

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 338

Published on 16 December 2011

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editors: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

Peter Jackson. "French Security and a British 'Continental Commitment' after the First World War: a Reassessment." *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXVI, no 519: 345-385. DOI: 10.1093/ehr/cer074. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cer074> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR338.pdf>

Review by **John F.V. Keiger**, University of Salford

Alternating currents: French foreign policy in flux.

For much of the twentieth century French power was at the service of two objectives: to limit the German threat and to satisfy the French ambition of playing a world role. But France has been sufficiently conscious of its declining power to understand that it could achieve neither without the support of other states. As the First World War ended France had two alternative routes for realizing its dual ambition. The first was to gain the support or acquiescence in those objectives from the Anglo-Americans, both of whom became a source of frustration and friction for France. The second was Europe, as a means of limiting German power and as a force multiplier for French influence abroad. The emphasis on European or Anglo-American relations has fluctuated according to various contingencies, but has been a feature of French foreign and defence policy for nearly a century.¹

Peter Jackson's important article in the *English Historical Review*, "French Security and a British 'Continental Commitment' after the First World War: A Reassessment", analyses in great depth and with great subtlety one of the cross-over points in that fluctuation of French foreign policy in the twentieth century. In his study of French security policy between 1919 and 1925 he conceptualises these alternatives of Britain (not the U.S.) or Europe as being between a 'traditional' and a 'multilateral' solution to France's European

¹ J.F.V. Keiger, 'The 'Novelty' of Sarkozy's Foreign Policy Towards NATO and the US: The Long View', *European Political Science*, Vol.9, 2, June 2010, pp. 155-63 and for a variation on this dichotomy see John Keiger, 'Whither French foreign policy: same horns, same dilemma?' 3 March 2010, <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=3336> accessed 1 Nov 2011.

security needs, principally against Germany. The former sought security through defence and treaty alliances to construct or maintain a balance of power; the latter approached security through a more idealist pan-European arrangement relying heavily on the constraining power of legal and normative restraints.

Jackson begins by disagreeing with Arnold Wolfers's contention, supported by other historians since², that France's policy in the interwar years aimed consistently at a resurrection of the 1914-18 military alliance with Britain (p.345). Jackson posits something more nuanced and more important for our understanding not only of French foreign policy, but also, even if he does not explicitly state as much, for our understanding of the construction of Europe. His contention is that "the commitment sought from Britain between 1919 and 1925 evolved from that of a traditional military ally to that of a joint-guarantor of a Europe-wide system of inter-locking arbitration and mutual assistance pacts" (p. 345). Furthermore, as Jackson points out, a key difference between the traditional and the multilateral approaches was that the former excluded Germany, whereas the latter included it. That Europe-wide system, that eventually included Britain, would gradually take the form of the 1925 Locarno agreements to provide security for Western Europe and would be the basis for Prime Minister Aristide Briand's 1929 still-born, but highly significant, plan for a United States of Europe. This reviewer would contend that this new French solution for providing for its security in Europe by enmeshing Germany in the European web would henceforth enter France's armoury of foreign policy options, which would alternate, even overlap, between the traditional and the multilateral up to the present.³

Jackson's argument for the gradual transition in French security policy between 1919 and 1925 is based on a painstaking analysis of the French foreign and defence archives, albeit the latter revealing the military's reluctance to abandon the traditional approach. What are the reasons that Jackson advances for this creative shift? The first, of course, is Britain, traditionally seen as a counterbalance to German power in Europe. But an alliance with it was unworkable, because no matter how hard the French might press the case this was out of line with British policy objectives. The second is what Jackson describes as the growing popular support for pacifism and international reconciliation fostered by Wilsonian ideals of international arbitration and the League of Nations. A third was the change amongst France's foreign policy-making personnel: at the top with Millerand and Poincaré's traditional approach giving way to the more creative Briand; but also among Quai d'Orsay permanent officials with the likes of more flexible permanent officials such as Jules Laroche, Alexis Léger, Paul Claudel and René Massigli. Fourth, according to Jackson, was the coming to power in May 1924 of the *Cartel des gauches*

² A Wolfers, *Britain and France between Two Wars: Conflicting Strategies of Peace since Versailles*, New York, 1940.

³ See J.F.V. Keiger, *France and the World Since 1870*, Arnold/Oxford University Press, 2001, chapter 5 'Germany', pp. 110-59.

coalition under Prime Minister Edouard Herriot with a greater commitment to internationalist solutions for French security. Thus as Jackson notes: “The security strategy that evolved during this period was a marriage of the traditional balance of power reflexes of French security professionals with the muscular internationalist doctrines of Cartel political leaders. The result was a juridical multilateral approach to security that culminated in the Locarno Accords” (p.385). Of course Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 put paid to the multilateral option thereby returning French policy to the traditional stance; multilateralism would only come into play again in the early 1950s.

What is particularly stimulating about Jackson’s argument is the subtlety with which it is built up for the period 1919-25 through a detailing of the ebb and flow of ideas, the influence of individual agency and structures, the promotion and the blocking of policies, their advancement and reversals. At no point does he fall prey to the historian and political scientist’s trap of attributing everything to one ‘turning point’, either to fit pre-conceived ideas about individual political leaders and parties, or to comply rather too tidily with traditional historical date boundaries for events. Consequently, he is able to avoid ‘watershed’ dates that obscure longer term trends. Thus Jackson acknowledges when appropriate how even the traditionalist Poincaré could begin to come round to the multilateral approach; or how Herriot’s *Cartel* government was building on changes that were already underway; or that very often traditional and multilateral currents co-existed among key officials.

Of course like all good research Jackson’s article raises questions, in particular about the foreign policy-making process. In explaining the cross-over from traditional to multilateral he touches on the change in Quai d’Orsay personnel. There is more work to be done here on that personnel’s world views and mental maps, how they developed, the role of the *Ecole Libre des Sciences politiques* from which they were nearly all recruited, and their age profile, in order to build up a sociology, even a prosopography, of permanent officials and how they promoted or blocked certain policies.⁴

Peter Jackson has not only produced an article of considerable erudition and rigour that forensically takes apart the foreign policy making process in France from 1919 to 1925, he has demonstrated how international history can integrate analysis from broader disciplines. The result is an argument that not only impresses but convinces in explaining this creative shift in French security policy.

John Keiger is Professor of International History at the University of Salford, UK. His books include *France and the Origins of the First World War* (1983), *Raymond Poincaré* (1997) and *France and the World Since 1870* (2001). He is co-authoring

⁴ For a study of this kind for the period 1898-1914 see John Keiger, ‘Patriotism, Politics and Policy-making in the French Foreign Ministry from the 1890s to 1914’ in R. Tombs (ed), *Nationhood and Nationalism in France. From Boulangism to the Great War, 1889-1918*, Harper Collins, 1991, pp. 255-66.

H-Diplo Article Review

with Gaynor Johnson a volume entitled: *Networks and Actors in the British and French Foreign Ministries: Responses to the Idea of European Integration, 1919-1957*.

Copyright © 2011 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.