

Peter Jackson. *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933-1939.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. x + 446 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820834-1.



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Ever since the spectacular military defeat of France in May-June 1940 scholarly attention has focused on the origins of the French collapse. Sixty years later the scholarly debate is still raging. One group of scholars still assigns the "strange defeat" to the profound "decadence" of the late Third Republic. Another group sees a more robust pre-war France than the proponents of "decadence" would allow and is disinclined to see the events of the spring of 1940 as being in any way predetermined. One important question, heretofore not seriously addressed in these debates, concerns the quality of French intelligence information about Nazi Germany. How well did the French grasp Hitler's long term intentions and the potential of his armed forces? What use did French policy makers make of the intelligence information they received? These are the questions Peter Jackson addresses in this important new book.

Although he provides some intriguing glimpses into French espionage in Germany, the bulk of Jackson's account deals with the ways French intelligence agencies assessed this information. Raw intelligence data is notoriously only

as good as the analysis to which it is submitted, which in turn depends on the operating assumptions of those examining the material. French intelligence analysts worked under a number of *a priori* assumptions. One was that the German national character was both warlike and highly efficient. Another was that paramount importance should be assigned to "the worst case scenario." These assumptions actually served the intelligence agencies well. From 1933 on their assessment of long term German diplomatic and military intentions was remarkably accurate. This in marked contrast to the politicians (Daladier) or the diplomats (Francois-Poncet) who were initially persuaded that Hitler's intentions were not very different from those of his immediate predecessors.

French intelligence was, however, less successful in assessing Germany's immediate military potential. Analysts could establish with some precision the formal German order of battle but proved unable to distinguish between battle-ready divisions and skeletal formations deprived of modern armaments. Until 1939 the intelligence

community, obsessed with German efficiency, was unable to appreciate the serious obstacles to German rearmament, notably the growing shortages of raw materials and labor. As a result, their estimate of, for example, the number of modern German aircraft was consistently wrong by several orders of magnitude.

Intelligence information, no matter how analyzed, is only as valuable as the uses to which it is put by the military and political authorities. Warnings about German aggressive intentions and capacity faced an uphill battle in the mid-1930's. Governments of the left remained committed to disarmament; those of the right (notably Flandin and Laval but also, most of the time at least, Doumergue) pursued a deflationary economic policy which left little scope for significant rearmament. French intelligence was at an additional disadvantage in that it was collected and analyzed exclusively by military agencies. As a result governments tended to regard intelligence information with some skepticism, suspecting that it was designed primarily to support the case for more military spending. Nor were they always wrong. In 1934 the French military deliberately exaggerated intelligence assessments of German military capacity, hoping, as they put it, to "create a war psychosis" favorable to their rearmament plans. (It is interesting that in 1934 this is precisely what the pacifist left, notorious for its paranoia, was accusing them of doing. But even paranoiacs have real enemies.) The strategy worked, up to a point. The air force did succeed in persuading the government to increase substantially its budget. But, owing to the erroneous perception of an "immediate" German military threat, the government did not proceed to a long term rationalization of the still essentially artisanal French aircraft industry. Instead it embarked on a rush program to build multi-purpose new French warplanes, most of which would be obsolete long before 1940. Moreover, by a process Jackson calls "reverse imaging" French intelligence assumed that France's own preoccupation with strategic

bombers was shared by Germany. By so doing it failed to grasp the importance of Germany's concentration on close support aircraft which would be so critical to the blitzkrieg campaign of 1940.

What difference did French intelligence make to France's diplomatic response to Nazi Germany in the 1930's? On Jackson's account, not much. Although the government was supplied with very accurate assessments of German intentions prior to the Anschluss, the Munich crisis and the Prague coup of 15 March 1939, there is little evidence that this altered the political will not to fight. It could be argued that the systematic exaggeration of German military might accounts for the lack of French diplomatic backbone in those years but Jackson does not think so. Even with more accurate information concerning the German air force, for example, there was no gainsaying the fact that well into 1939 French aircraft production remained far behind that on the other side of the Rhine.

In the months between the Munich agreement and the German destruction of Czechoslovakia, the French diplomatic position became much firmer. In 1939 the intelligence assessments of German rearmament became significantly more realistic and awareness of German economic problems more acute. The causal relationship between these two developments is complex. The government and the military were now far more receptive to intelligence reports which had long argued that Hitler could not be appeased. But on Jackson's account it was also the growing resolve of French governments with respect to Germany which induced the intelligence services to present a less pessimistic portrait of the military balance of power. To some degree this can be explained by what he calls the "producer/consumer" relationship that exists between intelligence agencies and their military and political clients. In essence the former tends to give the latter what it believes they want to hear. Moreover, both the politicians and the intelligence community had good objec-

tive reasons to be less pessimistic by 1939 as Great Britain became a more reliable ally, as the economy improved and as French military production began to match and ultimately surpass that of their enemy. By the end of the book it is clear that Jackson is in the camp of those who see the France of 1939 as politically confident, diplomatically firm and militarily back on its feet. Still, the question that looms out there is: what went wrong in 1940? I was hoping, in vain, that Jackson might provide a clue.

But this is the only disappointment in what is, by any standards, a first rate piece of historical writing. Jackson's research, most notably in archival sources, is impeccable. His writing displays an exemplary degree of expository clarity. Above all he does a superb job of integrating his findings about the intelligence community into the broader political, diplomatic, military and economic issues. His handling of these huge questions is both confident and economical. This is an important book which deserves a wide readership.

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