

Introduction

Despite a frequent tendency in the writing of the history of war to focus on a legend of a victorious general, or to view a decisive battle as a validation of national exceptionalism, Carl von Clausewitz posited the idea that in war, no result is ever final. In the event, the record of soldiers (and civilians, in this case, to be sure) in their variety who constitute the character of an army in a state and society or within the international system of alliances and coalitions becomes obscured or risks being condemned to caricature. In this regard, the story of any army in war and that of its soldiers comprises vastly more than simply the account of a single battle, for armies often pass through a cycle of victory, defeat, and regeneration, and new purpose. War – and in the case of France, occupation – also places societies under strain, pushes them into uncharted regions which require a new vocabulary and an altered language to express the misery, pain, humiliation, and bewilderment over a sense of altered certainties and shattered convictions. This generalization is especially germane to the story of the French Army and its soldiers and civilians in defeat and victory as a feature of the French nation and its role in Europe and beyond since the seventeenth century, themes which have been the subject of this author's scholarship for fifty years. In this regard, the French Army in the whole of the Second World War, its prelude and its aftermath, is a story that deserves a clear rendering in its extraordinary detail and complexity – the purpose of these two volumes.

The task to offer a comprehensive account of France for the Cambridge University Press series on *Armies of the Second World War* poses a significant challenge of chronology, cause and effect, and judgment, as well as the effort to cut through the myth, legend, and prejudice that too often characterize popular perceptions of France at war. This task starts with the fact that France's participation in the war, from say its prelude in 1936 through 1939 and onto the spring of 1945, fails to fit the pattern that might be said to adhere to such other major belligerents. Instead, the standard story of France in the Second World War as it now stands is segmented into distinct and often disjointed episodes, beginning with

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Anglo-French appeasement of the 1930s, transiting through the Phoney War in 1939–1940, and culminating in the stunning and humiliating “strange defeat” of May–June 1940. This by itself has inspired several generations of robust and evolving historical forensics which of late have invited counterfactual speculation about alternative outcomes, in themselves often linked to the neurotics of decline via a cult of the past, and the nostalgia, even sentimentality, that has come to characterize much popular history of the Second World War. These will be dealt with in the conclusion to volume two of this work. At this point, the English-speaking scholarship of France’s post-1940 presence in the war is largely reduced to cameo appearances of little explanatory power here and there such as Operation Torch, the November 1942 invasion of French North Africa, and the breakthrough at Monte Cassino in May–June 1944, spearheaded by the *Corps expéditionnaire français*. Here legend often obscures the truth visible in the best and most recent scholarship that breaks with fads, sentimentality, and a seemingly insatiable need to transform common men and women into heroes. This trend has been most apparent in France in a movement often referred to as “The French Resistance,” more as a myth at the time and since, spontaneously generated inside the country to assume a vital role in the crumbling of the Occupation. While interesting as a phenomenon of wartime society in the face of Axis Europe, as well as the dictates of national reconstruction in the Fourth and Fifth Republics, internal resistance offers little more than a footnote to the war, although heavily romanticized at the time and since as the “Armies of the Shadows,” and other melodramatic renderings. In addition to my work of 2013 on the ill effects of counterinsurgency in Western democracies, this work also aspires to demonstrate how this “resistance myth” laid a foundation, both intellectual and institutional, for the post-11 September 2001 craze for special operations as the highest expression of military organization and the sublime form of grand strategy.¹ The year 1944 witnessed the Liberation of France by Anglo-American armies, with Charles de Gaulle taking power in a flamboyant and highly mythologized manner during the August deliverance of Paris, leaving the final conquest of Germany to British, US, and Soviet armies – this is at best an incomplete misperception which this work attempts to correct in detail.

This customary fragmentation of France’s Second World War story is, in my view, both inaccurate and, given the impressive expansion of especially French-language current research little known in the United States or the United Kingdom on the many aspects of France at war, also obsolete. Far too much attention is given to the legends of 1940 as the opening shot of the war in the West which established Axis domination of the European Continent, agonizingly reversed at enormous costs of

suffering and death over the next five years. In this view, for France and the West, the 1940 battle of France became the war's culminating event, serving in the shadow of the Cold War as a sort of a cautionary lesson, along with the perils of appeasement, of the requirement for moral rearmament. Nonetheless, the 1940 armistice does not transform France into mere bystander and suffering victim of that war's larger course of events. In fact, like the other Allied powers who experienced initial battlefield setbacks – Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States – France struggled to reconstruct its military power within the context of a global conflict. However, the nation and its army faced numerous handicaps, beginning with the fact that the armed forces were broken into warring fragments, while the country was occupied by Axis forces, which made reconstitution and renewing the fight doubly difficult. Unlike the other major Allied nations, Vichy French and Free French offered very different diagnoses of the causes of the debacle determined by ideology and long-standing frictions in politics, society, and the army itself, on what form France's military rehabilitation should take, and to what political and strategic ends French military power should be directed. Much of France's army of 1940 was incarcerated as POWs in Germany, so that military strength must be refashioned largely from the manpower of France's underdeveloped colonial empire, or internally from a civilian *levée*. This process forms a central part of this work and it is a story poorly understood in the English-speaking world.

These two volumes aspire to correct the skewed periodization and a distorted emphasis on the heretofore distinct episodes or ancillary events that compose France's wartime storyline, one that operated in many domains little prone to the customary chronology and cause and effect. This work breaks new ground to unify the many disparate realms of the conflict and the institution of the French military broadly defined, the French nation in its fractures, and the many fields in which French soldiers, sailors, and civilian resisters proceed over a longer period of time than as found in conventional histories on the topic that pivot too much on the early summer of 1940 and suddenly burst again into view in June 1944. This study goes beyond the "decisive battle" military history literature with its focus on "the Fall of France," to establish a narrative sweep of France at war within the international system, in Europe, Africa, and beyond, to include society and the respective political camps so central to French life and identity. Plainly, the story conceived in this more expansive and variegated framework does not finish in the newsreel scenes of the dining car at Compiègne in which figures in *Wehrmacht* field gray dwarf the handful of French officers. Rather, these books seek to address the military and the war in its totality, to follow France's post-June 1940 attempts to

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regenerate military power in its many guises and across political divisions, both at home and in the empire. These volumes follow the fate of soldiers in their diversity as they proceed through the years after June 1940, most of which has received entirely too little attention in the Second World War's grand chronicle. This work is also attentive to the full variety of France's wartime experience, seeking to incorporate those omitted from traditional descriptions of the war – POWs, women, civilians-in-arms, colonial subjects, foreign refugees – and to recall that much of the Second World War was fought outside of Europe, and by many non-European peoples. The simple fact is that France did not exit the war with the signing of the June 1940 armistice. But the effort to reconstitute French military power crumbled into Vichy collaboration, Alsace-Moselle occupation struggles, the mobilization of French North Africa, and the endeavors – some might say the antics of Charles de Gaulle as seen by skeptics in the year 1941 or 1942 – of “the squatter on the shores of the Thames,” a man who appeared somewhat incongruous to Churchill and FDR, but who in France was perceived as noble, and of the French in exile within the Anglo-Saxon alliance.

1 France in the Age of Total War

As the revisionist powers shifted the European security order in the years after 1933, the public assigned blame to the imperfect peace signed with Germany on 28 June 1919 at Versailles, followed by treaties signed with Austria at Saint-Germain, and Hungary at the Trianon. Summing up the century, *The Economist* condemned the Versailles agreement as “the final crime . . . whose harsh terms would ensure a second war.”¹ As Canadian historian Margaret Macmillan notes, however, Hitler did not go to war in September 1939 because of the Versailles Treaty, although the burden of sole war guilt, disarmament, reparations, and occupation in the pact furnished a legend of martyrdom under the swastika. Though defeated on the western battlefields in the summer and fall of 1918 and temporarily immobilized by the revolution in 1919, a Germany that had internalized many of Erich Ludendorff and Walter Rathenau’s principles of policy and strategy remained exceptionally powerful in Europe – a fact that became obvious after the stabilization of 1924 and Gustav Stresemann’s reintegration of Germany into Western Europe in the years thereafter. The Great War had unleashed too many forces in the European system and radicalized the domestic politics of Central and Eastern Europe, to say nothing of a Western Europe exhausted by war, to be contained by the precarious post-war international collective security scaffolding erected in Paris’s royal suburbs. In the wreckage of the Hohenzollern, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires and elsewhere, Woodrow Wilson’s “national self-determination, that noble ideal, produced dreadful offspring when it was wedded to ethnic nationalism.” The architects of the Versailles peace – Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George – soon passed from the diplomatic stage as the disorder of an incomplete peace manifested itself in the discord of the victors and the unbroken will to fight of the vanquished. In November 1919, the US Senate refused both to ratify the agreement and to join the League of Nations, and gutted the Covenant of the League. Consequently, the League’s concept of collective security proved unable to meet the dangerous effects of the failing peace once the Great War’s victors surrendered the initiative in the decade of the 1930s.

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Nor could French statecraft of alliance and containment in Western and Central Europe endure without ample backing from the Anglo-Saxon victors and in the face of German, Italian, and Soviet power. This American defection from European security in anything but a disjointed commercial role compounded the discord among the victors. (The Dawes and Young plans as well as the fairyland diplomacy of forbidding war had been underpinned with petty fogging macroeconomic ideas of balanced budgets and the reparations puzzle.) This disarticulation of statecraft deprived the post-Great War security order of many of the tools required to deal with large and difficult questions of national minorities in new nation states and the inevitable revival of aggression and militarism in Central Europe in a new style of diplomacy and conflict which makers of statecraft in the 1920s could only poorly answer in policy and strategy.²

By far the largest and most challenging Great War legacy in an epoch that came to be described by Ludendorff's term total war confronted civilians, soldiers, diplomats, and policymakers with this question: "whether and how modern war among highly industrialized nations was still possible as an instrument of policy." The destructive capacities of all-azimuths propaganda for boundless war goals, bombing aircraft, long-range, high-explosive artillery, poison gas, and submarine torpedoes exceeded the limited political objectives on a mid-nineteenth-century model that war was meant to achieve – these had been quickly swept aside by warfare on a scale that obliterated the traditional roles of armies, generals, admirals, combatant societies and ministries and courts to give some coherence to combat. "Warfare had become total war, affecting all aspects of the social and political life of the belligerents."³ From the moment that he had been named Hindenburg's chief of staff in 1916 in the advent of the Third Army Supreme Command, Erich Ludendorff "became an advocate of 'what may be called a technical dictatorship for the purposes of the conduct of mass warfare' or what we more commonly call a technocratic rule," writes Michael Geyer. Ludendorff's concept of total war sought to harness the political, economic, and social dynamic of the nation to "engulf all of society in an ever-expanding machine of violence." Needless to say, Ludendorff's "total war" concepts reconfigured civil-military relations in Germany in a manner that the makers of peace struggled to comprehend fully in 1919, but which Ludendorff spent years enumerating in his incessant publications until his death in 1937. "Machine warfare was fought best by soldiers fortified by propaganda and backed up by an ideologically unified nation." Clausewitz's view of war as a political act became the first casualty of Ludendorff's "expanding and escalating the use of force" in which strategy was reduced to a form of

social and technocratic mobilization as embodied in the second industrial revolution and the union of general staff and heavy industry management. This became reflected in escalating war aims via the *Vaterlandspartei* on the need to “purify” one’s own society as a prelude to dominating that of the enemy. In Ludendorff’s total war vision, soldiers no longer employed their expertise to achieve limited foreign policy objectives while containing inevitable losses. Hitler and the National Socialists eagerly took up Ludendorff’s vision of “national purification through conquest or, as we have called it apocalyptic war . . . [as] the first step in creating a new German master race . . .”⁴

In his second book of 1928 and in his first meeting with the heads of the military in February 1933 once he became chancellor, Hitler expounded his view not only that war offered a feasible option for Germany, but also that war offered a way of life central to national socialism and the party-state regime that emerged in 1933, and the only way to realize his vision of achieving national purification. Unlike Hitler and his disciples, most European military and political elites had no desire to re-experience Great War traumas.⁵ This anxiety was especially the case in the France of the Third Republic, for which national survival had been purchased in 1914–1918 at the exorbitant cost of 1,300,000 casualties and the occupation of ten of France’s most productive departments.⁶ “There was no fundamental disagreement in France between military leaders and politicians or diplomats in the principles of French security policy during the inter-war period,” concludes the German scholar of inter-war militaries and keen observer of the skepticism of professional soldiers about Nazi ideals of total war Klaus-Jürgen Müller. “Generally, accord and accommodation rather than dissent characterized the relationship” between soldiers and political leaders in France.⁷ That “accord and accommodation” centered on the Third Republic’s “traditional military credo” of a fortified eastern border, foreign alliances, and universal conscription.⁸ While such policy may have created a temporary French dominance on the continent in the 1920s, by the 1930s European diplomacy encountered several limitations. First, with the epoch of the dictators at hand and with enduring generalized disarticulated policy in Paris, London, and Washington D.C., three of Europe’s five major powers sought to overturn the post-Great War status quo. Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany were states ideologically committed to war, that, on the model of Soviet Russia, sought to deploy diplomacy to divide their enemies and better to position themselves for conflict when the time came to initiate it in what in the twenty-first century is called hybrid war, but was just as prominently a feature of totalitarian statecraft in this period of unrelenting conflict, subterfuge, mass persuasion, and intimidation. As early as 1933, Britain’s

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ambassador to Berlin, Horace Rumbold, perceptively noted that Hitler's ultimate aim was the "creation of a militarized 'racial community' capable of waging wars of conquest." Nazism was "an ideology of war" in which "peace was regarded merely as preparation for war."⁹ In equally significant measure, Stalin's outlook, driven by a Marxist-Leninist belief that war was an inevitable product of capitalist conflict, was more opaque. While Moscow was not looking to ignite a war, nor, plainly, was it committed to upholding the status quo hammered out at Versailles and its ancillary treaties. The Soviet dictator's conviction that the USSR was "encircled by enemies," i.e. especially the Poles and the Japanese, was confirmed in his mind by the Anti-Comintern Pact signed between Germany and Japan in 1936, which Mussolini joined the following year. Soviet intelligence bombarded Stalin with reports which nourished his paranoia. Meanwhile, the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, which might have offered a corrective, became a central target of Stalin's Great Terror from 1934 onwards. Those experienced and sometimes sensible Soviet diplomats with actual knowledge of the outside world were sidelined, arrested, and an estimated 20 percent of them were executed as the terror took hold in the late 1930s. Many critical Soviet diplomatic posts went unfilled. For Stalin, the fact that European powers had launched rearmament in the 1930s meant that they sought to acquire the "means by which to re-divide the world." Peter Jackson notes that for the Soviet Leader, diplomacy offered "a tool to help ensure that 'inevitable war' would take place under conditions favorable to the USSR."¹⁰

Burdened with the long-haul impact of the war on their empires and domestic politics and economy, Britain and France remained the two status quo powers, and French pre-war diplomatic efforts focused on replicating the *entente* of 1914–1918. As the horizon darkened as the 1930s unfolded, this task would prove an elusive and often frustrating one for Paris for several reasons of domestic and international character as well as concerning military affairs. First, the long shadow of the Great War and the Depression disinclined the leadership and populations of both countries to contemplate an encore against Hitler, especially as rearmament with mechanized weapons would undermine economic recovery. This hesitancy was accentuated in London by the conviction of anti-Soviet conservatives especially, that Britain had made a grave strategic error in joining the Grand Alliance with France and Russia in 1914. From this classic balance-of-power and maritime perspective, as a naval power backed by a vast empire, the question of who dominated the continent was not an issue worth the sacrifice of significant amounts of British blood and treasure. Seen by the lights of the twenty-first century and not that of the year 1935, at the time of the Anglo-German naval

treaty which scuttled the Versailles disarmament clauses that had not already been scrapped, such arguments are easily refuted. And, indeed, “British strategy underwent a remarkable evolution” in the wake of the September 1938 Munich Conference, by not only abandoning a policy of “limited liability” on the Continent, but also subscribing to the French thesis that the security of Western Europe and that of Eastern Europe were linked, and demanded once more a continental commitment with ground and air forces if war came.¹¹

A second problem for Neville Chamberlain, Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer since 1931 and Prime Minister from 1937, was an acute awareness that mobilization for a “people’s war” would require, in the words of Labour intellectual Harold Laski, a “socialist reconstruction, national and international.” Such a “new world order” would propel the United States and perhaps the Soviet Union into the first rank of nations, severely debilitate the British economy, and possibly witness the dismantling of colonial empires that would diminish Britain’s international status and require a remake of British identity. Chamberlain’s compromise in the defense realm was to focus on the modernization of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force (RAF). “Chamberlain thus fiercely opposed proposals for a large-scale expansion of the army,” notes Talbot Imlay, out of “fear of the financial, industrial and political price of creating a mass army.” He recognized that mass mobilization “risked transforming the balance of industrial and political power in Great Britain.”¹² Rather than lay the groundwork for a “people’s war,” the British Prime Minister opted to preserve the British army basically as a diminutive, regimentally structured colonial constabulary that was outclassed by the rapidly modernizing *Wehrmacht* and even the Soviet Army. The RAF, destined primarily to shield the British Isles from air attack, and the Royal Navy became the pillars of Home defense. But as Whitehall began to worry that French resolve might falter in the face of a resurgent Germany, from early 1939, the British army belatedly began to garner attention. But this effort became a forward deployed contingent – the BEF – which the *Wehrmacht* routed in the Spring 1940 campaign that resulted in the Fall of France.¹³

France’s post-1919 security was anchored in “collective security,” a mesh of conventions and arms control and arbitration arrangements based on the Covenant of the League and the Little Entente that pivoted on Central European nations whose ambition could not match their limited means. Naval conferences at Washington in 1922 followed eight years later by that in London sought to prevent a naval arms race. If diplomacy of security failed, then sanctions could be imposed on the offending party through the League of Nations. Collective security

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came under pressure, however, first when Japan started a war in Northern Asia in 1931, and, later, when Germany stormed out of the Geneva disarmament conference in October 1933, and along with Japan, left the League, followed by Italy four years later. This collapse of collective security and the strategic answers of the period 1919–1935 challenged France to come up with new ways to manage its security.¹⁴

The centerpiece of post-Great War French diplomacy had been the 1925 Locarno agreement, which guaranteed the western frontiers of France, Belgium, with which France struck a military alliance, and the Germany of Gustav Stresemann in the few placid years of the Weimar government. In an attempt to extend Locarno eastward, Paris concluded a military alliance with Poland. The Quai d'Orsay also negotiated supplementary political treaties with Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. These arrangements were sometimes disparaged by critics as “illusions of pactomania” which added up to something far less than an “eastern alliance system” equivalent to that with Russia in 1914. For starters, none of these countries provided a military or economic counterweight to Germany as the military power of the latter revived by 1935–1936. Nor were they predisposed to operate in concert. The Poles and Czechoslovaks in particular were at daggers drawn over Silesia, to which they both laid claim. For the decade from 1925, French diplomacy sought to extend Locarno eastward to entwine Germany in a European-wide security system underwritten by London and Paris. Paris' goal became to integrate both Great Britain and Germany into a multilateral mutual assistance regime to commit London to defend France and her eastern alliances. Unfortunately for France, London initially viewed France's diplomatic flirtation with these weak and mercurial Central European states as an alibi to shun a resurrection of the *entente*. French statecraft was dealt a blow in 1934 when Warsaw signed a pact with Berlin, more or less directed against Stalin, but at the expense of the French Little Entente. German statecraft was also active in Belgrade. While some British diplomats recognized Hitler's bellicose intentions early on, London believed that the best way to contain Germany was to persuade Berlin to curtail rearmament. The Anglo-German naval agreement of 1935, which sought to limit the tonnage of a growing *Kriegsmarine*, offered an example of this approach and symbolized the crossed purposes of policy among the victors of 1918–1919 in the changing European order.¹⁵

Given that the aim of Europe's revisionist powers was to capsize the diplomatic order established at Versailles, Saint-Germain, and Trianon, by 1935 if not before, the incoherence of France's diplomatic encirclement plan would have left Cardinal Richelieu red-faced with embarrassment could he have caught sight of it from heaven. The urgencies for