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Philip Nord, *France 1940: Defending the Republic*. Yale University Press, 2015. xviii + 189 pp. Notes and index. \$27.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 970-0300-18987-2.

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In this brief and briskly written book, Philip Nord, a leading historian of modern France, explores the nature and significance of that country's defeat in 1940. The subject is not new: the first post-mortems began to appear almost immediately after the debacle and have continued ever since. Nord justifies his entry into a crowded field by presenting the book as an "alternative narrative" to the "decadence story" (p. 153). The book itself is divided into four parts or arguments. In the first part, Nord sets out to refute the notion of decadence—the notion that the Third Republic was profoundly rotten and that its collapse was inevitable and even justified. Instead, he asserts, France responded with notable vigour during the 1930s to the threat posed by Nazi Germany, taking the lead in organizing a coalition of countries while also preparing its armed forces and economy for war. In the second part, he argues that the defeat was the result of strategic and tactical errors by the French military combined with considerable daring (and luck) on the part of the Germans. In the third part, which discusses the immediate response to military defeat, Nord argues that French military leaders conspired with top-ranking civil servants to strangle the Republic, opening the door to the authoritarian regime of their dreams. Nord offers his final and most intriguing argument in the conclusion: that Vichy's authoritarianism amounted to a brief pause in the longer history of France's attachment to the republic. According to Nord, soon after the defeat the vast majority of French people turned their backs on Vichy and its authoritarian project, returning to the republican fold. If the immediate result was a mass civil resistance movement against both the German occupiers and the Vichy regime, the wartime return to republicanism also cleared the way for the post-Liberation restoration of the republic by acclamation.

The first two chapters, one on pre-war diplomacy and the other on armaments and morale, are the least satisfying part of the book. In overturning the "decadence story," Nord takes on a paper tiger. An extensive body of specialist scholarship exists that rejects the notion of decadence; and in 2003 Julian Jackson came out with an award-winning synthesis in this vein.^[1] Nowadays, a revisionist thesis would be that there was something profoundly and fatally wrong with the late Third Republic. But the problem is not only that there is not much fight left in the "decadence story," it is also that Nord's treatment of French diplomacy and armaments are cursory. France's diplomacy, he writes, "was not entirely dismal", while its "rearmament push" was not "such a dismal failure" (pp. 21, 43). Leaving aside the question of who in fact claims that they were dismal, such statements do not tell us very much. Granted, France's response was not dismal, but what was it then? Nord's answer, of course, is that it was pretty good. But this begs the question of perspective. It would be hard to argue that Georges Bonnet, the foreign minister, judged France's diplomatic situation on the eve of war to be favourable, just as it would be to claim that Raul Dautry, the armaments minister, or Paul Reynaud, the finance minister, were optimistic about the armaments and financial situations in the opening months of 1940. The point is not that all was dismal, but rather that France's response to the possibility and then reality of war up to May 1940 requires a more sustained analysis than Nord offers.

In the next two chapters, which discuss the Battle of France, Nord argues that France's defeat in 1940 is best explained in military terms. "France's defeat in 1940", he states, "was a military phenomenon, not the inevitable expression of some generalized national malaise or moral deficiency" (p. 97). Once again Nord is echoing a scholarly consensus: Martin Alexander, Robert Doughty, Karl-Heinz Frieser and Eugenia Kiesling among others have all argued that the military defeat was due not to "national malaise or moral deficiency," but to a combination of strategic, doctrinal, operational and tactical factors. Perhaps the most striking error was the decision to send French and British armies into Belgium to confront the advancing Wehrmacht, leaving the Allies vulnerable to a German breakthrough on the Franco-German border as occurred in the Ardennes.

As Nord recounts, in some ways the plan made good sense: France itself would be spared as a battlefield while Allied armies would be able to link up with Belgian and Dutch forces, creating, in principle, a stronger front. But for the plan to work, the Germans had to do exactly what the French wanted them to do. Ernest May has explained the plan as an intelligence failure, which it certainly was; but it also amounted to a remarkable failure of imagination on the part of French military leaders.[2] Some British commanders wondered about the wisdom of placing all of the Allies' military eggs in one basket, but, as the junior partner in the military alliance, they preferred not to push the issue.[3] In any event, French military thinking and practice proved to be strikingly inflexible, not merely at the highest planning levels but also at the lower battlefield level. Nord is right that French soldiers generally put up a good fight, even if, in the end, they found themselves overwhelmed by the pace of operations imposed on them by the Germans. And he is right that French armies arguably performed no worse than others during the war's opening years. But this was scant consolation for a military organization that was widely considered to be one of the best in Europe and whose chief purpose during the interwar years had been to prepare for a possible war with Germany. It is worth adding that this was not the case with the Belgian, British or Dutch armies, though the Soviet army is another story.

The third part consists of two chapters dealing with the response of French elites to the military defeat. Nord is chiefly interested in the question of why the French government chose to ask the Germans for an armistice rather than to continue the war abroad, either in the empire or as a government in exile, as happened with other defeated countries (Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Czechoslovakia). His answer, as already mentioned, is that French leaders conspired to force Reynaud to resign in order to replace him with Pétain, who then ushered in an authoritarian regime. If the Third Republic had a "fatal flaw," Nord explains, it was its "military and administrative elites" who had always despised the democratic Republic and seized the opportunity to throttle it (pp. 104, 132). Here, Nord's claims to novelty are on more solid ground. Although Annie Lacroix-Riz has recently attributed the defeat and the onset of Vichy to a conspiracy of political-economic elites, her indictment of the Third Republic is far too sweeping and categorical to be convincing.[4] Nord's argument, by contrast, is more focused: the problem lay principally with the "military establishment" that had never been properly "republicanized" (p. 132).

For all its novelty, however, Nord's argument is not without problems. There is the question of just how representative were military leaders such as Weygand and Pétain or civil servants such as Bouthillier and Baudouin. Gamelin, who had been army chief for much of the 1930s, was viewed at the time (and by subsequent historians) as a loyal servant of the Republic. One might also mention François Darlan, the head of the French navy. Darlan would become and remain a loyal *Pétainiste* and *Vichyiste*, at least until November 1942, but during the 1930s he owed his rise in the navy in good part to his reputation as a reliable republican.[5] More generally, the claim that military elites were alienated from the Republic sits uneasily with the experience of 1914–1918 in which the French army was understood to be defending not only France and its soil, but also the Republic against the German invaders. In any case, Nord would need to examine the political-cultural history of the French military establishment during the interwar years in order to make a persuasive argument about its role in 1940. As for top-

level civil servants, it is far from evident that anti-republican sentiment was rampant among them before the defeat, even if calls for “state reform” could frequently be heard. [6]

Another and related problem with Nord’s argument about a conspiracy of elites is that it downplays the shattering impact of the military defeat. To be sure, France was not alone in suffering defeat. But unlike their Belgium and Dutch counterparts, French leaders perceived their country as a great power, one that had successfully resisted a German invasion for four long years in 1914–1918. That in 1940 France and its army went down to defeat in matter of weeks was a profound shock for the French—as well as for others. This shock, in turn, manifested itself in two related beliefs. The first was that the war was over, that the Germans had won and that Nazi Germany would play the decisive role in determining Europe’s future. The second belief was that the republican regime had utterly failed in its basic duty of national defence and therefore had to be replaced if France was to have any future. If anything, the emerging exodus of millions of French men, women and children, that stirred fears of political-social unrest on a massive scale, reinforced the appeal of an authoritarian regime. The defeat, in other words, constituted a sharp break, transforming contemporary understandings of the Third Republic. Pétain and Weygand would arguably have been willing to serve a victorious French republic, but they were not prepared to do so for a defeated one.

There is, finally, the question of why Reynaud offered so little resistance to the pressure for an armistice. Nord’s focus is on the heated discussions between government ministers and top-ranking officials in the desperate days of June 1940. Such a focus is certainly understandable: key decisions emerged from these discussions. But it does confine politics to the interactions of a handful of elite figures. Notably absent in Nord’s account is any larger political context, which in a regime such as the Third Republic arguably has to encompass parliamentary politics. From this perspective, it is Reynaud’s precarious political position even before the German offensive that is striking: in March 1940, his government won its first vote of confidence by a single vote. This razor-thin approval reflected the fact that Reynaud was something of an anomaly, being both on the political right and a *dur* (hard-liner) towards Nazi Germany. More to the point, Reynaud’s fragile political position reflected the difficulty of building a reliable parliamentary majority committed to pursuing the war against Germany (and Germany alone), whatever the costs. With the political right increasingly prey to anti-communism and to fears of the political-social consequences of a lengthy war and with pacifism running through the left, Reynaud found himself increasingly isolated. This isolation, in turn, helps to explain why Reynaud did not oppose more firmly the idea of an armistice: he knew as well as anyone that the political support for continuing the war was lacking. And this suggests that, even before the defeat, French morale (at least its political-parliamentary face) was perhaps less resolute than Nord contends.

In the book’s brief conclusion, Nord arrives at his final and perhaps chief argument: that Vichy constituted a brief interregnum in modern France’s political history. Vichy’s authoritarian project soon became unpopular as the great majority of the French began to distance themselves from Pétain’s regime, in the process re-embracing republicanism and forming a mass resistance movement. As Nord asserts, “it is fair to speak of an enduring, public commitment to republican values and institutions that was interrupted by the defeat and the exodus but that reknit itself, like a broken bone, in the first years of the Occupation” (p. 165). This is certainly an intriguing argument, but one wonders if it does not over-simplify some of the complexities of Vichy. When it comes to the resistance, there is risk of conflating anti-German feeling with anti-Vichy, as well as anti-Pétain, sentiments. That the German occupiers were thoroughly disliked by the mass of the population is undoubtedly true. After all, the Germans were uninvited occupiers. Yet presumably one could be anti-German and could even contribute to the resistance movement (or movements) in various ways, without at the same time being anti-Vichy. As Pierre Laborie among others has explained, there is also a distinction to make between Pétain and Vichy, with the former remaining more popular than his regime well into 1944.[7] All of this makes it tricky to portray the mass of French people as committed republicans.

Another problem is that, in a book of this length, Nord can only offer the barest sketch of his final argument, leaving the reader wanting more. As H-France readers will be aware, his previous book explored French state-making from the 1930s through to the postwar period, highlighting continuities across the three regimes.[8] But Nord's emphasis in that book was on the social and cultural aspects of reconstruction; it is therefore to be hoped that he will develop elsewhere his argument about French attachment to the Republic and to republicanism. If he does, it might be worth addressing more directly the question of how a republican parliamentary regime actually functioned. This question is worth asking, I think, because the French themselves repeatedly did so before, during and after the war. Mention has already been made of the call among civil servants for "state reform." But they were far from alone: during the 1930s prominent political figures such as André Tardieu on the right and Léon Blum on the left criticized aspects of the regime, especially its apparent lack of executive authority. At the same time, neither Tardieu nor Blum was an enemy of the republic.[9] Instead, they were part of an intra-republican debate about how a democratic republic should work. This debate resurfaced during the occupation both within and between the different resistance organizations. And, of course, it continued into the postwar period as French politicians faced the challenge of forging a new republican regime. The experience of occupation, together with the Allies' ultimate victory over Nazi Germany, delegitimized not only Vichy but also authoritarian regimes in general across Western Europe. What these major events did not do, however, was to determine what a democratic republic would look like in practice. This the French would have to work out themselves in what amounted to an ongoing political process, one begun during the French Revolution and that continues to this day.

In the end, it is hard not to conclude that Nord's book is much too short for its ambitions. To be convincing, the claims to novelty require a closer study of France's response to Germany, one that examines not only what the French achieved, but also the decisions taken in the political, economic and military realms, the dynamics fueled by these decisions, as well as how the French themselves understood developments. Similarly, the arguments about an anti-Republican conspiracy among French elites and about the long-term attachment of the French to republicanism, need to be fleshed out. Only then will it be possible to offer an "alternative narrative" of the nature and significance of France's defeat in 1940.

NOTES

[1] Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For an excellent overview, see Peter Jackson, "Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy before the Second World War", *History Compass* 4(2006): 870-905.

[2] Ernest May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000).

[3] Brian Bond, *France and Belgium 1939-1940* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1975), pp. 43-62.

[4] Annie Lacroix-Riz, *De Munich à Vichy: L'Assassinat de la Troisième République* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008).

[5] Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Bernard Costagliola, *Darlan: La collaboration à tout prix* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2015), pp. 31-32.

[6] Marc Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'État français. L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp. 21-42.

[7] Pierre Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

[8] Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[9] François Monnet, *Refaire la République. André Tardieu, un dérive réactionnaire (1876-1945)* (Paris: Fayard, 1993); and Léon Blum, *La réforme gouvernementale* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1936).

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