

Martin Thomas. *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era.* New York: Berg Publishers, 1996. vi + 268 pp.

Martin Thomas. *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996. x + 268 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85973-192-5; \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-187-1.

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Mutual Anglo-French Scapegoating 1935-1938

This somewhat technical book is good for experts because of its many footnotes, but it should not be the first book given to students of the Popular Front Era. Martin Thomas is a British historian at the University in the West of England at Bristol. He examined efforts by French and British military and diplomatic leaders to make an effective Anglo-French alliance. The book begins early in 1935 and goes to March 1938, when Adolf Hitler took over Austria, and when the goal of deterring him from making his first territorial acquisition failed.

During the period, diplomats, generals and admirals from both France and Britain blamed the other country for not standing up to the Axis. Although the book ends in March 1938, with an epilogue on the second Blum government in Paris, the joint appeasement policy led London and Paris to further diplomatic defeats from April 1938 to September 1939 that were quite predictable.

Thomas researched the relevant, well-organized documents in the British Public Record Office and the disorganized French archives that survive. Citations to the French materials are the most original part of the book. But despite the excellent archival research that went into the making of this book, this reviewer has doubts about the ultimate effect his story will have on the current generation of young readers. The author does not offer any decisive judgments. He has read many memos of the

two foreign offices and general staffs, but not very much of the press and parliamentary debates of the period. "Appeasement" was an ideological attitude that gripped France and Britain. Committee of Imperial Defense documents were often based on flawed political speculations and assumptions. This attitude was the other side of the coin of widespread hostility, fear, and contempt for Moscow, which was entertained by the ruling elites of London and even Paris. Therefore, the two democratic governments lacked a common strategy for resisting the two fascist imperialists, Hitler and Mussolini.

The author captures very well the confusing diplomatic military discussions of the January 1935-March 1938 period. Thomas clearly demonstrates that Chamberlain's appeasement notions from 1935 to 1938 were not some personal quirk, but penetrated deeply into the psyches of other British and French leaders. For example, some advisors in the CID believed in October 1936, when Belgium proclaimed its neutrality as between Germany and France, that Hitler would respect Belgian neutrality in the future. Also, some British diplomats even viewed the signature of the Axis Protocols in October 1936 as a step toward peace, toward a "general settlement," "appeasement," and "collective security" among the four West European capitalist empires! In reality, the Axis as an ideological bloc was based on fascist hostility to liberalism and democracy as well as to communism

and the Popular Front. The fascist powers, as Stalin well knew, were thus dynamic imperialist powers.

The author himself sometimes seems to share the illusion, held by Neville Chamberlain and the French general staff, that Mussolini could somehow have been detached from his anti-entente, imperialistic ambitions in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Mussolini had wanted to keep Austria as a buffer state against a rearming Germany in 1934. But during the Ethiopian War he began to lean toward Hitler, and their emotional bond increased every day that the Spanish Civil War persisted. The dream of a Stresa Front an Anglo-French-Italian alliance proposed in April 1935 was discussed by reactionary diplomats in London and Paris from April 1935 on into 1939.

Thomas apparently has not read Italian documents indicating that Mussolini sneered at Chamberlain's advances to him. Throughout the Spanish Civil War, the British sought a detente with Mussolini in the Mediterranean and in Spain; meanwhile, the French Navy feared that Mussolini would wind up holding Spanish naval bases in the Balearic Islands. But even Thomas has to admit that the Axis became firm when Hitler visited Rome in May 1938. This reviewer thinks that the parallel policies, later called the "Axis," began to jell late in 1935 and became firm in July 1936 when the Spanish Civil War broke out. While Germany's Legion Condor and Italy's CTV fought together in Spain, no diplomatic trial balloon by Chamberlain was going to break up the Axis. Mussolini had publicly committed himself to Franco's victory. Nor does Thomas discuss the Duce's visit with "Der Fuehrer" in September 1937 with the consolidation of the Axis Protocol of 29 October, 1936.

Throughout the three years that this book covers, including perhaps twenty or more diplomatic crises, many colonels and secretaries were drafting unrealistic memos filled with cliches and metaphors, based on an assumption that somehow the two fascist dictators would soon change course. Some may have imagined that, as British and French veterans of World War I, they would soon retire from their respective services.

This generation of historians now knows the outcome of the tragic appeasement story. Yet unintentionally, by letting the opinions of many generals and bureaucrats "speak for themselves," the author builds up the series of excuses made by democratic politicians and military men. Included were Chamberlain, Stanley Baldwin, Lord Halifax, Pierre Laval, Pierre Flandin, Sir Samuel Hoare, John Simon, Leon Blum, Georges Bonnet, and Ambassadors

Eric Drummond and Nevile Henderson; as well as Generals Maxime Weygand and Maurice Gamelin, Admiral Ernle Chatfield and Britain's World War I veteran Sir Maurice Hankey, chair of the CID. These men could not and did not predict Hitler's plans accurately.

Premier Blum's appeasement has sometimes been overlooked by earlier historians. Thomas does not make this mistake, criticizing Blum for offering Hitler's Economic Minister, Hjalmar Schacht, concessions in the African colonies taken from Germany at Versailles in 1919. The optimistic Blum still professed to believe, as late as January 1937, that Hitler would sign a disarmament agreement with Britain and France (pp. 177-178). Yet Thomas also believes that Blum had no choice but to humor the British on the Non-Intervention policy toward Spain. Blum, according to the author, became an appeaser to avoid Chamberlain's greater appeasement. Blum experimented with peaceful suggestions to prevent Chamberlain from making a bilateral deal with Hitler behind Paris's back.

Like the British Foreign Office, Thomas considers the Soviet Union to have been almost non-existent as a nation state in the balance of power system. Winston Churchill and Maxim Litvinov are two characters missing from Thomas's story. Did not the Soviet Union inevitably play a major role in the balance of power system of the era between 1935 and 1939? The famous Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement of 23 August 1939 should not have been such a surprise to the Anglo-French appeasers, if they had paid more attention to the continuing competition among London, Berlin, Paris and Rome from January 1935 to March 1938. Thomas's appeasers seemed to have lost any sense of what the history of a struggle for power was all about. With attitudes fixed on the past, they had few if any future plans to resist the growing power of the anti-communist Tokyo-Berlin-Rome Anti-Comintern Pact. In this atmosphere, Hitler and Mussolini were bound to turn the tables on a potential Anglo-French entente that did not materialize during the years of appeasement. In fact their actual military alliance only came about on 26 August 1939, when they had little military assistance to offer Poland.

The rather conservative author in the end does propose two modest theses and makes two judgments. He defends Leon Blum and French Minister of Defense Eduard Daladier as ultimately understanding the German and the Italian problems better than Chamberlain, a dreamer throughout the period. But this conclusion is hard to find, except on the last two or three pages of

the concluding chapter. The professional historian has to read every page and every footnote to discover the complex evidence for the above statement. At the same time, the reader has to dismiss as less important much contradictory evidence related by Thomas to defend the appeasers. As for the second judgment, throughout the book, the author uses the word "entente" to describe the Anglo-French diplomatic dance from January 1935

to March 1938. Although an entente of some kind existed, particularly in the minds of Anthony Eden and Leon Blum, many other appeasing bureaucrats seldom used the word "entente" from 1935 to 1938.

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