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Introduction: Maurice Gamelin, the defence of France and the decline of the Third Republic

Military defeats and national crises have repeatedly rocked France in modern times. They have made for a quarrelsome marriage between the French state and its defence services. The career of Maurice Gamelin, from his entry to St Cyr as an officer-cadet in 1891 until his dismissal as commander-in-chief of the French armies in May 1940, epitomises the traumatic nature of the French civil-military relationship. From Dreyfus to Dien Bien Phu, the history of the French armed forces has been bedevilled as much by ill-judged forays into politics as by military misfortunes.[1]

The present study seeks to present a favourable reinterpretation of the customarily maligned Gamelin. It endeavours to focus attention more than hitherto on Gamelin's positive contribution to French national security and political-military cooperation in the approach to the Second World War. In order to situate and understand Gamelin's place in modern French history it is, however, necessary not only to meet the man, it is essential to be introduced to the issues which he both confronted and, historically, represented. For this, some acquaintance is required with the background of civil-military relations under the French Third Republic and some familiarity needed with the attendant historiography.

As a young lieutenant, taking the Ecole de Guerre staff course at the close of the 1890s, Gamelin witnessed at first hand the travails of the French officers of the 'Dreyfus generation'. After the retrial and eventual acquittal of Dreyfus, the Radical-led government of Emile Combes (1902–5) attempted a purge to republicanise the French army hierarchy. In this process it was a soldier who functioned as Combes' military collaborator – to employ an epithet more usually applied pejoratively to the politicised officers of 1940. General Louis André, Combes' minister

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of war, had the task of manipulating the careers of the French army's officers according to reported political preferences and confessional convictions. André arranged politically biased promotions for those deemed to possess a 'republican' outlook on the basis of notorious secret files, the *fiches*. These dossiers contained the gossip and rumour that André garnered from informants – many of them freemasons – about the tastes and tendencies of every officer qualified for advancement. By this unashamedly partisan purge, the canker of political interference entered the heart of the French military corps. It was in this outwardly apolitical but inwardly disaffected body that Gamelin took up the profession of arms.[2]

Almost fifty years later, the military humiliation of May 1940 became Gamelin's personal calvary. At that moment of military defeat and national crisis, Gamelin discovered how imperfectly his own example of soldierly subordination to the regime was embraced by the officer corps that had been trained and educated under his authority in the 1930s. At its moment of greatest trial, the Third Republic was subverted by its own military guardians. Chief among the Republic's conservative pallbearers was a clique of officers which had proven impervious to Gamelin's demand that the regime be obeyed and respected throughout the army.[3] These uniformed political opportunists shamelessly converted the moment of their own deepest discredit as military professionals into the realisation of their political fantasies. What Charles Maurras termed the 'divine surprise' of 1940 was to drape a spurious legitimacy – the legitimacy of the desperate remedy for a desperate situation – over naked anti-republicanism. From France's military defeat there emerged, under Vichy, a cynical assault on the rights of labour, the lives of Jews and other minorities and on the very continuation of democracy. A key part was played by conservative officers in bringing about the reactionary order that unfolded in France from 1940 to 1944 – an order which wreaked a belated and vicious vengeance on the Dreyfusards.[4]

The triumph of the military and political authoritarians at Bordeaux in June 1940 signified the wreck of the compromise with the Republic to which Gamelin had devoted his career. However, during the death agonies of the regime, Gamelin found himself reduced to impotence. By dismissing him, on 19 May 1940, France's democratic civilian leaders had gratuitously signed the death warrant of the Republic. In its desperation to bolster morale, the government of Paul Reynaud was misled into restoring to high command none other than Gamelin's own predecessor at the head of the army, General Maxime Weygand. Conceived with the best of intentions, to stiffen French military resistance to

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the panzers, Reynaud's action inadvertently released a reactionary political revolution that swiftly gathered an unstoppable momentum. Weygand did not simply declare the battle of France to be lost; he also refused both to resign and to participate in exploring armistice terms with the Germans. For Gamelin's successor insisted that the cease-fire and termination of hostilities with Germany in June 1940 had to be negotiated not by the military command but by the government. The entire burden of the defeat was to be laid in this way on the political leadership. It was they whom Weygand and the military conservatives held culpable for France's calamity. Unmistakably, this was an echo of the fabrication by German officers of the 'stab in the back' legend surrounding the armistice of 1918 – a legend that purported to show how Germany lost the First World War not on the battlefield but at the hands of peacemongering politicians, the so-called 'November criminals'.

In 1940, Weygand strove not to find ways of continuing the French war effort alongside Britain but, rather, to block every bolt-hole for the civilian authorities whom he condemned for negligent attention to French security after 1919. The Fall of France was an unimagined opportunity for Weygand to help install a government that would dig the grave of the Republic which he regarded as responsible for preparing the catastrophe. In place of the *Troisième*, Weygand sought the establishment of an alternative and authoritarian regime – one predisposed to promote soldierly values of honour and obedience, to revive French chauvinism and to restore a disciplined patriotism. To expedite the last rites of the old regime, the Republic was stained with the discredit of national defeat.[5]

Under Marshal Philippe Pétain, the embodiment of a 'military view of the country's future' and hero of happier experiences for the French army, the military reactionaries played a full part in the adventure launched at Vichy in July 1940. Their objective was nothing less than the remodelling of the state, in a quest to retrieve the values of the Old Regime. Driven by obsessive anti-republicanism among the ranks of its conservative commanders, a part of the French officer corps prostituted itself into differing degrees of collaboration with its conquerors. Yet it was Gamelin who was singled out among the military leaders of the Third Republic. He was compelled to stand trial publicly, before the Vichy regime's supreme court. In the spring of 1942, at Riom, he was formally arraigned for a professional failure to prepare France for the war of 1939, and for responsibility for the subsequent débâcle.[6]

Gamelin was haunted by the hypocrisy of this indictment. Faced by an unholy alliance of accusers, he kept his own counsel. He despised the compact reached at Vichy between political opportunists such as Pierre

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Laval, Adrian Marquet and Jean Ybarnégaray on the one hand and, on the other, a cabal of his own pre-war military subordinates that included General Louis Colson, the chief of army staff from 1935 to 1940, and General Charles Huntziger, commander of the Second Army at Sedan in May 1940. After a short statement at the outset of the Riom trial, Gamelin retreated into a studied and dignified silence throughout the remainder of the hearings.[7]

Yet, even for this, he encountered criticism. There were those who argued that his refusal to speak out allowed the case for the defence of the inter-war military leadership to fall by default. In contrast to Gamelin, the general's civilian codefendants – who included two former prime ministers, an ex-air minister and a former secretary-general of the war ministry – vigorously protested their political and executive competence. They deployed documents and called witnesses to insist that they had energetically and effectively discharged their governmental duties in rearmament and war preparation. Léon Blum, prime minister in 1936–7 and again in March–April 1938, defended his record with especial success. So, too, did Edouard Daladier, minister for war and national defence between 1936 and May 1940, as well as prime minister himself from April 1938 till March 1940.

Neither of these statesmen sought to shift blame onto Gamelin (although they did not shrink from criticising other beaten generals, some of whom had become pillars of the Vichy regime by the time of the Riom trial). Nonetheless, as the hearings unfolded in the full glare of the collaborationist press between February and April 1942, the early flush of enthusiasm for Pétainism had already faded except among hard-core Vichyite zealots. Middle and junior-ranking army officers, scattered throughout France in enforced retirement from the 100,000 man army that the Germans had allowed Vichy, disliked the way the civilians had wriggled off the hook at Riom. Some soldiers felt that Gamelin should have spoken up on behalf of the army of 1939–40 – for their comrades who had, for the most part, fought bravely with whatever equipment they had possessed, for those who had been killed, and for the several hundred thousands who had been captured and still languished in German prisoner-of-war camps in 1942.[8]

Such criticism served only to disclose how seriously Gamelin was misunderstood by his contemporaries. Had he chosen to speak out at Riom, Gamelin would have aligned himself with the discredited political leaders of the Third Republic – leaders whose 'guilt' was predetermined in a process that had degenerated into a show trial. Gamelin did not prepare a case – even in his own mind – to defend and excuse his own defeated and demoralised subordinates. Rather, Gamelin's wartime

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reflections on the débâcle actually reinforced the thoughts that he had experienced about the disaster at the moment of his dismissal on 19 May 1940. As time passed, he became increasingly persuaded that much of the responsibility for its own failure and for France's consequent humiliation lay with the French army itself, and in particular with its general officers. Dismissive of the jurisdiction of the Vichy judges, Gamelin was equally contemptuous of the pre-war and wartime politicisation that he had seen occurring throughout the French armed forces.

Gamelin's standpoint reflected his mixture of disdain and detachment towards the hurly-burly of recriminations whilst the war remained in progress. His composure had, indeed, been an object of comment from the very moment he was relieved of high command. The journalist André Géraud, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Pertinax', saw Gamelin on 23 May 1940 and reportedly found him 'very serene', simply 'waiting for the time when he can justify himself'. Alexander Werth, the Paris correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, who heard the anecdote from Géraud's wife, cynically wondered to himself: 'How? Presumably by writing two volumes *chez Plon*.' In fact Gamelin wrote three. Drafting them afforded the general his principal source of intellectual distraction during his wartime captivity. Their speedy completion and publication in 1946–7 gave him a head start when the restaging of the Fall of France began in the postwar memoirs.[9]

Gamelin's wartime conduct contrasted sharply with that of his predecessor and successor, Weygand. The latter foolhardily hastened to accept appointment as minister for defence in Pétain's first Vichy government. Yet, by the time of the Riom trial, even Weygand had discovered for himself that defence policy under the yoke of the Nazis meant little except servility to German dictates. Weygand was led into irredeemable discredit in the summer of 1940 by his notorious impetuosity.

Gamelin's intrinsic caution and keen intelligence saved him from falling prey to any illusions about the realities of French partnership with the Third Reich. For Gamelin, therefore, the Vichy experience did not involve any rude awakenings of the kind undergone by Weygand in 1941. After his dismissal, Gamelin had no illusions left to lose. Weygand had been idolised by the French as the custodian of the 'secrets of Foch', the saviour to whom the Allied supreme commander of 1918 had, on his death bed, counselled France to turn if ever it found itself in grave danger. But Weygand proved to be more myth than messiah, when his hour beckoned in 1940. He was a narrow-minded reactionary with little strategic imagination and even less political acumen. He was a king-maker for Pétain, not a king himself.[10] Gamelin was open,

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perhaps, to the contrary criticism – to the charge of over-caution. But, politically, he possessed a shrewd instinct for self-preservation. Ultimately it was he, not Weygand, who kept faith with the dictum that Foch had taught at the Ecole de Guerre forty years earlier: before acting, 'first learn to think'.[11]

Imprisoned by the Germans in the Schloss Itter in the Austrian Tyrol from 1943 to 1945, along with an unlikely company of erstwhile luminaries of the Third Republic, Gamelin allowed his fellow captives glimpses of the case with which he might have replied at Riom. Three of his companions in captivity kept diaries. One was Daladier. The others were the former French ambassador to Berlin and Rome, André François-Poncet, and Augusta Léon-Jouhaux, wife of the former general secretary of the Confédération Générale du Travail, the French trade union organisation. From these accounts emerges a bizarre tale of the daily regime endured at Itter aboard a real-life ship of fools. In them lies first-hand evidence of Gamelin's dismay at the politics of collaborationist defeatism.

Gamelin had kept his peace at Riom, recounted Mme Jouhaux's journal, because he would have 'found it shocking to see polemics between generals aired in public places'. François-Poncet similarly recorded how, one day in 1943, Gamelin admitted that his taciturnity in the Vichy court room had been intended to avoid any 'escalation of public controversies between the generals'. Silence, furthermore, relieved Gamelin 'from having to indict Pétain and Weygand' for their responsibilities in France's catastrophe.[12] Even in his cheerless incarceration at the fortress-prison of Itter, Gamelin was not able to bring himself to unleash a wholesale condemnation of France's old army – in important respects, of course, his old army – of which many regiments had fought as best they might, and most of whose officers had made no move against the Republic for all of Pétain's and Weygand's example of disloyalty.

Yet, for Gamelin to have stated the verities as he saw them would, he also admitted at Itter, have compelled him to level his own accusations at those whom he felt had failed. He would have felt obliged to round not only on Pétain but on General Alphonse Georges, commander of the north-eastern theatre of operations facing Germany in 1940, and on generals Huntziger and André Corap, the commanders of the Second and Ninth Armies which had suffered the decisive German blows on the Meuse. Noting all this, François-Poncet reflected, more in sorrow than anger, that Gamelin himself appeared forgetful of the old adage: 'Qui s'excuse, s'accuse'.[13]

Gamelin was plainly haunted by the memory of the débâcle,

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according to all three Itter diarists. The general betrayed a compulsive need to anticipate reproaches that he imagined might be made against his own conduct. Through the long months of imprisonment his conversation showed that he was repeatedly reliving his pre-war decisions and the steps that had led down the road to 1940.

Rescuing the respect that he felt was the due of his old army would, he felt, require the drawing of distinctions. For there to be saints there had also to be sinners. For the pre-1940 army to be assigned what he regarded as its rightful measure of honour would have demanded that he name military men of high rank among those responsible for the defeat of French forces and the death of the French Republic. In Gamelin's sight, the counterpoint to the acceptance of the innocence of many was the recognition of the guilt of others. At the feet of commanders such as Georges and Huntziger, he would have placed a charge of executing his strategy incompetently. At the door of the French allies he would have laid other charges, specifically the 'poor conduct under fire of the Belgian army'. Also at fault was what Gamelin termed, at Itter, the 'failings of several French divisions' and the inadequate 'spirit of belligerence in the country at large'.[14]

Regaled at Itter with complaints of this type, François-Poncet concluded that Gamelin was guilty of an unseemly and unconvincing exercise in self-exculpation. Subsequently, scholars have endorsed the former ambassador's judgement. Yet, as the solitary soldier forced to stand trial over the fate of France in 1940, Gamelin could hardly avoid being more concerned with redistributing responsibilities than with advancing historical understanding. Moreover, Gamelin redeemed his tendency to assign blame to almost everyone except himself by confining his condemnations within the privacy of the prison. Confused and even contradictory his motives for silence before the Vichy court may seem; yet, in the context of Vichy's search for a scapegoat, Gamelin's very silence lends him more of an air of sadness than selfishness.[15]

In its eagerness to reproach the general for character defects and professional negligence, the Riom prosecution was closely rivalled by Gamelin's associates from within the pale of the Republic. Few who hunted for the *responsables* of 1940 ever let Gamelin out of their sights. Even though they would all be tarred with the same brush by their Vichy captors, there was no solidarity in adversity among the men who presided over the demise of the *Troisième*. Bickering and bitter recriminations predominated. Paul Reynaud, France's prime minister from March to June 1940, lamented that Gamelin was 'a prefect, a bishop, but absolutely not a commander'. It was a view shared by the

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president of the French Senate, Jules Jeanneney, who described Gamelin as 'a great prefect – but nothing more'.[16]

Nor were historians any more restrained in their censure. After the publication of Gamelin's memoirs, *Servir*, in 1947, A. J. P. Taylor mercilessly condemned him in a review article brutally entitled 'General Gamelin, or How to Lose'. In 1963 the more sympathetic Paul-Marie de La Gorce, in a history of the civil-military relations of the modern French army, could not resist accusing Gamelin of 'traits normally associated with figures of a decadent era'. This theme of decadence – a canker that was imagined to have sapped and corrupted the personalities and institutions of the later Third Republic – was fashioned into something close to determinism by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's severe and influential study of French external policy after 1932, *La Décadence*, published in 1979.[17] And, five years before that, the Canadian historian John Cairns had justifiably noted that, from 1940 till the early 1970s, 'for Gamelin, it has been something like thirty years of open season'. Hunted and hounded across the pages of academic interpretations as well as berated in more understandably partisan memoirs, the general had 'almost been reduced to caricature: diminutive, soft-handed, puffy-faced . . . an endlessly dilatory political soldier, a finally disastrous generalissimo'.[18]

Until recently, then, Gamelin was mocked and condemned when he was not simply dismissed as a superannuated incompetent. Taylor termed him, as long ago as 1947, 'a generalissimo now forgotten', and harboured no doubt that this was how things should remain, leaving all 'controversy . . . ended'. Only one semi-biographical study has appeared hitherto, published in Paris in 1976. Yet even this work served only as a reminder of the political and psychological problems presented by Gamelin's lingering reputation as 'the man who lost the Battle of France'. For though the book, *Le Mystère Gamelin*, was at best guardedly sympathetic towards the general, this did not save its author, Colonel Pierre Le Goyet, from becoming *persona non grata* at his place of work as a research archivist in the French army historical service at the Château de Vincennes – location, ironically, of Gamelin's own wartime headquarters in 1939–40.[19]

Notwithstanding these controversies, the later 1970s and 1980s did start to see a current of revisionism flowing in favour of a more dispassionate, balanced and scholarly treatment of the inter-war French high command. Less partisan assessments became more frequent. Re-evaluations occurred not just of the legends, such as de Gaulle, but also of the fallen idols, the sinning soldiers of Vichy. Weygand and even Pétain became subjects of fair-minded and fastidiously documented historical research, rather than objects of prejudiced polemic.[20]

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Though still far from becoming the mainstream in its own right, this revisionist current has begun to clear away some of the obscurantist murk which has for so long clouded the view of Gamelin's role between the early 1930s and May 1940. In a context of interpretatively original studies of French foreign and military policies down to the Fall of France, Robert J. Young as well as Jeffery A. Gunsburg have reconsidered Gamelin's aims and conduct. Under both of these heads, they have awarded the general a limited approbation.[21] John Gooch, in a broader examination of European armies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has drawn out the nature of the difficult balancing act which Gamelin had to perform in the 1930s, as he straddled the gulf between his own membership of the officer corps and his respect, not shared by most of his brother officers, for the Republic. Gooch acknowledges, sympathetically, how 'Gamelin alone appeared to bridge the gap between the ideals of the socialists and the conservatism of the generals, and that was both his and his country's misfortune.' Most recently, Douglas Porch has argued that 'Gamelin . . . does not appear to be the weak and characterless man of legend. On the contrary, he bent his energies towards keeping a [politically and doctrinally] restive army . . . in line.' In achieving this, affirmed Porch, Gamelin demonstrated that he 'had enormous strength . . . and great finesse to match. Simply because he was a "political" general and declined to pound the table and shout as had his irascible predecessor, General Weygand, this did not mean that he lacked character. He managed almost single-handed to keep a potential revolt . . . in the army under control in the late 1930s.'[22]

Yet these more positive – or at least open-minded – reappraisals of Gamelin have been limited in scope. They have addressed particular facets of the general's actions: his relationship to the Quai d'Orsay and the making of French foreign policy; his part in the development of mechanisation and tank forces in the French army; his dealings with the labyrinthine organisations responsible for collecting and collating intelligence. In his own right, however, as France's most prominent republican soldier and a central player in the drama that was enacted around the theme of French national security between 1933 and 1940, Gamelin has not until now received a full historical treatment.[23]

The present study seeks to give fresh impetus to the flow of revisionism concerning Gamelin. It will aim to elucidate his approach to the challenge of finding satisfactory security for France in the face of perils not simply from external aggression by Germany and Italy but also from self-inflicted wounds – from domestic dissensions and immobilism, from French society itself. This book's objective is as much to convey the difficulties that Gamelin faced as it is to explain why he opted at

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particular moments for particular ways of addressing French security problems. Above all, it is a serious endeavour to respond to the injunction of John Cairns that history must 'try to consider Gamelin as fairly as it considers every commander on whom finally the sun did not shine'.[24]

A detailed narrative of the Battle of France is not the purpose here. This is not another study which repeats the preference of many earlier writers for dismissing French defence policy and the politics of rearmament as merely a prelude to the *grande roulée*, the 'big show'. The present book seeks to exorcise the ghoulish fascination which the anatomy of France's collapse has so long exerted. It is not a further attempt to explain away the defeat of France – nor, for that matter, the defeat of any of the other powers swept aside by the Blitzkrieg of 1940.[25] What is proposed via Gamelin's vantage point over French defence policy made under the shadow of Hitlerism, is a new insight into the reasons the French felt unable to risk war with Germany before 1939. What is attempted is the peeling back of layers of later indignation towards those who led France from 1935 to 1939, to suggest the reasons why war seemed so unacceptably hazardous in those years. Throughout, this study concentrates on explicating the French position as it appeared to Gamelin at the time. From this approach, a more balanced judgement may be reached as to the coherence of Gamelin's case for choosing the path of resistance at last, when Germany invaded Poland in 1939.

In 1939, it will be argued, France went to war advisedly. At the hastily improvised meeting with the defence chiefs on the evening of 23 August, called because of the stunning news from Moscow that Germany and the Soviet Union had made a non-aggression pact, the French government, of Edouard Daladier, was told that its armed forces were ready to go to war. But it was also told plainly that neither the French army nor air force was yet ready to win that war. Hostilities were engaged over Poland with Gamelin's military colleagues still profoundly uneasy at the incompleteness of Allied support and French armed strength.[26] The present book seeks to avoid excessive intrusion of the events of 1940 into an analysis devoted chiefly to pre-war French defence preparations. Peacetime security policies possessed logics, dynamics, that were legitimately their own. These logics decisively shaped the nature of the war that France could wage in 1939 and 1940; yet they had not been implemented in any certain knowledge that France would have to fight that war, at that time.

Through Gamelin's perspective we may see that the disastrous days from 10 to 19 May 1940, the general's brief shooting war, formed a

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