

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Joel Blatt's review of Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940*.

H-France Review Vol. 5 (February 2005), No. 16

The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol5reviews/vol5no16blatt.pdf>

8 February 2005

Peter Jackson
ptj@aber.ac.uk

I have just read with interest Joel Blatt's review of Talbot Imlay's excellent book *Facing the Second World War*. In doing so I was struck, not for the first time, by a central assumption that seems to me to be underpinning so much of the historiography on France during this difficult period. This assumption is perhaps best expressed in the language of war as a 'test' which states (or nations) must face and must pass in order to be deemed somehow worthy in the judgement of history.

Blatt concurs with Imlay that France 'failed the test of war' in 1940 and it is of course impossible to disagree with this verdict. The corollary judgement to this, which is nowadays usually implied rather than outlined explicitly, is that this failure illustrates that there was something profoundly wrong with French society. Neither Blatt nor Imlay would be likely to go so far as to use the rhetoric of decadence or rottenness. At the same time, however, the logic of their argument leads inescapably (to me at least) to a set of moral judgements about the courage and determination of the French leadership. Because France failed the test of war, because it lost the battle of 1940, its leadership was deficient and lacked the foresight, dedication and resolve to take the correct decisions that would have brought victory.

Even if such choices existed by the late 1930s, I am a little uncomfortable with this language and with the unspoken belief systems that underpin it. Should we agree without reflection that success in war is, and should be, the ultimate 'test' with which we gauge the moral fibre of political communities? Is such an approach not uncomfortably close to the militarism that most scholars working on the history of France during this period claim to deplore?

One might respond, and Robert Paxton surely would respond, that the true evidence that there was something profoundly wrong with French society was not defeat in battle in June 1940, but instead the politics of the Vichy and collaborationist regimes that succeeded the Third Republic. Official collusion in the deportation of French Jewry seems to provide confirmation that there

was something rotten about French politics and society. Joel Blatt says that to properly understand the defeat and its aftermath we need to take a long-term perspective on the course of French history. He cites Thiers' famous dictum that 'The Republic will be conservative or it won't be' (though exactly what this tells us about the fall of France is unclear to me). What emerges is a familiar trope, conservative anti-communists are the villains. This is an increasingly familiar line of argument.

And yet, one is entitled to ask precisely which aspect of the long term history of France one should focus on when attempting to make sense of the defeat of 1940? To take the Dreyfus Affair as an example, where French society was split down the middle, should we concentrate on those that condemned Dreyfus on what was obviously suspect evidence? Or should we focus instead on those that defended his rights as a violation of a higher notion of justice that they deemed inseparable from their conception of what France stood for? During the First World War, to take another example, should we place greatest emphasis on the defeatism that threatened the war effort at times in 1917-1918 or should we concentrate on the courage, determination and heroism that played a crucial role in securing victory? Even during the troubled 1930s the picture is not always as clear as many historians tend to assert. Take autumn 1934, for example. Should we place crucial importance on the anti-parliamentarian demonstrations of 6 February? Or should we train our interpretive gaze rather on the much larger centre-left rallies that took place in defence of democracy six days later? And, while it is true that there was anti-Semitism in France, it was little or no more pronounced than elsewhere in Europe. While it is true that French officials participated in the mass murder of French Jews, it is also true that a higher proportion of the Jewish population survived in France than almost anywhere else in occupied Europe.

The point is that a look back at the period 1870-1939 does not produce any easy answers. Historians looking back on the period through the lens of 1940 tended, during the post war era, to take a predictably jaded view of things and to find everywhere evidence that the 'dark years' of 1940-1944 were the culmination of a long process of French decline. But all this happened a long time ago and, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we owe it to the past and to our students to embrace the complexity of society and politics in France during the era of the two world wars. France lost the war, it 'failed the test'. But exactly what this means should remain an open question.

12 February 2005

Mathilde von Bulow
muv20@hermes.cam.ac.uk

I would like to thank Dr. Peter Jackson for a thoughtful commentary on Professor Blatt's equally insightful review of Talbot Imlay's *_Facing the Second World War_*. As someone working on the Algerian war for independence, I can hardly offer a response focusing on interwar France

that will be just as meaningful, particularly not to the specialists in the field. However, I was struck by Dr. Jackson's comments, and I hope you will indulge me when I post a few thoughts of my own.

To me, the complexities and divisions of French politics and society that are talked about by Imlay, Blatt, and Jackson represent a reality that does not simply end in 1940. For this reason, I wholeheartedly agree that one needs to take a long-term perspective when approaching French history not only when assessing the period between and during the two world wars but also afterwards. Dr. Jackson is rightly concerned by what arguments such as, France 'lost the war' and 'failed the test' in 1940, say about the way we, as historians, judge the moral fibre and the success and/or failure of political communities. On the other hand, I think that without this argument, one cannot entirely comprehend the development of postwar France either. In my opinion, the wars in Indochina and Algeria, for instance, with all their domestic and international fall-out, cannot really be understood without a reference to the fall of France and those ominous years that followed France's defeat in 1940. Ironically, some of those who were 'the good guys' during that period, those who joined the Free French and who fought in the Resistance, later turned into the 'bad guys' in Algeria, precisely because they wanted to prevent yet another 'failure', 'defeat', and hence humiliation, for France. And this category of individuals does not just include army officers and police officials who resorted to 'Gestapo-like' methods against their Algerian adversaries, but also Socialist and Communist politicians, who voted for the military's special powers in Algeria in the first place. How does one explain that men who fought for the moral victory of 'Marianne' during World War II could join ranks with former officials of Vichy France to ensure the preservation of French Algeria, or could even be driven in some cases to support a radical right-wing organisation such as the OAS, without at least a passing reference to the 'defeat' and the 'failure' of 1940? That, too, deserves some thought, for I think it says a lot about the way the French saw themselves and about the kind of moral categories in which the French themselves thought, at least during the wars of decolonisation.

15 February 2005

Sally Marks
smarks@ric.edu

As I have not read Talbot Imlay's book, I cannot comment on it. Also, I specialize in international history, not French history, and so I examine events from a different and more comparative perspective. That said, I would suggest on the strength of Joel Blatt's impressively thoughtful review and some of the comments since that perhaps the problem is being made too complicated. While not denying France's many domestic problems and the fact that her leaders were mere mortals, not the supermen her predicament demanded, I would argue that France's problems boiled down to location and lack of power and that in actual practice little of decisive importance could be done about either.

A colleague who also studies the interwar Anglo-French-German triangle (which at times approached Anglo-German co-dominion) once remarked that World War II had destroyed

Britain as a great power just as World War I had done that to France. Those who study only France may find this hard to accept, but few international historians, who study comparative power, would disagree. France was now an ageing and declining power of the upper second rank. Briefly after World War I, France dominated the European continent owing to a temporary lack of competition, but that era ended by 1925. Britain and the US over-estimated French power, but Germany seems to have been more realistic as were most French leaders. Indeed, its weakness and dependence (the only reasons it accepted the Locarno treaties) were increasingly clear to those who were not prisoners of preconceptions.

As the situation in the 1930s became directly threatening, France could theoretically have strengthened its position somewhat. Certainly it could have improved its military communications but would that have saved it? Most important measures, such as structural reorganization of the economy, faced insuperable political or financial difficulties or both. Even then, there remained dependence on Germany for coking coal, on Britain for its empire, navy, and ties to Wall Street, on the US for money, equipment, and eventual rescue. There also remained geography, the demographic deficit, the problem of Belgium, and always dependence on Britain. In theory, France could have responded to the Anglo-German Naval Accord with a crash naval building program so it could reach its empire on its own (even secure access to North Africa depended on Italian neutrality). In practice, quite aside from fiscal constraints, France could not afford to offend its only real and non-controversial ally.

It seems sad but true that France was not really a victor in World War I. Rather, it hung on by its fingernails until rescue arrived and exhausted itself in the process. Once Germany and Russia revived, while the French army shrank amid ageing equipment, it was not capable of fulfilling its self-assigned role of guarding the status quo, especially without British support. It was condemned to live next door to a resurgent and much stronger Germany with no potential solutions (some of them very iffy at best) which did not further divide a weary and often divided nation.

17 February 2005

Julian Jackson
j.t.jackson@qmul.ac.uk

Having myself recently published a book on the Fall of France, I would like to add a few words to the discussions aroused by the review of Talbot Imlay's book, and the observations on it by Peter Jackson and Joel Blatt. The line of my own book was rather closer to Jackson than Imlay although I do think that Imlay's book is one of the most interesting and important contributions to the subject that anyone has made for several years. Quite apart from the new information he provides about all kinds of issues - for example showing that the Baku plan was taken much more seriously for much longer than any other accounts have suggested - the great contribution of his book is to offer a genuine comparative history of British and French war planning (rather as John Horne did some years ago for labour politics in the First World War). This is a great

achievement. I am not entirely in agreement with Jackson's criticism of Imlay's notion of war as a "test" which states, must fail and pass in order to be deemed worth in the judgment of history' (Jackson's words). Certainly Jackson is right to criticise the rather crude moral assumptions underpinning the popular histories of people like Alistair Horne (Horne for example blames the Popular Front's for a 'newly acquired instinct for disobedience, which was to bear moral fruit in 1940') or William Shirer. But there is surely nothing wrong, nor necessarily moralising, about questioning the resilience and effectiveness of a state's political institutions, the degree of national cohesion, the efficiency of the economy, etc. These are all legitimate, and value-free, questions; and to say that a state 'passes' these 'tests' is not equivalent to saying that it has become militarised or judging it according to Nazi standards.

Having said this, however, I do have some problems with aspects of Imlay's arguments. For example, I do not think it is really true to say that previous historians have stopped at September 1939 and so failed to take account of the way in which the phoney war undermined French resolution and morale. This is surely a major theme of Crémieux-Brilhac's massive work on the subject: most of Crémieux-Brilhac's study is indeed about the phoney war. I take Imlay's point about the arbitrariness of stopping at a particular moment, but up to a point the same accusation could be made of his book even if the arbitrariness of his endpoint is of course to some degree imposed by the circumstances (see point 3 below). Imlay does produce a lot of evidence to show how pessimistic and almost defeatist French opinion makers had become by April 1940, but it is always possible to take quotations from contemporaries to prove more or less whatever one wants. For example, Harold Nicolson's comments in October 1939, after a visit to France, that 'we are much too defeatist in London' while the French he had met are 'absolutely confident of victory'. Daladier changed his mind so frequently that one can pillage him to prove almost anything one wants.

In general, however, it seems to me that the debate must be moved on from the rather excessively polarised positions which, on the one hand, see the whole of French history as leading to defeat - that is something of the impression I get from Blatt's wishing to take us back to Thiers - or, on the other hand, see the Third Republic as a paragon of liberalism, stability and unity - which is sometimes where Jackson seems to want to take us (in understandable reaction against some of the more moralistic rhetoric of the 'decadence' school of historians). Conceptually I think there are four distinct issues/questions which need to be separated out from each other and tend too often to be conflated:

1. It is necessary to distinguish the causes of the defeat from the causes of the events that followed the defeat. It is quite possible to argue that the weaknesses and antagonisms which characterised French society in the late 30s were not necessarily a cause of the defeat but that they were a cause of the consequences of the defeat - i.e the Vichy regime. In fact one should probably break down the term 'Fall of France' into its constituent parts and distinguish between the military defeat (which was effectively consummated by 26 May if not indeed earlier) and the consequences that the politicians and military leaders (in particular Weygand) drew from the defeat even before the Vichy regime got under way.

No one can deny that, whether or not there had been a redressement in 1938/39 (as I believe there had), it was a precarious and fragile one, and that French society did remain deeply

divided. It is not so easy, however, to show how this impacted upon (i) the military defeat, but it is very easy to see how it impacted upon (ii) the immediate conclusions that many people drew from that defeat - France should sign an Armistice - and (iii) the longer term conclusions that many people drew from that defeat – France should have a 'National Revolution'. And indeed (ii) and (iii) are closely linked since many of the arguments put forward by Baudouin, Weygand et al. for an armistice clearly pre-figured the subsequent arguments in favour of National Revolution. Only if the 'Fall of France' is seen as including (ii) as well as (i) can the pre-existing problems of the Third Republic be incontrovertibly be seen as having contributed to it. (In his generous but not un-critical review of my own two books on the Dark Years and the Fall of France Jackson highlighted what he saw as a tension, even possibly a contradiction, between them given that the former book paid a lot of emphasis to long-term pre-war political, social and cultural trends in explaining the Vichy regime while the latter book argued that the defeat of 1940 was primarily a military event. I think I did try to keep the two issues apart conceptually, but perhaps I did not always succeed).

2. Having separated the military defeat from its consequences, one then needs to establish the reasons for the military defeat that actually occurred. Imlay gives a lot of cogent possible reasons why France was not well-equipped to win the war, but I am not sure that the reasons he adduces explain the reasons for the actual defeat that did take place. He is explaining why France would not have been able to hold out in a long war, but in fact the defeat she suffered was so rapid that these reasons did not have time to come into play. The immediate causes of the defeat that actually occurred were the strategic, tactical and operational failures of the French army High Command. In my opinion the best book on those failures is the one by Karl-Heinz Freiser which has recently been translated into French. Imlay's book is less about the defeat that France did experience than the defeat she would have experienced if she had not experienced the defeat she did experience.

The reasons for that defeat are in some sense very easy to establish in purely military terms. But the differences between defeat and victory – as indeed was proved in September 1914 - can turn on very little. Of course there is no such thing as a purely military defeat. The military are part of society in its totality, but making the connections can be very complicated. The weaknesses of the French air-force, and also the poor performance of the four French heavy armoured divisions (DCRs) obviously need to be explained by long-term factors to some extent. This is where I think Marc Bloch's analysis is still so brilliant. The burden of his book is that on the battlefield the French were intellectually out-classed by the Germans in 1940, and this is part of his wider indictment of the intellectual sclerosis of French society before 1940. To some extent his explanation for the defeat is that French decision makers were insufficiently annaliste in their ways of seeing the world: they suffered from excessive compartmentalisation. But this kind of analysis is rather speculative, and in the end one could make a case for France's defeat as resting on the bad performance of two infantry divisions (the 55DI and the 71DI) who happened to be the wrong men in the wrong place at the wrong time owing to major miscalculations made by the normally cautious Gamelin.

In this context the remarks of Sally Marks are very well-taken, but she also seems to me to be suggesting the reasons why France was bound to lose a long war, not why she lost the particular short war that she did lose. I think that everything Marks says is very perceptive - and it is

salutary to have this kind of comment from someone who is not specifically a French historian. Where I would slightly disagree, however, is with her implication that the French had not understood the consequences of their 1914-18 'victory', and the extent to which it had weakened them. On the contrary I think they were only too aware of that fact: it was this knowledge that lay behind Briandism, and behind the defeatist realism of people like Bonnet, Laval, Caillaux and many others (as I think Fabre-Luce once wrote: France could not afford to fight a battle of the Marne every 20 years). Even the most optimistically nationalist figures like Reynaud or de Gaulle realized that France could only survive as part of an alliance, and ultimately needed the assistance of American and/or the Soviet Union. That was French policy in 1939/40 but because of the 'strange defeat' of 1940 it never had the chance to prove itself. It was only those who had in a sense given up on France who believed that France could go it alone (as in his *La Seule France*).

3. Even if France did not have time to be defeated in a long war, there is still the question of whether, if she had had the luxury of being able to fight a long war, she would have been able to win it - or at least whether she was as well-prepared to win it as Britain was. Here Imlay's answer is a resounding negative, and much of what he says is compelling. But I am not entirely convinced. I don't think one can deny that in many respects France had more significant weaknesses than Britain in May 1940. One of these was certainly political polarisation. On this matter I think Jackson tends sometimes to be a bit panglossian about the French situation. It was quickly possible for Churchill to build a broad coalition in May 1940 - to bring in the key Labour Party figures - but the hatred of Blum in France was such that it was quite inconceivable that he could have been brought into any coalition in France. 'Union sacrée' was not possible in 1940. It seems almost inconceivable to me that one could have had in Britain a comment similar to that reported by the French economist Charles Rist in his diary: 'Mme Auboin tells me that after the Armistice she received a letter from a reactionary friend of hers containing the words: At last we have victory'. On the other hand, I don't think one should push the contrast between the two countries - or between 1914 and 1940 in France - too far. In my own book on the Fall of France I played two implicitly counterfactual games: imagining how we might have written the history of France before 1914 if there had not been a victory on the Marne, or imagining how we might write the history of Britain if there had been a successful German invasion in 1940. One can easily pick out all kinds of weaknesses which could become a teleological narrative explaining the reasons for the defeat. That is not to say that things were as 'bad' in France as Britain, but that in both countries the situations were more fluid and open-ended than they seem in retrospect. There were in both countries elements of defeatism, examples of inefficiency, instances of political division - and also their contrary - and how these different ingredients crystallized was to a considerable degree the result of the military situation. That is what I mean by saying that Imlay's pessimistic picture is partly a result of the moment his narrative ends: there were a lot of problems in May 1940, but there were also strengths, and if the French had been able to hold off the initial German onslaught, then the kaleidoscope might have been shaken in an altogether different way to produce an altogether different picture. (There is much evidence that soldiers who had been frustrated by the phoney war were suddenly galvanised and enthusiastic when the chance to fight properly was given to them - only to be disappointed again because of the incompetence of their leaders. We need to know a lot more about the history of individual French fighting units, and here the research being undertaken by Martin Alexander should prove very illuminating when it is published).

Imlay would presumably disagree with this, and certainly his gives a lot of evidence to back up his case. But one must at least be clear what he is saying: not that France lost because of all the factors he highlights, but that she would anyway have lost because of those factors. Perhaps he is right, but this a counterfactual proposition.

4. Finally there is the question of what might have happened if the Germans had not attacked in May 1940, and the Allies had continued to dig in for their long war. Here Imlay has some very interesting things to say about the degree to which the Allies had started to lose confidence in their own 'long war' strategy, and he implies that only the German invasion saved Reynaud from a political, economic and strategic crisis which would probably have destroyed him. Perhaps. But Third Republic governments had a habit of lurching from crisis to crisis, and indeed they had been doing so throughout the phoney war anyway. Because the music stopped for Reynaud May 1940 because the Germans invaded in May 1940 we will never know for sure whether it was about to stop anyway.

23 February 2005

Jonathan Liebowitz
Jonathan.Liebowitz@uml.edu

As someone who teaches the fall of France even if I don't do research in the area, I have been following this discussion with interest. I've noticed that none of the participants has cited Ernest May's *'Strange Victory'*. What do you think of the argument presented there?

22 February 2005

[X-Post H-Diplo <h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu>]

Peter Jackson
ptj@aber.ac.uk

I was especially pleased and interested to read the sophisticated and perceptive recent postings on this issue by Sally Marks and Julian Jackson. Both raise and address themes and questions that have preoccupied me in my own research for some time now.

Among Jackson's observations and arguments there is one passage, in particular, that returns to the key point that I was trying to make in my original contribution to this debate:

But there is surely nothing wrong, nor necessarily moralising, about questioning the resilience and effectiveness of a state's political institutions, the degree of national cohesion, the efficiency of the economy, etc. These are all legitimate, and value-free, questions; and to say that a state 'passes' these 'tests' is not equivalent to saying that it has become militarised or judging it

according to Nazi standards.

These two sentences underscore the fundamental disagreement between Jackson and myself, and indeed possibly between my own interpretive perspective and that of the majority of historians of the origins of the Second World War. To my mind concepts such as the degree of political cohesion, the effectiveness of a state's political institutions and even the efficiency of the economy are not, and can never be, value-free. On the contrary, they are laden with ideological assumptions and will mean different things when viewed from different perspectives. This was really the central point of my original intervention.

The further point that I made was not that Talbot Imlay, or anyone else, applies Nazi standards when using these concepts to explain the fall of France. My argument was rather that the capacity to wage and win wars should not be the overriding criterion we use when evaluating entire societies.

Indeed I was distressed to read a number of recent postings on this discussion thread that seem to assume that the fact that France lost the campaign of 1940 constitutes proof in itself that there was something wrong with the Third Republic. Surely we should be exercising a little more intellectual rigour in our analyses. We should outline what, exactly, we think was wrong with France and then show how this deficiency (or deficiencies) led to military defeat, exodus and collaboration. But in doing so one should bear in mind that these latter experiences were common to virtually every other state that was defeated and occupied by the Nazi regime. Was there something wrong with the leadership and institutions of all of these states? Were they all decadent? If so, then how much do such sweeping interpretations really tell us?

One common diagnosis is that France was a deeply divided society with bitter antagonisms on both sides of the left-right ideological chasm. This was certainly the case during the pre-war decade. But, to a significant extent, it remains the case today. Since 1789 French politics have consistently been characterised by these divisions and the tone of political discourse has almost always been more hysterical than that Britain, the US and most other English speaking societies. But is this evidence that France has always been decadent? Or merely that French political culture is distinct and should be judged on its own terms?

Decadence, it should be remembered, was a key Gaullist trope that was deployed in pursuit of very specific political aims in the post-1944 era. It drew on older traditions of representing French history in terms of decline, fall and revival. My view is that historians should avoid using such sweeping characterisations. They actually explain very little. So I tend to be impatient with scholars who try to explain away complex processes with crude simplifications about there being something wrong with France. There is always something wrong with every society. The point is to show, with as much precision as possible, how the state of French politics and society affected the military campaign of 1940. I would agree with Julian here that the case made by Marc Bloch in 1940 remains in many ways unsurpassed to this day. But that does not mean that I find it wholly or even mainly convincing.

The final point that I would make in response to Jackson's highly stimulating contribution is that I have personally never argued that a resurrection of the 1914 Union Sacrée was possible in

1939-1940. Indeed I have argued precisely the opposite on several occasions. I do think, however, that it was not just the right and its hatred of Blum that explains this. It was also the alienation of the left as a result of the decree laws and especially the government's strike-breaking in November 1938-9 that made such an alliance impossible. This, in itself, does not undermine the evidence that a national resurgence of sorts took place on the eve of war. It suggests, rather, that this resurgence, and the confidence that it produced, was less solid, more brittle if you like, than the revival before the First World War.

Sally Marks' contribution was particularly interesting to me because it reminds me of the imbalance between perception and reality. I do not mean the perceptions of historians of France but rather those of contemporary elites. There was often a significant difference between, on the one hand, the actual sinews of French demographic, financial and industrial power, and, on the other, the image of France as a great power that was central to the belief systems of so many French elites of the 1914-1918 generation. It is clear to me that the construction of France's identity as that of a great power, one with a civilising mission and thus a duty to the rest of the world, played an important role in policy making during the inter-war years. Along with a range of other, often contradictory, conceptions of France's "proper" role in international politics, the self-image of French "grandeur" set powerful limits on what was and was not possible in terms of foreign and defence policy choices. These limits varied from statesman to statesman. But they existed and there is plenty of evidence of their influence on policy making in the archival records that have been left behind.

This explains why decision makers responsible for national policy in France resisted accepting the role and status of second rank power for their *patrie*. Few could agree in their hearts and through their actions with an observation made by Jules Cambon to a young colleague during the early 1920s: "[Y]oung man, remember this: in the future the difficulty will be to slide France reasonably smoothly into the ranks of the second class powers to which she belongs". On the contrary, the widespread construction of France's international identity as that of a great European power constituted an ideology all of its own. It shaped the course of foreign and defence policy, in different ways, through to the outbreak of war. And it should not be ignored in analyses of French policy and the coming of the Second World War.

23 February 2005

Julian Wright
julian.wright@DUR.AC.UK

Firstly I must say how useful this debate is becoming. I stuck up some extracts from the early exchanges on a lecture powerpoint for first years - i.e. 'this lecture is happening LIVE', that sort of thing.

Secondly, I'm fascinated that it is in fact Peter and not Julian Jackson that I find myself more

drawn towards in this. While I think Julian Jackson's distinction between his long and short book, with their long and short prehistories of 1940, was in fact pretty clear (and underrated by some commentators) I do actually like the extreme scepticism of Peter Jackson when he remarks on the way we all use terms such as 'political cohesiveness' [or lack of] a little loosely! After all, if we go into the real political negotiations, not between generals and politicians in 1940 itself, but between political actors in the 1930s as a whole (which is what this argument is pointing us towards), then one is surely bound to find all sorts of odd political cohesion and incohesion in all sorts of strange places; and to extrapolate from such discoveries to 1940 would be virtually impossible.

The real problem at the root of all this seems to me the following: We are rightly devoted to Marc Bloch. But the business I've just described (the investigation of high political negotiations in the 1930s) has hardly been done, and I wonder whether we shouldn't leave Marc Bloch and his cheap imitators out of it altogether for a bit while we do some proper work on interwar politics.

This sounds a little pompous - it's not meant to be!

But for now, 2 things to say in support of my claim here: 1. I'm working a lot on Joseph Paul-Boncour (leader of the *quatre vings qui ont dit 'non'*). The complexity of his political career, particularly between 1932 and 1940, is staggering. Once you get into it you find that the logic of politics in the 1930s has its own seductive power, which means that the large generalisations of Bloch and others simply don't come into play until you stand back from the detail, at a MUCH later stage (when one's writing the back blurb perhaps). This sounds so obvious as to be crass - but it seems to me that we do all tend to start with the generalizations and not the high politics. One example of this is PB's advocacy of the League of Nations, AND of a robust policy of alliances and national defense. Seeming contradiction that certainly puzzled his contemporaries - but was it that strange? I find it really difficult to discover how unique this sort of thing was, because there's not much out there to help me. This is just one individual position - how many other strange generalization-busting ones of this type are out there waiting to be dissected? (by the way, I think 'Briandism' is a generalization waiting to be busted too).

2. Quite often when I want to find out what really was going on with some of the minor political characters that interest me in this period (Jean Hennessy is one - even tho' he is terribly terribly unimportant in the debate that's being pursued here) I have to go to those great multi-tome histories of the Third Republic that came out in the 1950s and which people used to dismiss out of hand. But when we are talking about 'the moral sinews of a political society' surely we should be doing some serious study of the middle-ranking figures that made up that society? And then trying to put them together - not to set us up with new generalizations, or at least not yet. There is a lot about the big characters of 'mainstream politics' if you like - Daladier, Blum etc. There is quite a bit about others such as Flandin or Cot. But there is a whole political morass that is not really understood because the large generalizations seem to come in first. Couldn't we start for once with 1940 totally put out of mind and see what sort of picture of 'moral national political fibre' emerged from a study of middling characters, on their own terms and those of the 1930s, rather than those of 1940? Am I stating something which everyone else will say 'oh how obvious, that's what we're doing all the time anyway?'

Or is another answer to my question that I'm asking for more national history of 1930s France and less international history? I don't mind asking this as it's two international historians whom I admire that started the debate in the first place!

23 February 2005

Ronald Florence
ron@18james.com

A footnote to the recent thread on the French defeat in 1940:

In Iraq, before the recent election, some educated voices apparently referred to "lessons" from French history. Dr. Haider Mohsin, a young internist at a hospital in Basra, told a reporter: "One of the causes that made France fall down in the Second World War was the sexual freedom ..."

From George Packer, "Testing Ground", a "Letter from Basra" in The New Yorker, February 28, 2005.