h-diplo *Article* REVIEW

Peter Jackson. "Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War." *History Compass* 4.5 (2006): 870-905.[1]

Reviewed by **Robert J. Young**, University of Winnipeg
Published by H-Diplo on 1 May 2007. Copyright © 2007 H-Diplo.

First things first. When my friend Peter Jackson sent me an offprint of this recent article, I told him that he had performed a very useful service to the ranks of the historical profession who are interested in interwar international politics in general and those of France in particular. Today, that impression endures, as does the friendship; and it would be fair to say that the editors of H-Diplo had some intimation of my appreciation of the article as well as of the talents of this much younger Canadian historian. At the very least, they knew from the contents of the article that I was unlikely to be spitting nails. To be more clear, and more candid, they knew that Jackson had been generous enough to award my work in this field a certain niche within the historiography of the Third French Republic, and an interpretive niche with which he himself was generally comfortable.

> ***H-Diplo Online Extra***
>
> *For the month of May 2007, read Peter Jackson's article online for* free, *courtesy of* History Compass, *at http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/hc/hc2006.html*

Since no review is intended to replicate or replace the original work, it should suffice to recommend that original to those who want a thorough up-date on the interpretive devices with which historians past and present have approached the issue of France's sudden collapse in 1940. In addition to the customary, detailed source references in the endnotes, Jackson provides an exhaustive, five-page bibliography of historical work completed between 1940 and the present. That is one of the reasons why the article renders a service to scholars, those long since graduated, as well as those about to be.

In the early pages Jackson provides a section entitled "Narratives of decline." But neither the many narratives he includes here, nor his own characterization of them, are simply descriptive. The works themselves, principally from the '40s through to the late '60s, are highly interpretive, most of them intent on explaining the collapse of 1940 by unearthing one rotten piling after another, all such accounts necessarily written by the war-touched generations. Decade by decade they constructed an interpretive scaffold from which could be hung examples of allegedly incompetent leaders – civilian and military – and of a citizenry riddled by self-indulgence and fear. Neither leaders nor followers had proven worthy of the task of defending the nation, hence the early autopsy reports of death by decadence. Following which, in a few short years, there came the dramatic prognosis of life after death, in the form of national rebirth delivered by the now iconic General De Gaulle. Decline and Revival: the greater the former, the more miraculous the latter.

[1] H-Diplo thanks Keren M. Oertly, Managing Editor of *History Compass*, and Vanessa Lafaye, Publisher of *History Compass*, for allowing H-Diplo readers complimentary access to Peter Jackson's article during May 2007.

Stable URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/Young-Jackson.pdf

This was not all the interpretive work of French scholars, although their centrality to the early historiography is obvious. Some Anglo-American historians rather liked the trend toward French self-mortification, and added their own forensic evidence of decay in inter-war France. For some, what they uncovered fit nicely with their pre-war and war-time apprehensions about the steadfastness, even the integrity, of the French as a people.

So it is not surprising that the earliest signs of any rethinking of this historical phenomenon came not from foreigners but from the French themselves. Jackson credits Sorbonne scholars grouped around Pierre Renouvin with this contribution, for it was they who began the transformation of 'diplomatic' history into the sub-field we now think of as 'international' history. Its inspiration was the need to look beyond and beneath the political class, certainly beyond and beneath the efforts of foreign ministry functionaries and ambassadors abroad, to see the operative *forces profondes* of their day. Which is to say that scholars, and their readers, began to appreciate some of the material and systemic constraints which French decision-makers had faced in the 1930s as the spectre of war grew larger on the horizon. Perhaps it was not so much a lack of character as a lack of resources – military, financial, productive, demographic – that underlay the caution which a succession of governments displayed in the face of the mounting challenge from Nazi Germany. Indeed, perhaps it was unfair to appraise France's pre-war and war-time performance without reference to the paucity of powerful and reliable allies.

Others began to think along similar lines, French and foreign, distanced by another generation from the shock of the 1940 defeat, and informed from the 1970s onward by a torrent of formerly inaccessible archival materials. For both reasons, perhaps, these scholars seemed more sensitive to the complexities involved in weighing an entire national performance and therefore more on guard against simple – if once so satisfying -- indictments of human failure. Jackson and I are in that tradition, and in the company of many scholars from around the world who, since the 1970s, have parted from the earlier, once dominant, approach that mixed explanation with accusation. That is why we are associated with the language of "revisionism." [2] By our lights, however, the interpretive debates have not melted into a sea of unanimity, fully mindful as we are of other works since the 1970s which re-furbished, at least re-stated, the case against the Third Republic and its 'guilty Frenchmen.' All of this Peter Jackson lays out for us with admirable clarity, as he proceeds first to the conclusion that we are now at an interpretive stalemate, an "impasse," and second to a plea for some kind of model that could fashion a breakthrough.

Whether such a model will come to someone's mind remains uncertain, although certain it will be that not everyone will be satisfied. And it is this prophecy that takes me away from the historiographical record to date, and to a consideration of some of the *ideas* which animate his article. For this is more than an inventory of what has been done. It is a thoughtful appraisal of some of the issues which are at the heart of the historical discipline in general, and of international history in particular.

One of those issues, I am sure, has been anticipated, one that far surpasses both French and international history. To what extent does human agency count in times past, or current? It is, of course, a very old issue, once captured in the exclusive phrase: "Great Men" versus Social Forces" – *forces profondes* in earlier guise. Enough has been said here to convey the once-current and still surviving notion that interwar French leaders proved themselves sorely deficient -- if not corrupt or treasonous then staggeringly incompetent. And enough to convey the rival notion that circumstance can often, if not

[2] See his *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

always, trump talent, even character. What has not been said, but which Jackson points out, is an underlying debate. If "revisionists" have balked at morality-laced judgements being passed down by living historians against the dead, they themselves have been accused of another sin. If, when the guns and the francs, the pacifism and the allies, have been factored into the decision-making -- so that we have an explanation deeper than that of human frailty – are we looking down the barrel of inevitability? Intent on retaining some shred of human dignity, dignity which must embrace error as well as insight, most of us would reject such smothering determinism. Yet we are rightly wary of counter-factual history that tries to re-read the past through assorted lenses of 'what-ifs.' Not 'what if' the pound sterling had been stronger, or the merchant navy larger, or the level of indebtedness lesser, but 'what if' human agents had seen things differently, acted differently, or earlier, or later. Neither Jackson nor I have a sure route to offer through this maze, but it is to his credit that his historiographical piece insists that we think about our craft.

Another idea that emerges from his text, a related idea, is what he calls "war as a 'test'." This, too, far exceeds the constraints of French history specialists. He means by this the usually unspoken assumption that a capacity to successfully prepare for and prosecute a war of survival is the ultimate measure of a nation's social health. Jackson questions this premise, one that, logically, would award a murderous Nazi regime a clean bill of health in 1940, and a bill of quarantine to a liberal-democratic, but defeated, France. Surely freedom of expression – which some would say the French took to a fault – would be another quite different measure of national well-being. What makes his point bite a little deeper, however, is the connection which he detects in some histories between what their authors have made of 1940 from the heights of the Cold War. In short, living as we once did on the edge of massive destruction, and in the laps of deterrence theorists, it may have been too much of a luxury to admit that might was not always right. Shorter still, historians are players in the historical process, never the leads to be sure, but certainly present somewhere in the cast.

There are traces of this idea throughout the Jackson text: Marc Bloch's famous analysis of 1940, that of an angry soldier-patriot; that of William Shirer in the 1970s, a jaded eye-witness rehearsing what he had lived through in inter-war France. More recently, those of Benjamin Martin and Ernest May whose readings of interwar France, though interpretively quite different, seem to have been explicitly informed by threat identification in America of the Cold War era and the 1990s. [3] Often, though usually with much less precision than the preceding examples, Jackson suggests the presence of links between historians' work and their political and ideological assumptions. I suspect that there is some truth to the suspicion; but although there are a goodly number of allusions to our work and discourse being shaped by "ideological underpinnings," by the "political contexts" of our own day, and by our "ready-made teleology," (888,893,894) most of us get off scot-free.

In one sense, as a bit-player in this historical episode, I regret that. Having few ideas and no conviction about all that may have shaped my own reading of France, indeed of the historical discipline, I could use some out-of-body insight. At one point Jackson recalls my own invocation of Canadian roots, an "elliptical reference" he says "to the importance of wider political, cultural and career structures in the

[3] Marc Bloch. *Strange Defeat. A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York: Norton, 1968); William Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969); Benjamin Martin, *France and the Après Guerre, 1918-1925* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); *France in 1938* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Ernest May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000)

writing of history." (880) I think his inference is correct, but I am no more certain of those personal *forces profondes* than I am of his, or that of any other. The liability of not being French has perhaps been offset by the asset of having started from scratch, in unrelieved ignorance. A toddler at the end of a war which returned my father and my uncle, and separated from France by ocean and prairie, I am certain that there is a generational and geographical perspective which is different from that of Bloch, or Shirer or, for that matter, Jackson. And I suspect that those differences have something to do with the way each of us has interpreted the past.

As for his plea for someone to discover an interpretive equivalent of the North West Passage, I understand the desire but expect to see it unfulfilled. Except on an individual basis, as each of us tries to negotiate the past as best we can, no more or less able than those whose works we have read, or the subjects we have read about. For even if we were all standing on the shores of that Passage, and facing the same direction, unanimity would elude us. I think Jackson would agree for, although he employs descriptive labels for the sake of convenience – orthodox and revisionist, ideational[ist] and structuralist – he knows that people are too complex to fit comfortably into word containers. Like him, I am "orthodox" when it comes to a belief that human agents do matter, and "revisionist" especially when it comes to mistaking prosecution and explanation. I *think* what started me off, many years ago, was a reaction against interpretations which at one and the same time struck me as being simplistic and unfair. Years later, still fumbling around for explanations of what had happened to France in 1939-40, I settled on the concept of ambivalence. Far from being indecisive -- French leaders and followers -- I suggested that they had been divided by competing and adamantine truths: those of the appeasers and those of the resisters, those of the Left and those of the Right, thus abandoning the middle ground to contemplative men and women wary of absolutes. [4] Jackson is right to say that this argument does not explain everything, and right to say that ambivalence, or uncertainty among decision-makers, is common enough to "most states at most times." (893) Fortunately for the planet, few of them initiate war. Unlike the crusaders of past and present.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Diplo and H-Net permit the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations), and a part of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/. For further information about our parent organization, H-Net, please visit http://www.h-net.org/.

Visit H-Diplo article reviews online, at http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/ , to access more H-Diplo article reviews and commentaries on journal articles about the history of foreign relations. To be notified when H-Diplo publishes new article reviews, either subscribe to the H-Diplo list via http://www.h-net.org/~diplo , or subscribe to our RSS feed, http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/rss/articlereviews.xml .

[4] Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1996).