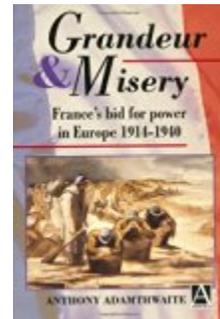


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony P. Adamthwaite. *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940*. London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. xx + 276 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7131-6576-0.

Reviewed by Hines H. Hall (Auburn University)
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Anthony Adamthwaite's most recent book on interwar France is a very readable synthesis of recent scholarship, including some of his own, that attempts to argue a revisionist thesis. In style and format it is clearly directed to students. The reviewer is obliged both to consider this book as a textbook and to evaluate it as a contribution to the expanding scholarly literature on the currently "hot" topic of interwar France's condition and the reasons for the debacle of 1940.

Grandeur & Misery, according to its publisher, refutes the "orthodox opinion" that France's collapse in 1940 was the "outcome of deep-seated political, social, and economic weaknesses." "Contingency is the theme of this book," is the author's statement at the outset; "there was nothing preordained or inevitable about France's performance as a great power in the years 1914-40. These years were not one long slide to disaster" (p. viii). The thesis is restated in the conclusion: "Crisis, not decline or decadence, best defines France's predicament. Grandeur did not have to end in misery" (p. 231). The collapse in 1940 was simply "a military defeat, largely explicable for military reasons" (p. viii). Adamthwaite thus agrees with diplomatic and military historians such as Robert Young and Martin Alexander that the Third Republic remained a going concern despite its problems in the 1930s. Its downfall was due to bad decisions and bad luck on the battlefield rather than to the "decadence" posited by J.-B. Duroselle, and echoed in Eugen Weber's *Hollow Years*.

Adamthwaite begins by surveying France's position before World War I. Here he situates the origins of many of the defects in institutions and mentalities that would continue to beset French policymakers after 1918. Among the most serious flaws were adminis-

trative disorganization and bureaucratic infighting, lack of coordination in policy-making, and a political elite "insular" in mentality and preoccupied with "logic and verbalism." These carried forward into the period of the war when "poor organization seriously disadvantaged French negotiators" in coordinating policy with the British, and at times compelled them to accept entirely British procedures and solutions. The postwar difficulties in Franco-British collaboration—what Adamthwaite calls the *mesentente cordiale*—are traceable in part to these experiences.

French diplomacy not only failed to head off war in 1914 but was characterized by "muddle and confusion" (p. 25) in managing wartime relations with allies and neutrals. Despite the emergency of the war, the French failed to improve significantly the coordination of strategy and diplomacy or to make the policy-making process more efficient. Nor was the war seized upon to accomplish major and long-overdue reforms of inadequate tax revenues and the state's antiquated financial practices. The refusal to come to terms with the need to broaden the government's tax base and to modernize the whole structure of fiscal and economic management remained a glaring weakness through the interwar period.

Adamthwaite's argument that things could have turned out differently begins with a review of French diplomacy at the peace conference, concluding that "the Tiger played a poor hand poorly..." (p. 62). A plausible judgment and possibly true, but Adamthwaite does not indicate exactly what better terms were sacrificed by Clemenceau's diplomatic mistakes. British and American constraints on France's freedom of action were the real problem, as the author readily ad-

mits. Clemenceau's main critics dared not topple him because they too recognized the unlikelihood of getting better terms from the allies (p. 58). What options were open to Clemenceau? Could France disassociate itself from its allies and adopt an independent policy? Adamthwaite is not persuasive when he states that a "younger and cannier Clemenceau," utilizing more effectively his professional diplomats and specialists, could have gained more for France. Despite what he sees as reverses for France in the peace settlements, Adamthwaite concludes that as a result of the peace conference "for the first time since 1870 French leaders had an opportunity to establish a French predominance" (p. 63).

If this opportunity existed, it was missed through a combination of events unfolding in the 1920s. Parliament and public opinion were traumatized by the physical and human losses of the war, lacked confidence in economic and financial recovery, and feared social instability. They were obsessed with restoring the franc to prewar rates of exchange. Political culture was Germanophobic and mistrustful of Britain and the United States. Despite a vigorous and sustained economic recovery beginning in 1921, unimaginative leaders, Raymond Poincare and Edouard Herriot, failed to mobilize this economic strength to reform an archaic financial system and to pursue an effective foreign policy. Lack of planning and bureaucratic coordination produced "incoherence" in policy-making. Public relations efforts were inadequate. Propaganda failed to sell France. A "victory culture," or national mentality of self-confidence and the will to act, simply did not develop. But inadequate leadership, Adamthwaite concludes, was "the crucial failure" (p. 88).

The crucial moment was the Ruhr crisis. In Adamthwaite's view this operation might have succeeded had Poincare shown more diplomatic suppleness by negotiating bilaterally with the Germans, or more strength by "imposing a separate Rhineland" by force (p. 101). Were either of the options, one must ask, really open to Poincare? Regarding the latter, Adamthwaite changes his mind between p. 101 and p. 108 where he decides, following Jacques Bariety, that Poincare wasted the opportunity to secure predominance through negotiation by gambling on Rhenish separatism and "the big prize of German disintegration." Could France have dictated a permanent solution on her own terms in 1923? Yes, says Adamthwaite, but his argument is not convincing. Why did Poincare decline to negotiate at the moment when the Ruhr occupation appeared to have succeeded? This question has defied a battery of historians. Adamth-

waite's guess is that Poincare was a bad planner and worse gambler. I would agree. He also lacked imagination, boldness, and sang-froid. Behind "Poincare *la guerre*" lurked "Poincare *la peur*" (Sally Marks' turn of phrase). But Poincare, like Clemenceau, was a realist who did not fail to recognize the instability of the Versailles settlement and the fragility of French will, resources, and power. Was not predominance beyond reach? Was it not dangerous to rupture close ties with Great Britain for the sake of a problematic economic partnership with Germany?

In mid-1924, the bumbling Herriot, handicapped by the weak franc and without an imaginative policy of his own, negotiated away what remained of French "predominance." But with Briand's long tenure as foreign minister beginning in 1925, a second bid for power was initiated, based this time not on the idea of predominance, but upon diplomatic leadership and conciliation of Franco-German disputes. In pursuing "detente" with Germany, Briand sought to preserve the advantages gained by France in the peace treaties. The Locarno agreements were the foundation of an "Indian Summer" that lasted until 1931. Prosperity and economic growth and stabilization of the franc in 1926 empowered French diplomacy vis-a-vis Germany, and freed France temporarily from dependence on the "Anglo-Saxon" powers. But France could not exploit this briefly favorable turn of events. Adamthwaite sees the fault for this in the constraints that a conservative political culture placed on Briand. French diplomacy remained reactive rather than innovative. German foreign minister Gustave Stresemann's death in 1929 and the upsurge of nationalism in Germany, the Depression, and, after 1931, France's loss of financial strength defeated Briand's policy. The second bid for power thus failed, though Adamthwaite insists—again unconvincingly—it need not have.

The economic problems created by the Depression as well as inherited cultural and institutional conditions impeded the development of modern military doctrine and reforms in the army. Public opinion remained largely indifferent to foreign affairs, Adamthwaite contends, even after Hitler took power and began rearming Germany. Political leaders failed to mobilize the media, which, he says, they might easily have done, to orchestrate support for a stronger response. Institutions, above all the army, were mired in "institutional inertia, received ideas and personality influences" (p. 151) that ineffectual politicians failed to overcome. More vigorous leaders such as Louis Barthou or innovators such as then Colonel Charles de Gaulle encountered frustrating resis-

tance. France adopted appeasement.

French diplomacy failed either to prevent war in 1939 or to secure the allies necessary to win it. Caution and conservatism precluded the possibility of a real alliance with the Soviet Union, and an Italian alliance was pursued only in unenergetic fits and starts. The French people and their leaders suffered a “crisis of confidence” paralysing the will to act. According to Adamthwaite, “If rulers and ruled had possessed the courage to say *merde* to Hitler before 1939 the story would have had a different ending” (p. 231). Yes, no doubt. And if Leon Blum had been Clemenceau, and Gamelin, de Gaulle, events might well have taken a different course. The proper concern is to explain why the French did not say *merde*, rather than to wonder what might have been, if they had. In the end Adamthwaite’s description of the 1930s weighs against more than it supports his major thesis of contingency. His comments about ineffectual leaders, an unreformed policy-making process, the absence of self-confidence, social conservatism and paranoia, obsolete strategic doctrines and weaponry seem far more suggestive of decadence than of mistaken choices. Was there potential resilience in the tottering Republic of the 1930s? If so, Adamthwaite does not show it.

Was defeat inevitable? Better questions are, was defeat avoidable? Was victory possible? Inevitability is an abstraction that ought to be banished from the vocabulary of historians. Of course the fall of France was not

inevitable. What in history is? Was decadence the condition of France in the 1930s? Yes, in my view. Profoundly so, though there is evidence as well to suggest renewal was under way before military collapse cut it short. But Marc Bloch was right. The roots of defeat were not strictly military; they ran deep in French culture and society. Adamthwaite’s suggestion that the French were afflicted with self-doubt and paralysis of will recalls the meditation of another famous observer of the rout of 1940: “Ineffectualness weighed us all down, all of us in the uniform of France, like a sort of doom. It hung over the infantry that stood with fixed bayonets in the face of German tanks. It lay upon the air crews that fought one against ten. It infected those very men whose job it should have been to see that our guns and controls did not freeze and jam” (Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *Flight to Arras* [1942], p. 92).

Ineffective leaders, demoralized soldiers, listless workers, lost battles: these were not just the result of bad luck, nor of wrong choices. Do not such factors as class, generation, ideology, gender also figure in? Inter-war France remains an open, challenging, and fascinating field for historical study.

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