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Louis Clerc, *La Finlande et l'Europe du Nord dans la diplomatie française : Relations bilatérales et intérêt national dans les considérations finlandaises et nordiques des diplomates et militaires français, 1917-1940*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2011. 381 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$64.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-90-5201-750-1.

Review by Michael Jabara Carley, Université de Montréal.

Louis Clerc, a lecturer at the University of Turku in Finland, has published a work on Franco-Finnish relations from the Russian Revolution to the Russo-Finnish “Winter War,” which ended in March 1940. The work appears to be a little revised doctoral dissertation defended at the Université de Strasbourg in 2007. It is a highly detailed study of bilateral, mostly political relations, rooted in French and Finnish archives. Ostensibly, the book is about French political relations with Finland (and less so about Finnish relations with France), but in the background is almost always the shadow of Russia (and after 1922, the USSR). The Quai d’Orsay, or French Foreign Ministry, rarely considered its relations with Finland independently from relations with the USSR or Germany.

The author’s narrative begins in 1917 with the Russian Revolution and the dismemberment of the tsarist state. The grand duchy of Finland had been a part of the Russian empire since 1809 when it was annexed from Sweden. In December 1917, a month after the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd, Finland proclaimed its independence. The Finnish action was emulated with less success in other parts of the former tsarist state as anti-Bolshevik elements, former tsarist officers, politicians, local nationalities, and Cossacks took advantage of the weakening of centralized control to attempt to separate from Russia in order to block the spread of Soviet authority. The western allies, notably France, Great Britain, and the United States, almost immediately distributed large bundles of cash to encourage resistance to Soviet authority.

The Quai d’Orsay was ambivalent about supporting Finland and the other non-Russian nationalities. Russia had been an important French ally until the abdication of the tsar in March 1917, and the Quai d’Orsay hoped for the restoration of a Great Russian state, allied to France. The situation was complicated by German influence in Finland and elsewhere in the Russian borderlands. In early 1918 the anti-Bolsheviks hoped for German and/or Allied support to overthrow the Soviets, while the Bolsheviks contemplated resistance to Germany and its allies if they could not obtain peace in negotiations at the German-occupied town of Brest-Litovsk.

What were France and its allies going to do? Support the anti-Bolshevik, pro-German nationalities and former tsarist officers, or the revolutionary anti-German (so it appeared) Bolsheviks in the Russian heartland? The main question became and would remain throughout the interwar years: “Who is enemy no. 1: Germany or Soviet Russia?” Was it more important to defeat the Germans in the east or to overthrow the revolutionary Bolsheviks whose revolutionary ideas might be “catching” in the west? The answer came quickly not only in Paris, but also in London and Washington: the pro-German affinities of the anti-Bolshevik opposition would be overlooked; it made no sense to support and build up a military force, the nascent Red Army, which could then threaten the capitalist west with socialist revolution.

Clerc points to French ambivalence toward Finland as the White Finns, supported by German troops, crushed Red Finnish resistance in the spring of 1918. Struggling to survive, the Bolsheviks could do little or nothing to help their Finnish allies. The Quai d'Orsay burned hot and cold toward the non-Russian nationalities and tried to finesse its position by waiting to see who would win the Russian civil war (1917-1921). If the Russian White Guard armies could not overthrow Soviet authority, France would support the nationalities and a weakening of Soviet Russia. Hence, after the fiasco of French military intervention in the Ukraine and Crimea (December 1918-April 1919), the Quai d'Orsay organized the *cordon sanitaire*, a barrier of East European states, to keep Bolshevism bottled up in Russia. It was the period of the first Red Scare.

French ambivalence toward Finland continued throughout the interwar years. The Quai d'Orsay did not like to see a German presence in Finland, although France and Britain negotiated the Locarno accords with Weimar Germany in 1925. These agreements guaranteed security on the French and Belgian frontiers but not in the east. Here was a problem for France and Britain during the interwar years: they expected others to pay the price of *their* security. Although Clerc has little to say about French relations with the USSR, these were strained or hostile during the most of the 1920s, until 1932, and again after 1934-35. In Paris, Finland was viewed as "a symbol of opposition to Russian communism," and most of the time this suited the Quai d'Orsay and the general staff (p.154).

All well and good, the "viril" Finns might have calculated (p. 169). But would France and Britain support Finland—or Poland or Czechoslovakia for that matter—if their independence were threatened? For the Helsinki government, this would have been the prime concern. "Enemy no. 1" was the USSR, not Germany. During 1932-1934, Finland did not like to see France improve its relations with Moscow. Finnish agents in France lobbied anti-communist opposition groups in order to impede a Franco-Soviet rapprochement being pursued by Foreign Ministers Édouard Herriot, Joseph Paul-Boncour, and Louis Barthou. Nor did Finland like the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact concluded in May 1935. Finnish concerns were exaggerated because the pact was an empty shell. The anticommunist Pierre Laval had succeeded Barthou, who was assassinated in October 1934, and Laval reversed the policies of his three predecessors. The French shift was noticed in Moscow, alarming the Soviet government and arousing its mistrust.

At the same time, Finland began to look to Nazi Germany for security against the USSR. This development worried some French observers but was accepted by others as "an anti-Soviet reaction" (pp. 167-169). One could hardly blame the Finnish government for Laval himself was flirting with Berlin, a point the author appears to miss. Europe was becoming politically polarized: when the perennial question came up of who was "enemy no. 1", many got the answer wrong.

Clerc notes that during the 1930s the Quai d'Orsay viewed Finland as "in the shadow of the USSR" (p. 220), although the author seems confused about the high and low points, mostly low, in Franco-Soviet relations. In 1939, when it became clear to almost everyone that war with Nazi Germany was imminent, the Finns worried about Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance negotiations in Moscow. Georges Bonnet, the cringing French Foreign Minister, still thought in terms of maintaining a European balance of power and avoiding war. Clerc might well have asked in what alternate reality Bonnet was living. The Soviet government worried about improving Finnish-German relations—a development skated over by the author—and considered Finland a potential enemy in a German war against the USSR. Moscow was convinced that war was coming and was determined not to be isolated when it broke out.

The narrative of the last-minute Moscow negotiations between France, Britain, and the Soviet Union has been told before, including by myself. Clerc examines these negotiations briefly without explaining the Finnish position concerning them. At the Foreign Office in London, the Finns were active in obstructing negotiations with the USSR: "most tiresome" was how one British diplomat described Finnish activities [1]. Of course, when they failed and the Soviet Union concluded a non-aggression

pact with Nazi Germany, the French accused Moscow of betrayal. It was “pot calling kettle black,” but hypocrisy did not prevent Édouard Daladier, the French premier, from declaring the French Communist Party illegal, arresting its deputies and party activists, and closing down the communist press. Against Germany, which invaded Poland on 1 September, Daladier was less decisive. In the first weeks of the *drôle de guerre*, Poland disappeared.

Meanwhile, in the east, the USSR wanted negotiations with the Finnish government, most notably to push back the Soviet-Finnish frontier on the Karelian Isthmus away from Leningrad. The city was located only thirty-two kilometres south of the Soviet-Finnish border and thus was vulnerable to long-range artillery. Clerc deals only briefly with the lead-up to the outbreak of the Winter War on November 30. No one thought there would be war, according to the author, though some observers did in fact expect it. In early October, both the French and British ambassadors reported that the Finns might fight. Apparently, V. M. Molotov, the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, was not particularly concerned. He thought fighting, if there were any, would be over in three days. In fact, it went on for more than three months! Soviet dictator I. V. Stalin, normally cautious in foreign affairs, gravely miscalculated.

So did the French. The author underlines just how determined Daladier was to confront the Soviet Union in Finland even at the risk of war, either declared or undeclared. In the meantime, the *drôle de guerre* continued on the western front. Daladier appeared to prefer a war with the USSR to an unwanted war with the unwanted enemy, Nazi Germany. Even in October, before the Winter War broke out, the Italian Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, hinted at the idea of a large anti-communist coalition against the USSR. The British and French ambassadors in Rome liked the idea, but Benito Mussolini scotched it.

After the outbreak of hostilities, the western press got very excited. It was a throwback to 1918-1919 and that first Red Scare. At the beginning, the Finns held off the Red Army. David had smote Goliath. In Britain there was a little restraint toward Moscow, but in France the hinges came off the doors. Paris trembled with excitement! Finland was the *cause sacrée*; the Finns were “heroes of the western world.” [2] They were friends, brothers, allies. Finnish victories became vicarious French victories. *Vive la Finlande!* In the war ministry and the Quai d’Orsay, there was big thinking about occupying Leningrad, bombing the Baku oil fields in the Caucasus, and even toppling the hated Soviet government. Plans were made to send an Anglo-French expeditionary force to Finland. 50,000 troops were ready to go, Daladier told the Finnish ambassador in Paris, although the real number was more like 12,000-13,000, according to the British. It was just like the Foreign Office to discourage Daladier’s enthusiasm for war with the USSR. The Finnish David inflicted heavy losses upon the Red Goliath, but the fable after all remained a fable. In February 1940, the tide of battle turned; by the end of the month, the Finnish army was on its last legs. Hurry, Daladier told his subordinates, we must get boots on the ground in Scandinavia to help the Finns.

Could the Finnish government trust French promises to deliver the necessary support? “Fairy stories,” a British diplomat called them [3]. Norway and Sweden balked at giving transit rights to Anglo-French forces, and the Foreign Office was more candid with the Finnish ambassador in London about the possibilities of assistance. The Finnish government held out for a little longer, but during the evening of March 12, it came to terms in Moscow. Until the end, Daladier tried to delay the conclusion of peace, embarrassing even the Foreign Office. The late British historian A. J. P. Taylor reckoned that the most “charitable conclusion” one could draw about Anglo-French policy during the Winter War, was “that the British and French governments had taken leave of their senses” [4]. The Red Army put almost one million troops in the field against Finland, what did Daladier think 12,000, 13,000, or even 50,000 Anglo-French soldiers could do against such a force? But 50,000 was not the real figure. Meanwhile, the *drôle de guerre* continued a little longer on the western front where the real enemy was preparing to strike.

Clerc underscores Daladier's role in goading his generals and officials into action. Daladier goaded the British too, and seemed to be making some headway in London just before the end of fighting. The Finns calculated that whatever Daladier might be saying, Anglo-French support would not be enough or in time to halt the Red Army. Who knows what catastrophes might have occurred if the fighting had gone on a little longer? The author does not speculate. Nor does he seem aware of the strength of anticommunism in France throughout the interwar period, where most politicians and generals, though not all, got wrong the answer to the perennial question: "Who is enemy no. 1?"

## NOTES

[1] 17 Oct. 1939, N5263/991/38, National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), FO 371 23692.

[2] From the reviewer's unfinished manuscript on the formation of the "Grand Alliance" in 1941.

[3] 8 March 1940, N2935G/9/56, TNA, FO 371 24804.

[4] A.J.P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 469, n. 1.

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