provoked by Finance Minister Paul Reynaud's liberal economic policies, including an end of the forty-hour week, Daladier chose laissez-faire over planning. Among the consequences stemming from a lack of central direction of economic mobilization for war and the privileging of industrialists over labor were inefficiencies of production, and inequalities of burdens (industrialists made large profits while workers' overtime pay was heavily taxed).<sup>[5]</sup> Many industrialists opposed planning as steps towards socialism and communism. They also distrusted workers and blamed deficiencies in production on alleged communist "sabotage," for which Imlay finds "little evidence" (p. 295). Imlay asserts, "(i)f only in their own minds, French employers and officials got the working class that their economic and social policies deserved" (p. 296).

Imlay also breaks sharply with the idea that French leaders were "confident," "complacent" and "passive" as they confronted war. Rather, during the phony war, numerous factors brought France to a strategic crisis as, after March 1940, both Premier Daladier and Premier Reynaud lacked a clear majority in parliament in support of the war. With the long war strategy in tatters, French leaders actively and desperately sought opportunities to win a short war. When the British blocked a proposal to open a front in the Balkans, the French turned to plans to disrupt the flow of iron ore from Sweden to Germany and to attack Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus (the Baku Plan), thereby risking overt war with the Soviet Union. Imlay concludes that only the French defeat of 1940 opened the possibility for ultimate victory.

In strategy, Great Britain moved closer to France between 1938 and 1940. At first, British leaders followed a policy of "limited liability," virtually disregarding Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe as strategic factors. However, after the Prague coup of March 1939, British policy makers began to heed France's demand for an eastern front. Eventually, British policy makers, too, lost confidence in the long war strategy. As differences between British and French strategic perspectives diminished, British leaders, too, were tempted to join France in desperate rolls of the dice to win a short war.

If Great Britain and France ultimately reached a measure of accord on strategy, Imlay maintains that domestic politics and economic mobilization differed substantially in the two countries. In contrast to intense political polarization in France, a coalition emerged in Great Britain against Nazi Germany.

Thus the rise of Winston Churchill and his coalition government should not be viewed as due to the efforts of Churchill alone, but as the product of at least two years of broader developments. As his appeasement policy failed, Neville Chamberlain was forced to modify his policies. Imlay stresses the "distance" traversed by Chamberlain in even agreeing to seek an accord with Stalin, but he also notes the hesitation that remained. The British Prime Minister did not conceive of war against Nazi Germany in ideological terms, and regarded massive war preparations as burning bridges he wanted to keep intact. Over time, opposition from the Labour and Liberal Parties and an increasing number of Tory dissidents strengthened around a commitment to total war.

Domestically, the British government established more harmonious and fairer labor relations between industrialists and workers than in France. In 1938, it urged cooperation between labor unions and industrialists in armaments production. Longstanding collective bargaining procedures and a greater openness than in France to cooperative interactions between government, labor, and management laid the foundation for effective economic planning and armaments production. Although some industrialists and elements in the government favored policies that would have subordinated labor management, cooperation ultimately prevailed.

In comparing France and Great Britain, Imlay breaks with another prevalent view when he asserts that interactions between the two were a two-way street with France often influencing its island neighbor. Imlay ascribes the preponderant influence on the contrasting domestic political outcomes to the Popular Front in France which, "whatever its accomplishments... alienated the French Right at a critical time." He adds, "(f)rom this perspective, the long period of conservative rule in Britain during the 1930s appears fortuitous" (p.360). Finally, Imlay offers a counter-factual to a counter-factual. He contests Ernest May's (and others') hypothesis that if France had detected and blocked the German offensive through the Ardennes, then a 'long war' scenario might have led to an Allied victory. Imlay suggests that instead a long war would have accentuated France's problems and intensified strategic "radicalization" and led to an assault against Baku and the Soviet Union, which "might very well have proved disastrous not only for France and Britain but also for Europe and the world in general." (p.363)

Were conditions in France in early 1940 really as bad as Imlay posits? I share Imlay's assessment that French leaders were far from confident. The entire interwar period in France might lend itself to thoughtful psychological analysis of French decision making. In the realm of political economy, Imlay admits an economic recovery occurred prodded by Reynaud's decisive choice of laissez-faire policies.<sup>[6]</sup> At the same time Imlay maintains that the recovery came at a heavy price for war preparations. Here we need a discussion between specialists. Finally, Imlay paints a picture of the period from 1938-1940 as one of ongoing political polarization, of a strengthening reaction by the Center-Right and Right against the Popular Front, a subject of debate in a recent exchange on H-France.<sup>[7]</sup> Here, Imlay makes his own fruitful contribution, asserting that different groups gave different meanings to the war, with some offering "total" and others, "limited" commitments.

One of the main reasons for different responses in France to the crisis of 1938-1940 was the intense and at times phobic anti-communism on the Right, and also in segments of the Radical and Socialist Parties, for which Imlay provides extensive evidence. They struggled to decide whether Hitler or Stalin was the primary enemy. The impact on foreign policy-making was enormous since Russia had already played such a crucial role during the period before World War I and in August 1914. Furthermore, although Stalin was indeed one of history's most brutal dictators and mass murderers, after the fall of France, necessity and Hitler's vast ambitions ultimately led the west to alchemize the Soviet dictator into "Uncle Joe." If Imlay is correct about the eventual convergence of French and British strategy, it happened too late. Timing matters as much in international relations as in romance. Stalin appears to have been open to serious negotiations for an alliance from 1935-1938, while western leaders were not. One historian

even characterizes the conflict between the west and the Soviet Union from 1917-1939 as "the early Cold War." [8] France appears only to have begun to feel the appropriate sense of desperation about an eastern front after Munich and really only after the Prague coup. By that time, Stalin was moving towards his notorious accord with Hitler. Historians will probably never know with certainty whether France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union could have reached a military agreement because a maximum effort to achieve it was never mutually attempted by Chamberlain, Daladier, and Stalin. The Munich Treaty and the Hitler-Stalin Pact were ugly bookends to Auden's "low, dishonest decade." Let me offer a counter-factual. What might have happened if Hitler had been a communist-nationalist-racist and if the French Right and others had been confronting a Nazi-communist Germany?

I question, though, Imlay's laying responsibility largely on the Popular Front in explaining differences in domestic politics between France and Britain. In a literal sense, he may be right, but political polarization in France antedates 1936. The primarily rightist riots of February 6, 1934 preceded and contributed to the formation of the Popular Front. French politics had polarized seriously from 1923-1926 and from 1911-1914. The Third Republic had been founded following a civil war in which perhaps as many as 17,000-20,000 communard prisoners had been murdered after their capture, echoing the slaughter of the Terror of 1793-1794. It is not just the Popular Front, but French history that differs from that of Great Britain. Of course, Imlay knows this and one of the pleasures of his book is his sophistication and his attention to nuance as well as to the main lines of argument. Nevertheless, these thoughts also raise questions concerning Imlay's periodization.

Scholars have debated precisely when France's victory of 1918 unraveled. For some, it dates from the first half of the 1920s.[9] For Imlay, the crucial year is 1938, but his book had the unintended consequence of convincing me that the 1934-1938 period was the most critical. Louis Barthou, the unintended victim of the assassination by Croatian terrorists in Marseilles in October 1934 of King Alexander of Yugoslavia, represented the experienced conservative leader France lacked and needed during the 1930s. Barthou had sufficient conservative credentials to build a broad coalition against Hitler that could include the Soviet Union. After Barthou's demise, Pierre Laval retained the form of a French accord with the Soviet Union, but vitiated its substance. Even before Stalin purged and executed many of his military commanders in 1937, France had adopted a policy of stringing the Russians along, talking with them to avoid a Soviet-German connection, but resolutely refusing to discuss a military alliance. As we know, between 1935 and 1938, Hitler dismantled the post-World War I international structure. The Versailles and Locarno Treaties were viable, despite their vulnerabilities and limits, until they were not defended. The battles not fought between 1935 and 1938 were crucial. The German Army of 1935 was not the German Army of 1936, let alone of 1938 or 1940. By 1938-1940, the horse had already bolted from the barn.

I also hesitate to embrace completely a thesis claiming so baldly British success and French failure between 1938 and 1940. Perhaps the problem again lies in the choice of only a two-year time frame. For one thing, Great Britain's overall appeasement policies contributed significantly to the French defeat of 1940 and the narrowness of the British survival in 1940. Still, the question is whether Imlay's interpretations are plausible. I share his conviction that central planning was the most effective means to mobilize the economy for war. Moreover, Imlay does discuss the profound differences between Britain and France, the role of geography that favored the island, the different histories of each country. In general, Imlay seems to downplay individuals whose actions in his story are greatly influenced by the balance of political forces. Perhaps he goes too far; Chamberlain, Daladier, and Churchill made choices too. Nevertheless, his conception of Churchill as the expression of Labour Party, Liberal Party, and dissident Conservatives' dissatisfaction with Neville Chamberlain crystallizing into a political coalition organized around intransigent hostility to Nazi Germany is fruitful. One implication of Imlay's thesis is that the Labor and Liberal Parties deserve to share Winston Churchill's magnificent moment in 1940.

My own interpretation of the defeat of France in 1940 is pluralistic. Three observations continue to be evocative. At the formation of the Third Republic, Adolf Thiers asserted, "The Republic will be conservative or it won't be at all." [10] Stanley Hoffmann characterized the Third Republic as "plenty of brakes and not much of a motor." [11] Robert Paxton wrote, "The Battle of France from the French side was a bit like one of those slow motion nightmares," [12] which also describes well French military and overall preparations during the 1930s. In explaining the defeat of France, one needs to consider the long range patterns of French history and of the Third Republic; the middle range developments of World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, and the interwar years; and the period from 1935-1940. Talbot Imlay focuses insightfully on the very end of this time-frame. His book is tightly organized, provocative, and significant, and is based on extensive archival research and primary sources. The work is worthy of careful consideration whether one agrees with him or not. *Facing the Second World War* is a challenging book that offers a deepened foundation for discussion.

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## NOTES

[1] Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).

[2] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La décadence 1932-1939* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979).

[3] Ernest May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

[4] William D. Irvine, "Domestic Politics and the Fall of France in 1940," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 1996, as cited in *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*, Joel Blatt, ed. (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn, 1998, 2000), p. 99.

[5] Imlay develops these ideas further in a recent article: Talbot Imlay, "Paul Reynaud and France's Response to Nazi Germany, 1938-1940," *French Historical Studies*, 26/3 (Summer 2003):497-538.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 499-500.

[7] Comments by Vicki Caron, William Irvine, and shorter contributions by others, November 13 through early December 2000, H-France and H-Diplo.

[8] Michael Carley, "Episodes from the Early Cold War: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1917-1927," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52/7(2000):1275-1305; Carley, "The Early Cold War, 1917-1939," *Relevance*, 65/4(Fall 1996):6-11. [9] For example, see Sally Marks, "Smoke and Mirrors: In Smoke-Filled Rooms and the Galerie des Glaces," in *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*, Manfred Boemeke, Gerald Feldman, and Elizabeth Glaser, eds. (Cambridge and New York: The German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1998), particularly pp. 368-370.

[10] Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 5th edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 206.

[11] Stanley Hoffmann, *In Search of France* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 17.

[12] Robert Paxton, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, 4th. edition (Wadsworth, 2002), p. 417.

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