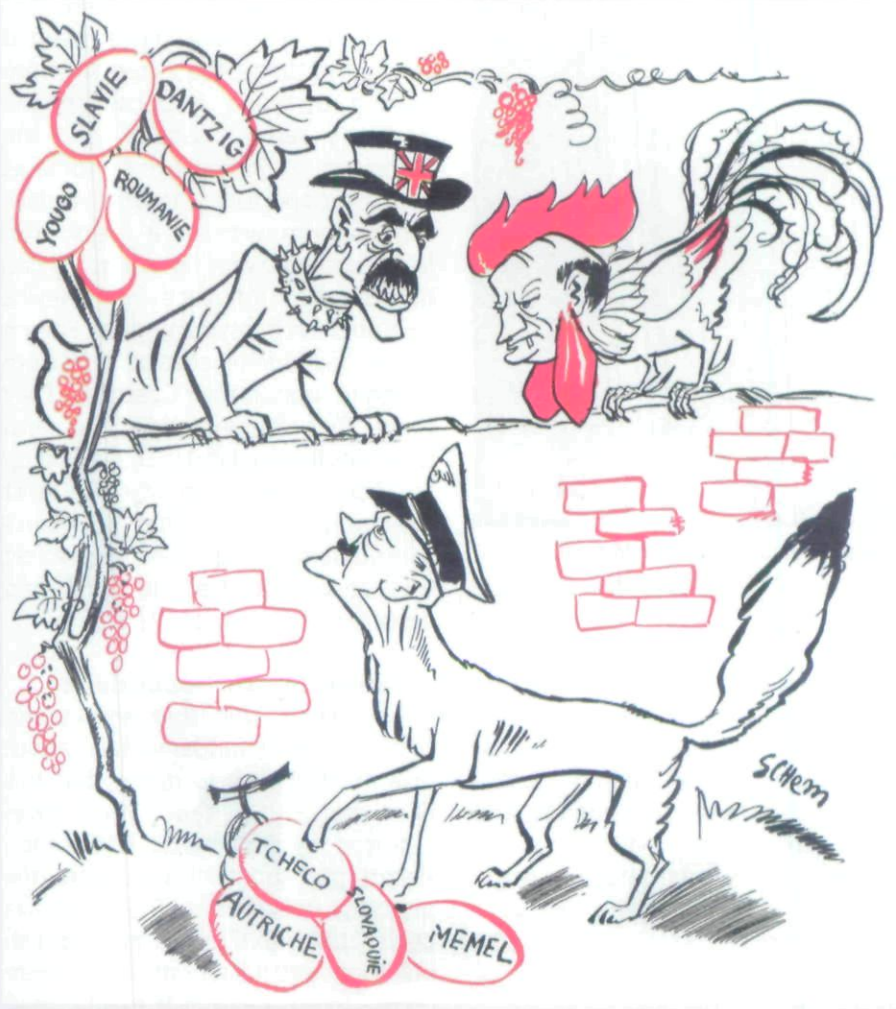
French Appeasement

Andrew Boxer considers explanations for France's disastrous foreign policy between the wars.



In this hopeful French cartoon from 1939, Hitler ponders whether to write off his next territorial demands as sour grapes, in the face of combined resistance from Chamberlain and Daladier

Introduction

In the early summer of 1940 French armies were defeated in just six weeks and surrender was followed by four years of German occupation. And yet just 22 years earlier France had been victorious over Germany and had helped to fashion a peace treaty designed to prevent any resurgence of German power. How did France go from triumphant victor to humiliated victim in so short a time?

Interpretations of the French Collapse

For many Frenchmen at the time, and a number of historians since, the answer was simple – France had been betrayed by its unreliable ally, Britain. French efforts to restrain Germany and enforce the Treaty of Versailles had been obstructed by successive pro-German British governments determined to pursue appeasement. Other explanations of France's collapse have looked inwards, describing interwar France as a decadent, divided society led by nonentities who lacked the courage to pursue tough policies. A third analysis emphasises the difficulties France faced in the interwar period. Given that France's population and economic resources were inferior to those of Germany, and that the victorious powers were almost as badly damaged by the First World War as the defeated, it was only a matter of time before Germany reasserted itself and sought revenge for its defeat in 1918.

There is some truth in each of these explanations, but none is satisfactory on its own.

Blaming the British

Not surprisingly, many Frenchmen made the British the scapegoat for their abject defeat of 1940. Blaming the British offered a convenient way of assuaging French guilt and shame.

It is not hard to see why the French felt they had been given inadequate support by Britain in the interwar period. In Britain, sympathy for the defeated Germans and suspicion of the French were evident very soon after the First World War. The English poet Robert Graves recalled that, among fellow ex-soldiers in Oxford in 1919, 'anti-French feeling amounted almost to an obsession' and that 'pro-German feeling was increasing. I often heard it said that … we had been fighting on the wrong side; our natural enemies were the French'.

These sentiments seemed to be mirrored by British government policy. Britain and France disagreed fundamentally about how Germany should be treated. The British believed that peace and security in Europe could be guaranteed only if Germany became a fully functioning democratic state strong enough to trade with its European partners. They argued for a peace treaty that would not breed resentment in Germany. The French, on the other hand, were preoccupied with the threat to their security from Germany. They required a tough peace treaty, rigorously enforced, which would prevent Germany from threatening them again. Many in

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France felt that British policy ensured that the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919 was neither tough nor rigorously enforced.

Worse, during the peace negotiations of 1919 the French had been persuaded by the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, to drop their demand for a separate Rhineland state in return for a promise of an Anglo-American guarantee of French security. But the guarantee never materialised. Lloyd George argued that it had been nullified by the US Senate's rejection of the Versailles Treaty. This, in the words of Anthony Lentin, gave the French 'a sense of betrayal, vulnerability and isolation'.

Enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles was the subject of rancorous dispute between Britain and France until, in French eyes, Britain's determination to accommodate German grievances had, by the middle of the 1930s, destroyed the Treaty, leaving the French with no option but to co-operate with British appeasement of Hitler. Many Frenchmen believed that Britain's pro-

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German policies were foolish because the Germans were bound to seek revenge for 1918, and any threat to French security would endanger Britain as well. In 1928 Georges Clemenceau, the prime minister who had led the French delegation at Versailles, observed: 'Any

Edouard Daladier signs the Munich agreement, 29 September 1939.

understanding with Germany is impossible, and England, whether she likes it or not, will be compelled to march with us at the moment of danger in order to defend herself. Despite the misunderstandings and the dissensions that may separate us now, England will be forced to come to France's side exactly as in 1914.' It was not until 1939 that the British seemed to accept the truth of Clemenceau's prophecy.

Time and again in the interwar period, the French felt that they had been let down by Britain. British diplomatic hostility had been partially responsible for the failure of the French invasion of the Ruhr in 1923 – in French eyes, merely an attempt to force the Germans to meet their reparations obligations. At the Disarmament Conference of 1932-34 the British determination to accord equal rights to the Germans ignored legitimate French security worries about the threat posed by a rearmed and resurgent Germany. In June 1935 Britain's naval treaty with Germany not only unilaterally destroyed another clause of the Treaty of Versailles but fundamentally weakened the Stresa Front – an agreement made only two months earlier by Britain, France and Italy to condemn Germany's rearmament.

British inertia has also been blamed for preventing the French from making a tough response to the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 – seen by some as the last opportunity to stop Hitler's expansionism without a major war. Many apologists for French policy can detect the influence of Neville Chamberlain in restraining the French during the Sudeten crisis of 1938 from acting to support their Czech ally. They claim that by the time the two countries resolved in 1939 to stand up to Hitler it was too late to resist effectively, and that Britain's contribution to the allied war effort was too small to avert the humiliating disaster suffered in June 1940.

Assessing British Responsibility

It is certainly true that Britain and France differed fundamentally about how to deal with Germany, but this does not prove that France was betrayed by Britain. Lloyd George's sleight of hand over the guarantee promised to France in 1919 may have been dishonourable, but British politicians and military strategists were unable to escape from the fact that, if France were to be defeated by Germany, Britain's own security would be gravely threatened. Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary from 1924 to 1929, was the British politician most committed to France. His biographer David Dutton writes: 'Chamberlain supported the conclusion reached by his Foreign Office officials early in 1925 that the best hope for a lasting European peace lay in a firm British commitment to France.' Other British politicians may have been less keen on an explicit commitment, but even Austen Chamberlain's half-brother Neville, best known for his commitment to appeasing Germany, realised that Britain could not abandon France. This is why Britain nearly went to war

France's war wounded had specially reserved seats on public transport – a permanent and vivid reminder of the impact of the war.

against Germany in 1938 over what Neville Chamberlain called 'a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'; it was France, not Britain, that was allied to Czechoslovakia, but if France went to war, so would Britain. On 6 February 1939 Neville Chamberlain emphasised the commitment when he told the House of Commons: 'The solidarity with which the interests of France and this country are united is such that any threat to the vital interests of France, from whatever quarter it may come, must evoke the immediate co-operation of this country.'

The idea that Britain's relentless pursuit of appeasement forced the French to conform to a policy they disliked does not bear close examination. France had no intention of reacting forcefully to the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 – Frenchmen deliberately stressed their dependence on Britain in order to shift the blame for inaction across the Channel. The French used exactly the same tactic in 1938. By allowing Neville Chamberlain to take the lead in negotiating the Franco-British response to the Sudeten Crisis, the French Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier (who disliked the whole business of abandoning France's Czech ally), could ensure that the British premier bore the brunt of the opprobrium. And in this he was successful.

Anthony Adamthwaite is correct when he argues that 'assertions that France always obeyed her English governess are misleading because they ignore the fact that in practice French policy was much more assertive and independent than supposed'. That assertiveness became evident soon after the Munich settlement when the French successfully pushed a reluctant Neville Chamberlain into a more resolute policy. In January 1939 French intelligence services fed rumours to the British that Hitler was about to launch a sudden attack in the west. The British government responded by abandoning its policy of 'limited liability' – the refusal to commit more than a token British force to a war in Europe. Military staff talks to co-ordinate the military action of the two countries, which Chamberlain had refused in November 1938, were begun in February.

While British policy-makers cannot entirely be absolved of blame for the allied defeat in 1940, it is simplistic to conclude that they should carry it all. Indeed, some historians believe that the French brought disaster on themselves.

Blaming the French

A number of analysts of French responsibility for their downfall in 1940 argue that the country was in terminal decline between the wars, wracked by deep social and political divisions which spilled over into civil strife, and pervaded by a gloomy pessimism about their ability to fight another war. This is why French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle called his study of the country's diplomatic response to the threat of Hitler *La Décadence*. A similar verdict was reached by René Girault describing France in 1938 and 1939: 'The perception of French power, among all decision makers, was based on a strong sense of impotence. Decay was in the air. They were preparing for defeat.'

Some historians look back to the establishment of the Third Republic for the origins of France's troubles and blame the weakness of the constitution established in 1870, arguing that the French were so determined to avoid another Napoleonic regime that they saddled themselves with a system that ensured weak, unstable coalition government. JR Western castigates the Third Republic as 'the triumph of all who wished the government to be timid and inactive'. Between the two wars, the office of French Prime Minister changed hands no fewer than 29 times (in contrast to Britain which had just seven such changes). This degree of political instability, it is argued, made the formulation of consistent and coherent government policy difficult. 'France's timid performance on the international stage,' writes Piers Brendon, 'reflected its profound weakness at home.'

Short-lived governments were also a product of the profound divisions between left and right in French society and politics. In addition to a variety of conventional political parties, there were anti-democratic groups who commanded significant popular support. These ranged from Communists (who were slavish adherents of Stalin) on the extreme left to a motley collection of vociferous nationalist, right-wing groups, many of whom openly admired the fascist dictators. These political divisions were particularly acute in the 1930s when, in common with the rest of Europe, France suffered the impact of the Great Depression. Fist fights between politicians became so common that the National Assembly voted to ban members bringing in their canes in case they were used as weapons. In February 1934 serious rioting in the streets of Paris worsened the polarisation of French society. PMH Bell sees a clear link between these divisions and French appeasement policies: 'ideological divisions weakened the French reaction to the growth of German power in the 1930s, and thus helped to promote the conditions in which war might come'.

This even affected the French military. Williamson Murray has argued that 'to a great extent the French army reflected the paralysis and crisis in leadership that seems to have gripped French society in the 1930s'. Piers Brendon agrees, blaming the decision to build the Maginot Line

French reservists toast the Munich settlements. Daladier was not amused: 'The fools, if only they knew what they were cheering!'

defences for creating 'a demoralising apathy, a grand illusion that the nation could resist invasion without really fighting ... It sapped the initiative of soldiers more than usually intent on preparing to fight the previous war'.

Assessing French Decadence

French foreign policy in the interwar period was certainly not glorious. But this weakness can be attributed to the country's supposed culture of decadence only if French statesmen had the opportunity to adopt tough policies but, instead, invariably chose the feeblest option available to them. Most criticism has focused on French failure to respond to Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the abandonment of the Czechs in 1938. In neither case was French policy tough or heroic. But in both crises the opportunities for strong action were circumscribed by a highly unfavourable economic, political and diplomatic climate. The decisions taken, though weak, were the product of pragmatic thinking rather than decadence.

Nor did the frequent changes of government have much impact on the formulation of foreign policy. Robert Young argues that, despite political instability, a cross-party consensus existed about how to deal with Germany. 'We have allowed our recognition of some deep-seated domestic disagreements to obscure what was a fairly coherent, mainstream response to the problem of national security. Most French commentators seemed to approve of a strategy of negotiating from strength, which is another way of insisting on the compatibility of deterrence and conciliation.'

Finally, explaining the defeat of 1940 in terms of decline and defeatism only makes sense if French policy shows a linear, downward descent towards disaster. But it did not. On the contrary, in the year before the outbreak of war, it became much more vigorous and resolute. French armament spending quadrupled in the year after Munich and the impact of this investment was such that Richard Overy maintains the French armed forces were better equipped than the Germans in 1940: 'By September 1939 British and French aircraft output and tank output exceeded that of Germany ... In terms of quality the new generation of French combat aircraft ...were the equal of the German or British counterparts [and] in tank construction the French enjoyed both a qualitative and a quantitative advantage [over the Germans].'

Neither British perfidy nor French decadence is a wholly satisfactory explanation of French appeasement because both explanations underplay the unprecedented difficulties France faced between the wars. These problems severely curtailed her politicians' freedom of action.

Interwar French Weakness

Jacques Néré believes that French statesmen displayed resolution but were overwhelmed by the difficulties they faced. 'Efforts [were] made by French policy during these years to remedy a situation whose deterioration was clearly recognised [but] the peace of Versailles was impossible to maintain without the active co-operation of the three allies who had won the war. Once this co-operation had disappeared, everything was to crumble as if by an inescapable fate.'

Although victorious in 1918, France appeared stronger than in fact she was. The First World War had been won at enormous cost. JM Winter estimates that 1.3 million French soldiers were killed, and although this was a smaller number than the Germans lost, it was a higher proportion of their men aged 15 to 49. This worsened the existing population imbalance between the two countries, especially in terms of men available for conscription into the armed forces. By the outbreak of war in 1939 the German population (including the territories seized by Hitler) was almost 80 million, while the French had just over half that number. In addition, four million French soldiers were wounded in the First World War, 750,000 of whom were so maimed that they were unfit

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for work. France's war wounded had specially reserved seats on public transport – a permanent and vivid reminder of the impact of the war. Revulsion against war was evident at all levels in French society. Politicians were aware of it as a powerful current in popular opinion. In September 1938, just before Prime Minister Daladier left for the Munich Conference, he was told of a petition against war which had received 150,000 signatures in just three days.

During the First World War there was hardly any fighting on German soil. North-east France, by contrast, was devastated. Furthermore, the difficulties of extracting reparations payments meant that the French ended up paying more than the Germans to repair this war damage. Much of the country's overseas investments had been sold to pay for the war and inflation meant that the franc lost 80 per cent of its value between 1914 and 1920. The cost of war pensions had to be added to the country's war debt. These two items still consumed over half government expenditure two decades later. To make matters worse, the new Communist government in Russia refused to repay French loans to tsarist regime.

The First World War also destroyed France's alliance system. Before 1914, France's security rested on its treaty with Russia. This meant that Germany risked a two-front war if it attacked France. But after 1917 the Communists were not interested in helping capitalist France. In the 1920s the fledgling USSR was anyway too weak and too preoccupied with internal turmoil to be of much value as an ally. France had been victorious in 1918 with British and American help. However, US postwar isolation and Britain's refusal to sign a treaty guaranteeing French security left the French feeling isolated and vulnerable, disappointed that the Treaty of Versailles had not disabled Germany more thoroughly. Many Frenchmen felt that it was only a matter of time before Germany recovered its strength and sought revenge for 1918 in a renewed bid for the hegemony of central Europe. This explains Marshal Foch's famously acerbic assessment of the Treaty of Versailles: 'This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.'

To replace the alliance with Russia, the French signed a series of pacts with the newly independent states of eastern Europe – Poland in 1921, Czechoslovakia in 1924, Rumania in 1926 and Yugoslavia in 1927. But these did not make up for the loss of Russia and the Anglo-American guarantee. None was strong enough to offer much help to France in the event of another war against Germany.

Once the threat of Hitler became apparent in the 1930s, the French made efforts to supplement these alliances. The obvious counterweight to Germany was the USSR whose help was essential if France's commitments to the states of eastern Europe were to carry any weight. This is why France concluded a Pact of Mutual Assistance with the USSR in 1935. The Pact did not serve its purpose in deterring Hitler but this was not entirely the fault of the French. Stalin's inscrutability and opportunism made him an unreliable ally. Furthermore, once Hitler began exploiting the festering border disputes and ethnic quarrels of eastern Europe for his own purposes, France's alliances became something of an embarrassment – more likely to drag the country into war than to deter German aggression. It was also vital for France to maintain friendly relations with Italy if the Germans were to be kept out of Austria. However, it was not French feebleness which destroyed any chance of an effective French-Italian alliance but Mussolini's determination to conquer Abyssinia and his eagerness to embrace the friendship of Hitler.

There is now virtually a consensus among historians that strong French action to remove the Germans from the Rhineland in March 1936 was all but impossible. The difficulties are summed up by Richard Overy:

> France was deep in political crisis, ruled by a caretaker government in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. The French generals, victims of government cutbacks, advised caution. The French public mood was against war and for peace. Abroad, France feared isolation. Britain refused to act over the Rhineland, relations with Italy were rapidly deteriorating over the Ethiopian affair. The last thing French leaders wanted was a repetition of the debacle in the Ruhr in 1923, when they were cast in the role of aggressor for trying to uphold the letter of the Treaty.

French policy during the Czech crisis of 1938 was similarly compromised. Martin Thomas believes that France faced 'a volatile economic position and incipient financial breakdown in September 1938'. Her strategic position had been weakened not only by the Germans' remilitarisation of the Rhineland but also by the Belgian declaration of neutrality in October 1936. This made it much more difficult for the French to aid Czechoslovakia by invading Germany from the west and fighting a German army which, according to French military intelligence, was much stronger than their own forces. The

Hitler poses before the Eiffel Tower on 28 June, during a three-hour trip to Paris. What had brought France to such a calamitous position?

Czechs' ability to resist had also been undermined by Hitler's absorption of Austria in March 1938 which enabled the Germans to outflank Czech defences. Finally, even if the USSR honoured its alliance with France and the Czechs, it was unlikely that the Red Army would be allowed to cross Polish or Rumanian territory.

Prime Minister Daladier was not proud of France's failure to support its Czech ally in 1938. He was surprised by, and contemptuous of, the enthusiastic crowds who greeted his return to Paris after the Munich Conference. His policies in the remaining year of peace demonstrate that historians should be wary of accepting that France's defeat in 1940 was 'an inescapable fate'. French statesmen made controversial decisions in the 1930s. These were certainly not glorious, and many were mistaken, but they were pragmatic responses to the considerable difficulties France faced between the wars rather than the effete efforts of decadent men subservient to British bossiness.

Further Reading

Richard Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (Macmillan, 1989)

Robert J Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (Macmillan, 1996)

Anthony Adamthwaite, 'France and the Coming of War' in Patrick Finney (ed), *The Origins of the Second World War* (Arnold, 1997)

Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-40* (Arnold, 1995)

Martin Thomas, 'France and the Czechoslovak Crisis' in Igor Lukes and Erik Goldstein (eds), *The Munich Crisis, 1938* (Frank Cass, 1999)

PMH Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (Longman, 1986)

Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley* (Jonathan Cape, 2000)

Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat: The Collapse of French Diplomacy 1932-1939* (Enigma Books, 2004)

J Néré, *The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975)

Issues to Debate

*How significant a factor in interwar diplomacy was Anglo-French disagreement?

*How far did the failure of French foreign policy reflect a wider malaise in politics and society?

*What defence can be made of French foreign policy decision-makers between 1918 and 1939?

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