



France 1940: Defending the Republic by Philip Nord.

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In this tightly argued book, the prolific historian Philip Nord¹ (Princeton Univ.) refutes the idea that the French Third Republic of the interwar years was a decadent society with a sclerotic political system whose failure to recognize soon enough the threat posed by Nazi Germany made it unable to defend itself during the Battle of France. He contends that its military leaders betrayed the republic at the moment of defeat by seizing the opportunity to replace it with the collaborationist Vichy regime.

Nord concedes that current scholarship on the subject has by now corrected the false image of France in 1940 created initially by Marshal Philippe Pétain and historian Marc Bloch² and then solidified as received wisdom in the public consciousness by the popular works of William Shirer and Alistair Horne.³ Revisionist scholars⁴ have debunked the notion of a French body politic hobbled by a blinkered bourgeoisie and wage-grubbing trade unionists. Nonetheless, although “Vichy’s advent was not proof of French decadence,” there existed, writes Nord, “another, no less consequential malaise whose diagnosis remains yet to be worked out” (xvii). To make that diagnosis, Nord extends his account of the fall of France another month beyond the signing of the armistice on 23 June. In its effortless mastery of the historical material and the content and force of its argument, *France 1940* brings to mind John Lukacs’s *Five Days in London, May 1940*.⁵

The book comprises three parts of two chapters each. Part I concerns diplomacy and war preparedness; Part II battle plans and lightning war; Part III the armistice and the road to Vichy. In his conclusion, the author stresses that, although France was slow to grasp the growing threat posed by Nazi Germany in the 1930s, by 1940 it was no less prepared for war than any of the Third Reich’s other adversaries. Indeed, in some respects it was better prepared. The stunning rout of the French army in 1940 reflected not some national sociopolitical malaise, but chronically weak leadership. The Reich’s victory was equally the result of a shrewd eleventh-hour military judgment that yielded a triumph that shocked Germany as much as France.

Defeated “France’s anti-republican elites swung into action, using every tactic fair and foul to get their way. It’s not that they conspired, but that they soldiered toward a common goal” (154), guided by a shared worldview. Men like Gen. Maxime Weygand and the politician Paul Baudouin “thought of themselves as true patriots, truer in their patriotism than the parliamentarians who, they were con-

1. His previous work includes *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1986), *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1995), *Impressionists and Politics: Art and Democracy in the Nineteenth Century* (NY: Routledge, 2000), and *France’s New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2010).

2. In *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1949).

3. Respectively, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1969) and *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).

4. Nord cites, in particular, Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003), and Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2000).

5. New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999.

vinced, had got France into its present predicament” (154–55). All these things considered, Nord observes, “France’s 1930s look a little less dismal. There was always the bright spot of the Popular Front, but it now looks like the Daladier years that followed have something to be said for them as well” (159).

Diplomatically, France in the 1930s had friends, but of the fair-weather variety. The most important, Great Britain, wary of making any firm commitment to France, discouraged the Third Republic’s political leaders from showing a backbone in the face of danger. Indeed, this habit predated the 1930s; in this respect, Nord’s characterization of the 1925 Treaty of Locarno is too rosy. Though it may well be true that France’s intention was to restore Germany to its place in the fabric of international life, those who sought this goal on the Weimar government’s behalf had little domestic support.⁶ The British, for their part, wanted to change from de facto ally of France to a neutral arbiter of Franco-German relations.⁷

By 1938, French rearmament was closing the gap with Germany in numbers and quality of armaments, in part, Nord rightly points out, because the Reich’s productivity was being overestimated. Although the French air force was no match for the Luftwaffe, the SOMUA⁸ medium tank and Char B1 heavy tank were competitive with their German counterparts.

Nord pays too little attention to France’s central strategic dilemma: as a continental and colonial power with both an Atlantic and Mediterranean coastline, it required both a large army and a significant naval force. The strategic priorities of the British and Germans mirrored each other: the former was an insular power whose navy naturally received the lion’s share of its defense expenditures; the latter favored its army over its navy and built an air force specifically to support the Wehrmacht’s ground operations. France, by contrast, had to allocate its defense resources across its service branches.⁹ Still, if France was in fact ill-prepared for war in 1940, the crucial question is, Nord points out, *compared to whom?* Although Britain’s rearmament program made impressive gains in the late 1930s, the Soviet Union and the United States were less prepared for the war they ended up fighting than any of the major belligerents. Even Germany’s preparations were still far short of the Wehrmacht generals’ wish list when Hitler’s diplomatic timetable stampeded military events.

Regarding France’s unexpectedly spectacular defeat—the focus of the first half of his book—Nord emphasizes that the Allies were not at a crucial disadvantage in spring 1940:

Once war was declared, the Belgians and the Dutch abandoned neutralism and at last aligned with Britain and France. Together, the four powers fielded more divisions than the Germans. France by itself had almost as many tanks as the Wehrmacht, but France was not by itself: it was reinforced by a British ally with a tank force of its own, however modest in size. As for airpower, the Luftwaffe outstripped France’s air force by a wide, albeit shrinking, margin, but not the combined fleets of France and Britain together. Numbers, of course, do not tell the whole story. French tanks were impressive war engines, but they had design flaws, and a lot would depend on how they were used. France’s warplanes were outclassed by Germany’s but Britain had a fighter fleet second to none, as the Battle of Britain would in due course demonstrate. Once again, much would depend on how the Allies exploited the weaponry at their command. The Germans, then, may have enjoyed a qualitative edge in armaments, but that edge was not so great as to be decisive in itself. What mattered was deployment. (36)

6. See Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar’s Greatest Statesman* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2002) 492–525.

7. See Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005) 387–456.

8. Société d’outillage mécanique et d’usinage d’artillerie, a French manufacturing firm.

9. See Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1984) 105–219, and Jackson (note 4 above) 30–31.

Nord maintains that France's defeat resulted not so much from a failure of strategy as from poor execution. In his chapter on battle plans, he argues convincingly that France's defensive posture was wholly logical in light of the experience of 1914–18. Construction of the Maginot Line began in 1928, when memories of the Great War were fresh; the defense works had the advantage that “a frontier defended by fortifications required a smaller manpower investment than a frontier defended by soldiers alone” (65). The French never assumed they could stop or reverse a German attack singlehandedly; they imagined that—as in the First Battle of the Marne—French, British, and American industrial might would force Germany into a lengthy struggle it could not win for lack of sufficient manpower and matériel. Of course, when the Wehrmacht simply outflanked the Maginot Line via the Ardennes, French interwar strategy came to be seen as a tribute to lunacy. But Germany's early plan for invading France (Case Yellow) was much less audacious. It was Erich von Manstein's last-minute modification of the plan along with late, ill-advised changes in French planning that made the critical difference.

Nord stresses in chapter 4 that Manstein's change of plan would not have been so decisive but for Gen. Heinz Guderian's execution of it: “The *rapidity of the advance* cut off the British and French armies stationed in Belgium from the bulk of the Allied armies further to the south, in effect slicing the Allied forces in two. This made possible a crushing victory of the kind the Wehrmacht had not anticipated” (90; my emphasis). Thus, an optimal combination of planning and execution ensured the comprehensive German victory, one seen in the ensuing mythology as a testament to German clairvoyance and French myopia. But the Third Republic was not in fact so inherently dissolute nor the Third Reich so uniquely robust that the outcome of 1940 had always been in the cards. Indeed, the other Allied powers might have fared no better without the natural barriers of the Atlantic Ocean, the English Channel, and the Russian steppes. Still, a military defeat is never just a military defeat “but always has a political dimension, and it's when politics are added into the equation that the real strangeness of the French case stands out” (102–3).

In the second half of *France 1940*, the author turns to the political dimension of the Third Republic's defeat. He shares Julian Jackson's conclusion that the politics of the 1930s “help explain the consequences of the defeat more than its causes,”¹⁰ but articulates it more vigorously

The Republic did not just self-destruct but was cornered into self-destruction. There was an Iago in this tragedy, indeed, many of them, officers and civil servants who felt little if any loyalty to the regime they served, appeasers and right-wingers who, though they were never more than a minority, exploited a moment of extreme crisis to get the upper hand. (111)

For some French officers, the army represented a state-within-a-state. It “had its own, non-democratic ethos, and it was a refuge for royalists and Catholics who wanted to serve France but had a hard time making peace with a secular republic” (131). For them, the surrender at Compiègne in June 1940 offered a chance to revisit an older agenda and eliminate the Third Republic under the leadership of Pétain, the hero of Verdun. Among Vichy's many disgraceful and revealing moments was the trial of the former leader of the Popular Front, Léon Blum, who had been among the last voices of genuinely liberal reason in Europe in the 1930s. His unforgivable sin was being both a Jew and a socialist. This marked a dire relapse into the anti-Semitic and anti-republican dementia that had climaxed in the Dreyfus Affair, giving the parliamentary center-left one of its greatest victories.

France 1940 packs an awful lot into a small package. Its sweeping comparative perspective on France's real and imagined failings in the 1930s will inform and provoke its readers more effectively than other acclaimed books thrice its length.

10. Jackson (note 4 above) 227.