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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eugenia Kiesling. *Arming against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. Ppp. 260. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0764-8.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 1997)

E. Kiesling: Arming against Hitler

After more than fifty years, the collapse of France's armed forces before the German onslaught in May 1940 still seems enigmatic, since the French army enjoyed a superior reputation. Eugenia C. Kiesling, a Ford Fellow and Assistant Professor at the US Military Academy, has produced a detailed study of pre-war French military planning based on extensive research in French, British and American archives. Initially the author wanted to understand the inadequacy of French strategic thinking in the 1930s, but she came to see that the proper object of study was not what France ought to have done in some abstract sense, but what determined the choices that the French made (xiii). Her conclusion states the French problem in a nutshell: "In spite of French efforts to prepare a national defense formidable enough to win a war that Germany was not deterred from starting, the six week campaign of 10 May through 25 June l940 produced the very catastrophe against which French national defense organization, defensive preparations and military doctrine had meant to guarantee" (173).

In six densely argued, brilliantly written chapters, Kiesling states her arguments and research findings. She explains that France's interwar "stalemate society" (Stanley Hoffmann's phrase) did not permit a different kind of strategic planning. Peacetime planning for a war that France would only fight if forced harkened back to the successful conclusion of World War I even though "victory in the Great War went to the side where greater resources produced bigger battalions" (12). But now the greater resources and the bigger battalions were not forthcoming. Endless parliamentary battles ensued over conscription, and by 1928 no effective national mobilization plan had been crafted. In the Chamber of Deputies the army was seen as power-hungry, socially divisive and politically conservative, while the military establishment looked with open disfavor on civilian interference, particularly among the left leaning deputies.

In the first chapter the author discusses the framework of a national organizational law which was only established after two decades of parliamentary effort in July 1938. "The French leaders," she argues, "could insist that the prospect of total war required peacetime preparation for the dedication to the national effort of the nation's collective human and material resources but accept a wartime organization law that excluded women, largely protected private property, left unchallenged the particularism of the separate armed forces and entrusted the necessary preparatory measures to an inadequate national security infrastructure" (40).

In chapter two the author describes the establishment of a National Defense College amid turf battles between the army, navy and air force in 1936, and outlines the annual national defense exercise with its unrealistic problems for the following three years. The next two chapters lay out in detail the problems of training conscripts for the peacetime army at a time when the length of service was cut from three years to twelve months, and also in a period when the effect of the "hollow years" and the staggering human cost of victory in World War I were felt most strongly. In a chapter entitled "The Unready Reserve" the author describes the difficulties of training the reserve sections (among other problems, reservists were often in bad health) in the French system based on 20 regional catchment areas. In the end there were two nearly separate training schemes, one for the active army and one for the much larger shadow reserve component. The constraints in human resources, in training personnel, in up-to-date equipment, in funding for new equipment, in

anti- military sentiments in parliament were many, and they all had to be considered in fashioning a French military doctrine. This doctrine had to embrace "a defensive strategy and an army composed largely of poorly trained reservists....If something else was demanded it would violate the principle of military subordination to political leaders....The army had to create the safest possible doctrine, one designed to win a defensive war, using the short service conscript army that French citizens were willing to provide" (117). In the very important next-to-last chapter this French military doctrine is analysed against the background of the very real restraints described above. Basic to the whole problem of fashioning a doctrine was the nature of the conscript/reserve army, designed to defend France at a tolerable price, particularly in terms of manpower. Out of these various considerations the theory of a methodical battle grew and turned into the centerpiece of the French position. This doctrine seemed to be appropriate not only for French strategic requirements of a defensive war, but also to the abilities of an inexperienced army. It also accommodated the need for new weapons among which the tank was probably the most important. Though France had finished World War I in possession of the best new tanks, it was in no hurry to upgrade this weapon. In this existing doctrine tanks and infantry were supposed to work and fight together, but the technological means for communication between them and the joint training were missing and technical advances were not exploited. Until the middle 1930s the French felt comfortably superior vis-a-vis the likely German challenger. After the balance changed, French choices became more constrained and more crucial. However, the French command felt uneasy in trusting the nation's survival to untried methods and untested machines. The French command was reassured when German war games in 1938 used the French doctrine of interspersing tanks with infantry rather than Heinz Guderian's approach of independent armor units. But this was not to be the final German decision.

The author concludes that "the campaign [of 1940] took the turn it did, at such enormous cost, because, in spite of two decades of effort, neither the French Army nor the nation it defended was ready for war" (173). The roots for that unreadiness lay in the fact that French strategy planned a long defensive war, to be fought in Belgium, for which the proper arrangements – both diplomatic and military – had not even been made. A German thrust through the Ardennes had not been expected, because that path had been considered impassable. Since the National Organization Plan, the cornerstone of French security policy, was not effective the 1939, mobilization repeated many of the mistakes of the earlier plan of 1914, but the country was given a grace period by the six months of "phony war." Still, the availability of an increasing amount of new equipment did not make up for the lack of unit cohesion, training with new weapons, and leadership that favored the safest possible defensive stance. French deficiencies were not perceived by their own command, and not realized by their allies. Kiesling's final assessment is that "it was an army unready for war against the Wehrmacht in 1940, but it could not have been different and remained the army of the Third Republic."

The author would have done well to explain more of the concept of the "hollow years," and the severe manpower shortage in the 1930s. A discussion of the lack of diplomatic and military agreements with Belgium, and the decision to end the Maginot Line would also have been welcome. The book is not an easy read, but it is worth a careful one, since it and Robert A. Doughty's 'The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939' (Archon Books, 1985) are the only studies that deal with French military doctrine.

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Citation: Agnes Peterson. Review of Kiesling, Eugenia, *Arming against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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