
H-France Review Vol. 6 (April 2006), No. 42

Benjamin Martin, *France in 1938*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. x + 252 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cl). ISBN 0-8071-3050-8.

Review by Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick.

For W. H. Auden the 1930s were “a low, dishonest decade”; for Eugen Weber they were France’s “hollow years.”[1] 1938 has often been portrayed as the year in which the moral fiber of the Western democracies reached its nadir, culminating in the Franco-British capitulation to Nazi demands at Munich. It is the choices of France’s political class and the uneasy mood of its people over those fateful twelve months which Benjamin Martin seeks to evoke and assess. His conclusion is that, like the character Mathieu in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Age of Reason*, they faced unpalatable choices but also sought to evade their responsibilities.

Such an interpretation is, in many ways, a familiar one. The argument that the era was one of decadence, characterized by societal stagnation, divisive politicking, and uncertain leadership, is venerable. Elements of it appear in Marc Bloch’s classic *Strange Defeat*, written in the wake of the collapse of 1940.[2] Martin’s contribution—using an approach reminiscent of his previous book, *France and the Après Guerre*[3]—is to provide a fresh and focused synthesis, drawing extensively upon printed primary sources, the press, contemporary films and novels, and selectively upon relevant scholarship. The result is a work which makes the central figures of the era come alive and lucidly conveys the anxieties which beset the late Third Republic, contentious though its thesis might be.

France in 1938 is divided into four fairly long chapters, each devoted to one season of the year. This chronological approach allows Martin to track shifts in diplomatic policy and the popular mood. The themes of the book are quite consistent, however, with the threat of war with Germany at the heart of the story. Martin begins in December 1937 as Yvon Delbos, the Foreign Minister at the time, tours the capitals of Eastern Europe. Cheering crowds greet him in Warsaw, Bucharest, Belgrade, and above all Prague, but in reality “[c]onfidence in French leadership, dropping since the remilitarization of the Rhineland, was now in free fall” (p. 7). Before long the Premier, Camille Chautemps, resigned to avoid association with the ignominy of allowing Germany to annex Austria; that task fell to the Socialist leader Léon Blum. After April 1938, Blum’s successor, the Radical Édouard Daladier, sought to project an image of determination, but Martin concludes that in reality he was indecisive. Too often, it seems, “the Bull of the Vaucluse,” as he was known, proved to have the horns of a snail. Daladier’s Foreign Minister, Georges Bonnet, was far more consistent—but his goals were to avoid war and appease Germany.

Thereafter Martin recounts the “moral collapse” of French diplomacy. He covers the debates—in the press, parliament, and cabinet—which culminated in the decision to abandon Czechoslovakia. Martin does not deny that France’s international position was precarious, and that Neville Chamberlain’s desire for appeasement limited the Third Republic’s options. But he does not see those factors as relieving France’s leaders of their responsibilities. His characterization of the Anglo-French relationship at the time, and its ruinous consequences for Czechoslovakia, are summed up nicely in the following passage: “The British pressure on France was unseemly, even deceitful, treatment of an ally. For Bonnet here was an exquisite and memorable experience in irony. An Anglophile, he adopted the English public school tradition of passing blows downward by amplifying the pressure on Prague” (p. 137).

After the capitulation at Munich, the final months of 1938 witnessed a disturbing effort to achieve a rapprochement with the Third Reich. *Kristallnacht* attracted only sparse attention in much of the French press and Joachim von Ribbentrop was received in December to sign a declaration of Franco-German cooperation. "France in December," Martin concludes, "first revealed the relish with which some of the French would submit to Nazi wishes and the indifference to this prostration by almost everyone else" (p. 214). It would have been better, he contends, for France and Britain to have risked war over Czechoslovakia.

Domestic politics in 1938 were intricately connected to the international crisis, and Martin devotes considerable attention to them as well. His assessment of the Popular Front, which was fragmenting as the year began and eventually collapsed in the fall, is quite negative. While its intentions may have been good, the Blum government's economic policies were incoherent and Blum failed to provide leadership when he decided not to risk British ire by supporting the Spanish Republicans. Nor is Martin impressed by Daladier's break with the Popular Front and his willingness to confront the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) by declaring that France had to go back to work. Instead of trying to cooperate with the parties of the left or "imposing blame and burdens all around ... Daladier chose to impose them only on the working class (p. 146)." By contrast, Martin deems the reforms imposed by Paul Reynaud, who took over as Finance Minister in November, as highly effective, though he also notes that they ensured the CGT would attempt a general strike which Daladier crushed with glee.

Martin supports his analysis with discussions of culture and crime. He sees films like *Port of Shadows* and works of literature such as Sartre's *The Reprieve*, written during the war but in a conscious effort to recapture the mood of 1938, as reflecting the despair and turpitude of those months. He also incorporates discussions of some of the most sensational trials of the year to reinforce his thesis. Having explored the shortcomings of the Third Republic's justice system in two previous books, he is well-equipped to show how such cases revealed the moral and political tensions wracking France.[4]

Among the trials Martin assesses is that of La Plevitzkaïa, the wife of a Soviet agent who in 1937 had arranged the killing of a prominent White Russian leader. The killers had escaped, leaving her behind. According to Martin, the Popular Front government, worried about relations with the Soviets and the French Communists, decided to make no attempt to capture them. Indicative of its sharp break with the Popular Front, and reflecting the vindictive mood of the time, Daladier's ministry had La Plevitzkaïa tried as an accomplice. Given her efforts to mislead the authorities about her husband's activities, her conviction was not a surprise, the sentence of twenty years' hard labor was. Since the prosecution was unable to charge the Soviets, and since the former Popular Front Minister of the Interior Marx Dormoy refused to testify, La Plevitzkaïa was punished with particular severity; she "had to pay because the prosecution could not place the Soviet Union and the Popular Front in the defendant's dock with her" (p. 181).

France in 1938 thus sustains the charge that the late Third Republic was "decadent." There are, of course, historians who see things differently. While the capitulation at Munich has few defenders, some recent scholarship shows there were other trends at work during this period. Dashed hopes figure highly in the history of the Popular Front, but the Blum government has been given credit for attempting bold, and badly needed, social and cultural reforms.[5] The pursuit of Franco-German rapprochement in December 1938 may have foreshadowed Vichy's policy of collaboration, but in the intervening period there were arguably signs of recovery. With the Popular Front out of power, French conservatives became more willing to call for firmness in dealing with Hitler. French workers were dismayed at the loss of the forty-hour week, but in key sectors such as aircraft manufacturing, productivity was increasing rapidly in 1939-40.[6]

To be sure, recent work by Talbot Imlay contends that this growing consensus was quite fragile, with many elements of the French right still uneasy about the notion of total war against Nazi Germany. But even then, the situation was more complex than an emphasis upon a generalized, growing rot in the system allows.^[7] With respect to popular culture, Michael Miller's book *Shanghai on the Metro* suggests, through the prism of interwar spy novels, that the mood of interwar France was less consistently anxiety-ridden than we might think.^[8] Such alternative perspectives appear in Martin's bibliography, but he does little to address them explicitly in the book itself.

Nevertheless, *France in 1938* has considerable strengths. Martin writes in a compelling style, and ties many different strands together into a coherent interpretation. He calls attention to those who believed that the decisions of 1938 were disastrous and that alternatives were available: the head of the French military mission to Czechoslovakia, for example, resigned in protest over Munich and offered his services to Prague. Marin also suggests there were politicians, notably Georges Mandel, who could have risen to the challenges that France was facing. By arguing that other paths could have been taken, he reminds us why assessing the late Third Republic remains such a fascinating, yet controversial task.

NOTES

[1] Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1994).

[2] Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968 [1946]); for a good overview of the relevant historiography see Robert J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 37-59.

[3] Benjamin F. Martin, *France and the Après Guerre, 1918-1924: Illusions and Disillusionment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

[4] Benjamin F. Martin, *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Epoque* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) and *Crime and Criminal Justice under the Third Republic: The Shame of Marianne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

[5] Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); there is now also a very useful overview of the Popular Front in Rod Kedward, *La Vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900* (London and New York: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 184-218.

[6] For a concise discussion of this revival see William D. Irvine, "Domestic Politics and the Fall of France in 1940," in Joel Blatt, ed., *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), pp. 85-99.

[7] Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 135-185.

[8] Michael B. Miller, *Shanghai on the Metro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Sean Kennedy
University of New Brunswick
skennedy@unb.ca

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172