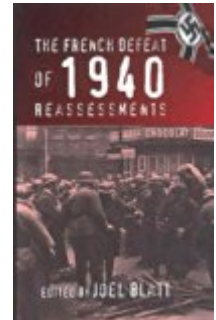


Joel Blatt, ed.. *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*. Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1998. 370 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57181-109-7.



Reviewed by Sally Marks

Published on H-France (September, 1998)

The central question addressed by scholars from several countries in this volume is why France collapsed. Their varied responses are well-written and thought-provoking but, alas, addressed exclusively to scholars. With maps, translations, and explanation of acronyms, a paperback edition of this collection of essays could also profitably have been used with students. Though Elisabeth du Reau's contribution has been translated and William Keylor's important essay added since original publication of the collection in *Historical Reflections* (22: 1, winter 1996), shorter passages and technical terms often remain in French.

Three themes dominate the book: the influence of World War I upon France, the influence of Marc Bloch's *Strange Defeat* on historians, including the contributors, and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's view of "decadence" as an explanation for the French defeat. However, while all agree that World War I had great influence, the authors are far from unanimous about what its effects were. They do not fully agree about Bloch's views on decadence. And there is only partial explo-

ration of that question of decadence, especially which elements in French society allegedly had succumbed to it.

The authors unanimously condemn French military strategy in 1940, which they agree arose from the experience of 1914-18, as did the lack of *elan* in 1939-40. Nobody defends France's tactics or suggests its military communications were adequate, and all concur that France was counting on a long war, again as a result of World War I, but consensus on the effects of the Great War extends no further. They generally believe that in 1940 Britain and France were not "hopelessly out-classed" in men and equipment, though Nicole Jordan notes that how they are used is what matters (p. 29), whereas Martin Alexander points to shortages in key areas, such as Britain's lack of armored vehicles (pp. 306-7). Beyond this, there is little consensus, though several authors see decadence theory chiefly as scapegoating.

As is usual in a collection of this nature, some contributions more directly address the central issue than others. Philip Bankwitz provides a valuable brief summary of military and military-civil

factors but, as requested by the editor, primarily discusses his experiences with the Second French Armored Division during the 1944 liberation. Reau's rather loosely focused account of Edouard Daladier's activities during the Phony War is helpful about economic cooperation with Britain and attempts to purchase American equipment and makes the important point that "the French did not have the clear sense that 'the nation was in danger'" (p. 125), but she does not elaborate. Carole Fink's report on Marc Bloch's activities during the Phony War is essentially biographical but contributes a sense of what he foresaw before the defeat occurred. Bloch found France unprepared, badly organized, and complacent. He doubted the war could be fought entirely in Belgium, feared Blitzkrieg and hinted at the possibility of defeat, worried about the troubled Anglo-French relationship and about repression of the left but not the right in France, underestimated the importance of air power, and in the end thought a good defensive line could hold, even against tanks. In short, Bloch saw much, but not all.

Two contributions which at first glance seem tangential prove to contribute directly to our understanding of the 1940 debacle. John Cairns outlines the Anglo-French approach to the Russo-Finnish Winter War, demonstrating convincingly that most of the major problems of May-June 1940 were present in this earlier, smaller episode. Vicki Caron's important and horrifying account of French refugee policy from September 1939 until the collapse, including the cancelling of naturalized citizenship upon suspicion and internment in primitive camps, demonstrates that Vichy's anti-semitism had earlier roots, though protest under the Third Republic led to alleviations. Further, Caron places the refugee question in a context of muddle, disorganization, indifference, defeatism in the army command, hatred of the left, bureaucratic ineptitude, and scapegoating.

The trendy is represented by Robert J. Young and Omer Bartov. In a beautifully written essay,

Young maintains that because the Third Republic did a better job than Germany of cultural image-making in *The New York Times* and won the propaganda war, it was not a spent force lacking the energy and will to take on the Third Reich. But in the end Young demonstrates only that the *Times* was pro-French, deeming Paris the capital of civilization, and that its book reviews and women's pages gave more and better coverage to France than to Germany. Bartov addresses memory as a causative factor, making much of rather scant evidence to argue that fear of another war caused anti-militarism, fascism, disintegration, and paralysis and to conclude that abhorrence of war led to military defeat and collaboration (p. 84). In the only other essay devoted to the domestic scene and the only direct assault on decadence theory, William Irvine points out that France in 1939-40 had overcome the divisions and hesitations of 1935-38 and that the *poilu* was fully prepared (if not foolishly eager) to fight; he was not the problem. Irvine's important and thoughtful essay declares that Vichy arose from defeat, not decadence, and that "... it was not decadence that led to 1940; it is 1940 that has led us to view the late Third Republic as decadent" (p. 99).

The chapters about France's potential allies place the problem in a longer time frame. It is a pity that Joel Blatt did not contribute a piece on Franco-Italian relations, but Michael Carley and William Keylor provide a much-needed larger and longer context from 1919 on. Carley notes, as does Caron, that France could not decide whether its paramount enemy was Germany or Russia. His essay implies decadence of the *grande bourgeoisie* and echoes of World War I in French fear that the Red Army would be unable to launch an immediate offensive, but primarily he argues that, despite the importance of Russia to French survival, there were no lost opportunities. French governments were too anti-Bolshevik, too much prisoners of the *grande bourgeoisie*, and too deferential to anti-Communist Tory British governments to deal seriously with the Soviet Union.

Keylor's chapter on the "illusion" of American support observes that once again France planned to await the U.S. arrival, but is mainly noteworthy for reminding us that there was much talk of decadence in France before 1914 and that another outcome would have led us to discuss that and the hollow years of 1905-1914, and especially for stressing interwar France's degree of dependence. He notes that France would probably have lost in 1914 if Britain and Russia had acted as they did in 1940 and rightly stresses that France needed at least two of World War I's crucial three allies.

The one ally France had is dealt with only in the short run. Martin Alexander notes that Britain dominated French diplomatic policy until 1939 when the roles reversed, mainly because Britain had so little to offer militarily and thus subordinated itself to French generals, whom he argues were not complacent. He notes that both countries were committed to the concept of the long war but did little planning for the short-term, though one must survive in the short run to fight a long war. Alexander is relatively gentle in dealing with French military errors, but Nicole Jordan excoriates General Maurice Gamelin's strategy in a pungent essay which also cites Bloch extensively in attacking Gamelin for scapegoating the allegedly decadent left at the Riom trials. She argues that this led to the myth that military honor was intact, which she denounces as being as unsound as the Gaullist myth of an early and wide Resistance.

The concluding essay by Stanley Hoffmann was initially written for another volume and addresses the effects, not the causes, of the 1940 defeat. Thus it does not provide a summation. Fortunately, Joel Blatt's thoughtful Introduction does. Readers are advised to reread his final five pages after completing the volume, for he provides important insights, not least that France arrived "at the railway station of 1940 pulling a train with few allies and few advantages" (p. 10).

There are several themes which this book brushes but does not address head-on. Nobody

mentions France's geriatric military leadership; little is done with the question of whether there was a real sense of danger. There is no discussion of the declining role of an enlarged empire which could only be reached via the Royal Navy, though Reau mentions dependence on Britain's merchant marine, especially tankers to bring oil from the Middle East. If France was not with Britain "hopelessly outclassed," one wishes that somebody had explored the extent to which France and Germany respectively were on a full war footing, especially for the long war. Alas, nobody examines the peculiar French propensity to assume that whatever France needed would somehow happen because France needed it. Blatt notes that "France needed close to a 'perfect war' in 1940" (p. 11) with key variables falling to its favor, and certainly the assumption that Germany would proceed as Paris required was the ultimate expression of this propensity, but other examples abound in regard to the Winter War, the Belgian role, and the assumption that Poland would provide four to six months of respite.

There is a more fundamental problem which underlies the entire discussion. Blatt notes that France had been defeated in 1870 and barely survived in World War I, whereas Keylor stresses dependence on allies. All agree on the strategy of the long war, which implies that the goal was to survive until another rescue. Yet most, and especially Keylor, suggest that with better strategy and tactics and more cooperative allies, France might have survived 1940 to await that rescue. Perhaps so, but surely the implications lead one to wonder whether debating why the defeat of 1940 should be replaced by discussion of why not? Though Blatt mentions France's struggle to remain a major power (p. 8), nobody says that it no longer was one, merely the shell of one, a fading dowager faced by a lusty, muscular young giant. For historians of France as well as Frenchmen, this cruel fact is difficult to accept.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/>

Citation: Sally Marks. Review of Blatt, Joel, ed. *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2316>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.