

2014

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

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

Published on **2 May 2014**

H-Diplo Review Essays Editor: Diane Labrosse
H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Review Essay on Kim Munholland. "The Gravediggers of France at the Château d'Itter, 1943-1945." *Journal of Opinions, Ideas, and Essays* 5 (15 August 2013).

<http://purl.umn.edu/155578>

Stephen A. Schuker. "Seeking a Scapegoat: Intelligence and Grand Strategy in France, 1919-1940," in *Secret Intelligence in the European States System, 1918-1989*. Edited by Jonathan Haslam and Karina Urbach, 81-127. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Young-Munholland-Schuker.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Robert J. Young**, Professor Emeritus, University of Winnipeg

Those of us who have worked on the history of twentieth century France will welcome the appearance of these new pieces, for they are the products of two long and distinguished scholarly careers. Kim Munholland is one of this continent's more accomplished historians of France, and one of its most eclectic. From an early study of European society before World War One, to subsequent works on Second World War French Resistance, the Free French and Americans in New Caledonia, even the Nazi pursuit of fine French wine, this scholar has long earned the admiration of so many historians of modern France.

Like Munholland, Stephen Schuker has also used the past four plus decades to assemble a remarkable corpus of work, principally in the form of wide-ranging historical articles on twentieth century history. Most, though not all, have been addressed to inter-war Europe, and most have reflected his interest in American, French and German foreign policy, and confirmed his special expertise in matters of international finance. His early book on the reparations imbroglio of the 1920s remains a classic.

When it comes to these new pieces, our two scholars have even more in common. Given their long research careers, no complaint is offered here by observing that both pieces are based principally on published literature, both primary and secondary. No complaint, because new interpretations may emerge just as easily from texts being re-examined by proven *connaisseurs* as they might from some newly discovered archival trove.

Speaking of things in common, there is yet another likeness between these two pieces. Although from very different perspectives, they both explore some of the reasons for the sudden collapse of 1940, as well as the concept that the actions and inaction of *certain* pre-war and war-time leaders – military and civilian – pretty much explain the crashing military defeat and the precipitate collapse of the Third Republic. In short, we have the notion of ‘guilty’ men, or “gravediggers” to use André Géraud’s long-familiar epithet from the 1940s.¹ Equally familiar, of course, is the logical conclusion that guilt means nothing in the absence of innocence. In quite different ways, the pieces before us try to defend the reputations of some of those most commonly placed in the dock. As for the concept itself, one author seems open to it, the other more hostile.

Kim Munholland has focused his attention on a Tyrolean castle, two handfuls of its involuntary guests, and essentially a two-year period toward the end of the Second World War. The *Schloss Itter* was under control of the German army, the ‘guests’ were members of the French military and political elite who, having offended Marshal Pétain’s Vichy regime and therefore the German Occupation authorities, had been transported deep into the Austrian Tyrol. What fate awaited them – trial, execution, eventual release -- remained unclear until May 1945 when they were liberated by units of the American army.

Apart from the presence of two deported Italians, the rest were French nationals. That much they had in common, along with a sentence of indefinite, if comfortable, imprisonment. They also shared, to be sure, a resolute determination to prove that their own pre-war and war-time records had been beyond reproach. To do so, of course, usually meant finding much to reproach in the records of others – including those of many fellow ‘guests.’ In short, one of their greatest commonalities was guaranteed to aggravate differences. So it was that internecine divisions came to command pride of place in the Château d’Itter, divisions rooted in conflicting explanations of why France had collapsed so suddenly in May-June 1940, and in conflicting responses to the abrupt transition from the Third Republic to Pétain’s autocratic regime.

Their numbers included one former President, Albert Lebrun; two former Prime Ministers, Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud; two retired generals, Maurice Gamelin and Maxime Weygand; one Ambassador, André François-Poncet; the former head of the *Confédération Générale du Travail*, Léon Jouhaux; and three men who – despite their current circumstances – continued to sympathize in various degrees with Pétain’s regime: Jean Borotra, Marcel Granger, and Colonel François de La Rocque. These, together with Augusta Bruchlen, Jouhaux’s companion, Christiane Mabire, Reynaud’s companion, and Mme Weygand, constituted a single French legion but which, for the sake of *politesse* and digestion, was prudently divided among three dinner tables.

For the better part of two years these well-fed captives had little to do beyond tirelessly promoting their own views on what lay behind the collapse of 1940 – indeed, for some, an

¹ André Géraud, *The Gravediggers of France: Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, Pétain, and Laval: Military Defeat, Armistice, Counter-revolution* (Doubleday, 1944).

extended *effondrement* since the end of World War One – and advancing their own spirited denials of having had any personal responsibility. A great deal of this verbal exchange was gradually reduced to written text in the privacy of their own quarters, and subsequently published in the form of diaries and memoirs. It is upon this material, supplemented by an extensive array of secondary literature, that Munholland constructs his narrative and his analysis of that prolonged, often heated, exchange.

The narrative, from arrival to liberation, is straightforward, as narration should be. The analysis, predictably, is more difficult, for my earlier use of words like “divisions” and “differences” are pale substitutes for the fragmentation that was all too manifest at Itter. On the matter of the military defeat, there were pockets of agreement – the two generals maintaining that they had been hog-tied by a succession of pre-war, civilian governments as well as let down by uniformed subordinates; Daladier and Reynaud insisting, in part, that their efforts had been undermined by sloppy pre-war military planning and war-time battle conduct; Borotra and La Rocque arguing from the right that the defeat had stemmed from a worn-out Republic, one already discredited before the final collapse; Jouhaux arguing something similar, although from the left. In short, agreement usually meant a thin veneer over thick disagreement. Certainly no love had ever been lost between Gamelin and Weygand, and none ever found between Daladier and Reynaud.

Though obviously connected, the loss of a battle was not the same as the loss of the Republic, a democratic regime dismantled by a combination of German firepower and Frenchmen looking for a new order. On this account, republicans like Daladier, Reynaud, Gamelin and Jouhaux agreed that the new was far worse than the old; François-Poncet agreed, but not until 1942; Borotra, La Rocque and Granger continued to believe that the new was better than the old; and Weygand, no fan of the Republic, has been seen by some as a faithful servant of the Vichy regime but, most recently, as an unsung hero of the Resistance.² Historians, as we well know, are no better than their subjects when it comes to seeing eye-to-eye.

And this glimpse of the obvious really takes us to the heart of Munholland’s argument, which I take to be as follows. First, having such a disparate group of people in one place for an extended period of time guaranteed that the atmosphere would be charged and that people would gravitate toward whichever table they thought promised the greatest degree of consensus. Second, rather than see the protracted feuding as proof of a France dysfunctional, one might consider these debates, and their underlying passion, to be evidence of a society which respected dissent and in which no camp had an exclusive claim on patriotism. Third, while the expression ‘gravediggers,’ and the concept behind it, understandably had its place in the perceptions of some contemporaries, neither the expression nor the concept belongs in the parlance or analysis of today’s historians. With so much less at stake, we can afford to be a little less judgmental, Munholland would argue, and a little more generous.

² Barnett Singer, *Maxime Weygand. A Biography of the French General in Two World Wars* (McFarland & Co., 2008).

Stephen Schuker, it seems to me, is somewhat more open to the concept of ‘guilty men,’ even if his central aim is to defend rather than prosecute. In his judgment, far too much responsibility for the defeat of the French forces and the ensuing fall of the Republic has been piled on the shoulders of the French intelligence community. Many contemporaries did so, including some of those incarcerated in the Tyrol – senior officers like Gamelin and Weygand, senior statesmen like Daladier and Reynaud. When it came to the crunch, they said, their orders and decisions too often emerged from incomplete or erroneous information. Many historians, Schuker believes, have bought into these claims, over-playing the imperfections of the French intelligence system as a short-cut to explaining why France fell. In fact, he contends, the root of the problem was not the actual *gathering* of intelligence data on German means and intentions. It was the tortured, time-consuming routes through which the information had to pass before it could reach the highest decision levels – too much of it slowly excised during passage through bureaucratic labyrinths. Far worse, it was the sceptical, unreceptive, closed minds that received this information when it eventually made it through to the top.

Much of Schuker’s account is devoted to explaining how this state of mind had emerged. This extended article of some 46 pages is divided into 11 sections. The first two advance the allegation of badly flawed, pre-war and war-time intelligence, raise doubts about the accuracy of that very allegation, and survey some of the key historiographical works that have weighed in on that debate. Most, we are told – Martin Alexander, Douglas Porch, Peter Jackson, Julian Jackson, Ernest May, Olivier Forcade – subscribe to the allegation, although Forcade’s qualified subscription takes him closer to the appraisal left by one German intelligence officer, an appraisal that actually applauded the work of his contemporaries in French intelligence.³ It is the latter point of view that Schuker reiterates and develops over the course of the ensuing pages. In short, he intends to lay out a defence brief for the Third Republic’s intelligence services. Starting, however briefly, with the seventeenth century (III).

There follows a series of sections, one on the experience of French intelligence officers in World War One (IV), one on various institutional baffles that muffled the voices of those officers (VI), one on some theoretical models for understanding that muffling (VII), and several (V, VIII, IX) on an inter-war array of practical, hard obstacles that were strewn in the path between the often accurate data and the would-be military and civilian decision-makers for whom the data were intended. These ranged from severe and prolonged budgetary constraints, to a troubled national currency, to poor inter-and-intra-ministerial

³ Martin S. Alexander, “Did the Deuxième Bureau Work? The Role of Intelligence in French Defense Policy and Strategy, 1919-1939,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 6 (1991) : 293-333; Douglas Porch, “French Military Intelligence and the Fall of France,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 4 (1989): 28-58;

Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy-Making, 1934-1939* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Olivier Forcade, “Le Renseignement face à l’Allemagne au printemps 1940 et au début de la campagne de France,” in *La campagne de 1940*, edited by Christine Levisse-Touzé, pp. 126-55 (Tallandier, 2001).

communications, to the country's demographic and industrial weaknesses, to a national psyche preoccupied by ideological differences.

Beside these, the apparent and real failures of the French intelligence services in 1940, (Section X) look miniscule by comparison. What is more, so Schuker insists, those failures definitely did not include their famously alleged ignorance about the vulnerability of the Ardennes sector through which the Germans pushed in May 1940. Contrary to popular belief, the high command decided not to reinforce that sector, *despite* the warnings of its *Deuxième Bureau*. This is not to say, as Schuker acknowledges, that French intelligence was faultless, only that its limitations were part of a national panorama of sustained inaction and indecisiveness. Ultimately, German victory was due to a crushing superiority in modern aircraft and armour, which itself was a product of the demographic and industrial edge Germany enjoyed over France. No amount of intelligence, Schuker seems to suggest, however complete and precise, could have compensated for that imbalance.⁴ That being so, he nevertheless does want to argue that more effort, grit, and insight on the part of French officialdom – military and civilian – might have narrowed the gap. Therefore, while French wartime leadership in 1940 may well be judged “incoherent” (112), the real reason for the collapse must be traced back through two decades of uninspired, under-performance. Hence the “gravediggers of France,” a phrase Schuker finally employs, and with an implicit acceptance of the concept behind it (108). Thus, instead of one part being responsible for the malfunction of the whole, it is the whole that is used to explain uncovered flaws in one of its parts.

I do have several reservations about this article. The least includes a sense that it has tried to cover too much in one fell swoop, a belief that the sections are in need of smoother transitions between them, and a conviction that any final section should wrap up an argument rather than return to a narrative, in this case to post-1945 developments. A second pertains to the way some of the historiography is represented. Someone more innocent and less knowledgeable than Stephen Schuker might conclude – quite erroneously – that the explanations for 1940 that have been advanced by people like Julian Jackson or Ernest May place *all* the weight on faulty gathering and dispersal of intelligence information. Such is not the case. Incidentally, I think this piece would have profited from Peter Jackson's historiographical article, a piece which strikes me as more comprehensive than what is found here, and which even includes some of my own post-1978 jottings.⁵

The third order of concern should begin with an unabashed admission. I've never been comfortable with the guilty men approach, especially when I see it employed to exonerate some other accused. For that reason, I am in greater temperamental accord with Kim

⁴ “Seeking a Scapegoat,” p.108.

⁵ Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France. The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory. Hitler's Conquest of France* (Hill and Wang, 2000); Peter Jackson, “Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War,” *History Compass*, 4/5 (2006): 870-905.

Munholland's treatment of the "gravediggers" than I am with that of Stephen Schuker. The latter ends, or rather almost ends, by invoking a British judgment handed down in the heat of June 1940, that of a rotten France long since hollowed out by termites.⁶ The former, by contrast, ends on an appeal for historians to surrender their judicial robes and mindset and to exercise some generosity when appraising the behaviour of those who can no longer reply.

Robert Young is Emeritus Professor and Senior Scholar at the University of Winnipeg. He has published books and articles on French inter-war foreign policy, military planning, intelligence gathering, propaganda strategies, and research materials in French archives. He is also a biographer of Louis Barthou and Jules Jusserand. His most recent article is "A Very English Channel: Britain and French Appeasement," in *The Origins of the Second World War*, edited by Frank McDonough (2011).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

⁶ A very different impression of France has been left, more recently, by Martin S. Alexander, "After Dunkirk: The French Army's Performance against 'Case Red,' 25 May to 25 June 1940," *War in History*, 14 (2007): 219-64; and his "Radio-Intercepts, Reconnaissance and Raids: French Operational Intelligence and Communications in 1940," *Intelligence and National Security*, 28, no.3 (2013): 337-76.