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Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis*. London: Palgrave, 2001. vii + 219pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 US (cl.). ISBN 0-333-94926-9.

Review by William D. Irvine, York University.

In the years between the two world wars, Anglo-French relations were often tense. The two nations were at odds over reparations, the Middle East, disarmament, and financial policy. As late as 1935 members of the British Foreign Office could still be heard rehearsing the catechism of past French perfidy: Chanak (1922), Fashoda (1898), and Egypt (1882)! The subject of *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War* is somewhat more narrow than the title suggests. The book deals exclusively with the Ethiopian crisis and with the German remilitarization of the Rhineland. But these eighteen months were critical both for Anglo-French relations and for the fate of Europe. The Ethiopian crisis destroyed the last vestiges of credibility of the League of Nations and cost France a significant ally. Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland weakened France strategically and dealt a serious blow to her alliance system. Both crises were accompanied by mutual recriminations between the two notional allies.

The "commonly held view," Richard Davis tells us (p.7), is that Anglo-French tensions were the result of fundamentally different foreign policy premises. The French sought uncompromisingly to preserve the post-war status quo by coercion, both military and diplomatic; the British, by contrast, were more conciliatory and pragmatic, open to gradual modifications of that same status quo. This would, according to this wisdom, explain the relative ease with which the British, their Locarno guarantee notwithstanding, accepted the remilitarization of the Rhineland. It does not quite account for Britain's seemingly stronger stance on Italian aggression in Ethiopia or her relative concern for preserving a critical role for the League of Nations. France, after all, had in the 1920's been rather more attached to the League than had been her cross channel neighbor. But, argues Davis, defenders of the traditional wisdom get around this problem by noting that whereas the French had always seen the League as essentially a club for keeping the Germans in check, the British had seen it as an institution for the peaceful resolution of possible sources of conflict.

The central thesis of this book is that the operating assumptions of Britain and France were, contrary to received wisdom, in fact very similar--reflecting common strategic problems, political pressures, and financial constraints. The mutual recriminations between the politicians and diplomats of the two nations served to mask how much they had in common and indeed, in a perverse way, were deliberately designed to do so.

The Ethiopian crisis appeared to confront an appeasing France against a principled Great Britain. It certainly was the case that France was anxious to avoid alienating an increasingly attractive ally--having Italy aboard would permit the realization of the long cherished dream of the *front continu*, a contiguous set of allies from France into the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Alienating Italy over the Ethiopian question therefore was highly unpalatable to the French. But as Davis reminds us, the British were only slightly less worried about breaking with the Italians. They too looked to the Italians as a valuable naval auxiliary in the Mediterranean, allowing Britain the better to keep her overseas Imperial commitments. The British, like the French, were fully aware of the hypocrisy involved in any

condemnation of Italy for having done precisely what the two democratic nations had done on a major scale in the previous century and had continued to do in the Middle East as recently as the previous decade. Aggression, as Talleyrand might have said, is a question of dates. Neither country expressed much sympathy for Ethiopia and treated the aggrieved nation with a condescension not devoid of racism. Indeed the odd British expression of willingness to fight Italy typically had more to do with the "bumptiousness" of "an inferior race" led, as one British minister inelegantly phrased it, by "this dago dictator" (p. 35).

All of this meant that the British were nearly as eager as the French to cut a deal with Mussolini that would have granted him most of his imperial ambitions. But the British, like the French, had to deal with a public opinion that was refractory to such overt appeasement of naked aggression. In the British case public opinion was mobilized by Lord Robert Cecil's League of Nations Union which organized the 1935 Peace Ballot; in France the pro-League sentiment usually came from elements in the Radical party, indispensable in virtually any inter-war government. Not wanting to take action against Mussolini, but faced with domestic pressure to do so, both governments tended to place the blame for their inaction on the other. The British seemed obsessed by the prospect of a "mad dog" attack by the Italian navy should sanctions be applied and repeatedly demanded unequivocal guarantees of support from the French. When the reply seemed too cautious--Laval was not given to unequivocal statements although on Davis's account he was less coy than the British claimed--British ministers pounced on this as an excuse for inaction.

In the end, the Hoare-Laval plan, which might have appeased the Italians, was leaked to the press, and the resultant public uproar killed the scheme. In the wake of this it suited the British to claim that the whole idea had been the work of that rogue Laval, who apparently had manipulated the aging and sickly Sir Samuel Hoare. Given Laval's already unsavory reputation, this was a plausible enough tact. But it was also pure myth. The Hoare-Laval plan had owed as much to Hoare as to Laval, and the rest of the British cabinet--despite subsequent denials--had given it their support.

The Rhineland crisis of March 1936 also seemed to pit the hard line French against the conciliatory British. The British had never made a secret of their uneasiness about the Rhineland guarantees, either in the Treaty of Versailles or in Locarno. By 1935 there was little stomach for a fight over what the Germans could do in their "own back yard," and for the most part the Rhineland was seen as a useful bargaining chip, possibly to obtain the much cherished Air Pact, the aviation equivalent of the Naval Agreement. Of course there was the awkward matter of the British signature as a guarantor at Locarno, but from the British perspective this signature was about as binding as that of Fascist Italy, also renewed as recently as April 1935.

For the French, the demilitarized Rhineland was critical to their military security as well as the credibility of their alliance system. Yet, and despite the fact that by the beginning of 1936 it was obvious that Hitler would be making some moves imminently, the French had no serious plans for dealing with unilateral German action. The politicians and the military took turns fobbing the problem on to one another, and the result was that when Hitler re-entered the Rhineland on 7 March 1936 the French had no plans in place for a military response. Moreover, the British were well aware of this fact. So while it suited the French in the wake of the remilitarization, to vilify perfidious Albion for her infidelity to the Locarno pact, this was elementary grand standing serving to mask the fact that France was no more willing than Britain to stand up to Hitler at this juncture.

By and large Davis's argument is convincing. He writes well, and the book is short, crisp and efficient. It moves largely at the level of pure diplomatic history. Davis is certainly alert to the role of public opinion and the importance of the British election of 1935 and the one looming in France in 1936. I suspect that most readers would have appreciated slightly longer discussions of these questions. While Davis's explanations of the dynamics of the two crises are convincing, it is less obvious that this represents a

radical revision. The example he most often sights of the "commonly held view" turns out to be the venerable Arnold Wolfers, *Britain and France between the Wars*, an important book, to be sure, but one originally published in 1939. But these are quibbles. This is a valuable book for anyone dealing with Franco-British relations in the era of appeasement and a welcome supplement to Martin Thomas's recent volume on a slightly later period, *Britain, France & Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1996).

William D. Irvine
York University
birvine@glendon.yorku.ca

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