

Martin Thomas. *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era*. Oxford: Berg, 1996. x + 268 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$17.50 US (pb). ISBN 1-85973-192-9.

Review by William D. Irvine, York University, for H-France, September 1997.

When Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936, Anglo-French relations were at a post-war low. To the problems of the 1920s-- reparations, war debts, the middle-east--were added the tensions over re-armament, France's eastern alliances, the Franco-Italian rapprochement, the Anglo-German naval agreement, and mutual recriminations over the Ethiopian crisis. In essence, the French found the British to be insensitive to its security needs; the British found the French obsession with security to be inimical to an understanding with Germany. Paradoxically, on Martin Thomas' account, the election of the Popular Front government, so different ideologically from that of Great Britain, marked the beginnings of a warmer relationship. It was under the Popular Front that the French began to lay the groundwork for an effective peace-time alliance. The "bedrock of Popular Front diplomacy would be the continued effort to draw Britain further into continental affairs, not by challenging British appeasement policy but by appropriating it" (p. 55). By this, the author means that the French remained sceptical of the possibility of taming German territorial ambitions by appeasing them, but wanted to demonstrate to the British that if, as they were certain would be the case, her appeasement efforts failed, the failure could not be blamed on French truculence.

The book is based on an very thorough knowledge of the relevant French and British archives. It is classic diplomatic history, but pays due obeisance to the importance of financial matters and, at least with respect to France, demonstrates some sensitivity to domestic politics. Nonetheless, there remains a great deal of what Monsieur X said to Lord Y in this account. No crime that, but at times it is uncommonly hard to dig a clear thesis out of this dense text. What, for example, are we to make of the Anglo-French-Belgium staff talks in the spring of 1936? Either they had "a lasting symbolic importance" (p. 41), or "they did not add up to much" (p. 42). Much of the time the reader feels treated to an extensive, nuanced, well informed discussion of assorted diplomatic dead-ends. The negotiations over colonies are a case in point. In 1936-37 significant elements in the British diplomatic establishment (but not the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden) felt that yielding (mostly French) colonies to Germany would either appease German appetites or, at a minimum, strengthen assorted "moderates" surrounding the German economics minister Hjalmar Schacht. An entire chapter is devoted to this issue despite the fact that Lord Plymouth, who headed a committee on the feasibility of colonial concessions, reported (correctly) that Hitler would not be satisfied with British or French colonies. Moreover, Leon Blum's abortive discussion with Schacht in August 1936 notwithstanding, neither Andre

Francois-Poncet, Germanophile French ambassador to Germany, nor Marius Moutet, Socialist minister of colonies, nor the entire French general staff were anything but utterly hostile to the whole enterprise. Similarly, the history of both French and British re-armament in the late 1930s is well known. The author promises not to rehash this issue but rather "to assess rearmament as a feature within Anglo-French relations" (p. 147). Yet we soon learn that "there was remarkably little British impact upon the direction of French rearmament" during the period under discussion (p. 154).

It may be that Anglo-French relations improve under the Popular Front. Certainly the British professed a distinct preference for dealing with Leon Blum and Yvon Delbos as opposed to, say, Louis Barthou or, especially, Pierre Laval. But serious tensions persisted: over Spain, Ethiopia and former German colonies. As the author notes, the relationship was rather more tense by the end of 1937 than had been the case six months earlier. Such improvement as there was would appear to owe less to French diplomacy than to "Britain's strategic dependence upon France" (p. 231). And, when his story ends, in the spring of 1938, it is not at all clear that the French had made much progress in weaning the British off their penchant for appeasement. Nor would anything in the next six months suggest such a development.

In spite of the title *Britain, France and Appeasement*, this is a book which says nothing about the Munich settlement. Georges Bonnet, a name as intimately associated with appeasement as is that of Neville Chamberlain, appears primarily in his capacity as minister of finance. The key here is the subtitle, *Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era*, which permits the author to end his account with--and really before-- Blum's ephemeral second government (March-April 1938). Just when the Popular Front ended is a matter of debate: from some perspectives it was dead with the defeat of Blum's first government on 22 June 1937 and deader still with the formation of the Chautemps government, without socialist participation, on 18 January 1938. The logic which insists that the Popular Front was still alive in March 1938 is the same logic that has it lasting until 30 November of the same year. But such periodicity would ruin the author's thesis. On the last page of the book, he assures readers that "French willingness to fall in with the early stages of Chamberlain's distinctive appeasement in 1936 and 1937 did not presage the humiliating French appeasement at Munich in September 1938" (p. 234). No compelling arguments are adduced for this proposition and most readers are likely to conclude that exactly the opposite is true.

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