

BRITISH VIEWS OF THE FRENCH ARMY, 1933-1940

By

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Hefyn Gareth Mears, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

The sudden defeat of the French army in June 1940 shocked the world. Amongst the most stunned were those in positions of power in Britain who had observed the French army closest in the preceding decade. This thesis intends to analyse how and why British observers arrived at those ultimately unfounded judgements. In this sense the examination of British views of the French army is intended in part to act as a warning from history for today's defence policy makers in the United Kingdom. It provides a warning through the analysis of the potential hazards of being a junior partner in a coalition with trusted senior allies and examining the importance of being able to make accurate judgements on their potential operational effectiveness. In so doing the thesis therefore aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the difficulty of questioning the strength of a much larger coalition partner, albeit in this context in terms of ground forces, but something which is highly relevant to Britain in contemporary defence affairs. In particular it will add to the field of study of asymmetrical coalition relations, specifically in the largely overlooked area of 'knowing your friends', through analysing the effectiveness and nature of Britain's reporting on the French army. The thesis also seeks to widen the historical lens more specifically in explaining British perspectives of the French army at a strategically critical point in European history. In analysing the 'army' dimension of Franco-British relations, further light will be shed on some of the bigger questions surrounding diplomacy and the military during the 1933-1940 period. Notably, it will be shown how various cultural and institutional issues within the British army impacted upon how Britain reported on the French army and by extension influenced the course of wider Franco-British relations during this time.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The sudden defeat of the French army in June 1940 shocked the world. Amongst the most stunned were those in positions of power in Britain who had observed the French army closest in the preceding decade. Not only was the speed of France's defeat unforeseen, but the French army had been expected to be a vital component in achieving victory against Nazi Germany. With few exceptions between 1933 and May 1940 official British assessments had demonstrated a high level of confidence in the combat effectiveness of the French army. This thesis intends to explain how and why British observers arrived at those ultimately unfounded judgements. The examination of British views of the French army is intended in part, to act as a warning from history for today's defence policy makers in the United Kingdom. It provides a warning through the analysis of the potential hazards of being a junior partner in a coalition with trusted senior allies and examining the importance of being able to make accurate judgements on their potential operational effectiveness. The thesis therefore aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the difficulty of questioning the strength of a much larger coalition partner, albeit in this context in terms of ground forces, but something which is highly relevant to Britain in contemporary defence affairs. In particular it will add to the field of study of asymmetrical coalition relations, specifically in the largely overlooked area of 'knowing your friends',¹ through analysing the effectiveness and nature of Britain's reporting on the French army.

Although the Franco-British defeat of 1940 occurred over eighty years ago, the demise of this allied coalition in battle still has relevance to Britain's place in the world today, in relation to how it positions itself alongside other nations in engaging in military alliances. At the start of the Second World War Britain was unable to challenge German military power alone, but could only do so in coalition with France, and then in terms of ground forces, as a junior partner. Similarly today, the United Kingdom is unable to undertake any operation overseas, even on a small scale, without the support of allies, in particular the United States. Moreover, as it was to the French army in 1939, in any large-

¹ See Martin S. Alexander, *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1998).

scale operational deployment today Britain would be a junior partner in a coalition. This has been illustrated by the position occupied by Britain in coalitions in campaigns this century in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Levant and currently in counter-insurgency operations with France in the Sahel. Although the United Kingdom has increasingly found itself as a junior partner in coalitions since the Second World War, this position has become increasingly apparent with the gradual and relative decline in the size of Britain's armed forces. Given this position, it is vital that Britain has an accurate understanding of its coalition partners to, as far as is feasible, mitigate against any potential setbacks in operations with their potential for far reaching strategic, economic and political consequences.

The thesis also seeks to widen the historical lens more specifically in explaining British perspectives of the French army at a strategically critical point in European history. This also has a further contemporary relevance to British defence matters. Indeed, Britain has an increasingly close defence relationship with France today. This has seen the establishment of a combined joint expeditionary force between the two nations, with extensive joint engagement in training, exercises and operations. Furthermore, it is the intention of both countries notwithstanding post-Brexit diplomatic quarrels, that these ties will become increasingly more entwined. It is therefore important that the British historical defence community has an enhanced understanding of the two nations' historic military relationship. This is needed in order to place today's alliance in context but also to further the analysis of the past to be aware of the cultural links and differences of the two nations' armies' experiences that aid the awareness of how each other's armed forces have become shaped to as they are today.²

In addition, I will analyse in detail the 'army' dimension of Franco-British relations for the 1933-1940 period. Closely examining this angle will shed further light on some of the bigger questions surrounding diplomacy and the military during this period. Notably, it will be shown how various cultural and institutional issues within the British army impacted upon how Britain reported on the French army and by extension influenced the course of wider Franco-British relations during this time. The analysis of Britain's relationship with the French army will cover a time when it moved from one of limited engagement into a wartime alliance. The thesis is limited in the main to the study of relevant British officials' views, as these naturally had the greatest impact in shaping British perspectives over this time. In doing

² It is for largely this purpose that the Ministry of Defence has sponsored this research project.

this the views of those British officials who were best placed to form an opinion on the French army will be examined, together with those for whom the effectiveness of France's ground forces was most relevant and important. Attention will therefore be devoted to those officials and officers at the War Office, Britain's embassy in Paris and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) after its deployment to France following the declaration of war. It will be shown how and why these different actors engaged with the French army in helping sustain Britain's confidence in France's ground forces. In so doing, the views of British observers will be assessed and the aspects of the French army that they chose to examine and report on will be analysed. The thesis will also explore which issues concerning the French army British officials did not comment on and why this was so.

In order to explain why Britain viewed the French Army as it did, it is important to understand the role that assumptions, prejudices and favourable attitudes may have played in forming judgements. Indeed, much has been made by recent historians of the influence or otherwise of the prevalent antagonistic attitude towards France held in British political and public opinion during the 1930s.³ Yet, although British observers of the French Army may have been influenced to a degree by favourable or unfavourable personal attitudes towards France, this thesis will argue that a further different set of influences, assumptions, beliefs and actions were more important in forming their judgements.

When analysing British views of the French army, I will show the confidence of Britain's observers of France's ground forces featured significantly. Although British confidence in the French army prior to 1940 has been acknowledged by previous historians, this thesis expands the analysis of this issue further than hitherto. This project will not only explain why British confidence in the French army existed but extend its analysis to how Britain studied France's ground forces and the influences which shaped the resulting judgements. In so doing I will expand upon the work of other historians who have studied British perspectives on France by analysing the factors and processes which moulded Britain's views on the French army. This dissertation will argue that there are three major

³ See Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France 1936-1940*, (London: Macmillan, 1999), 1-26; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 66-71; P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente and Estrangement* (London: Longman, 1996), 178-180; Robert & Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France, the History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 520-524 and Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 13-16, 188-189.

factors which shaped these perspectives. Firstly, and most importantly, was the influence of the nature of the British army as an institution and the culture it helped create. This shaped the way the army reported on and understood its French counterpart. Included in this analysis is the impact of the limited diversity in the professional and personal backgrounds of those British officers that reported on the French army.

An important element of these cultural and institutional factors, it will be argued, was how British views were formed in part by the incomplete understanding that British officers had of their own army, which was linked to the limitations of the form of professional 'education' that was available to them. The British army appeared to possess a lack of rigour in how its officers studied their profession. This was a problem compounded by an emphasis on character and leadership, of which notably there were frequent references in the reporting on French senior officers, rather than technical attributes, for example on matters of logistics, signals and communications. In conjunction with this it will be shown that the British regimental system contributed to the narrowing of the intellectual outlook of officers with the consequence that the British army was not always successful in producing officers able to think beyond the confines of their regiment. As other historians have shown, this limitation contributed to the British army's shortcomings early in the Second World War in all-arms cooperation.⁴ However, this thesis goes further and states that with many British officers seemingly insufficiently aware of their own wider army, it is clear how this could be extended to other military matters, in this instance to being able to use reporting to build an accurate picture of many aspects of France's ground forces. These cultural and institutional issues had an influence that extended beyond the direct outputs of the British army but also in turn helped shape the course of Franco-British relations. In this respect the thesis considers further issues raised by assessments about potential or actual allies, in that their results are not just shaped by the efforts put directly into this reporting but by the wider foundations of an army's culture, training and education. Indeed, although historians have demonstrated how the British army's shortcomings in its education, training and doctrine in all-arms cooperation impacted on its own operational effectiveness, this study goes further to explain how its impact on the reporting on the French army had an extended influence into diplomacy and foreign affairs. This thesis therefore attempts to demonstrate that the wider dynamic of Franco-British relations was shaped in part by calculations on the French army which were

⁴ See, for example, David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59-63.

undermined by cultural and institutional weaknesses of the British army, whose officials provided the government with its professional advice on France's ground forces. Although the institutional and to an extent the cultural weaknesses of the British army have been considered by historians, notably on how this impacted combat effectiveness, they have not been analysed to show their wider impact in defence or foreign relations and by extension the potential they have to hinder or help maximise influence with an important friendly power.

This thesis will argue that the second major factor in shaping British perspectives of the French army was more broadly the result of Britain not studying France's ground forces effectively and consistently through the period, due to a sense of confidence resulting from the First World War. It will be shown that the potent legacy of the First World War played a significant role both in inhibiting study of the French army and in sustaining Britain's confidence. Many British officers in the inter-war years looked upon the French army with deference because of its role in the Allied victory of 1918.⁵ Britain's closest observers of the French army were all aware that during the Great War France had suffered major setbacks on the battlefield and experienced serious difficulties such as widespread mutinies. Yet, the fact that the French army emerged victorious in 1918 with what many perceived in Britain as qualities of *élan* and endurance lived long in British minds.⁶

Finally, I will show the significant role in producing confidence in the French army that was played by British observations and experiences of France's ground forces. All of those from Britain who reported on the French army were competent military officials who had been successful in their careers; their observations were taken seriously. Although the French army collapsed suddenly in June 1940, it had many attributes which were militarily sound and warranted confidence. Even when criticisms were occasionally offered on the French Army, these were not deemed sufficiently serious to undermine operational effectiveness.

Although of lesser significance, it will be stated that three further factors also had important roles in generating Britain's confidence in the French army. Firstly, this was the result of a degree of wishful thinking of many in the British government during the 1930s.

⁵ See chapter 3.

⁶ John Ramsden, " 'French people have a peculiar facility for being misrepresented': British Perceptions of France at War, 1914-1918" in *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale Since 1904*, ed. Antoine Capet (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18.

Indeed, the French army's perceived strength provided a useful additional justification for those in Whitehall that were reluctant up until 1939 to devote sufficient resources to prepare an expeditionary force for service on the Continent in the event of war. Secondly, those in senior positions in the War Office that advocated a 'Continentalist' rather than an imperialist strategic outlook in Britain's defence policy, had to believe in the effectiveness of the French army.⁷ Thirdly, it will also be demonstrated that a consistent factor in generating faith in the French army was the impact which the British army's own serious weaknesses had on the outlook of senior officers and officials. The French army by its size alone ensured that it was more operationally capable than Britain's much smaller ground forces. In this sense the way that the French army compared with its British counterpart in size is an explanation as to why it was perceived to be so strong by most British military observers. However, this perception was heightened by the perilous condition of the British army during the inter-war years after a long period of retrenchment. A further serious consequence of the British army's significant weaknesses during this time was that it preoccupied British military officials to such an extent that it reduced their capacity to devote attention to other matters, including the French army.

Historiographical intervention

Asymmetrical coalitions/relations

Through analysing Britain's relationship with the French Army this thesis will add to the neglected field of study of asymmetrical coalitions. Although alliances between nation states have been studied since they have existed, an overlooked aspect in scholarly works is the dynamics and principles that exist in coalitions of unequal partners. This thesis therefore endeavours to focus attention on these areas through examining the effectiveness and nature of Britain's observations and reporting on the French army. The Franco-British coalition that was eventually formed in 1939 was of course an unequal alliance. Although the two nations were both considered 'great' powers with vast potential imperial resources at their disposal, it was the United Kingdom which had relatively greater economic and naval power. Yet, it was France that had by far the superior power in terms of ground forces, which would be the main bulwark in attempting to resist a German offensive in the west.

⁷ J. P. Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation*, ed. David French and Brian Holden Reid (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 177.

Nevertheless, all alliances are not constituted equally. Each nation will always have unmatched strengths and weaknesses which can act disproportionately as assets and liabilities in coalitions. Moreover when there are clear junior partners in alliances it is almost always the case that the strongest has the greatest influence in a coalition's operation. This is clearly understood, if not always explicitly stated, by all who have studied international alliances between nation states. However, little detailed attention has been paid to the ways in which junior partners behave in an unequal alliance in both their interactions and the way they were able to maximise influence in pursuit of their own aims.

One historian who has studied this to an extent, in the context of nation states of differing sizes in coalitions, is Robert Rothstein in *Alliances and Small Powers*.⁸ The broad aim of Rothstein's work is to examine the foreign policy behaviour of some European small states since the Congress of Vienna as they have used alliances to promote their goal of national security. In particular Rothstein's book is concerned with establishing that small powers are something more than or different from 'great' powers writ small and therefore asserts we should not generalise about states, as small powers think and act differently. Rothstein notes a series of principles that apply to small nations entering coalitions with larger powers. Firstly, he acknowledges that for the most part, small powers have entered alliances reluctantly. The decision to ally obviously involves significant disadvantages as well as advantages. However, Rothstein states that despite the disadvantages that can ensue, the alliances can have a significant effect in ensuring the success of external actions like collective security. He observes that the policy of alliance does not of course guarantee security but it is always the most obvious weapon for the small power and the most employed. However, Rothstein shrewdly acknowledges that 'borrowing someone else's strength, like borrowing money, has disadvantages as well as advantages'⁹, yet the primary advantage that a small power gains from its larger ally is the promise of military support. He also notes that alliances tend to freeze the status quo which existed at the moment of signing. Particularly relevant to this thesis are Rothstein's observations that small powers are not likely to be critical of great powers whilst simultaneously noting that the 'goals the alliance is

⁸ Robert L. Rothstein. *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). See also, for example, James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances." *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (1991): 904-933; Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Michael I. Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1981).

⁹ Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*, 45.

likely to pursue are bound to be closer to those desired by the stronger partner unless the weaker partner can utilise its reverse potentiality to an unlikely degree'.¹⁰

This thesis broadly agrees with Rothstein's arguments and contends that the dynamics of an unequal alliance can be applied to aspects of the relationship between the Franco-British armies. In particular the thesis concurs with Rothstein's principles in that it would have been very difficult for British military officials to be critical of the much larger French army. Equally it was the case that the status quo of the balance in the relationship between the two armies froze at the time Britain agreed to commit its ground forces to the Continent in 1939, even though in the ensuing months the BEF began tentatively to increase in size and operating capability.

However, this thesis goes further than Rothstein's analysis, which considers asymmetrical alliances at the level of nation states, to examine how similar dynamics operate at subordinate levels, such as between the armed forces of the allies, and how these in turn influence the broader relationship. Indeed, as a result of this narrower focus on the two nations' armies, it will be possible to understand how the dynamic of an unequal alliance within a coalition of unequal components can influence the wider relationship between the two states. Furthermore, although this thesis concurs with Rothstein's principles that a junior partner will always be a voice of secondary influence in a coalition, it shows that an actor, be it a state, non-state or other institution can maximise its leverage if they are operating upon firm institutional foundations. On this understanding the thesis will show that had the British army not been constrained by some of its cultural and institutional weaknesses, it could have developed a greater awareness of the French army with its operational capability gaps and therefore have been able to exert a greater, albeit limited, degree of influence.

British views of the French army

Whilst adding to the study of asymmetrical coalitions, this thesis adds further specifically to the understanding of how a potentially or actually smaller ally views and evaluates its larger partner. In this sense it adds to the scholarship of what Martin Alexander describes as 'knowing your friends'.¹¹ Alexander's main focus is on the work of intelligence agencies and communities towards their allies. Alexander notes that although studies of

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹¹ Alexander. *Knowing Your Friends*.

intelligence, surveillance and espionage have flourished since the subject entered the academic mainstream in the late 1970s and 1980s the matter of intelligence work devoted to friends and allies is a neglected subfield.¹² Alexander explains that this is in part because intelligence gathering on an ally is the most highly sensitive type of intelligence operation and largely often leaves no written record for historians to study. Indeed, the most sensitive types of assessments against allies are more likely to be destroyed after use, weeded later or at least withheld from the public domain for greatly extended periods of time.¹³ Nevertheless, separate from the most sensitive intelligence gathering, sources produced and available from the diplomatic corps and various parts of the military establishment allow the opportunity to analyse how a nation privately judged a potential ally. As Alexander notes, few academics have ‘considered the issues raised by assessments about potential or actual allies... and forming estimates about friendly powers and friendly military forces. This neglect is surprising. For it is important to know yourself and by extension your allies.’¹⁴ This claim is very pertinent in the context of this thesis.

Although the vast amount of archival material generated in the 1930s and 1940s by the British government has been examined closely by historians, they have not yet analysed extensively and specifically how Britain viewed the French army. Although in the histories that have been produced on Franco-British relations, the way in which Britain viewed the French army has been touched on, they have certainly left significant scope for further analysis. More commonly when official British views of France and the French have been studied this usually focuses only on issues of wider relations between the two countries.¹⁵ One rare study devoted to British views in the context of foreign and defence matters is Michael Dockrill’s *British Establishment Perspectives on France 1936-1940*.¹⁶ However, Dockrill deals principally with wider foreign and defence policy, and very little attention is given specifically to how the French army was viewed from London. Where British views of the French army are briefly discussed, Dockrill appears to downplay the extent of Britain’s

¹² Ibid., 1.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁵ See, for example, Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France*; P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940* and *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1974) and Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War*.

¹⁶ Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*.

confidence.¹⁷ Furthermore, Dockrill overemphasises the views of just a small number of individuals in Britain who doubted the French army's combat effectiveness. This thesis will present a much more detailed analysis of how Britain viewed the French army than that offered by Dockrill, demonstrating that British confidence went much further than he suggests, and will explain why this was so.

Nevertheless, Dockrill's work is of value in drawing attention to the importance of the role played by attitudes and assumptions in Franco-British relations, which need to be considered when explaining British views of the French army. Dockrill's study adds further to the work of other recent historians who have placed a great emphasis on the roles of national sentiments, attitudes, assumptions and the importance of other non-state actors in foreign affairs. In particular, the likes of Dockrill, Julian Jackson and Philip Bell together with Robert and Isabelle Tombs have highlighted the influence of an antagonistic attitude towards France that existed in British political circles and indeed wider public opinion, to explain the course of Franco-British relations during the 1930s.¹⁸ Jackson, for example, has explained Franco-British disagreements during this period as being the result of 'a series of assumptions, prejudices, myths and memories that each country entertained about the other'¹⁹. Although these historians correctly highlight the existence and significance of a degree of Francophobia, others such as Richard Davis have shown that it was still possible for British policy makers to put aside these feelings based on an understanding of strategic interests, ideals and values that were shared between Britain and France.²⁰

The historian that offers the greatest insight into British views of the French Army is Alexander. More than other historians, Alexander emphasises the extent of British confidence in the French Army noting that no-one that mattered in the British leadership believed that France faced a real danger of an early quick and complete defeat.²¹ *In Knowing Your Friends* he asks the question if assumptions about allies are intrinsically more optimistic or more pessimistic and says that such questions are at the heart of the study of the British miscalibration of the state of French defences before 1940. Yet, Alexander notes that even

¹⁷ Ibid., 58-59.

¹⁸ See Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 1-26, Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 66-71, Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 178-180 and Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 520-524.

¹⁹ Jackson, *Fall of France*, 66.

²⁰ See Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War*.

²¹ Martin S. Alexander. "‘Fighting to the Last Frenchman’? Reflections on the BEF Deployment to France and the Strains in the Franco-British Alliance, 1939-1940' in Joel Blatt (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 317.

extensive research still leaves doubt over whether British observers were shocked by the French defeat because of weaknesses that were deliberately hidden by the French; if there were systematic British failings in its intelligence establishment; if British intelligence was too indulgent towards the French because of the influence of memories of France's army in the First World War or if Britain's modest contribution inhibited any serious attempt to investigate the condition of the French army.²² This thesis aims to provide some answers to these questions.

Alexander also refers to these issues in his work with William Philpott and in a chapter of his study of Maurice Gamelin where he examines the appraisals that the two armies formed of each other. In these works Alexander notes that 'historians have been shy about extending their researches into French and British policies to include an inquiry into the military and strategic appraisals that each nation explicitly made about the other'.²³ However, as the scope of Alexander's focus in these studies is much broader than solely British views of the French Army he does not offer an extensive analysis of how Britain perceived France's ground forces, as I do here.

Although it is not the intention to offer a detailed analysis of the fall of France it is inevitable that the defeat of June 1940 looms large when explaining British assessments of the French army. This thesis is sympathetic to the views advocated by revisionist works on the Battle of France which state that although the French army was not without weaknesses, its defeat was not inevitable, and was a viable fighting force. Ernest May, for example, accurately states that intelligence failures to predict the location of the main German attack together with the French inability to recognise this mistake and react sufficiently swiftly to it through command and communications failures were the most decisive factors in the French defeat.²⁴ Similarly Lloyd Clark has convincingly shown that had Germany not adopted the plan of attack which it did in 1940, against the wishes of some senior officers in the German command, an Allied defeat was not a certain outcome.²⁵

The work of May and Clark also shows that on the occasions where the French Army was given the opportunity to fight as it had intended, it often did so with great efficiency.

²² Alexander, *Knowing Your Friends*, 6.

²³ Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 240.

²⁴ See Ernest R May. *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I B Tauris, 2009).

²⁵ See Lloyd Clark, *Blitzkrieg: Myth, Reality and Hitler's Lightning War – France, 1940* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), 64-65, 383-386.

Equally, Alexander has also highlighted the significant role played by elements of the French army in shielding the BEF's retreat to Dunkirk, aiding the evacuation of so many men of the British army and also in effective defensive operations south of the Somme.²⁶ With a specific military focus in these examples, these historians have added further to the move since the 1970s away from the approach of viewing the Battle of France as the final stage of the Third Republic's inevitably terminal decadent decline.²⁷ This thesis therefore adds further to their work by demonstrating the extent of the confidence of those British officials with the greatest professional military expertise to judge the French Army, thus providing additional evidence to illustrate strengths within France's ground forces. The views of these historians also indicate that this thesis' findings of the deeply sustained British faith in the French army was not entirely misplaced. Consequently, it can be argued that British observers had some grounds for their confidence in the effectiveness of the French army and thus add further weight to revisionist arguments.

Two further areas should be acknowledged when considering British views of the French army but which are beyond the scope of this thesis. Firstly, British confidence in France's ground forces was also a result of broader confidence in the Allies' strategic outlook, in which the French army was only one factor and not necessarily the most important. Indeed, Britain's faith in the French army can also be partly explained by the broader confidence in the Allies' ability to triumph again in a conflict with Germany. The extent of the confidence which existed in London in this respect has been shown by David Edgerton in his study of Britain in the Second World War.²⁸ Edgerton demonstrates that Franco-British forces were merely the sharp end of its war effort which would be powered by the overwhelming superiority of the combined economic strengths of the two countries' empires and, more significantly, the wider global economy. In this sense British confidence in the French army reflected a self-assurance that Britain was well equipped to defeat Germany with all the tools necessary to wage and win a total war of significant duration of which the military was just one part. With a high level of confidence in the wider war effort, British observers could be more relaxed about the effectiveness of the French army, believing that although weaknesses

²⁶ See Martin S. Alexander "Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 93-109 and Alexander, "After Dunkirk: The French Army's Performance against 'Case Red', 25 May to 25 June 1940". *War in History* 14 (2007), 219-264.

²⁷ See below, 14-15, 31-32, 174, 227, for further details of this earlier historical interpretation of the Third Republic.

²⁸David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine* (London: Penguin, 2012).

may have existed, they would be insufficient to jeopardise the Allies' efforts.²⁹ This was a confidence which became increasingly felt in London and Paris after the Munich agreement when increasingly favourable assessments on the present and future balance of power with Germany began to be received. This has been shown by historians such as Wesley Wark in the *Ultimate Enemy*, Robert Young in *Command of France*, Alexander in *The Republic in Danger* and Peter Jackson's *France and the Nazi Menace*.³⁰

However, although this confidence in the wider war effort existed up until the declaration of war, Talbot Imlay argues that just a few months later, by early 1940, this faith had begun to wane.³¹ Indeed, Imlay shows that in the first few months of 1940, the French government was considering abandoning the long-war strategy in favour of a short one with fears of Germany becoming increasingly strong. Although never as pessimistic about the shifting balance of power, Imlay also states that the British government too came to question the long-war strategy and its underlying assumption that time was an ally, hence the considerations of opening operations in other theatres during the Phoney War period. Indeed, Imlay believes that French and British planners increasingly found the long-war strategy inadequate in offering a route to victory.³² Yet, even if doubts were beginning to arise in the long-war strategy, this did not mean faith in the ability of the French army to withstand a German offensive was faltering. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, the collapse of the French army still came as a shock to British observers.

Secondly, beyond the scope of this thesis are British considerations of the role of Allied and German air forces. The perceived strength of German airpower together with weaknesses in British and French air power feature regularly in many of the BEF's testimonies of the Battle of France and earlier in the Phoney War.³³ It would appear that the psychological effect of modern airpower on the battlefield created this perception together

²⁹ For senior officers of the BEF's confidence in the wider war effort see, for example, Brian Bond, ed. *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), 250.

³⁰ Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985); Robert J Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger* and Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

³¹ Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³² *Ibid.*, 76.

³³ See, for example, Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 237, 240, 244; TNA WO 106/1682. GHQ cipher to War Office, 12 May 1940; 106/1678; WO 197/136. Gort, Despatches, 11 April 1940; WO 197/29. Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, letter to Lieutenant Colonel J D Woodall, 20 February 1940; LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. Dill to George VI, 22 October 1939; LHCMA CLARKE 1/1. Colonel Frederick Clarke, unpublished memoir, 'The Memoirs of a Professional Soldier in Peace and War', 29 April 1968, 13.

with the earlier inter-war fears over the overwhelming destruction that modern air forces would be able to inflict in the future. Modern scholarship has shown though that greater allied air assistance could not have saved the French army and BEF as they lost what was primarily a ground war on the field of battle.³⁴ Moreover, the *Luftwaffe* had suffered heavy losses in the first part of the Battle of France, whilst by mid-June had lost forty percent of its aircraft and was at approximate parity with the French.³⁵ As the historian Douglas Porch noted, Allied inferiority in the air ‘was not the decisive element in the campaign’.³⁶

Franco-British relations

This thesis also aims to show how analysing British views of the French army furthers our understanding of Franco-British relations during this time. Where Franco-British relations have been studied previously, British views of the French army do not appear prominently or as the primary focus, despite the crucial role the French army had in wider strategic thinking and planning. There are broadly two tendencies that exist in the literature on not just Franco-British relations over the period but also on the broader topics of the fall of France and French defence policy of this era. The first and earliest line of thought viewed the demise of the Third Republic as the result of an apparent decadent nature which includes the view that Britain was the dominant partner in foreign affairs with, as François Bédarida characterised it, France at the beck and call of its English governess.³⁷ This explanation of events was mostly notably first shown in Marc Bloch’s *Strange Defeat* and later by William Shirer, Alistair Horne, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Eugen Weber, Williamson Murray, E. H. Carr, Arnold Wolfers, Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott.³⁸ These studies advocated the view that in foreign and defence policy the French government had only been able to follow London’s lead and was unable to formulate independent or effective policies in these areas.

³⁴ See, for example, Patrick Facon, *L’Armée de l’Air dans La Tourmente: La bataille de France 1939-1940* (Paris: Economica, 2005) and J. A. Gunsberg, *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West* (London: Greenwood Press, 1979).

³⁵ Alexander, “Radio Intercepts, Reconnaissance and Raids”, *Intelligence and National Security* 28: 371.

³⁶ Douglas Porch. ‘Why Did France Fall?’, *Military History Quarterly* II (1990) 39, cited in Alexander “After Dunkirk”, *War in History* 14: 234.

³⁷ Peter Jackson “Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War.” *History Compass* 4 (2006): 870.

³⁸ Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949); William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Enquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (London: Heineman, 1970); Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (London: Macmillan, 1969) and Jackson “Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War.”, 870-905.

This interpretation saw France in the 1930s as being incapable of meeting the challenge posed by a resurgent and aggressive Germany with its collapse the inevitable outcome of a long process of moral and political decay.

However, since the 1970s a second tendency in the literature emerged, aided by the release of government records on both sides of the Channel, where historians have moved away from the interpretation of the course of these events being explained as part of the inevitable decline of the Third Republic. Instead the understanding of the foreign and defence issues of that time has been furthered by stressing the political, economic and military constraints placed on successive French governments. In so doing historians have also illustrated achievements in French rearmament and Paris's hitherto doubted ability to exert influence in foreign affairs. This has been shown by the likes of Peter Jackson in *France and the Nazi Menace*, Robert Doughty's *The Breaking Point*, Alexander's *The Republic in Danger*, Young's *In Command of France*, Jeffery Gunsburg's *Dividend and Conquered* together with the work of May, Anthony Adamthwaite, Martin Thomas, Julian Jackson and Raphaële Ulrich-Pier.³⁹

These more recent historians have challenged the previously held assumption that France was unable to formulate an independent and effective foreign and defence policy. However, British perspectives of the French army do not feature in any significance in their arguments. Yet in analysing British views of the French army this thesis adds further to the weight of the arguments of these historians. It does so by emphasising in detail that in terms of the specific issue of land warfare, in Franco-British relations, Britain took a subservient position to France's ground forces, acknowledging its inferiority in its operational capabilities relative to that of the French army. Given that this perspective on the French army was shared by Britain's most senior and able military officials, this thesis, by examining the extent to which this was believed and why, adds further support to acknowledging a degree of

³⁹ Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Robert Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hampden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1990); Alexander, *The Republic in Danger*; Robert J Young, *In Command of France*; Jeffery A. Gunsberg, *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940* (London: Greenwood Press, 1979); May, *Strange Victory*; Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur & Misery: France's bid for power in Europe 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*; Jackson, *The Fall of France*, Raphaële Ulrich-Pier, "The 1930s" in *Cross Channel Currents: 100 Years of the Entente Cordiale*, ed. Richard Mayne, Douglas Johnson and Robert Tombs (London: Routledge, 2004).

robustness to the French Republic, by indicating aspects of the French army's strength despite its defeat in June 1940.

Indeed, it will be demonstrated that British officials' frequently unquestioning view of the French army adds further to these more recent studies by showing that in areas of defence policy concerning France's ground forces, the French government was entirely independent of British influence. Indeed, by adopting a non-critical approach to the French army, British officials helped create a subservient relationship to France's ground forces. Consequently, army matters were an area of foreign and defence policy in which France was effectively given a free rein from London to pursue a course entirely of its own choosing. This in turn helped ensure that the strategy for which the Allies would decide to undertake ground operations in any future war would be determined exclusively by the French army's leadership. This is a point made by Alexander for the period when Britain's alliance with France was formalised in 1939 and through to the Battle of France. He notes that during this time British officials were deferential and subservient, the passive recipients of information on what the French command had decided for the alliance rather than partners in the joint planning of strategic operations. On this Alexander states that:

Perhaps the hand of the "English governess" may have guided the making of the Franco-British coalition. However, ...a distinctively French grip reasserted itself once the diplomats withdrew and left the warriors centre stage. The French, after 3 September 1939, assumed the leading role in the direction of Allied strategy in the west and shaping the British part within it.⁴⁰

Although this thesis shares this view, it advances it by showing in detail that the subservient position adopted by British officials stretched back far earlier into the interwar years. Indeed, this study goes further than Alexander by emphasising that throughout the 1930s there was complacency in British officials' reporting on the French army. British officials clearly exhibited a relaxed attitude to studying the French army and only limited effort was made on a small number of occasions to ensure that more detailed reporting was compiled. Moreover, subsequent chapters will explain more extensively than hitherto why this was the case.

The two tendencies identified above on the scholarship on Franco-British relations have been challenged by Imlay in his book *Facing the Second World War* which examines

⁴⁰ Alexander. "Fighting to the Last Frenchman?" in Blatt (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940*, 297-298.

how Britain and France met the test of modern conflict before and during the Second World War.⁴¹ Imlay states that in the large body of literature that exists on various aspects of Franco-British relations, there are several shortcomings. He argues that the first stems from the narrow focus of many studies, with some having a specialised approach devoted to topics such as diplomacy, military policy and armaments. In contrast Imlay attempts to examine several aspects at once. Furthermore, he notes that the two schools of thought referred to above share weaknesses in drawing grand judgements from narrow accounts of military and diplomatic events. Imlay attempts instead to offer a broader approach with study of strategic, domestic political and economic factors in a comparative history from the late 1930s to May 1940 across these three dimensions. Although he does this convincingly, there is still much to learn from a closer examination of Franco-British relations more narrowly during this time. In this respect, through the analysis of British views of the French army, it will be shown how one aspect of two nations' relations, in this case Franco-British army relations, can have extended consequences beyond their immediate setting. Moreover, it will be shown how the factors that shape that aspect of the bilateral relationship can be deep rooted in the culture and structures of a state's institution, which in the case of this study is the British army.

Indeed, this is where this study differs more broadly from others on aspects of Franco-British relations. This thesis will show how cultural and institutional factors within the British army not only shaped Britain's perspectives of the French army but how they then in turn had a further impact in helping shape the course of Franco-British relations. In this respect the thesis shows how aspects of the British army's officer corps, regimental system together with an imperfect form of further officer education impaired Britain's ability to gain an accurate understanding of the French army which then fed into judgements on how the British government pursued its wider defence and foreign policy posture towards France. These cultural and institutional issues within the British army have to this point not been acknowledged in terms of how they impacted upon strategic considerations in Britain's alliance with France.

It has been claimed that a lack of awareness on the British government's part of an accurate appreciation of French affairs helped shape Franco-British relations in the 1930s and contributed to the suspicions and tensions that were one characteristic of relations between London and Paris at this time. In this broader context the historian John Cairns wrote how

⁴¹ Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*.

little insight into French matters that Whitehall received from its officials in Paris. Cairns asserts that:

Of French labour, of the political Left... embassy despatches said little. Of the economy, the minor press, the professions, veterans, students, the world of letters, almost nothing. What was present quite often in the twenties and thirties was opinion likely to reinforce the suspicions of the Foreign Office...What was lacking much of the time was informed analysis of the national condition. Whether the condition was typical of cotemporary reporting is an open question. But the view of France seems shallow, and at the end it was uncompromisingly severe.⁴²

Similarly Cairns noted that Sir Anthony Eden observed of Sir Robert Vansittart, the Foreign Office's permanent under-secretary, that he 'spoke French but not much of France'.⁴³ Whilst Cairns shows how London's lack of overall understanding contributed to the course of Franco-British relations, this thesis will show the specific importance of Britain's knowledge gap on the French army to the bilateral alliance that was formed. Moreover, it will analyse the incremental causes of this, particularly noting the importance of cultural and institutional weaknesses within the British army, illustrating their influence on strategic considerations in London's relationship with Paris.

Methodology

To analyse British views of the French army it is necessary to consider how British officials could have most effectively based their judgements on France's ground forces and then contrast that to the way in which British observers actually did form their assessments. Judging the effectiveness of an army without a serious operational test on which to base assessments is not an easy undertaking and this was a challenge that faced British officials in the 1930s in forming their views on the French army. Furthermore, as Britain and France entered the war in September 1939, the British government realised that the French army, and indeed its own forces, would not be at full operating capability given the time it would take to further train and mobilise the full economic and military resources that France would eventually have at its disposal. Moreover, the unpredictability of operations where an enemy

⁴² John C Cairns. "A Nation of Shopkeepers In Search of a Suitable France: 1919-1940". *The American Historical Review* 79 (1974) 741.

⁴³ Lord Vansittart. *The Mist Procession* (London: Hutchinson, 1958) 429 cited in Cairns "Shopkeepers", 740.

intends to maximise an opponent's vulnerabilities, often in an unforeseen way, ensures that predicting the course of a battle or campaign should not be considered a realistic possibility. British observers should therefore not be considered to have been able to predict the course of events of May-June 1940 which led to the French army's sudden defeat. After all, many senior officers in the German army were deeply apprehensive about their own forces' prospects in an offensive against the Allies in 1940.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, it is still possible to ask if British officials were basing their judgements of the French army on a criteria which was effective, and if it would have been possible for them to be more critical. Subsequent chapters will show how and why Britain judged the French army as it did. However, to analyse British views appropriately we need to consider a framework against which Britain could have expected to base their assessments. An effective framework on which to judge an army's potential combat effectiveness is provided in the case studies in the three volume history of different nations' armed forces in the twentieth century edited by Allan R. Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*.⁴⁵ Throughout the various contributions in these three volumes when assessing the operational effectiveness of a nation's ground forces a consistent framework emerges. Indeed each contributor judges that the means by which an army's effectiveness be considered is by analysing its leadership, doctrine, equipment, morale together with the compositions and functions of its different arms and services. These may appear to be obvious criteria to judge the effectiveness of an army, but as will be shown an accurate appreciation of these aspects was not necessarily how British officials formed their views on the French army. This thesis will therefore explain by what criteria British perspectives on the French were formed and how it came to do so in the way that it did. Moreover, the question of why British observers did not strictly follow the framework set out above, even though some of its officials were given direction to so, will be explored.⁴⁶ Furthermore, it will be explained why some of these key indicators of combat effectiveness were not given the consideration that they would appear to merit. The importance of this framework to judge an army's combat effectiveness should not be

⁴⁴ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 64.

⁴⁵ Williamson Murray and Allan R Millett (Eds), *Military Effectiveness: Volume 1, The first World War* (Cambridge University Press,); *Military Effectiveness: Volume 2, the Inter War Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Military Effectiveness: Volume 3, The Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ See Chapter 2 with reference to TNA WO 33/1387, 'Memorandum for the Guidance of Military Attachés' in 'Amplification of Instructions Contained in Letter of Appointment', August 1928. Also in Chapter 2, the role of the British military attaché will be placed in the context of the work of other nations' attachés, see Alfred Vagts, *The Military Attaché* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967).

underestimated, especially given the absence of a significant operational test for the French army by which Britain could judge the viability of its future ally's ground forces.

In analysing British views of the French army, it is important to set out exactly whose perspectives of France's ground forces will be examined in this thesis. In the case of this study, it will only examine 'official' British views, that is that ultimately those of the British government. Although public opinion and that of wider British politics will be referred to in order to contextualise 'official' British views, they will not be the subject of detailed scrutiny in this study. Naturally then it will be the judgements offered by Britain's key defence policy figures and institutions that will be analysed. In particular this thesis will accordingly offer an analysis of the views of those British officials that were best positioned to view the French army and those for who the effectiveness of France's ground forces was most relevant and important. Prior to 1939 the two government departments and their various outposts which had officials that observed the French army most closely were the War Office and the Foreign Office. For the period for 1939-1940 as Britain's engagement with the French army deepened, the BEF was deployed to France and it is the most relevant officials and officers based in France who were best placed to judge the French army that will be examined for this later time. For reasons of space, the views of senior officials in London after the declaration of war will not be analysed in detail, although will feature. Instead the emphasis will be on the judgements of British officers and officials in France who relayed their information to Whitehall from a much closer proximity to France's ground forces and shaped the outlook of their political and military masters back in the United Kingdom. The precise British officials who will be examined most closely will now be outlined in an overview of the primary sources on which this thesis is based.

Primary sources

The large number of minutes of meetings, memoranda and reports generated throughout the War Office and Foreign Office across their various committees, branches and related institutions offer a wealth of material from which it is possible to learn of views held within the British Government on the French army. In starting research on this thesis it was envisaged that given the importance of the French army to Britain's strategic interests on the Continent, that there would have been closer attention devoted to the French army across the British government in Whitehall than the surviving archival material would indicate. A

survey of the available archival material reveals, though, that scrutiny of any note on France's ground forces in government was largely limited to those officials with greatest military expertise at the War Office.⁴⁷ In turn the War Office received its information in the main from the British embassy in Paris and then from the declaration of war in September 1939 from various components of the BEF deployed in France. Consequently, the primary material consulted for this thesis derives largely from officials and officers at the War Office, the embassy in Paris and the BEF. Although these official records produced by officials have been examined by historians since the 1970s there has been insufficient interrogation and examination of them specifically into how Britain viewed the French army and analysed to show in detail how these views were formed. The reconsideration of these records in this context therefore offers a fresh perspective on Britain's relationship with the French army during this time.

As noted above, a genuine understanding of an army's potential effectiveness is largely based upon an accurate appreciation of a force's leadership, doctrine, equipment, morale together with the different roles and functions of its arms and services. It had been anticipated that British officials' views on these issues would have been covered in depth in the various available archival sources. However, this proved not to be the case with officials covering many of these aspects of the French army in an apparent superficial manner, or in some cases not at all. The focus of the thesis was therefore concentrated to analyse those areas which featured most prominently in British sources on the French army such as its leadership and morale. However, the limits of British scrutiny of the French army in the surviving archival material ensured that it was necessary to question why British views on the French army were often cursory and broaden the scope of this thesis to assess why many aspects of the French army were absent from British appreciations.

For the period up until September 1939, one of the most important sources to consult are the records that survive of the British military attaché in Paris. The military attaché was the British official who had the greatest contact with the French army in the 1930s. Formally accredited to the French government, the British military attaché had privileged access to the French general staff and was the official channel by which military information was passed

⁴⁷ Departmental records which reveal the War Office's officials' views of the French army are found in the following various record series of the War Office, Foreign Office and Cabinet Office at TNA: WO 32, 33, 106, 190, 216, 259; FO 432, 371 and CAB 2, 21, 29, 53.

from London to Paris and vice versa. Consequently, the military attaché was Britain's main source of information on the French army prior to the declaration of war. As a result of this position the military attaché is the single largest source of comment on the French army in the available archival material from within British government during the 1930s. Surviving reports of the military attaché are found in the general correspondence files of the Foreign Office together with other relevant reports from Britain's embassy in Paris.⁴⁸ However, these reports are generally of a political nature containing factual routine information gathering based upon conversations with French officers and officials, rather than offering a detailed analysis of the French army.

Official records directly relating to the French army are most numerous for the times in which British contact with France's ground forces was at its greatest. For example, when Britain engaged in joint-staff talks with the French in April 1936 and resumed them from March 1939, a significant amount of archival material on matters concerning the French army exists. Equally, from September 1939 there is understandably a very large increase in the available records on the French army. This occurs as contacts between the two armies became ever closer and the number of military missions that liaised between Franco-British headquarters proliferated. In contrast, far fewer records are available for much of the 1930s when Britain sought to keep its distance from the French military.⁴⁹

Following the declaration of war British contact with the French Army greatly increased as London and Paris began to cooperate closely together. Greater engagement between the two governments and armies in the operation of the Franco-British coalition generated a large quantity of archival material from which it is possible to garner the views held within the British government on the French army during the Phoney War. In particular the deployment of the BEF to the Continent gave the British military in France a closeness to the French army unequalled by any part of the British government. The position occupied by the BEF in the field means that the records of the British army in France are amongst the most important sources of information in assessing how Britain viewed the French army. Of notable importance to this research are the records of the military missions established for liaison with the French army's most senior headquarters. The first of these was commanded by Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse, and was formed to represent the Chief of the

⁴⁸ See the FO 371 and FO 432 series together with those of the War Office's Director of Military Operations and Intelligence (DMOI) in the WO 106, WO 163, WO 190 and WO 208 series at the National Archives.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 3 for details of Britain's intentionally limited engagement with the French Army.

Imperial General Staff (CIGS) at the headquarters of the French supreme commander, General Maurice Gamelin. A second mission commanded by Brigadier Sir John Swayne was established to represent the BEF's commander-in-chief at the headquarters of General Alphonse Georges who commanded the French North-East area of operations in which the BEF served.⁵⁰ The work and records of these military liaison missions have been overlooked and rarely feature in most of the literature produced on this period. This is surprising as the papers of these missions are significant resources and other studies ought to have utilised these hitherto. This thesis will accordingly devote an entire chapter to these military missions.

The personal papers and correspondence of key British foreign and defence policy figures are another source of information offering official perspectives on the French army. Of most interest are the papers of secretaries of state at the War Office, together with those of the CIGS and other senior British army officers.⁵¹ These papers are not only useful sources in their own right, but also help to add further detail and fill gaps in the records of the departments in which these individuals served. For example, the personal papers of Field Marshal Montgomery-Massingberd, CIGS between 1933 and 1936, offer a far greater insight into his observations of the French army following his visits to France than that is contained in the surviving War Office records of his visits. Of the personal papers for the period after September 1939, of most importance are those of the senior British army officers that served with the BEF in France. In particular the papers of the officers of the BEF's General Headquarters (GHQ), corps and divisional commands, together with those in liaison roles with the French Army will be examined.⁵² This thesis will also examine reports and unpublished memoirs of numerous mid-rank British officers notably with the so called Second BEF in Normandy and Brittany which provides new details and insights on British perspectives of the French army. In particular, these testimonies from these field officers shed further light on the moral and psychological breakdown witnessed by British personnel among French army officers and troops.

⁵⁰ The records for these two liaison missions consist of war diaries located in the WO 167 record series at TNA and a range of reports and correspondence produced for the War Office including its Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence and CIGS. These records are found in the following record series at TNA: CAB 21, 104; WO 106, 193, 197, 202, 208.

⁵¹ Each chapter outlines the private papers of officials and officers used in this research.

⁵² Extensive records for the BEF are held at TNA. Amongst the records are War Diaries in the WO 167 record series whilst the WO 197 record series contains the surviving files of the BEF's GHQ and various narratives, notes and summaries written by British officers. Other records originating from the BEF can be found in the WO 106 record series for the Directorate of Military Operations and Military Intelligence.

Given that British observers failed to report on the serious shortcomings of French signal communications which were pivotal in the French army's defeat, there will be special attention devoted to this area. Notably the records of the French army's *Service de Transmissions* held at the *Service Historique de la Défense* (SHD) will be examined. In part it will be done so to show the extent to which the French army were aware of their own weaknesses in this area to ascertain if it is reasonable to consider if British observers could have identified these weaknesses. For added context the French army's efforts in studying the signals of other nations' armies will be assessed to contrast the limited lengths which British officials went to in undertaking this task on their French counterparts.

Although a large quantity of archival material exists which offer British assessments of the French army, there are still gaps in the historical record. The records available are restricted to a certain extent by the destruction of likely relevant material during the Second World War. This is partly the result of a German air raid in September 1940 when the War Office record repository on Arnside Street in London was hit and a large number of potentially relevant records were destroyed. Amongst these records were papers of the CIGS, the vast majority of which were destroyed for the period 1904-1939. Equally, a significant number of the BEF's operational records were lost in the chaos of the evacuation from France in June 1940. Similarly, certain private papers and personal reflections of some of the senior officers who served with the BEF are not extensive, restricting the historical record further. For example, the commander-in-chief of the BEF, Lord Gort, died in 1946 whilst still a serving officer. Consequently, he was unable to leave a memoir or consolidated collection of papers offering a perspective of his time with the BEF. In addition, of the twelve divisional commanders who served with the BEF only Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery has a single collection of papers in Britain's archives.

Thesis structure

This thesis will then accordingly offer an analysis of the views of those British officials that were best positioned to view the French army and those for who the effectiveness of France's ground forces was most important. The first part of the thesis will explain the attitudes that emerged prior to the declaration of war between 1933 and September 1939. This will begin in the first chapter with analysing the reporting of the British embassy in Paris, specifically that of the ambassadors and military attachés. Their observations are particularly important as during that time these were the British officials that

had the greatest contact with the French army which was unrivalled by any other part of Britain's government. The chapter will set out the political context in which the embassy operated before focussing on the generally positive reporting of the ambassador and military attachés which was heavily focussed on the French army's leadership but limited overall in its scope. The criteria by which the embassy judged the French army will then be analysed and explain how its views were formed.

The judgements of the War Office on the French army will then be assessed in the next chapter. As the service ministry responsible for the governance and operation of the British army, the War Office was the professional home of those with greatest expertise and responsibility for informing government on matters concerning the French army. Accordingly the views of the War Office's two most senior officials, the secretaries of state for war and the CIGS will be examined most closely. Their views will be analysed in the broader strategic and political situation of the time illustrating how British views of the French army featured in the War Office's strategic calculations. It will be shown that positive engagement with the French army played an important role in shaping confidence in the France's ground forces, but that this was influenced by constraints which limited contacts with Britain's future ally and a significant enduring deference to the French army from the First World War. In addition it will be demonstrated that weaknesses in British doctrine impacted on British officers' understanding of the French army contributing to aspects of France's ground forces not being reported on, including crucially a serious oversight of critical weaknesses in signals and communications. The chapter will also consider how British assessments at this time contrasted to those made on the German army prior to September 1939.

The second part of this thesis will then examine the period of the Phoney War between September 1939 and the start of the German offensive on 10 May 1940. After the declaration of war British contact with the French army increased dramatically and presented the opportunity for a better understanding of France's ground forces to be developed. For this period, the observations of those from Britain who engaged with the French army at different levels will be closely examined. This will include the senior liaison missions, the BEF's GHQ and those commanders in the field down to middle ranking appointments. The reporting from these different officials and officers based in France played a significant role in helping shape the view of the War Office back in London. The thesis will assess British views of the French army up to May 1940 in this way as these different officials engaged with the French army at

different levels and in differing ways. They offer different perspectives of different aspects of the French army. Equally in taking this approach it will be possible to demonstrate the full extent of the confidence that Britain had in France's ground forces.

Chapter 4 analyses the hitherto overlooked work of Britain's two principal military missions to the French army. The chapter will analyse the positive working relationships between the liaison missions and the French command together with the occasional critical observations of the French headquarters offered by liaison staff. It will also be demonstrated that the work carried out by the liaison missions was in part influenced by the often apparent lacklustre nature of Britain's war effort that was initially limited militarily, economically and in what it demanded of its civilian population at this time, and how that impacted on liaison staff's reporting on the French command. The next chapter provides an analysis of the BEF's leadership and officers in the field's judgements on the French army. It will show that the BEF's own weaknesses helped shape its perspective of the France's ground forces before assessing the influence of preconceived ideas of France, the French and the new conflict had on officer's views of the French army. The chapter will also contemplate the fear of a French 'Fifth Column' which was a common feature of mid-ranking officers' thoughts during this time.

The last research chapter analyses British views of the French army during the Battle of France. In so doing it shows how British confidence was eventually shattered in the French army in a way which was unimaginable in the preceding decade. Indeed, soon after the start of the German offensive widespread criticisms were offered on many aspects of France's ground forces. The changes in these views were of course the result of witnessing the French army being defeated in a manner which had previously not been given consideration. In witnessing the French defeat and with the benefit of hindsight many British observers were quickly able to identify weaknesses in their ally which they had been unable to do so previously. Yet, within Whitehall and the BEF there was no explanation for why these weaknesses were not noted before they were exposed on the battlefield. This chapter will show that the increased tensions between the two nations' armies during the campaign which led to British views becoming more critical of its ally was in large part the result of the breakdown of effective liaison between the BEF and French army due significantly to the signals and communications weaknesses which blighted France's army and that had been largely previously un-noted by British officials.

Although the French army's defeat was comprehensive the chapter shows that there was evidence in the Battle of France that some British observers' earlier confidence was not entirely misplaced. Perhaps because of the nature of the defeat that ensued, many British officials and indeed later historians have overlooked the creditable performance of some French army units in certain engagements during the campaign of 1940. These actions demonstrated that there were units of the French army capable of performing effectively in battle. This chapter will also include a section on British views of the French army in the Norwegian campaign which was ongoing at the time of the Battle of France. France's unheralded involvement in the battle for Norway has largely been overlooked by historians, but it will be demonstrated that French army units under generals Béthouart and Ganeval performed well against their German counterparts and won admiration from British officers who judged them to serve far more effectively than their own men.

Finally, the thesis will conclude with a summary of how and why those in Britain who had observed the French Army most closely had confidence, to the extent which they did, in France's ground forces. It will then provide a summary analysis of how and why Britain reported on the French army in the way in which it did so. In so doing it will be examined to what extent British confidence could be justified, and if Britain's various observers of the French army could have formed alternative views on France's ground forces. The conclusion will then outline the significance of British views of the French army in our understanding of wider Franco-British relations during this period. It will also be questioned if British views of the French army in the period in question provide any contemporary lessons for coalition relations particularly in asymmetrical alliances. In contrast to the 1930s and Phoney War, it will be illustrated how critical British assessments in the immediate post-war years led to Britain taking a more assertive role in the affairs of the French army at the start of the Cold War. This it did even after the creditable combat performances of French units in their various guises later in the Second World War. In this sense it appears to show that Britain had identified that its unquestioning and deferential approach to the French army prior to the Battle of France had provided an incomplete perspective. Although this is not directly acknowledged in British records, the new dynamic to Britain's relationship with the French army after 1945 indicates that this was the case. This thesis will therefore add further to the understanding of the dynamic of Franco-British relations of this period in the specific area of Britain's engagement with the French army. In so doing it examines an aspect of

Franco-British relations which led to Britain finding itself in a strategic position of great danger in June 1940 following the defeat of France's ground forces which had not been considered a likely eventuality.

Chapter 2

The View from Paris, 1933 – September 1939.

Located in the heart of Paris on the prestigious rue du Faubourg St Honoré, Britain's embassy in France potentially offered the British government a rich source of information on the French army. Indeed, throughout the 1930s Britain's ambassadors and military attachés in Paris had contact with the French army which was unrivalled by any other British officials. The reports and correspondence they sent to London rarely questioned the effectiveness of France's ground forces, instead placing great confidence in the French army. As its principal source of information on the French army, these reports contributed significantly to the British government sharing that faith. This chapter will explore and explain why Britain's most senior officials in Paris had such faith in France's ground forces.

Firstly, this chapter will explain that the embassy's confidence in the French army was the result of the direct positive engagement that the ambassadors and military attachés had with the various elements of France's ground forces. In many cases these components were militarily sound and there was little reason not to have faith in what they witnessed. Secondly, this confidence will be shown to be attributable to a narrow focus by the attachés on the qualities of leadership, spirit and morale. Had senior embassy officials attempted to assess the French army more broadly then it is possible their confidence would have been less pronounced. Finally, it will be shown that cultural and institutional issues helped shape how Britain's senior officials in Paris formed their judgements on the French army. It will be demonstrated that the nature of the military attaché post in Paris in the 1930s, commonalities in the social and professional background of its occupiers, and shortcomings in British officers' career education all contributed to shortcomings in the reporting on the French army.

This chapter focuses on both what the ambassadors and military attaches experienced at first hand, together with the influences of their social and professional background and career education. Undoubtedly, the senior officials at the embassy arrived in Paris with preconceived ideas of France and its army. There were also clearly other external influences which to different extents shaped their outlook too. Many of these influential factors were not unique to those at the Paris embassy but were common to varying degrees to others in the British army and government in the decade preceding the Second World War. Although these will be referred to, they will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapter.

The Embassy's reporting during this time is referred to in numerous studies, but mostly in outlining the course of the British government's relationship with its Paris counterpart in broader foreign affairs. The narrower view of the French army from Britain's embassy does not feature in detail.⁵³ Yet an appreciation of exactly how the ambassadors and military attachés reported on the French army is essential to understand the British confidence in the ability of France and Britain to contain or confront Nazi Germany. This is largely due to the scarcity of other sources available to the government in London to learn about its future ally's military.

For the period up to September 1939, Martin Alexander and William Philpott's studies of Franco-British defence relations have paid the most attention to the role of the British embassy in Paris and its military attachés.⁵⁴ However, Alexander and Philpott do not scrutinise the embassy's study of the French army in detail. Instead, their remit and focus is on the wider context of Franco-British foreign and defence relations and the deteriorating security situation in Europe, which accounts for the more pessimistic tone of the embassy's views cited in their work. They both acknowledge that Britain's military attachés were not particularly 'industrious' in their study of the French army and this in part led to a 'blurred' understanding of France's ground forces.⁵⁵ They do not though analyse in detail why embassy officials reported as they did, nor explore the institutional and cultural factors that helped shape their judgements.

⁵³ See, for example, Martin S. Alexander and William J. Philpott, eds., *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 4, 11-12, 102-103, 107-108, 110, 112, 133, 142-143, 145, 197 and Martin S. Alexander, and William J. Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on Future Military Cooperation 1928-1939" *Intelligence and National Security* 13 (1998): 53-84; Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France, 1936-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 9, 27, 45-49, 54, 59, 69-70, 75, 78, 80-82, 98-99, 101, 109-112, 115-118, 120, 129, 133, 142-143; Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 55-56, 59, 91, 96, 127-128, 158-159, 196; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67, 69-70; P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente and Estrangement* (London: Longman, 1996), 211, 231 and Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis*. (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 14, 43, 70-71, 83, 156, 171, 176, 188.

⁵⁴ Alexander and Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars*, 4, 11-12 and Alexander and Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War.", 53-84; Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31, 91, 149, 235, 253-254, 261-263, 394; Martin S. Alexander, *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1998), 6, 62-66, 68-70. The private correspondence of Col David Fraser, military attaché in Paris from 1938 until 1940, also briefly features in Martin Alexander, "Fall of France". *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13 (1990) 10-44.

⁵⁵ Alexander and Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars*, 11.

Michael Dockrill's *British Establishment Perspectives of France 1936-1939* also refers to the work of the embassy.⁵⁶ Dockrill's use of the views of Britain's embassy is placed in an even broader perspective of foreign affairs. The views offered of the ambassadors and the attachés are not discussed in detail in Dockrill's work and not at any point in relation to the French army. Instead, the views of senior officials are used in explaining the developing situation in Franco-British diplomatic relations. Equally, although Dockrill acknowledges confidence in the French army, he too does not explain why this existed.

The sole history devoted to the workings of the embassy or any of its senior officials is John Herman's *The Paris Embassy of Sir Eric Phipps*.⁵⁷ In this study Herman examines the work of Sir Eric Phipps who served as Britain's ambassador in Paris between 1937 and 1939. Herman though does not focus upon Phipps or his embassy's views of the French army. Instead he is principally concerned with Phipps' apparent contrasting attitude to appeasement from his service as ambassador in Berlin to that in Paris. Herman explores in detail to what extent Phipps may have been much more strongly in favour of appeasement when serving in Paris, but not his views of the French army.

Beyond these small number of narrowly focused studies where Britain's embassy in Paris is referred to, the work of the ambassador and military attachés only receive brief mentions in works produced on broader Franco-British relations in the interwar period. Occasionally there are brief quotes from mainly the ambassador and much more rarely the military attachés. These are again usually used in the context of analysing Franco-British relations during this time and not in relation to France's army. Where these quotes have appeared they have largely been extracted from the Foreign Office and War Office records that have been released since the 1970s. This material has tended to be used in a broader explanation of the nature of relations between Paris and London in challenging the previously prevailing consensus held by historians such as E H Carr, Arnold Wolfers, Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, prior to the 1970s, which stated that Britain was the dominant partner in foreign affairs.⁵⁸ The historians that have challenged this include Anthony Adamthwaite,

⁵⁶ Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 9, 27, 45-49, 54, 59, 69-70, 75, 78, 80-82, 98-99, 101, 109-112, 115-118, 120, 129, 133, 142-143

⁵⁷ John Herman, *The Paris Embassy of Sir Eric Phipps* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ 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.

Martin Thomas, Robert J Young, Julian Jackson and Raphaële Ulrich-Pier.⁵⁹ In so doing they have sought to challenge Francois Bédarida's argument that France was at the beck and call of its English governess.⁶⁰ Once again though, in these histories the French army does not feature with any great significance.⁶¹ They do though argue that the fall of France was not the inevitable result of a decadent Third Republic. In this sense their arguments reflect a greater confidence in the French state, notwithstanding serious weaknesses, which strengths in aspects of the French army contributed towards.

Although there are a significant number of records generated by the Paris embassy on the French army, they are far smaller in number when compared to those available on those armies identified as having the potential to disturb the peace in Europe, such as Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. Indeed, the greater quantity of official sources that survive of the study of other nations' militaries is one indicator that greater effort was devoted to gaining an understanding of those which were considered to be possibly hostile in the future.⁶² However, there is not only a difference in the quantity of the material but also in the nature of the surviving records too. Certainly the material available on the French Army appears not to have been collated by the Embassy to be used by the War Office and Foreign Office in a manner conducive to the effective assessment of the strength and weaknesses of France's ground forces.⁶³ This is reflected in the character of the records and reports which are mainly of a political nature containing factual and regular collation of information based upon meetings with French officers rather than offering a detailed appreciation or analysis of the French army. There was a tendency to evaluate the army in terms of its leadership, morale, numerical size and strength of its fortifications. The surviving archival material contains nothing that could be considered to offer a closely focussed analysis of different aspects of the French army.

⁵⁹ Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur & Misery: France's bid for power in Europe 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*, Robert J Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), Jackson, *The Fall of France*, Raphaële Ulrich-Pier, "The 1930s" in *Cross Channel Currents: 100 Years of the Entente Cordiale*, ed. Richard Mayne, Douglas Johnson and Robert Tombs (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶⁰ Jackson "Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War.", 870.

⁶¹ See below for further details on how Britain's embassy in Paris viewed the French Army adds a further insight into the nature of wider Franco-British relations during the 1930s.

⁶² The disparity in the number of records compiled on Germany compared to France is seen in the WO 190 records series which offered military situation reports on Germany and adjacent countries, largely based on the work of attachés. In this record series there are a total of 671 files for the period 1932 to 1939 with only 7 specific to France.

⁶³ See Chapter 3 on how Britain analysed the German military in contrast to that of the French army.

The disparity in the archive material available on the French army compared to the militaries of Germany and Italy has been noted by Alexander and Philpott. They stated in the mid 1990s that it was ‘probable’ that not all relevant records had yet been released into the public domain. To support this claim, Alexander and Philpott highlighted that ‘Military Attachés Annual Reports, 1929-1939’ on the Italian Army that had only then recently been released.⁶⁴ Yet, the catalogue of the National Archives shows that no such reports on the French army have been released since the time of Alexander and Philpott’s research. Furthermore, enquiries made in research for this thesis with the MOD’s Historical Branch (Army) and the MOD’s Records’ Client Manager at the National Archives indicates that this is not the case. Instead the comparatively smaller quantity of official records that exists on the French army is most likely explained by the greater emphasis placed by Britain on studying potentially hostile nations and to a lesser extent vulnerabilities that exist in the lifecycle of records.

Of the senior officials at the embassy, the military attaché was the British official who had the greatest contact with the French army. Consequently, the military attaché is the single largest source of comment on the French army in the available archival material from British government officials during the 1930s. Much of the correspondence and reports contained within the Foreign Office files relate to non-military matters. However, there are a significant number of reports relating to the French army contained in these files that have been compiled by the military attaché. The attachés’ records consist mostly of memoranda and reports written to the ambassador based heavily upon meetings with senior French army officers. Also included in these despatches are notes, press cuttings and reports of the attachés’ attendance at the annual French army manoeuvres and visits to units. Information was also provided on French army policy in general terms and the proceedings of relevant French parliamentary debates. These reports of the military attaché sent to the ambassador were for the most part subsequently forwarded onto the Foreign Office in London. Frequently, the ambassador added a further personal interpretation to the reports of the military attaché, occasionally emphasising certain points or offering a dissenting view. Study of the work of the embassy’s senior officials in relation to the French army is largely restricted to these official papers because the ambassadors and military attachés of this period did not produce memoirs and with only one exception did not deposit any diaries or

⁶⁴ Alexander and Philpott “The Entente Cordiale and the Next War”, 78.

collection of private papers. Indeed, of the ambassadors and military attachés, only Sir Eric Phipps has a consolidated collection of personal papers that covers the relevant period of service in Paris, which are held at Churchill College, Cambridge. Within this collection though the French army does not feature in any significant way, with subject matter, where it concerns France, relating to wider diplomatic matters.

This chapter will now explain the context in which the embassy operated. In so doing it will outline the duties of the ambassadors and military attachés in relation to the French army and provide a brief overview of those who occupied those positions in the embassy. It will then be explained how senior officials' direct engagement with the French army shaped their confidence in France's ground forces. The way in which the embassy studied and questioned the French army will then be assessed and how cultural and institutional factors, most notably in the British army helped develop the judgements made. As part of an explanation for this, the nature of the role of the military attaché together with the social and professional backgrounds of those in that post and the ambassadors will be examined to explain how these too shaped the way the French army was perceived.

The political context.

Those British officials posted to the Paris embassy in the 1930s experienced a decade of substantial political upheaval in France. As the French government struggled in tackling the challenging economic situation, fascism and communism gained popular support with outbreaks of civil unrest, most notably in Paris in February 1934. The subsequent years brought much domestic political turmoil for the French government and in the elections of May 1936 the radical leftist Popular Front emerged victorious. The governments of the right that then followed restored a degree of economic stability with a programme of rearmament which left the French army well equipped for the conflict that would follow. Simultaneously, however, the strategic picture progressively deteriorated in Europe against French security interests. As German military power grew in strength and the Nazi regime began to push its territorial demands, France strove unsuccessfully for new military alliances for deterrence and defence.

As events unfolded in France, the British embassy found itself in the middle of an increasingly strained Anglo-French relationship. Franco-British relations were tested by disagreements over conflicting economic policies, the Geneva disarmament conference, and

differences over any revision of the Versailles settlement. Relations were seen to have reached a low point in 1935 with conflicting views over the Abyssinian crisis, French displeasure at the Anglo-German naval agreement and British disapproval of the Franco-Soviet Pact. Although these diplomatic disputes occurred frequently, they were insufficiently serious or enduring to prevent the two countries from entering the Second World War as allies. Neither did these have any direct impact on the ability of Britain to assess the French army.

In contrast to its tempestuous politics, the French army appeared to be a bulwark of stability. Although during the 1920s and early 1930s the potential effectiveness of the French army had declined through a period of retrenchment; from 1934 a series of rearmament programmes were set in place which led to modernisation and significant improvement in the general condition of France's ground forces.⁶⁵ This ensured that the French army was equipped with on the whole very effective, although not necessarily outstanding small arms, artillery, tanks and anti-tank weapons.⁶⁶ This new equipment was procured with an emphasis placed on being able to be mass produced rather than holding a distinct qualitative advantage over the potential enemy. Yet, with the exception of radio communications, a shortcoming of major importance that this thesis will return to in chapter 3, the French army was certainly effectively equipped. Indeed, although French arms were mass produced and relatively simple to operate, so as to be able handled easily by conscripts, France's ground forces possessed some very good equipment. For example, in 1939 the SOMUA 35 was considered the best battlefield tank in western and central Europe.⁶⁷ Equally, French anti-tank weapons used the best available technology and were capable of penetrating all German armoured vehicles with the exception of the Panzer IV. In addition to the stabilisation of the French army's condition brought upon by the rearmament programmes there was also great continuity in its leadership. Indeed, during this period the French army was led by just one chief of its general staff, General Maurice Gamelin. Further stability was engendered by a consistent doctrine, *la bataille conduite*, which although not without its weaknesses was in keeping with the character of France's mass conscript army.

In the years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the British government had little direct contact with the French army, other than through the military attachés.

⁶⁵ For an outline of the achievements in the French Army's rearmament see Jackson, *Fall of France*, 12-16.

⁶⁶ See Eugenia C Kiesling, "'If It Ain't Broke Don't Fix It.'" French Military Doctrine Between the World Wars." *War in History* 3 (1996): 216.

⁶⁷ For a summary of the strength of French armour, see Ernest R May. *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I B Tauris, 2009) 209; Lloyd Clark, *Blitzkrieg: Myth, Reality and Hitler's Lightning War – France, 1940* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), 34 and Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 14.

Nevertheless, there had been brief staff talks between the British and French services in 1936 after Germany's remilitarisation of the Rhineland. However, it was not until March 1939 that extensive contact and joint planning began, as war in Europe neared. It was only from this point that relevant officials in London began to have an extensive and potentially insightful engagement with the French army.⁶⁸

The ambassadors and military attachés

Throughout this time Britain had four different ambassadors in Paris. In 1933 Sir William Tyrrell was ambassador having been appointed in 1928. Tyrrell was forced to retire suddenly in 1934 due to ill health and was replaced by Sir George Clerk. He continued in post until 1937, when he was replaced by Sir Eric Phipps. In July 1939, Phipps was succeeded by Sir Ronald Campbell who remained Britain's ambassador until the French defeat in 1940. During the period in question, Britain had three military attachés assigned to Paris, all then serving at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel for a tour length of usually three years. In 1933 the British military attaché was Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Heywood, an officer of the Royal Artillery who was appointed to the position in May 1932. Heywood was succeeded in February 1936, by a Guards Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Beaumont-Nesbitt. He was replaced by another Guards Officer, Lieutenant Colonel William Fraser in August 1938, and was still in post when war was declared in September 1939.⁶⁹ All three were able to converse to a high standard in French. Indeed both Heywood and Beaumont-Nesbitt were qualified in the army as first class interpreters, whilst Fraser held this qualification at the second class level. All three attachés were assisted by two officers at the rank of either Captain or Major. The attachés' two assistants also held the British army's interpreter qualification at either first or second class.⁷⁰

These appointees had typical backgrounds for ambassadors or attachés at this time. In the case of the ambassadors all had served as career diplomats and were perceived as amongst the most capable of their peers thus being awarded the prestigious Paris appointment. Of the ambassadors it was Phipps that had most experience of France both personally and professionally. He had studied at the Sorbonne and had served in several posts

⁶⁸ See Chapter 3 for a full explanation of the Britain's distancing from France in the 1930s.

⁶⁹ Postings to the Paris embassy for Britain's military attachés and their assistants are detailed in the *Army List* of the time. Among other details recorded are an officer's regiment/corps and dates of promotion.

⁷⁰ The Linguistic qualifications for the military attachés and their assistants are cited next to their entries in the *Army List* during the time of their service.

at the Paris embassy. Prior to his appointment as ambassador to France he had held the same position in Berlin between 1933 and 1937.⁷¹ As ambassador in Germany, Phipps persistently warned the Foreign Office of the character of the Nazi regime and its growing military strength. In contrast to Phipps, Clerk had no prior experience of postings to the Paris embassy although was familiar with the situation that France found itself in having served as Britain's ambassador in neighbouring Belgium and Luxembourg, in addition to Turkey. The least experienced of the three ambassadors was Campbell, having only held the relatively junior ambassadorial appointment in Belgrade. He was appointed to the position in Paris though having been identified as a talented prospect within the Foreign Office.

The military attachés that served in Paris during this time all shared similar army career backgrounds. All served with distinction as middle-junior ranking officers in the First World War on the Western Front, and like many of their peers, but not necessarily older generations of officers, were likely to view the French army as a natural ally. This service amongst the younger cohort of officers also resulted in an enduring deference towards the much larger French army that they admired for having come through adversity to emerge victorious in 1918.⁷² During that conflict all three officers were decorated for gallantry. Heywood was mentioned three times in despatches, Beaumont-Nesbitt twice in despatches and was also awarded the Military Cross. Equally, Fraser was mentioned in despatches on three occasions in addition to being the recipient of both the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross.⁷³ Prior to their appointments to the Paris embassy, only Beaumont-Nesbitt had any professional engagement with France's military, when he served as an instructor in the French army between 1920 and 1921. The calibre of the three officers is demonstrated by both Heywood and Beaumont-Nesbitt eventually attaining the rank of Major General and Fraser being appointed to Brigadier. Given the commonality of the military attachés and ambassadors' backgrounds, it is perhaps not surprising that there was continuity in the outlook which they offered on the French army.

It is difficult to find direct evidence of either Britain's ambassadors or military attachés in Paris during the 1930s holding strong personal views on France and the French way of life which in turn may have coloured their assessments of the French army. There

⁷¹ Herman, *The Paris Embassy of Sir Eric Phipps*, 7.

⁷² See Chapter 3 for details on the British army's deference to the French army from the First World War that endured during the inter-war years.

⁷³ Gallantry awards for Heywood, Beaumont-Nesbitt and Fraser are detailed in their entries in the *Army List* during the time of their active service.

were though amongst this group of ambassadors and attachés those that were ardent Francophiles such as Phipps.⁷⁴ Although personal insights into how senior officials viewed France are rare, there are instances where this is revealed. For example, Heywood emphasised the positive aspects of French character in a lecture in 1938 when he described the differences between the people of Britain and France:

The traditional representation of a Frenchman as a short, rotund little man, with black hair and with a painted beard is as wrong as the extremely cadaverous looking individual with red hair and flowing red whiskers by which the Englishman is traditionally regarded in France...The nation as a whole presents a mass of complex, often contradictory, qualities, which render it, especially to the Anglo-Saxon, extraordinarily difficult to understand. The French possess great intellectual qualities, method, continuity, logic and an inordinate craving to plan everything beforehand to define and limit access of thought and action, to lay down rules and to provide for all possible contingencies.⁷⁵

Even though in this instance Heywood is emphasising that France and its people should not be thought of in an overly generalised way, he too appears to do so in outlining French character, in a stereotypical, albeit positive manner. Heywood though is stressing his perceived positive outlook on France and its people, in a way which was contrary to the wider Francophobia that existed in Britain at this time.⁷⁶ Indeed, public opinion was characterised by unsympathetic and stereotypical attitudes towards France. This stemmed from the antagonism between Britain and France born from centuries of conflict and disputes. This in turn led to a dislike and distrust imbedded in British history, popular opinion and folk-memory, even though since the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* relations between the two countries had been significantly more harmonious.⁷⁷ Although many among the upper and middle classes were admirers of the French way of life and its culture, this was a minority view with old stereotypes persisting. Moreover, even though there were pro-French voices in Whitehall and Westminster, the prevailing political view until the late 1930s viewed France ungenerously and with suspicion in its post-1918 attitude towards Germany.⁷⁸ Consequently, sentiments of Francophobia endured even when political circumstances or

⁷⁴ Herman, *The Paris Embassy of Sir Eric Phipps*, 7.

⁷⁵ HLRO JCCD DAV/227. Brigadier T. G. G. Heywood to GOC Aldershot, 16 June 1938 cited in Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 1.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 178-180 and Robert Tombs and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France. The History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (London: Pimlico, 2007) 522.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 2, 6, 20, 178-180 and Robert Tombs and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France. The History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 520-524.

⁷⁸ See chapter 3 for further details on British political attitudes towards France.

official propaganda encouraged a different view.⁷⁹ The British public therefore remained prone to outbursts of Francophobia, irrespective of the recent common experience of wartime alliance, with many convinced that Britain's first enemy continued to lie immediately across the Channel. These underlying sentiments had a tendency to regularly rise to the surface in both the popular press and within official circles.⁸⁰ Heywood's reflection on the French should not be perceived as being a strong indication of any Francophilia on his part though, but merely an understanding of differences between Britain and France.

Of the ambassadors and military attachés, Phipps appears to be have been the most favourably disposed to France, a result, perhaps, of his French education and prior postings to Paris. Indeed, the *Dictionary of National Biography* states:

This education gave a French tinge to his character and tastes, which should itself in the profound knowledge which he acquired of French politics and culture and in the sympathy which he felt throughout his life.⁸¹

This positive outlook notwithstanding, Phipps was a professional and there is nothing to indicate his confidence in the French army was shaped by his sympathy for French culture and tastes. After all, in reporting on wider French affairs, he could be pessimistic about France's future and security prospects.⁸²

Of the ambassador and the military attaché it was the latter which was most advantageously positioned to offer assessments of the French army. This was because the work of the ambassador covered wider political, diplomatic, economic and defence matters, whereas the military attachés' brief was dedicated solely to the French army. British military attachés were first stationed at major embassies overseas in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This followed from the escalating international tensions of the time and the requirement for better information about foreign military developments, especially following the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.⁸³ At a time of restricted and relatively primitive intelligence services, the military attaché was a key source of information on other nations' armies in embassies around the world. By 1936 Britain had thirty-eight military

⁷⁹ Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 3.

⁸⁰ Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War*, 188.

⁸¹ *Dictionary of National Biography 1941-1950* (London: Blackwell, 1959), 670 cited in Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 15.

⁸² See below and TNA FO 432/4, Phipps to Lord Halifax, 7 December 1938.

⁸³ Wesley K. Wark, 'Three Military Attachés at Berlin in the 1930s: Soldier-Statesmen and the Limits of Ambiguity', *The International History Review* 9 (1987): 586.

attachés serving in different nations' capitals.⁸⁴ In Paris the British military attaché was formally accredited to the French government and had privileged access, granted regularly to no other British officials, to the French general staff for regular meetings. The military attaché was tasked with reporting directly to the ambassador and the DMOI at the War Office, whilst also serving as the official channel by which military information was passed from London to Paris and vice versa. The military attaché together with his foreign counterparts in Paris also attended the French army's annual manoeuvres to obtain an insight into how France's ground forces operated. There were also occasional opportunities for the attachés to visit French units across its Empire.

The military attachés were guided in their reporting by instructions issued by the War Office's DMOI.⁸⁵ In these instructions military attachés were ordered to routinely report on army estimates, annual manoeuvres, the police and *gendarmerie*, but also to provide:

a general appreciation of the army...dealing especially with its efficiency and readiness for war and drawing attention to any important changes in strength, organisation, training, material and industrial mobilisation and to the trend of military thought...he should, so far as he can express his personal opinion upon any matters he brings to notice, remembering that the general staff is dependent mainly on military attachés for information regarding foreign armies.⁸⁶

Furthermore, military attachés were instructed that in their reports and despatches, where appropriate, appendices were to be added on 'military education ... infantry and cyclists...cavalry...artillery...engineers...aviation...tanks and armoured cars...signal and communication services...survey...transportation...supply...medical services...veterinary services...ordnance services...gas services...fortresses and defences...military operations...political tendencies of the army...small arms'.⁸⁷

It should be emphasised that these instructions were issued by the War Office to Britain's military attachés around the world. Consequently, the same guidance was provided for military attachés in countries perceived as potentially hostile, neutral or friendly. These instructions were therefore merely a framework of guidelines, albeit effective ones for being

⁸⁴ Alfred Vagts, *The Military Attaché* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 69.

⁸⁵ TNA WO 33/1387, 'Memorandum for the Guidance of Military Attachés' in 'Amplification of Instructions Contained in Letter of Appointment', August 1928.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

able to acquire an accurate understanding of a nation's military. The weight attached to the importance of these guidelines would thus have reflected the relative importance of a military attachés posting in a particular country. If a nation was not considered sufficiently important or there was complacency in how a country's military was judged then it appears likely that the instructions would not have been given as much consideration as in a country where there was a greater urgency to acquire an understanding of a nation's army. For example, it would be likely in a country such as Germany where the military posed a threat to British interests that the guidelines were followed relatively strictly. In contrast in a perceived friendly power, such as France, these instructions were not given the same weight, especially given the nature of the military attachés appointment in Paris.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the guidance issued by the War Office to its military attachés is clear in what information it expected to receive on a foreign nation's army. Had the War Office been in receipt of details on all of these matters, then it would have been possible to acquire an accurate understanding of an army and its capabilities. However, even if a military attaché had been able to report on all of this both extensively and accurately, there would still be no certainty in appreciating exactly how an army's fortunes would fare in battle. Indeed, the French army's enemy in hostilities would have an impact on just how operationally effective it could be and forecasting confidently the future course of a campaign would be both extremely difficult and unwise. It would have been possible to be more confident on this matter if the French army had an operational test on which observers could have judged its actual effectiveness and use that as a basis from which to consider future operations. The last significant engagements the French army had undertaken against a significant military power were in 1918 under circumstances very different to which it would face in any new conflict with Germany almost twenty years later. In contrast Hitler's support for the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War had enabled small numbers of troops and aircraft to be tested under operational conditions.⁸⁹ Although Nazi intervention in Spain did not indicate how its formations would perform against a first class military power, it did show developing German concepts and methods on which its forces could be judged. Nevertheless, the War Office clearly requested extensive and detailed information on foreign armies from its attachés to acquire as great an understanding as possible of a nation's ground forces. In the

⁸⁸ See section below for details on the nature of the military attaché appointment in Paris.

⁸⁹ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 20-21.

instance of France, with the absence of any operational tests to judge its military, gathering this information would be vital to gain an understanding as complete as could feasibly be possible given these circumstances.

Positive reporting on the French army: leadership

One source of the embassy's confidence in the French army were the largely positive encounters its staff had with the French army's leadership. Indeed, due to the regular meetings with senior French officers, the French army's leadership was one of the most frequently commented upon aspects of the French army. However, views offered on senior officers were not extensive or detailed. The lack of serious study of the French high command is particularly surprising as the embassy was aware of a perceived increasing level of importance being placed on these officers in French politics. For example, as early as July 1934 Sir George Clerk was reporting to foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, on an increase in the influence of the French army's leadership in government.⁹⁰ Similarly, later in the decade, the embassy noted appointments that indicated greater involvement of the French army in diplomacy. Indeed, at this time Marshal Pétain was appointed as France's first ambassador to Franco's Spain and General Weygand was given the leadership of a political-military mission to Romania and Turkey.

One way in which the leadership of the French army was reported on was in the annual 'Record of Leading Personalities in France' submitted by the ambassador to the foreign secretary.⁹¹ Yet, despite the obvious importance of the French Army's high command, between 1933 and 1937 just three officers, Gamelin, Weygand and Pétain were featured in these reports in what are otherwise extensive profiles of leading figures in France. From 1938, the annual report was extended to other officers likely to occupy senior command roles in the event of war, but even then only with the addition of Generals Alphonse Georges and Gaston Billotte. More broadly, beyond the contents of the annual report, it would appear that not more than a dozen senior French officers were well known to the embassy based on regular conversations or encountered on visits to the annual French army manoeuvres. Yet, given the limited staff and resources of the embassy and military attachés it should be asked how it was possible to gain an accurate appreciation of a peacetime officer corps some 28,000 strong and scattered across 20 military regions of metropolitan France and others in North

⁹⁰ TNA FO 371/17653, Clerk to Sir John Simon, 9 July 1934.

⁹¹ TNA FO 432/1-5.

Africa and the Levant. This was an intractable problem for British assessors of the French officer corps.

The annual reports were not only limited in the number of senior officers covered, but also restricted in their details. Gamelin was described as:

intelligent, practical...He gets on very well with English people...He is modern in his military views...being endowed with a lucid and elastic mind, he will probably evolve something really useful out of the present French military organisation without changing its basis.⁹²

Similarly, Weygand is subject to a less than thorough appraisal but was nonetheless held in high regard, being described as having ‘a very quick brain and a remarkable power of clear, lucid and concise exposition...he is distinctly well disposed towards Great Britain and is on friendly terms with many English people’.⁹³

The superficial nature of the ‘Leading Personalities’ reports was replicated in other despatches and memoranda compiled by the embassy in Paris on the French Army’s leadership. Examples of this are demonstrated by Colonel Heywood’s observation of Weygand as ‘most friendly and kind’,⁹⁴ whilst Colonel Fraser in 1939 wrote of him, ‘what a wonderful little man he is. I know no one for whom I have more affectionate admiration’.⁹⁵ Marshal Pétain who served as a member of the *Council Supérieur de la Guerre* during the 1930s was also commented upon in a similarly brief manner, but judged to have been a ‘hard...individual with an excellent army and war record, due greatly to his imperturbable and strong character.’⁹⁶

There were also similar assessments of French officers with lower profiles prior to 1939, but who would occupy important roles when war was declared. One such officer was General Billotte who became Military Governor of Paris in 1937 and also made a favourable impression. Colonel Beaumont-Nesbitt described Billotte as ‘a man whose personality makes itself felt and who appears to have the best qualities of leadership’.⁹⁷ Billotte is praised further in the ‘Leading Personalities’ report of 1939 where it was stated that he ‘possesses great energy and decision of character and...cool and balanced judgement. His wife is of

⁹² TNA FO 432/1, ‘Record of Leading Personalities in France’, 17 January 1934.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ TNA FO 371/16706, Heywood to Sir William Tyrrell, 15 March 1933.

⁹⁵ TNA WO 106/5387, Fraser to van Outsem, 30 August 1939.

⁹⁶ TNA FO 432/1, ‘Record of Leading Personalities in France’, 17 January 1934.

⁹⁷ TNA FO 432/3, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Phipps, 17 December 1937.

British nationality, a fact of which he is very proud'.⁹⁸ Another of the small number of officers commented on in this way was General Henri Giraud, serving in September 1936 as Military Governor of Metz and Commander of the 6th Region. He was described by Beaumont-Nesbitt as 'one of the foremost French commanders...undoubtedly a very fine fighting man'.⁹⁹ Only one figure in the French army's leadership appears to have been doubted by the British embassy and that was General Georges. Although he was featured positively in the 'Leading Personalities' reports of 1937 and 1938, in 1939 a more critical assessment was added from the embassy which stated:

he has been nominated to command the northern group of armies in the event of war, but at present time he does not give the impression of a really fit man, and it has been suggested that he might not be equal to such grave a responsibility.¹⁰⁰

Georges' fitness was doubted because he had been seriously wounded by the bullets of the Marseilles dockside assassin, a Croat, who killed visiting King Alexander of Yugoslavia and French foreign minister Louis Barthou in October 1934 at the start of the Yugoslav monarch's state visit to France. Significantly, the embassy would have realised that once deployed to France in the event of war, the BEF would have a large part of its fate placed under Georges' leadership. Yet, although this was understood, these concerns held about Georges are seemingly made without serious consideration for the significance that his weaknesses could have for the BEF in the event of war.

A striking feature of the language used in assessing the senior French officers is how military attributes are not used in these judgements and instead issues of character are more prominent. Although strength of character is important in senior leadership, the extent to which this is featured in the embassy's reporting is surprising given that it would only account for part of a military command's effectiveness. The comments do though reflect the nature of the culture of British army officers which existed at this time. Moreover, the comments on the senior officers perhaps reflect a detachment from the need to be fully engaged with a vast continental land force. Although the British army had grown into such a force during the First World, it had retrenched since then to a size in keeping with its earlier traditions. A very British centric outlook certainly appears to have taken hold again in the

⁹⁸ TNA FO 432/5, 'Record of Leading Personalities in France', July 1939.

⁹⁹ TNA FO 432/3, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Phipps, 17 September 1937.

¹⁰⁰ TNA FO 432/5, 'Record of Leading Personalities in France', July 1939.

inter-war years. Whereas the focus of the French army was principally on the defence of Metropolitan France, British officers had a greater sense of imperial commitments and peaceful service at home. It is true that France had its own strong ties to its empire and the events of 1914-1918 ensured that Britain could never again consider itself to be militarily isolated from the Continent. Yet, the cultures of the two armies differed on this. Evidence for this can be seen in the regimental and corps journals of the British army in the interwar years where European matters did not feature in regimental life in any significance compared to the regular news from stations at home and outposts around the Empire.¹⁰¹ That is not to say that the British army was not aware that as the 1930s progressed that the biggest threat to British security lay on the Continent in resurgent German military power. Moreover, the British army devoted significant effort in thought and deed to ensure that its ground forces could contribute to a future war in Europe if such an eventuality arose. However, culturally there was a detachment from this in the British army with virtually no other significant personnel serving on the Continent other than those as military attachés.

Isolation from the Continent perhaps therefore allowed the British army's cultural values to be unintentionally projected onto the French. Regimental affairs, the day to day existence in the army for the vast majority of officers was not touched by considerations of events in Europe. With France sharing a land border with an increasingly aggressive and assertive Germany, the French army's leadership were not afforded the luxury of sharing such a detachment. The comments of the military attachés reflect then this detachment, refusing to judge the French officers on military attributes, instead believing that good character was sufficient to guide the French army in the defence of the Continent. In this sense it is possible that the British perceived strength of the French army dating back to the First World War and its numerical size subconsciously inhibited the embassy from questioning its leadership too deeply. As nothing appeared to be amiss in their character in the eyes of the embassy and in the context of the French army's wider perceived strength, there was no need to judge these officers any further.

Creditably though Britain's military attachés did report accurately on the anti-Soviet and anti-Communist views which were held by senior French army officers. This was noted at the time of the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935, and amongst discussions over the possibility of

¹⁰¹ See, for example, the interwar journals of the Royal Army Service Corps and the Royal Army Ordnance Corps available at www.rlcarchive.org.

staff talks between Paris and Moscow. During this time Beaumont-Nesbitt reported that the 'dislike of the Franco-Soviet Pact' was 'one of the most frequent and important topics' in conversations with senior officers in 1935. Typical of the French officers that held these views according to Beaumont-Nesbitt was General Giraud who offered 'emphatic condemnation of the Franco-Soviet pact',¹⁰² seemingly partly based on racial prejudice as he was described as having 'considerable contempt for Slavs, and for Russians in particular'.¹⁰³ A more measured sceptical view on the Soviet Union though was also reported on with a lack of faith widely held amongst the French army's leadership on the potential effectiveness of any military alliance with Moscow. This was reported to London by Beaumont-Nesbitt after a conversation with Gamelin who, it was noted, viewed 'the military value of Russia as a negative one' and believed that military staff talks between France and the Soviet Union 'might do more harm than good to France'. Beaumont-Nesbitt regarded this to be 'so entirely in accordance with similar expressions of opinion by other responsible officers that I consider they can safely be accepted as representing the present policy of the general staff'.¹⁰⁴

Much as the embassy closely observed the French high command's views towards the Soviet Union, they also took a keen interest in their views of Germany. In so doing both the military attachés and ambassadors observed correctly that senior French officers were always fearful of Germany's potential military power. This was accurately reported upon in 1933 during discussions on the Geneva disarmament conference when the French high command expressed their unwillingness to offer further reductions in their armaments and further concessions to German rearmament. As Germany's military strength began to increase as the decade progressed, so too did the French army's apprehension. This was clearly understood by the embassy with Colonel Heywood informing London in 1934 that the French general staff judged that 'by April 1935, Germany will possess a military instrument giving the possibility of waging war with some chance of success'.¹⁰⁵ A similar view was expressed to London later that year when Heywood noted that the French army's leadership was offering a 'pessimistic account of the state of German rearmament' with Germany able to 'freely increase their military strength'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² TNA FO 432/2, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Clerk, 17 September 1936.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ TNA FO 432/2, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Clerk, 16 October 1936.

¹⁰⁵ TNA FO 371/17653, Heywood to Clerk, 19 June 1934.

¹⁰⁶ TNA FO 432/1, Heywood to Clerk, 21 November 1934.

The Embassy also observed how the French army's high command increasingly viewed the European security situation as a 'grave concern', lobbying its government hard for additional resources to counter the German threat. This was reflected in Colonel Heywood's remarks, albeit prematurely, on 10 April 1935 that it was 'not exaggerated, therefore, to conclude...that we have now entered a period of preparation for war'.¹⁰⁷ By January 1939, this judgement was inevitably further advanced with Colonel Fraser reporting that 'I have the impression that the French general staff are convinced that war is coming in Europe, and before very long'.¹⁰⁸

Linked to the fears of German aggression were the reports from the Paris embassy of an increasing eagerness on the part of the French army's leadership to establish an alliance with Britain. Although the ambassadors and military attachés always appeared to view the French army's high command as pro-British and eager to secure a defence accord, they reported that this became particularly evident from the autumn of 1938 following the loss of Czechoslovakia as a potential ally. Phipps wrote to foreign secretary, Lord Halifax in December 1938, that this feeling was becoming so great that in the event of war, if France did not receive a significant British land contribution of 'no less than twenty divisions' to support the French army, its leadership 'may lose heart'.¹⁰⁹ Even though the embassy feared that the military leadership in Paris could 'lose heart', it is surprising that this did not lower the ambassador's or the military attaché's confidence in the French army.

Positive reporting on the French army: limited scope

Army policy in general terms as advocated by the French army's leadership was regularly noted by the military attachés in their reports. However, evaluations of the French general staff's advocacy are rare in the existing archival material. One example where this did occur was on the judgement of the French high command's efforts in the early to mid 1930s to increase the period of national service from eighteen-months to two years. This proposal was viewed positively by Britain's military attaché at that time. An extension in the period of national service was needed to address the sudden decrease in numbers of the annual contingent to be called up between 1936 and 1940 caused by the halving of the birth-

¹⁰⁷ TNA FO 432/1 Heywood to Clerk, 9 April 1935.

¹⁰⁸ TNA FO 432/5, Fraser to Phipps, 2 January 1939.

¹⁰⁹ TNA FO 432/4, Phipps to Lord Halifax, 7 December 1938.

rate between 1915 and 1919. Heywood remarked in January 1934 that at a time of strengthening German military capabilities 'the scheme appears a sound one on paper'.¹¹⁰

Wider aspects of the French army other than its leadership were rarely commented upon by either the ambassadors or military attachés. An exception to this trend, however, can be seen after the attaches attended the French army's annual manoeuvres in September. Attendance at these exercises presented the opportunity for the military attaché to observe the French army on exercise in large formations. In the reports attachés always presented a favourable review of what they had witnessed. Typical of such reports, was that produced by Beaumont-Nesbitt after the 1936 manoeuvres held in the South of France, close to the town of Aix-en-Provence. Having returned to Paris after the manoeuvres he wrote that:

Units as were encountered in back areas, or on the march, looked healthy and contented, even if turn-out, both of officers and men, left much to be desired from the British point of view...The impression which I obtained was a distinctively favourable one. There was an air of alert resolution about the division and corps commanders with whom I came in contact, and the rather paternal attitude adopted by the French officer towards his subordinates is one which ensures that his personality permeates his command...I am confident that morale and discipline in the formations with which we were immediately concerned is good. Had this not been the case, I do not believe that they would have carried out in such excellent style the march past which took place...their performance was one which could only have been undertaken by troops with good morale and sound discipline.¹¹¹

A similarly positive appraisal was made by Beaumont-Nesbitt after the September 1937 manoeuvres carried out near Alençon in Normandy. After attendance at these manoeuvres he reported that:

a notable point...was the keenness and energy displayed by all ranks...it was evident that an excellent spirit prevailed and that their morale was high. This was all the more satisfactory as these formations belonged to Western France where the standard of training is perhaps lower than in the eastern regions.

Beaumont-Nesbitt noted further that the manoeuvres at Alençon had not only impressed him but also 'created an excellent impression on the many spectators present'.¹¹² These were the last manoeuvres in which the military attachés were able to pass judgement on the French army prior to the Second World War. This was because the 1938 manoeuvres were cancelled

¹¹⁰ TNA FO 432/1, Heywood to Tyrrell, 3 January 1934.

¹¹¹ TNA FO 432/2, Colonel Beaumont-Nesbitt to Sir G Clerk, 17 September 1936.

¹¹² TNA FO 432/3, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Clerk, 8 October 1937.

due to the Czechoslovakian crisis and war had been declared before manoeuvres could be held in 1939.

The reports produced by the military attachés after the manoeuvres were not only always positive, but, similarly to routine observations, limited in scope. The reports had a tendency to be fixated on morale, discipline and appearance of the units that they encountered. Although these matters were certainly worthy of comment, other aspects of the French army such as its equipment and doctrine should have been given greater consideration to justify the confidence held. In contrast this did occur in the embassies of foreign capitals such as Berlin and Rome, where nations' militaries were perceived to pose an acute threat to British security interests.¹¹³

If detailed reports on the French metropolitan army were infrequent, appraisals of its forces overseas were even rarer. French colonial forces were not only important for the defence of France's empire but were also anticipated to be transferred to the new Western Front if war broke out with Germany. An exception to the embassy's lack of reporting on this was in February 1938, when Beaumont-Nesbitt visited French forces in Tunisia. Once again engagement with the French army proved to be positive. As a result of this visit and conversations with senior officers such as the assistant chief of the French general staff, General Henri Dentz, Beaumont-Nesbitt judged the French army in North Africa to be able to deal effectively with any likely threats that it could have faced in that region. On this point, the military attaché stated to Phipps that 'if the existing or potential effectiveness was compared with those which Italy has available in Libya, the advantage is overwhelmingly in favour of France, and is a sufficient reason for the confidence as to future developments in North Africa'.¹¹⁴ The limited assessment of France's colonial forces is a significant omission from the reporting by Britain's embassy in Paris. In a future war colonial forces were anticipated to make a significant contribution to the French army's efforts and therefore on this understanding it is surprising that the embassy did not devote more efforts in assessing them.

¹¹³ See Chapter 3 for how Britain reported on the German military threat in contrast to that of the French army.

¹¹⁴ TNA FO 371/21594, Beaumont-Nesbitt to Phipps, 24 February 1938.

Critical judgements

While the Embassy's reports on the French army were mostly positive, there were occasional criticisms. However, these were infrequent and not serious enough to dent confidence. For example, in late 1938 the ability of the French army to withstand Germany was briefly doubted but even then this stemmed from a reassessment of the wider strategic rather than from changing perceptions of the France's ground forces. Indeed, the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, the declaration of Belgian neutrality, the creation of an alliance between Rome and Berlin, German *Anschluss* with Austria, together with the loss of Czechoslovakia as a potential military ally cast doubts in the minds of those in the Paris embassy on France's ability to succeed a future conflict with Germany. On this matter Colonel Fraser wrote to Phipps on this in December 1938 stating that:

with no allies to count on in Europe, France finds herself faced by a greater Germany containing a population almost exactly double her own and which will eventually be able, therefore, to mobilise two divisions to everyone of hers...if France is to rely on land on her own resources, plus, perhaps, the remnants of a Belgian army, with which to confront an attack by Italy and Germany, the disproportion of numbers would be too great, that she would be hard put to it to defend herself even temporarily, and that the outcome could only be a matter of time.¹¹⁵

Although these fears were held in late 1938, they did not endure for long. This was in part because confidence was always retained in the French army, despite the wider strategic picture in Europe becoming less favourable to France.

Nevertheless, there were further examples of isolated concerns amongst the ambassadors and military attachés on certain aspects of the French army at various points during the 1930s. One such incidence of this concerned the occasional reluctance of French conscripts to undertake their compulsory military training. An example of this occurred in 1935, after some reservists were retained for a longer period than had been expected. On observing this Colonel Heywood reported that:

This measure will not be popular...and may lead in some places to some display of discontent. In the case of a regiment to which a British officer has been attached, he informs me that a certain number of officers have now been ordered to sleep in barracks in order to deal with such manifestations which might occur.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ TNA FO 432/5, Fraser to Phipps, 22 December 1938.

¹¹⁶ TNA WO 432/1, Colonel Heywood to Clerk, 9 April 1935.

Heywood reflected further on this matter in a despatch to the War Office on 2 March 1935 in which he stated 'the average Frenchman regards and fulfils his military obligations as a somewhat irksome but necessary duty and never regards them with enthusiasm'.¹¹⁷ Although considered worthy of comment by Colonel Heywood, such observations are not unusual of conscript soldiers of any nation. Furthermore, Heywood and others based at the Paris embassy did not expect at any point that such typical reluctance amongst conscripts would seriously undermine the French army.

Of greater concern to British officials in Paris was the potential of communist influence to undermine the other ranks of the French army. Indeed, after the Popular Front became the dominant political force in France, there were clear if ultimately unfounded concerns about communist infiltration of the French army. Beaumont-Nesbitt appeared, though, to have been relaxed about such a consideration. He judged that:

outside the army, men may come under Communist influence, and in many cases are, or call themselves, Communists, within the army, so long as the officers are of the right type and are left alone by the politicians, the NCOs and men generally shed their political affiliations and can be relied upon.¹¹⁸

Although Britain's ambassador at that time, Sir George Clerk, did not want to dissent from this view, he believed there was still potential for the French army to be undermined by communism. Clerk stated this in a despatch to foreign secretary Eden in which he wrote:

The recent successes that M. Blum has had in withstanding the Communists on the question of intervention in the affairs of Spain on the one hand and in settling the Lille textile strikes on the other, have undoubtedly set back the communist cause...the set back may only be a temporary one, and, should the economic situation grow more difficult, as well it may during the coming winter, the Communists may more than make up the ground which they have so recently lost. Such a situation must necessarily react in some measure upon the army, and in the not impossible event of the army having to be used to clear factories occupied by strikers or to quell civil disorders its devotion would be put to severe test. Communism in this country is neither scotched nor killed, and its possible reactions upon the French army must continue, during the present uncertainty, to give rise to some anxiety among those who have this country's interests at heart.¹¹⁹

Anxieties over the spread of communism demonstrate once again that British officials in Paris were more concerned with the ideas and spirit of French soldiers rather than how they

¹¹⁷ TNA FO 371/18800, Heywood to Clerk, 2 March 1935.

¹¹⁸ TNA FO 432/2, Colonel Beaumont-Nesbitt to Clerk, 17 September 1936.

¹¹⁹ TNA FO 432/2, Clerk to Eden, 22 September 1936.

were equipped or the doctrine to which they would fight. Moreover, even though there were fears of the French army being undermined by communist influence, this did not detract from the broader confidence which the ambassadors and military attachés had in their future ally. This was shown in confidence in the French army still being maintained as war was about to be declared. Just days before the declaration of war the embassy looked on approvingly of the mobilisation measures that the French army undertook in August 1939. The reassurance that the French army was moving towards war in a manner that was reassuring to the Paris embassy was reflected in the observations of Colonel Fraser at the time. In his despatch to the War Office in August 1939, Fraser noted that:

The mobilisation this time has gone far better than it did last September. So far as I have been able to find out there have been no unfortunate incidents or muddle at the mobilisation centres and the morale of those called up has been excellent; in fact, France today, presents a spectacle of calm determination which is most impressive and the country is by no means disposed to settle this affair on Hitler's terms.¹²⁰

How the embassy studied and questioned the French army

Although the British embassy in Paris offered comment on the French army to the Foreign Office and War Office in London, the surviving archival material clearly does not provide a detailed understanding of its future ally's ground forces. Absent from the records is any significant analysis of the French army's strengths and weaknesses. This of course was contrary to the formal guidance issued by the War Office to its attachés. Instead, the reports from the embassy are of a more basic factual nature based upon information derived in the main from encounters with senior French army officers. Even when this information is conveyed it is done so in having seemingly been accepted uncritically. In order for the military attachés to have been able to provide accurate assessments of the French army it would have been necessary to scrutinise in detail its doctrine, training, organisation, equipment, and leadership. This though was a course of action not pursued by any of the attachés during the 1930s. The French army was reported upon as if it was considered almost as a singular organisation, not recognised as a vast institution made of a great array of components of inevitably varying standards. Obviously the military attachés were aware of

¹²⁰ TNA WO 106/5367, Colonel Fraser to Colonel W E Van Oustem, 30 August 1939.

the way in which the French army, as with all nations, was comprised of different arms and services. Indeed, there is no doubting their competence to suggest otherwise. This was not reflected in the military attachés reporting though, as a result of the brevity of most of the despatches and other correspondence produced. It is because of this self imposed brevity in reporting that there was no opportunity to present detailed assessments of the many factors which needed to be considered to accurately judge the effectiveness of the French army. Consequently, French infantry, artillery and combat service support arms are not reported upon in any significant detail. Equally, there is an absence of any insight on the French army's doctrine, training, equipment, logistics and communications. There was also a lack of reporting on non-military matters such as civilian morale and attitudes which could impact on the French army. Yet, as the military attaché's brief was to report specifically on issues directly relating to the French army, the lack of attention devoted to wider societal factors is understandable. Without consideration of these many issues, it should have been difficult to place too much confidence in the effectiveness of the French army, and yet this is exactly what the British embassy did.¹²¹

Not reporting on these aspects indicates complacency born of confidence. Clearly this confidence was not based on the embassy's official observations and positive interactions with the French army alone. Undoubtedly a series of assumptions and an outlook shaped by other factors were also significant in generating confidence in the French army. This applied to virtually all British observers of the French army, not just embassy officials. For the period up to the declaration of war these issues will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. Nevertheless, it must therefore be remembered at this stage that shaping the embassy's view of the French army was the broad consensus amongst British and indeed military experts worldwide that judged France's ground forces to be extremely powerful.¹²²

Responsibility for the Paris embassy's less than extensive study of the French army must to a large extent also rest in Whitehall. Considering that officials in London were deliberately distancing themselves from the French army, it is surprising that greater instruction did not emanate from the Foreign and War Offices for its embassy to provide

¹²¹ See below for how this in part is explained by the nature of the role of the military Attaché in Paris, the lack of diversity in senior appointments at the Embassy in the 1930s and limitations to a British officer's career education.

¹²² The extent of confidence in the French army was demonstrated by the shock generated by its defeat in June 1940. For the global shock at the French army's defeat see Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 2-3.

detailed analysis on its future ally's ground forces, in order to compensate for the gap in their own direct knowledge. As seen above, the DMOI issued instructions to its attachés on appointment which should have resulted in extensive reporting, but this seems to never have been fulfilled in Paris or for that matter pursued by the War Office.¹²³ It would appear that during the 1930s, even as war came to be seen as inevitable, Whitehall failed to request more information on the French army. This situation continued even beyond the declaration of war until just weeks before the German attack in the West, when officials in Whitehall began to realise that their embassy was not fulfilling its potential as a source on the French army.¹²⁴

The character of the embassy's reporting on the French army and therefore confidence in France's ground forces was the result of the questions it posed in examining its future ally's military. In as far as the judgements made by the embassy went, they appear to have been broadly accurate. This is certainly evident in the two areas on which the ambassador and military attaché commented upon the most, the French army's leadership and spirit. The high command of the French army was competent, with its most senior officers having attained their prestigious appointments through notable and successful careers. There was certainly nothing flawed about France's senior officers that merited concern that they would be unable to lead the French army effectively in battle. In this sense it could be argued that the embassy in Paris was correct to have confidence in the French army's leadership. Senior French officers, and in particular Gamelin did of course make serious errors in planning how France would respond to a German attack in the West. This was borne out by the French high command's inability to consider seriously that Germany would launch a major attack in a different area other than through Northern Belgium, similar to the Schlieffen Plan of 1914. This though was a single, albeit calamitous, failure in judgement of the French command which did not indicate a wider deficiency in military competence. As has been argued recently by Lloyd Clarke in his study of the Battle of France, had the Germans attacked in 1940 along the lines the likes of Gamelin were convinced they would, then it is likely the French army would at the very least have been able to resist more effectively than it did.¹²⁵ Therefore with an absence of any serious weaknesses in the French army's leadership, it can

¹²³ See Chapter 4 for the War Office's attitude to studying the French army and why it did not make greater efforts to scrutinise France's ground forces more closely.

¹²⁴ See TNA FO 371/24310. Roger Makins, Foreign Office to British Embassy, 1 May 1940.

¹²⁵ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 383-386.

be understood why the ambassadors and military attachés continued to have faith in France's high command and by extension the French army as a whole.

The nature of the role of the military attaché in Paris and lack of diversity in senior appointments at the embassy

Undoubtedly contributing to the ineffectiveness of the military attachés' scrutiny of the French army was the perceived status and importance of their role during that era. Indeed, a posting to a British embassy during the 1930s was viewed as not much more than an extended social tour. This was particularly considered to be the case in Paris during that time, where the appointment was not judged to offer a route to promotion or senior command.¹²⁶ Moreover, all of the military attachés held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, which although notable in denoting a successful career, was insufficiently senior to hold anything close to equal terms when dealing with the most senior ranks of the French army. Support in carrying out their roles was limited too, with assistant military attachés in Paris holding rank of only Captain or occasionally Major. This was something that the British army would later remedy and appoint attachés with greater rank in due course.

However, during the 1930s many other world powers took the role of military attaché more seriously than Britain, according them greater status in the bureaucratic hierarchy of their services. This was certainly the case in the French army and it was no coincidence that their attachés around the world reported more comprehensively and more frequently than their British counterparts.¹²⁷ This is shown by the extensive reporting for example by the French military attachés in London in their reporting on the British army. The reports and dossiers produced were very detailed, analytical, technical and covered all the British army's arms, services, roles and functions.¹²⁸ This point is expanded upon by Alfred Vagts in his study of military attachés who claims that other nations' attachés were higher skilled and more valued within their countries' armed forces compared to Britain.¹²⁹ On this basis there appears to have been an issue specific to British military attachés who, it appears, were not

¹²⁶ Alexander and Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars*, 11.

¹²⁷ Alexander and Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War", 59.

¹²⁸ See, for example, SHD 7N 2806. See also Chapter 3 for the difference in French reporting on the important issue of signals communications in contrast to that undertaken by British officials on this area of the French army.

¹²⁹ Vagts, *The Military Attaché*.

taken very seriously within Britain's military structures. It would seem though that during this period, Britain was not the only country which did not give much weight to its attachés' worth. This point is highlighted by Vagts, who offers a perspective on the work and background of US attachés and contrasts them with other countries in Europe. Vagts notes that US attachés had traditionally 'nearly always been chosen on the basis of superior qualifications...consequently they form an elite ...their exceptional character is further enhanced by the position they have held...in that...important but ambiguous zone between diplomacy and defence'.¹³⁰

The quality of reporting by attachés in Europe was noted by the US ambassador to Berlin, William E. Dodd, who believed that they were selected primarily on their language skills and were poorly equipped for their task. He stated that:

Army and navy attachés here, and I think all over Europe are utterly unequal to their supposed functions. They simply have never received good training, except in drill and tactics. They may know a little history, but they do not grasp the social and economic problems in countries to which they are accredited.¹³¹

The value of language skills to the appointment of military attachés certainly played a role in those posted by Britain to Paris given that all during this period held the army translation qualifications which were a rarity amongst the British officer corps. The importance of linguistic aptitude in these appointments not just in Britain but across Europe was noted by Berlin's first post war military attaché in London, Colonel Geyr von Schweppenburg, but it was considered insufficient in the German military where other attributes were given greater weight. The German colonel observed that 'compared with other western European armies, language knowledge was probably least demanded in the German army, whereas tactics as the supposed *arcantum* of victory was madly cultivated and appreciated'.¹³²

Of the European nations it would appear that Germany gave greatest importance to the roles of its attachés, certainly more so than Britain did. Indeed, Vagts shows that the service attachés in the German military hierarchy were treated particularly seriously stating that they were especially well qualified and had very appropriate and relevant backgrounds

¹³⁰ Ibid., x.

¹³¹ William E. Dodd, and Martha Dodd, eds., *Ambassador Dodd's Diary* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1941) 149 cited in Vagts, *The Military Attaché*, 70-71.

¹³² Leo Dietrich Geyr von Schweppenburg. *Erinnerungen eines Militärattachés, London, 1933-1937* (Stuttgart, 1949) 14 cited in Vagts, *The Military Attaché*, 71.

for their postings. He also notes that they often went onto higher rank and command. Equally, in contrast to Britain, from 1935 onwards, with war drawing closer, the German service attachés were called home annually for consultation, with some of their leaders listening willingly to their oral testimony.¹³³

Yet, it is true that in the embassies of capital cities of countries that offered the potential to disturb peace in the world, the role of the British military attaché was considered of greater importance by Whitehall. Greatest importance of all of course was attached to the role of the military attaché in Berlin when concerns about the expansion of German military power began to rise. The secretiveness of the Third Reich and the dangerous unpredictability of its leaders furthered the seriousness of the military attachés' role there, relative to those that served in Paris. However, even in Berlin, in spite of the obvious potential importance of the military attaché, the lack of status attributed by the War Office in the 1930s to the role was demonstrated in revealing comments made by a CIGS at that time. Indeed in 1932, CIGS Field Marshal Sir George Milne wrote of Britain's military attaché in Berlin that he was 'highly thought of and in due course would get a much better job than that of military attaché'.¹³⁴

Clearly then the way in which the appointment of military attaché fitted into the culture of Britain's military structures influenced the effectiveness of the embassy's reporting of the French army. Yet, it seems that also preventing the embassy from forming a different view of the French army was a further cultural influence; that of an apparent lack of diversity in the appointments that were made to the positions of the ambassador and military attaché. After all, of those appointed as ambassador, all shared very similar professional backgrounds to each other and the same was true of the military attachés, with great commonality in their career paths in the army. More broadly still than their professional backgrounds was the commonality they shared in their social backgrounds. Indeed, all of the ambassadors and military attachés were the products of a privileged upbringing and education. All of the ambassadors of this era in Paris were graduates of Oxford and Cambridge and were also products of leading British public schools. The same was also true of the military attachés who attended prominent public schools such as Eton and Charterhouse as was the case of

¹³³ Ibid., 57-60.

¹³⁴ TNA FO 371/17695. Field Marshal Sir John Milne to Sir Robert Vansittart, 3 July 1934 cited in Wark, 'Three Military Attachés at Berlin in the 1930s', *The International History Review*: 589.

Beaumont-Nesbitt and Fraser respectively.¹³⁵ In this respect as a group of officials they were representative of the wider British establishment of the 1930s.

Given their similarity in backgrounds it is maybe not surprising that the ambassadors and military attachés brought common preconceived ideas on France and the French army when they took up their appointments. Similarly, this perhaps explains the continuity in the views offered by the ambassadors and military attachés when they occupied their posts. For example, all tended to view senior French officers in a similar manner, judging them on their character and seldom commenting on matters relating to their military attributes. This was seen notably with Beaumont-Nesbitt believing that Billotte having a British wife was worthy of note in the 1939 ‘Leading Personalities Report’.¹³⁶ In this sense perhaps being products of Britain’s ‘elites’ made the ambassadors and military attachés judge French senior officers heavily on their character, the type of people they were, not strictly on military terms, but almost looking upon them as they looked upon themselves. The commonality in backgrounds would have of course been true to many of these type of positions in the British diplomatic service and military at this time. Clearly then it is unrealistic to expect that the senior appointments to the embassy in Paris could have been radically different in terms of its personnel or offering a substantially contrasting viewpoint but, nevertheless, had this been the case it is entirely possible that a more diverse embassy staff may have been less content to invest so much confidence in character, for example.

The lack of diversity in the appointments of the military attachés in Paris, is particularly important as these were the officials with the greatest of responsibility in reporting on the French army. The background of those who served as military attaché should not be viewed in isolation though as they were indicative of the culture of the wider British army officer corps during this time. Indeed, it was inevitable that the class bound-professional and personal limitations of British officers restricted the diversity of outlook which in turn applied to those who served as military attaché. This is commented upon by Roger Broad in his biography of General Sir Ronald Adam where he notes that the British army did not reflect wider society and instead ‘adhered firmly to the values and past times of the landed gentry, from which it still drew many officers’.¹³⁷ The historian Sir Michael

¹³⁵ Giles Milton, *Churchill’s Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Mavericks who Plotted Hitler’s Defeat* (London: Hatchette, 2016), 26 and LHCMA, Identity Statement: Fraser, Brig. the Hon William <http://www.kingscollections.org/catalogues/lhcma/collection/f/fr10-001>

¹³⁶ TNA FO 432/5, ‘Record of Leading Personalities in France’, July 1939.

¹³⁷ Roger Broad, *The Radical General: Sir Ronald Adam and Britain’s New Model Army 1941-1946* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2013), 36. See Chapter 5 for further details of Adam from his time as a corps

Howard also observed of the British army in the inter-war years that its officer corps ‘so far as wishing to adapt to social and technical changes, looked to the army as a haven where they could escape from them’.¹³⁸ This was remarked upon further by Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas, a Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) officer who lectured at the British army’s Staff College stating that he saw the British officer corps as ‘a closed caste with limited knowledge of other classes. Herd thinking was very prevalent in the fighting forces and it overrode logical thinking’.¹³⁹

The lack of diversity in background was more broadly illustrated in the British army with over four-fifths of officer cadets in this period having received a public school education.¹⁴⁰ Amongst those regiments who were recruiting most of their officers from public schools, often ‘character’ was ranked higher than intellectual attainments.¹⁴¹ Indeed, once an officer cadet and commissioned it would appear that during this time the British army’s authorities placed greater emphasis on character than technical skills. For example, in 1940 secretary of state for war, Sir Anthony Eden remarked that ‘the army officer must be a leader first and technician second’.¹⁴² It is therefore not surprising that observations about character were so prevalent in observations that military attachés made about the French army’s most senior officers.

Although during the interwar years the British army’s officer leadership was less dominated by social prestige, class remained an important characteristic of the officers who largely filled the army’s most senior regiments. Furthermore, the superior prestige of the teeth arms and its regiments over other corps had greatest influence and certainly in appointments such as military attaché at the Paris embassy. The influence of class and regimental prejudice was seen for example in the attitude of the British army senior officers to its secretary of state for war, Sir Leslie Hore-Belisha from May 1937. Although officers’ dislike of Hore-Belisha was in part due to differences over policy,¹⁴³ playing a significant role appeared to be the secretary of state’s background. For example, Field Marshal Gort

commander with the BEF prior to his appointment to Adjutant General which is the main focus of Broad’s book.

¹³⁸ Sir Michael Howard, “The Liddell Hart Memoirs” *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 3(1966): 61 cited in Broad, *The Radical General*, 36.

¹³⁹ Lt Col T. B. Nichols. JCSC, ‘Camberley Red’, Junior Division. Vol. 1, file 9/3, March 1937 cited in Broad, *The Radical General*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴¹ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c. 1870-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145.

¹⁴² TNA WO163/48. Minutes of the Army Council, 10 October 1940 cited in French, *Military Identities*, 149.

¹⁴³ See Chapter 3.

referred to Hore-Belisha as having those ‘foreign touches’ that he did not appreciate, a not too subtle reference to his Jewish background.¹⁴⁴ Hore-Belisha’s poor relationship with the general staff can perhaps also be explained by the secretary of state being a victim of regimental snobbery from the army’s most senior officers. This was borne out of Hore-Belisha’s service as a captain in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) while the general staff was comprised of officers that had been commissioned into the British army’s more prestigious and most senior regiments.¹⁴⁵

Those posted as military attachés clearly then reflected the social and class-based limitations of the wider British officer corps. Yet, change in the nature of the military attaché appointments need not have been radically different to those that were made at the time to potentially offer a different insight into the French army. During the inter-war years those who occupied the military attaché post in Paris were from a very limited number of the army’s most senior regiments and corps, and in the case of the 1930s, all were either Guards or Royal Artillery officers. This reflected the dominance of these regiments in these appointments during that era due to a regimental preference and prejudice that prevailed. Even though less senior regiments and corps had officers equally able, there was a tendency for these officers to be overlooked for prestigious appointments such as the military attaché in Paris. Yet had officers been selected from these regiments and corps then it is possible a different insight could have been offered. For example, an officer of the Royal Signals would have instinctively taken a more elevated interest in matters relating to communications. Had this occurred then perhaps critically a greater awareness of the serious weaknesses in French communications could have been created. Similarly, an officer appointed from one the army’s logistics corps would have in all likelihood offered significant insight into the frequently overlooked French system of supply and transport. This is a lesson which the army appears to have belatedly learned from with contemporary defence attaché appointments granted to officers from a much wider range of regiments and corps. The limits created by a lack of diversity would have of course applied to the postings to other embassies such as that in Berlin. However, the nature of the Paris appointment, softened by the lack of urgency that existed in postings like Berlin, may well have allowed the weaknesses brought by limited diversity to be accentuated.

¹⁴⁴ Jackson, *Fall of France*, 78.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Wilkinson, “Hore-Belisha – Britain’s Dreyfus,” *History Today* 47 (1997): 22.

Shortcomings in British army officers' career education and how this impacted on British reporting on the French army.

All of those who served as military attaché had proved themselves at the very least to be highly competent officers, demonstrated notably by their rise to the rank of colonel. In so doing these officers will have demonstrated a high standard of military knowledge with which they would have been able to form their judgments in their reporting on the French army. However, the observations of all three officers covered in this chapter were the product of an army education that had severe shortcomings that affected those officers who served during this era. As a result of this, British officers were prevented from attaining a professional knowledge that could maximise their effectiveness in carrying out a wide range of their military duties. Historians such as David French have shown how this would later have an impact on an operational level in the early stages of the Second World War most notably contributing to failures in all-arms cooperation.¹⁴⁶ Yet, limitations in an officers' professional knowledge could clearly impact upon other non-operational aspects of the British army. These non-operational areas though have been given little attention by historians with greatest focus having been devoted to those that impacted directly upon combat and warfare. It would appear though that shortcomings in an officer's army education can in part be used to explain the limited insight in the reporting of military attachés in Paris. Indeed, in the same way the social class and cultural backgrounds of British officers was reflected in the military attachés and influenced the way they reported on the French army, so too it would appear was an officer's education.

As has been demonstrated above, a key characteristic of the reporting on the French army was the limited scope of aspects of France's ground forces that were covered. In part this can be argued to be the result of the narrowness of many British army's intellectual outlook which could often be limited to the confines of the regiment or corps to which they had been commissioned. This was characterised by Broad as the British army being unwilling to face up to changes in military affairs in the inter war period and Howard's observation that 'the army remained firmly geared to the pace of regimental soldiering as an agreeable occupation rather than a demanding profession'.¹⁴⁷ Broad also convincingly questions if the 'brains' of the British army changed enough during this period to cope with changed

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59-63.

¹⁴⁷ Broad, *The Radical General*, 36.

circumstances.¹⁴⁸ At the root of this intellectual military stagnation is the argument that the British regimental system contributed to the narrowing of an officer's wider military knowledge.

French in his study *Military Identities* shows how the impact of the regimental system had been considered over time to have not always been successful in producing officers to think beyond the limits of their regiment or corps.¹⁴⁹ However, French notes that by the 1930s the British army's leadership had attempted to address this issue with a degree of limited success. Nevertheless, it was apparent by 1939 that the regimental system still continued to hamper an officer's professional understanding with officers struggling to think of military matters beyond their regiment and corps with an officer's regiment providing a more powerful focus for their loyalty than did the concept of the wider army.¹⁵⁰ As a consequence of this the British army risked producing officers only trained to perform the role and functions of the regiment or corps and not sufficiently aware of their profession to face various wider military challenges. This issue was noted by the War Office observing that officer cadet colleges did not instil any ambition into potential and then commissioned officers to study their profession. Consequently, officers were produced that at worst had no commitment to taking their profession seriously or at best an inward-looking professionalism that encouraged them to believe that the regiment was the centre of their profession. Indeed, in 1903 a committee examining the education of officer cadets at Sandhurst concluded that few showed keenness to study their profession as they understood that they would be commissioned even if they were receiving low-marks in examinations.¹⁵¹

By the 1930s, the only institution within the British army that could breakdown the mental insularity of the regiment was the Staff College at Camberley. However, too few officers strove to study there and some who considered it were even discouraged from doing so by their commanding officers.¹⁵² In some instances commanding officers regarded officers under their command as disloyal to their regiment in wanting to widen their knowledge by attending Staff College, spending two years studying rather than undertaking regimental duties. In the 1930s some infantry regiments were even observed to boast that none of their officers had been encouraged to leave their regiment in order to attend Staff College.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ French, *Military Identities*, 145-179.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 146-149.

¹⁵² Ibid., 146.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 153.

Moreover, even those who had studied at Camberley in the interwar period were not well versed in the study of other nations' armies. Indeed, in the 1930s there had been complaints from officers who were studying at Staff College that their syllabus provided 'no light...on foreign armies and ideas'.¹⁵⁴ Although this matter was addressed by Lord Gort when he became Commandant at the Staff College in 1936, this was far too late to have any significant impact before war in September 1939.

Undoubtedly though the Staff College offered an effective way for the British army to further educate its officers. Indeed, after the First World War it ensured that officers were able to understand the technical aspects of their profession but also that they had a wider understanding of the historical, economic and contemporary political and strategic issues connected with imperial defence and the grand strategy of empire. It certainly helped officers who attended it to overcome the mental parochialism of the regimental system and became essential for attaining high command.¹⁵⁵ However, too few officers attended the institution to have greater benefits across the British army's officer corps. Only a minority attended Staff College, with it producing relatively low numbers only just sufficient to meet the demands of the peacetime army.¹⁵⁶ Of those who observed the French army most closely during this time, two of the three military attachés in Paris had attended Staff College.¹⁵⁷ The same is true of the heads of the two most senior British liaison missions and the BEF's most senior officers during the Phoney War period, who were all graduates of Staff College.¹⁵⁸ However, crucially the staff officers and assistants serving at middle ranking levels under these officers did not have the benefits of attending Staff College in common with the majority of British officers, thus depriving the army of a greater professional intellectualism required to study their own force and those of other nations.¹⁵⁹

The robustness of an officer's further education in the British army could though vary across the various different regiments and corps. For example, by the 1920s after commission Royal Artillery (RA), Royal Signals (RS) Royal Tank Corps (RTC) and Royal Engineers' officers were encouraged to think in greater terms of combined arms understanding. In the

¹⁵⁴ LHCMA LIDDELL HART MSS 11/1931/1, diary entry, 12 August 1932 cited in David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 46.

¹⁵⁵ French, *Military Identities*, 177.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 162.

¹⁵⁷ Heywood and Fraser had attended Staff College by the time of their appointments to Paris, Beaumont-Nesbitt had not.

¹⁵⁸ See chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁵⁹ It is possible to ascertain if an officer attended Staff College by the annotation 'PSC' appearing next to their name in the *Army List*.

case of the RA they not only taught its officers the technical aspects of gunnery at the School of Artillery at Larkhill but from 1929 officers from other arms came to the establishment to study the role of artillery. The infantry though did this to a lesser extent and did not have an institution which did so until after the Second World War.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, whereas other arms were compelled in the ordinary course of their work to study issues concerning the infantry, in many cases the training of an infantry officer was rather narrower in its focus and likely to be confined to its own arm.

It is true that efforts were made for examinations for officer promotion to become increasingly intellectually demanding by the 1920s. This undoubtedly did have an impact in ensuring the need for further study was considered more important. This was demonstrated by the degree of resentment felt by officers on the demands that these examinations in terms of the pressure that they placed on them. Nevertheless, the system of promotion examinations had its shortcomings, as French states:

it is doubtful whether they encouraged more than a minority of regimental officers to study their profession in a sustained fashion. Officers might work hard to pass the examinations, but many took their books only in the few months before they sat them and finished study with great relief.¹⁶¹

The British army's system of officer education and any requirement for serious study of the military profession evidently had serious shortcomings. The military attachés in Paris were products of this flawed system and so it seems likely that it negatively affected their ability to report on the French army. It would therefore appear that the limited scope and insight of the military attachés in Paris can in part be explained by the wider weaknesses of the British officer corps to study its profession sufficiently serious. Although improvements were being made in an officer's wider awareness of military matters beyond their serving regiment or corps by the 1930s, this was too late for those who served as military attaché in Paris during this time. Indeed, these officers were commissioned many years before these limited improvements took effect. The same is also true of other officers who observed the French army closely that will be examined in subsequent chapters. Given that these officers had less than optimal education of other arms beyond their regiment, it can be convincingly argued that this would also ensure that gaining a complete understanding of the French army as a

¹⁶⁰ French, *Military Identities*, 274.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

whole would be extremely challenging. Reporting on the French army therefore would appear to reflect the limited effective professional study of military matters in the wider British officer corps of this time. It is interesting to note that this apparent lack of intellectual rigour to the study and understanding of military affairs appears to have been detected by French observers of the British army. Indeed, the French military attaché noted critically in 1934 that the British regular army ‘although perfectly disciplined and trained, is still insufficiently educated’¹⁶² whilst stated:

the British army, however modernized it may be in the material domain, is hardly so in the intellectual domain and that it has not lost any of its habits, remaining similar to itself. . Without even speaking of the unfortunate habits that it has contracted by always manoeuvring on the same ground...of certain notions which seem childish to us... and we are struck. by its special character made of a curious amalgam of circumspection and recklessness.¹⁶³

Conclusion

In the decade preceding the Second World War, senior officials at Britain’s embassy in Paris had and sustained a high level of confidence. Although in late 1938, Phipps and his military attaché doubted briefly if France would be able to emerge victorious in a war with Nazi Germany, this was a reflection of concerns over the deteriorating wider strategic situation in Europe which had turned against French security interests. It was not a reflection of the operational viability of the French army which was little doubted by the ambassadors and military attachés that served in Paris during this time. The Embassy’s confidence was in part the result of the direct experience that the ambassadors and military attachés had in their engagement with the French army which was always positive. The positive nature of this direct contact was then in turn relayed to the Foreign Office and War Office back in London. The confidence reflected in these reports was largely based upon the perceived standard of the French army’s leadership and morale as these were the two areas by which the British embassy tended to judge France’s ground forces. Without an operational test on which to judge the strength of these two attributes, it would have been difficult for those at the

¹⁶² SHD 7N 2806 dossier 1. Report ‘*Manoeuvres de l’Armée britannique*’ from General Voruz to *Ministre de la Guerre*, 11 December 1934, 11.

¹⁶³ SHD 7N 2806 dossier 1. Report ‘*Manoeuvres de l’Armée britannique*’ held between 19 and 21 September 1934, from General Voruz to *Ministre de la Guerre*, undated, 17.

embassy to arrive at any other conclusion, as under peace time conditions there was little to have indicated that there was anything amiss in terms of either the French army's leadership or morale.

However, judging the French army principally in terms of its morale and leadership were insufficient means on which to assess potential combat effectiveness. In this regard the embassy's confidence in the French army was the result of the way it chose to judge France's ground forces and in the questions it chose to ask and not inquire of the French army. It is certainly the case that contrary to the instructions issued by the War Office's DMIO, the military attachés did not report on broader important indicators of military effectiveness. Had the embassy chose to ask questions of wider aspects of France's ground forces then they would have been able to provide a more complete understanding of the French army's strengths and weaknesses. That the embassy chose not ask these questions is partly the result of the nature of the role of the military attaché in Paris during this time. Indeed, during the 1930s the Paris posting was considered to a large extent as an extended social tour. With a relaxed attitude being exhibited by the military attachés in Paris, it would appear that this impacted upon the way in which the French army was judged. There was though a wider issue of where the role of the military attaché fitted into the culture of the British army's structure which led to the position not being valued to the extent to which it could offer valuable insight.

The lack of diversity amongst the embassy's senior officials also contributed to the failure to ask searching questions of the French army. Not only was there great commonality in their backgrounds, but in the case of the military attachés they were appointed from a very narrow range of the army's regiments. Appointments from a broader number of regiments or corps could certainly have brought a more varied insight into the French army's different aspects. Although this lack of diversity also applied to other more productive embassies such as that in Germany and Italy, it is likely that the threat posed by the militaries in those nations created a greater focus on the work of the military attachés. Undoubtedly, the prevailing consensus in Britain in the interwar years which judged the French army to be a formidable force also shaped the views of embassy officials before they arrived in Paris. The reasons behind this, not least an enduring deference to the French army from the First World War, will be explained in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, the reports themselves produced by the embassy and especially those by the military attachés provided the most up-to-date appraisals on France's army which would

be used to form the foundations behind policy making in Whitehall. These decisions were therefore made indirectly upon the factors which influenced the reporting of the military attachés. Undoubtedly then the lack of plurality in the background of the British army's officer corps and shortcomings in how it studied its profession had an influence that extended into considerations in foreign and defence policy. It therefore demonstrates how important cultural and institutional matters deeply imbedded in an institution such as the British army can have consequences beyond their immediate environment and desired outputs. In the making of foreign and defence policy there are obvious military, economic and political factors which shape the decisions that are made. The cultural and institutional influences that shape those factors are less obvious though and can remain hidden directly from sight. Analysing the British embassy's views on the French army in detail and explaining how these observations were formed therefore gives prominence and highlights the importance of strong cultural and institutional foundations in key state institutions. The failure to address these weaknesses can have consequences far beyond than that which is immediately obvious.

Chapter 3

The View from London, 1933 – September 1939

Situated prominently on Whitehall in the heart of the British government, the War Office was best positioned of all government departments to offer assessments on the French army. As the service ministry responsible for the governance and operation of the British army, the War Office was the professional home of those with greatest expertise and responsibility for informing those in government on matters concerning the French army. However, with Britain's embassy in Paris passing information limited in its scope to Whitehall on France's ground forces, the War Office's ability to offer a complete assessment on its future ally was impeded. Nevertheless, the British embassy was not the War Office's only source of information regarding the French army. Indeed, most senior officials in the department had their views also fashioned by their own contacts with their Gallic counterparts, together with their wider perceptions of France and its army.

In order to understand how the War Office perceived the French army it is necessary to examine the opinions of its two most senior political and military officials, the secretary of state for war, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). To date, no study has been devoted solely to how senior officials at the War Office viewed France's ground forces. In the existing secondary literature which tackles most directly British views of the French army, the views of the War Office do not feature prominently. For example in Michael Dockrill's *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, the views of the CIGS and the secretaries of state do not feature, even though those who held those positions were very much establishment figures.¹⁶⁴ When the secretaries of state and CIGS feature in Dockrill's work it mainly concerns the discussions that took place within government on the nature of the force that the British army should deploy to the Continent in the event of war.¹⁶⁵

Although any force that Britain could deploy across the Channel would be serving alongside the French army, Dockrill does not link the discussions that the War Office was engaged with across government to how these may have been influenced by views of France's ground forces. Neither does he explain that these debates shaped views on the French army itself.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France 1936-1940*, (London: Macmillan, 1999).

¹⁶⁵ See below.

The extent to which this did in fact occur will be analysed in this chapter. The secretaries of state and their CIGS also feature in the work of Martin Alexander and William Philpott's research on Franco-British defence cooperation in the inter-war period.¹⁶⁶ Similarly to Dockrill, in this work senior officials at the War Office are largely referred to in conveying the debates in government over the extent of the British army's commitment to the Continent in the event of war. Likewise, Alexander and Philpott do not analyse in detail the sources of British confidence in the French army, even though this was a critical component in British strategic thinking.

In the histories of wider Franco-British relations of the interwar period, references to the War Office are even fewer.¹⁶⁷ The secretaries of state and the CIGS feature most prominently in those histories where Britain's preparedness for war in 1939 is examined.¹⁶⁸ In these studies much of the focus has been devoted to the War Office's struggles with the Treasury and Downing Street to acquire adequate resources to prepare for a new conflict. Within these works, all acknowledge that by 1939 the British army was dangerously unprepared for land operations on the Continent. In many instances there is criticism offered of the War Office's shortcomings in certain aspects in preparing the army for a future conflict. For example, David French criticises the War Office's unwillingness to engage effectively with the Air Ministry to establish a modern doctrine on air-land operations.¹⁶⁹ Once again though, although these studies recognise British confidence in the French army, they do so without any detailed analysis of why it existed.

Memoirs and a number of biographies have been published for all of the secretaries of state for war for the period in question with the exception of Douglas McGarel Hogg, Lord Hailsham, who served at the War Office from 1931 to 1935.¹⁷⁰ Of the CIGS though only

¹⁶⁶ Martin S. Alexander and William J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Martin S. Alexander and William J. Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on Future Military Cooperation 1928-1939" *Intelligence and National Security* 13 (1998): 53-84

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 41-42, 156-159, 163, 167, 215; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 77-78.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, ed. David French and Brian Holden-Reid, *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 175-191; David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 161-340; Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Effectiveness: Volume 2, the Inter War Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 98-130.

¹⁶⁹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 34-35.

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget: The Autobiography of Duff Cooper* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1957); John Julius Norwich, *The Duff Cooper Diaries*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005);

Gort has been the subject of a biography.¹⁷¹ These biographies and memoirs are similar to the secondary sources referred to above, in that views of the French army do not feature in any significance. Instead these works have a scope which is much broader than any matters on the French army or of indeed the principal figures' time as CIGS or secretary of state at the War Office, with greater emphasis placed on their wider careers and lives.

This chapter addresses this important omission by earlier studies, examining what sources, other than the British embassy in Paris, were providing information on the French army, how these were assessed by the War Office, and analysing how together they shaped official British perceptions of and contributed to confidence in France's ground forces. In so doing it will add greater perspective on the work of the War Office in the 1930s. In this sense it will show that amongst the British army's unpreparedness for war in 1939 was also an absence of a detailed understanding of France's ground forces, including an unawareness of the crucial weaknesses in signals communications, command and control. The research for this chapter is based upon a combination of official and private records of the secretaries of state for war and their CIGS. These papers consist of a combination of reports, memoranda, letters and minutes of meetings. Although this material in the main deals with wider matters concerning the British army, it is possible from these records to deduce details of how the War Office viewed France's ground forces. The French army of course feature in these records after direct engagement with senior officials' counterparts in France but also in discussions about the future role of the British army in the event of war on the continent and in matters relating to the developing strategic situation in Europe.

Private papers and personal reflections of the CIGs are not extensive. Of the three CIGS only Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, who held the appointment from 1933 until 1936, has a consolidated collection of papers in Britain's archives.¹⁷² Furthermore, Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell, who succeeded Montgomery-Massingberd proved reluctant to offer comment on his time as CIGS. Indeed, his dismissal from the position caused him great sadness which led to him spending the remainder of his life away from the public eye. This is reflected in Deverell's correspondence with War Office historians after the Second World War in which he stated:

Andrews Roberts, *The Holy Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (London: Phoenix, 1997). R J Minney, *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (London: Collins, 1960).

¹⁷¹ J. R. Colville, *Man of Valour: The Life of Field-Marshal The Viscount Gort* (London: Collins, 1972).

¹⁷² Montgomery-Massingberd's papers are held at LHCA.

I shrink from all publicity, and I only want to live the remainder of my life in the surrounds of my own home. It would be difficult to write without saying some hard things regarding my time in the War Office...The whole of my last six months as CIGS was a period of bitter sorrow for me and I like to forget the whole episode...Nevertheless I do intend to put down on paper the principal events of my life but they will be for private use only. I have no intention of reviving all the bitterness of the past. I have suffered in silence, and no useful purpose would be served in raising them all up.¹⁷³

Fortunately, all of those who were secretary of state at the War Office have deposited collections of papers at Churchill College, Cambridge.¹⁷⁴ Although these records largely cover the broader political careers of the secretaries of state, when combined with the surviving archival material as a whole, it is still possible to gather sufficient evidence to analyse the views held within the War Office on the French army.

This chapter will firstly provide context to the War Office's views of the French army by presenting an overview of the role of the ministry and those who occupied the positions of secretary of state and CIGS between 1933 and 1939. I will then explain exactly how the War Office viewed the French army and how this was shaped by its strategic calculations and helped sustain and justify its confidence in France's ground forces. It will then be shown how the positive direct engagement which the secretaries of state and CIGS enjoyed with their Gallic counterparts further generated faith in the French army. Next it will be outlined how a lasting deference towards the French army from the First World War contributed significantly to the British belief that France's land forces were the most powerful in Europe. I will then assess how constraints created by domestic and overseas opinion limited British contact with the French army and thus restricted the War Office's ability to gain a complete understanding of France's military. Linked to this, it will be demonstrated how the War Office sought to distance itself from the French army to limit any detailed joint planning which it felt could erode the British army's operational independence in a future conflict, as had occurred in the First World War. Included in this section will be an examination of those aspects of the French army which the War Office did not report on and consider why this was so. At this point there will be significant focus on the extent to which Britain was aware of the serious signals and communications weaknesses in the French army which played such a pivotal role in the defeat of 1940. The chapter as a whole presents an important case study on

¹⁷³ TNA CAB 106/1204, Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell to Brigadier H R Sandilands, 26 January 1947.

¹⁷⁴ See Lord Hailsham HAIL 1; Lord Halifax HLEX 1-2; Duff Cooper DUFC 2 and Leslie Hore-Belisha HOBE 5.

how a junior ally contemplates to position itself to a larger partner in a future unequal alliance. In this instance it will show the how War Office engaged with the French army throughout the 1930s acutely aware of its junior status in a potential new coalition. The full dilemmas and dynamics of this relationship will be analysed demonstrating the challenges faced by the War Office during this time.

The War Office, the secretaries of state for war and the CIGS

The War Office, led by the secretary of state, was ultimately responsible for the formation of all army policy, the collection and collation of military intelligence, and the preparation of the British army for war. As the most senior army officer in the War Office, the CIGS was the professional head of the British army. The CIGS was therefore the highest ranking officer on the Army Council, the senior military advisor to the secretary of state for war, and a permanent member of the Committee of Imperial Defence. The general staff itself was divided into three directorates of military operations and intelligence, staff duties, and military training. Between 1933 and 1939 the general staff experienced a high turn-over in its senior positions. During this time there were four CIGS and four directors for each of the general staff's directorates. Nevertheless, in spite of this relatively high turn-over of personnel, there was great continuity and a consensus of views within the general staff during this time. For example, the most senior officers in the War Office all shared a common continentalist strategic outlook, and also had similar priorities for the future direction of the British army.¹⁷⁵ In this sense all agreed that the principle threat to British security lay in the dangers posed by German aggression in Europe rather than in concerns over the defence of imperial territories.

Having ascended to their positions at the highest levels of the War Office, the secretaries of state and CIGS all would have naturally had their outlook in their posts shaped by their earlier career experiences. In the case of the secretaries of state all had to that point enjoyed political careers of similar length and prominence which were either interrupted or preceded by service in the army during the First World War. Likewise the CIGS of this period shared similar career paths in which the Great War featured prominently. Inevitably the similarities in their professional progression must have contributed to commonalities in

¹⁷⁵ J. P. Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation*, ed. David French and Brian Holden Reid (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 177.

their outlooks whilst holding their appointments at the War Office. It is also likely that such was the enormity of the events that both the secretaries of state and CIGS encountered between 1914 and 1918 that this would have played a significant role in fashioning their military and strategic calculations whilst serving at the War Office.

During the period in question, the position of secretary of state for war was held by four men all of whom had enjoyed notable political careers. At the start of the period, Douglas McGarel Hogg, Lord Hailsham, held the post. He had been appointed on 5 November 1931 and remained at the War Office until 7 June 1935. He was succeeded by Edward Wood, Lord Halifax, who held the position for just five months until 22 November 1935, essentially as a watching brief over that short time. Halifax was replaced at the War Office by Duff Cooper. Of the secretaries of state, Cooper had the greatest affinity with France. Indeed, Cooper was a devoted Francophile, having developed a deep affection for France since his first visit to Paris in 1900.¹⁷⁶ This affection was reinforced further by the time he had spent in France during the First World War. Unsurprisingly, at the War Office, and later as First Lord of the Admiralty, he was a leading advocate of Franco-British cooperation. Indeed, during his time at the War Office he ‘insisted that Britain and France were bound to stand together, that their interests were identical and that they were threatened by the same danger’.¹⁷⁷ After his resignation from the Admiralty in protest at the Munich Agreement, Duff Cooper continued to promote the idea of a Franco-British alliance as the cornerstone of European opposition to future German territorial demands. His love of France remained strong even after the French defeat of 1940. Indeed, when he returned to government at the Ministry of Information, he was one of the earliest supporters of General Charles de Gaulle and the Free French movement. Cooper was succeeded at the War Office by Leslie Hore-Belisha on 28 May 1937. He entered Parliament as a Liberal MP in 1923, but aligned himself with right-wing Liberals critical of their party’s support of the Labour minority government and became a ‘Liberal National’ on the formation of the National Government in 1931. His political persuasion meant that he was appointed secretary of state for war with much disquiet within the Conservative Party.

The turnover of secretaries of state at the War Office occurred at a similar pace to those officers appointed to the position of CIGS. At the start of 1933 Field Marshal Sir

¹⁷⁶ John Charmley “Duff Cooper and Western European Union, 1944-47” *Review of International Studies* 11 (1985): 53.

¹⁷⁷ Cooper, *Old Men Forget*, 202.

George Milne held the post and was succeeded by Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd in February of that year. Montgomery-Massingberd was replaced by Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell on 15 May 1936. Deverell though left the post abruptly after being sacked by Hore-Belisha in December 1937. Field Marshal Viscount Gort succeeded Deverell in January 1938 and held his appointment as CIGS until the outbreak of war, at which point he took up command of the British Expeditionary Force.

How the War Office viewed the French army

Throughout the 1930s the strategic picture in Europe steadily declined against French interests. Nazi Germany's rearmament programme, the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, Anschluss with Austria, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the invasion of Poland were, of course, also a threat to British security, leading to war being declared in September 1939. Given the importance of the French army as a bulwark against German aggression in the West, it is not unreasonable to consider that the War Office should have watched closely how its ally was preparing for war and, in particular, assessing whether its army was up to the challenge posed by a resurgent Germany. Throughout these events, on the whole, the War Office remained confident that the French army would be able to withstand a German assault in the West. The extent of this faith is demonstrated by Field Marshal Milne at the start of the period examined, when he described the French army as 'undoubtedly the most formidable military machine in the world. The higher command is excellent, the moral and fighting qualities exceptionally good.'¹⁷⁸ This was a belief from which the War Office on the whole did not waver despite the wider impact of the events in Europe in the 1930s.

Yet, this should not be interpreted to mean that the War Office did not take heed of how the French army and its leadership reacted or thought in light of the ensuing events. For example, the War Office took note of senior French officers' intransigence at the Geneva disarmament talks. This was noted by Montgomery-Massingberd who asserted that:

I do not think that there is any chance of their agreeing to a limitation of armaments for the simple reason that they do not believe a single word that the Germans write or say...My impression was that it will be very difficult,

¹⁷⁸ TNA WO 190/108. 'Military Appreciation of the Situation in Europe, March 1931' by CIGS cited in Martin S. Alexander and William J Philpott, "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on Future Military Cooperation 1928-1939," *Intelligence and National Security* 13, (1998): 63.

if not impossible, to change these views...as regards limitation of armaments. I came up against an absolutely dead wall.¹⁷⁹

Similarly, the War Office observed the French high command's scepticism of any military value of a Franco-Soviet alliance, whilst looked on approvingly at measures advocated by the French army, and later implemented by the government in Paris, to extend the terms of national service in response to the increase in German military power. On the latter the War Office took heed of the advice of Britain's ambassador in Paris, Lord Tyrell, who wrote reassuringly that 'the scheme appears a sound one on paper'.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the tumultuous events which followed in the wake of German belligerence and territorial expansion in Europe in the 1930s, had little impact in altering the War Office's overall impression of the French army.

The role of the War Office's strategic outlook in influencing views of the French army

The War Office's continentalist strategic outlook, which optimistically supposed the British army could play a minor, supporting role alongside the French army in resisting a German assault in the West, was a key factor that encouraged confidence in France's ground forces. This 'wishful thinking' was furthermore politically useful to those in Whitehall reluctant to devote serious resources to the preparation of a British expeditionary force for service on the continent in the event of war.¹⁸¹ Despite the importance the French army held in British strategic planning and assumptions, it would appear that the War Office was content to rely on this wilful confidence rather than critically assess its potential future ally's ground forces and adjust its planning accordingly.¹⁸²

Significant in shaping the War Office's outlook were the experiences of secretaries of state and CIGS during the First World War, which left them with a fear and suspicion of German military aspirations.¹⁸³ As a result, they paid close attention to military developments in Germany and from 1933 feared the territorial aspirations of the Nazi regime. They also came to the view that in the eventuality of hostilities Britain should deploy an expeditionary

¹⁷⁹ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd 10/4/2, Montgomery-Massingberd to Lord Halifax, 17 August 1935.

¹⁸⁰ TNA FO 432/1 Lord Tyrell to Sir John Simon 3 January 1934.

¹⁸¹ See below.

¹⁸² See Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff*, ed. French and Holden-Reid, 190.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 177.

force to serve alongside the French army in order to assist France from preventing the Low Countries from falling into German hands. This strategic calculation which would endure for the duration of the 1930s was articulated by the War Office in the Defence Requirements inquiry, which took place between November 1933 and February 1934. In this inquiry Lord Hailsham supported his CIGS, Montgomery-Massingberd, helped steer its conclusions to state that Germany should be considered the ‘ultimate enemy’ against whom all long-term planning should be directed. Hailsham and Montgomery-Massingberd ensured that this view was supported further in the general staff’s most comprehensive policy paper of the 1930s, *The Future Reorganisation of the British Army*, published in 1935. The continentalist outlook of this paper was made clear with its stated aim which was to ‘reorganise the regular and territorial armies on such a scale as will enable them to take part in a continental war’.¹⁸⁴

In order for Britain to be able to deploy a continental expeditionary force in a way that matched their strategic vision, senior officials at the War Office argued strongly for the necessary resources to ensure that the British army was properly prepared for any such future undertaking. This led to fierce inter-departmental debates, most notably with the Treasury. As a consequence of these ongoing disputes, a frustrated Montgomery-Massingberd opted for early retirement from the post of CIGS in May 1936. Montgomery-Massingberd was particularly exasperated by the Cabinet’s decision to postpone by three years his and Duff Cooper’s proposed territorial army rearmament programme.

Although Montgomery-Massingberd’s successor, Field Marshal Deverell sought to continue with the War Office’s established line of thinking, it ran into further opposition following the appointment of a new secretary of state, Leslie Hore-Belisha. Under pressure from the Treasury he took a different view to his predecessor, Duff Cooper, which resulted in Hore-Belisha’s introduction of the ‘New Army Policy’ in January 1938. Under this policy any preparation for a continental field force would be regarded as the lowest priority and would ensure that Britain’s military contribution to a future war would be limited mainly to naval and air power. This change had been insisted upon by the Treasury, the Admiralty and, more reluctantly the Minister for Coordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip. As a National Liberal, who was regarded as an outsider by most Conservatives, Hore-Belisha was heavily dependent on the patronage of Neville Chamberlain, the most influential figure in government both as Chancellor and later Prime Minister. Hore-Belisha was therefore left with little choice but to implement this change if he valued his political career. This change in

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 185.

policy was also influenced by the work of the military theorist and journalist Basil Liddell Hart. Chamberlain recommended that Hore-Belisha read part of Liddell Hart's book *Europe in Arms* which cast doubt on the need for a British field force to be sent across the channel in the event of war, because in his opinion, the superiority of the defence in modern warfare was so strong on land that it would be virtually impossible for the German army to achieve decisive results in an attack on France.¹⁸⁵ Liddell Hart summarised this point in 1938 claiming that:

When account is taken of the power of modern defence the limited length of the Franco-German frontier in relation to the size of the French Army, and the strength of the fortifications there, it is not easy to imagine that any assault upon it could have much chance of success.¹⁸⁶

Enabling Liddell Hart to make this case was his belief that the French army alone would be sufficiently strong to resist a German offensive in the West. In helping Liddell Hart form this assessment was encouragement that he and others in Britain took from efforts made by the French army in the second half of the 1930s to develop greater mobility and to increase the number of its armoured forces.

Liddell Hart's views in this respect were particularly influential with the Treasury and Chamberlain as they helped justify only modest spending on the British army. His opinion on this also undoubtedly helped bolster the confidence held by the general staff in the French army, even though they strongly disputed Liddell Hart's belief that the British army's contribution to a future war in Europe should be limited. The general staff did though share his belief in the creation of significant armoured forces, which the War Office pursued, albeit with only limited means. Liddell Hart's ideas on this matter were similar to those espoused by General Heinz Guderian in Germany who argued for the creation of Panzer divisions powerful enough to break through enemy lines, exploit this success and penetrate deep into the rear in order to destroy enemy command and control systems. This was a concept which British and indeed French observers were familiar with and that they had been able to witness in practice through attendance at the annual German military manoeuvres.

However, in Britain the War Office promulgated a doctrine which was less bold than its German counterpart in calling for the need to generate superior fire power from all

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 180 and see Basil Liddell Hart. *Europe in Arms* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1937).

¹⁸⁶ Basil Liddell Hart. Article in the *Times*, 8 June 1938, 17-18, cited in J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 121.

available assets before the deployment of armoured units. In doing so, command and control was also centralised away from subordinate commanders, in total contrast to what was argued successfully by the likes of Guderian in Germany, where junior commanders were expected to demonstrate their initiative, and to exploit opportunities that presented themselves on the battlefield. The War Office chose a more cautious approach than that taken in Germany as it seemed this would spare its manpower in minimising casualties rates, a reaction to the losses suffered on the Western Front in the First World War.

The French army's doctrine of the *bataille conduite* was similar to that of Britain's in this respect in that it too sought to conserve its manpower. The French army's doctrine also relied on a heavily centralised system of command and control over its forces on the battlefield. Where the *bataille conduite* differed from the framework to which the British army worked to, was that it was far more rigid with units advancing to a methodically set timetable and that encounter battles should be avoided at all costs. It is unclear to what extent the War Office was fully aware of the finer details of the *bataille conduite*, as there is an absence of discussion on matters of doctrine in Whitehall's surviving records on the French army. If, as should be reasonably expected, the War Office did understand the *bataille conduite*, its silence on the matter can be inferred to be the result of it being perceived as a sensible course of action, recognising that as in its own doctrine, France was also constrained to the extent to which it could offer a bolder more risk averse framework for which its army could operate under.

Unquestionably Liddell Hart's views played an important role in helping to justify the switch to Hore-Belisha's 'New Army' policy, which began to be formulated from January 1938. However the shift in policy aggravated further the bitter relationship developing between Hore-Belisha and the general staff who were opposed to such a change. To ease the implementation of the new policy Hore-Belisha, under pressure from Chamberlain, eventually sacked Deverell and virtually the entire Army Council. Deverell's replacement, Field Marshal Gort, together with the new members of the general staff were also opposed to the new policy and were quickly on bad terms with Hore-Belisha.¹⁸⁷ The general staff were though eventually able to persuade their secretary of state of the need to send a British field force to the Continent. This change occurred after the Munich agreement in September 1938

¹⁸⁷ See Jackson, *Fall of France*, 78 and Richard Wilkinson, "Hore-Belisha – Britain's Dreyfus," *History Today* 47 (1997): 22.

when the strategic balance shifted further in Germany's favour, amid increasing uncertainty over Hitler's intentions.

It should be emphasised that the War Office's view that Britain should deploy a field force to the continent did not suggest a lack of confidence in the French army's ability to withstand a German attack. Indeed, the force that Britain would be able to send across the Channel would be so small at first, that it was unlikely to have a decisive impact on operations. Instead the War Office's views on this matter reflected its belief in the positive impact on morale that a British army presence would have on both the French and the enemy alike. This view endured within the War Office right up until the declaration of war, and was emphasised further by Gort when he argued for the need for Britain to provide an expeditionary force to serve alongside the French. Gort asserted that:

The French might well turn around to us and accuse us of sitting on the fence and question our good faith. Our actions would be viewed in that light by France, and the morale effect on our coming down definitely on her side and promising the utmost support would not only be very great on the French but would have a correspondingly depressing effect on our potential enemies.¹⁸⁸

With the exception of a brief period under Hore-Belisha's early leadership, the War Office was clear in its strategic outlook and how its own army featured in it. Yet, the viability of its vision was entirely dependent on France possessing ground forces sufficiently strong to resist a German attack. If the French army was thought unable to withstand a German offensive, the War Office's outlook could therefore not be considered plausible. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the War Office deliberately ignored any worries about the French army, senior officials must have realised that the position they advocated on Britain's defence was predicated on confidence in France's ground forces. This realisation must have subconsciously shaped the view of the War Office in how it looked upon France's ground forces. It is certainly possible that it ensured observers at the War Office reflected upon the French army in the most optimistic of light to ensure that their strategic calculations could be considered to be correct.

¹⁸⁸ TNA CAB 53/10. Chiefs of Staff Committee (COS) minutes of the 268th meeting, 18 January 1939.

Positive engagement with the French army

In addition to the reports and dispatches sent to the War Office's Directorate of Military Intelligence and Operations (DMIO) from the Embassy in Paris, discussed in the previous chapter, the War Office perception of the French army was also shaped by a limited number of direct encounters successive secretaries of state and CIGS had with France's ground forces. Engagement with the French army was infrequent and so when direct contacts did take place they would have been of notable importance given their rarity to develop a firsthand understanding of France's ground forces. When these encounters occurred they tended to be positive in their nature and it would seem that they helped sustain faith in the French army. Although much has been made by historians of the at times strained nature of Franco-British relations,¹⁸⁹ the contacts between the two militaries were always highly amicable. Outlining the positive engagement between the War Office and the French army therefore not only emphasises the extent of the confidence in which Britain viewed the French army but also adds to the understanding of Franco-British relations of that time.

The visits to France and personal contacts with the French army's leadership appear to have been particularly valued within the War Office. For example, in his handover notes to Deverell, Montgomery-Massingberd wrote that these encounters enabled him to be '*au fait* with what the French army are doing as regards fortifications, equipment and mechanisation. It has also enabled me to get to know most of the leading French generals'.¹⁹⁰ Throughout the period in question it was the CIGS rather than the secretary of state who tended to have greatest contact with the French army. Typical of the positive assessments made after engagement with the French army is that made by Montgomery-Massingberd after his first visit to France as CIGS in August 1935:

There is no doubt that the French Generals and their soldiers are full of enthusiasm...There is nothing bellicose about it, but a determination to make their country secure against attack, and on General Gamelin's part a

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Alexander and Philpott, *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars* and "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on Future Military Cooperation 1928-1939" *Intelligence and National Security* 13 (1998): 53-84; Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 1-26; Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 66-71; Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 178-180 and Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War*, 13-16, 188-189.

¹⁹⁰ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/6. Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, 'Notes for my successor,' 1936.

fixed purpose to supply that army with the best modern equipment he can get and the best fortifications that can be made.¹⁹¹

During his August 1935 visit Montgomery-Massingberd was also very impressed by the French army units that he encountered. The CIGS particularly admired the Moroccan *Tirailleurs*, who he described as ‘very fine troops...the best. I have never seen better’. Similarly, Montgomery-Massingberd was enthused by the French Mechanised Cavalry Division he observed at Mailly and stated that ‘such a formation is a powerful engine of war...and would be quite invaluable at the beginning of a campaign’.¹⁹² Also on this visit Montgomery-Massingberd expressed confidence in the French army’s leadership that he met, which he considered to consist of ‘men with great military experience and sound sense’. He believed that contacts with them were ‘in itself an education’.¹⁹³ Montgomery-Massingberd judged the French high command to be pro-British and candid in the meetings that he had with them. On this point he asserted that in his meetings he was ‘now given information and...shown things that are shown to no other nation’¹⁹⁴ which he believed enabled him ‘to get a pretty clear idea as regards French plans and ideas in the event of a war with Germany’.¹⁹⁵ Specifically on Gamelin, Montgomery-Massingberd observed:

he evidently has the confidence of the French Army because I noticed that the relations between him and all the other senior generals...were extraordinarily good, but at the same time there is no doubt who commands the French Army...he is quite determined to make France secure.¹⁹⁶

Of particular interest to Montgomery-Massingberd on his 1935 visit to France were the new Maginot Line fortifications that were being constructed. On his week-long visit, Montgomery-Massingberd was able to spend three days touring the French border defences and admired what he was shown. He wrote on this to Halifax stating that:

¹⁹¹ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, letter to Lord Halifax, 17 August 1935.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/6. Montgomery-Massingberd, ‘Notes for my successor,’ 1936.

¹⁹⁴ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Montgomery-Massingberd to Halifax, 17 August 1935.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

I was tremendously struck by the progress the French had made in the completion of their fortifications...It is a most impressive work and I think would resist any form of attack that I can visualise being brought against it...My own view, from seeing these fortifications, and my recollections of our attacks against strong lines during the war, even with masses of heavy guns and tanks is that the frontier in three or four years time will be practicably impregnable.¹⁹⁷

Montgomery-Massingberd's positive perception of the French army that he encountered was shared by his successors Deverell and Gort after their visits to France, although the records of their views are not quite as extensive. Even though Deverell was only CIGS for a relatively short period, he was still able to attend the French army's manoeuvres in Normandy near Alençon in September 1937. These were the last manoeuvres held by the French army prior to the Second World War and left Deverell with an impression which he believed to be very encouraging. Of the French units that Deverell observed, he wrote:

The greatest keenness was shown by all ranks...Morale was high and the impression conveyed to spectators...was most creditable to all concerned. Furthermore it is to be remembered that these formations belonged to Western France where the standard of training is perhaps lower than in Eastern regions. The results therefore are to that extent all the more satisfactory.¹⁹⁸

Interactions between the secretary of state and the French army were not as frequent as those enjoyed by the CIGS. Contacts between the secretary of state and the French army did occur with greater regularity towards the end of the decade when the threat of war became perceived as increasingly likely. It is for this reason that of the secretaries of state, it was Hore-Belisha who offered greatest comment on the French army. Hore-Belisha's high regard for France's land forces was expressed after visiting the 1937 Alençon manoeuvres. Hore-Belisha was clearly impressed by what he had observed during the manoeuvres according to the comments he made both privately and publicly after his return to Britain. In his personal diary he reflected on his visit to Normandy that 'I was able to talk freely with soldiers, NCOs and officers and was most impressed by their intelligence, endurance and patriotism. The French generals regard their profession as a business.'¹⁹⁹ He also shared this view with the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ TNA CAB 21/575. Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell, 'French and German Manoeuvres 1937,' report to Sir Thomas Inskip, September 1937.

¹⁹⁹ R. J. Minney, *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (London: Collins, 1960), 57.

Cabinet when he described the French army to be in 'fine fettle'. He informed his ministerial colleagues that he had been impressed with the morale of the French army, which he felt particularly impressive considering the poor conditions in which the manoeuvres were undertaken. The French equipment that he encountered he described as 'very good' and added further that he 'wished to emphasise that he had formed the highest opinion of the French imagination and resolution of their civil and military achievement'. He also told the Cabinet that he had been greatly struck by the 'intelligence and adaptability of the army... had not found troops lacking in discipline or too mechanically disciplined' and was 'impressed by the dash and endurance of the private soldier'.²⁰⁰ The favourable impression made on Hore-Belisha by the French army at Alençon was noted by Britain's ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, who also attended the manoeuvres. The ambassador commented that Hore-Belisha had been so impressed as to have declared the French Army to be 'invincible'. Phipps also noted the French candour that been exhibited to Hore-Belisha, noting that 'the secretary of state was at liberty to see anything or to ask any questions he might wish and no attempt was made to hide anything from him'.²⁰¹ Following attendance at the Alençon manoeuvres, Hore-Belisha then became Britain's first secretary of state for war to visit the Maginot Line. On the defences, he reported to the Cabinet that he 'had been assured by experts that these were virtually impregnable to tanks or any other form of attack'. No analysis was offered by Hore-Belisha at Cabinet on France's wider defence strategy and where the Maginot Line featured in that. Nevertheless, Hore-Belisha's comments were well received by the Cabinet and without question.²⁰²

Despite the lack of discussion at Cabinet senior officials at the War Office understood and were assured by the plans which their French counterparts had developed. The perceived wisdom of French strategy is not explained in great detail or questioned in the records generated on the French army. Silence on this issue though can be inferred as agreement with it, and at the very least an understanding of it. Indeed, in its general terms France's defence strategy would have been understood by all close observers of military affairs, including in Germany. After all, the strategic picture that developed throughout the 1930s and the resources that France had at its disposal ensured that French options would be limited in the event of war being declared. The War Office appreciated that by September 1939 the chosen

²⁰⁰TNA CAB 23/89. Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet 35 (37), 29 September 1937.

²⁰¹TNA FO 371/20694. C 7129, Sir Eric Phipps, letter to Sir Anthony Eden, 13 October 1937.

²⁰² TNA CAB 23/89. Minutes of the Meeting of the Cabinet 35 (37), 29 September 1937.

French strategy was to fight a long defensive war in which greater national mobilisation would compensate for Germany's initial economic and demographic advantages. It was understood in London that the French army aimed to fight Germany deep in Belgium maximising any Belgian contribution to the war and thus protecting the industrial north of France. Similarly it was realised in Whitehall that French strategy had little option but to plan a war of significant duration where initial stationary and attritional hostilities would be followed by a war of movement. In the event of a German attack the French high command planned to hold on their right flank along the north-east frontier, conduct an economy of force operation in the centre along the Ardennes and defend well forward in Belgium. This was a strategy which from the viewpoint of the War Office seemed eminently sensible given the circumstances that France found itself in by the end of the 1930s with the absence of any viable alternative options.

In understanding French plans in these terms, it is evident why senior officials at the War Office approved at what they observed of the Maginot Line, which underpinned France's strategy. Furthermore, all of the visitors from the War Office were envious of the resources which had been committed to build the series of large fortifications at great expense on France's borders.²⁰³ However, they all also believed that this was an effective use of government finance given that the Maginot fortifications would allow France to leave this frontier relatively lightly defended in terms of manpower, permitting the French with sufficient troops to meet an expected German out-flanking manoeuvre through Belgium. Although the Maginot Line or Maginot 'mentality' has been criticised by many of the earliest historians of this period,²⁰⁴ the judgement of the War Office was understandable given that the principal of building defences along France's border with Germany appeared to be based on sound reasoning. That French strategy regarding the Maginot Line was fully understood and accepted as a reasonable course of action by the War Office is demonstrated in Montgomery-Massingberd's reflections on his visit to the border defences. Even after the French defeat he wrote that:

As regards the Maginot Line, the original object for which it was built was absolutely sound...The underlying idea was in the circumstances, as was the

²⁰³ See 'British Weaknesses' section below with Montgomery Massingberd's comments after his visit to France in 1935. LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Montgomery-Massingberd to Halifax, 17 August 1935.

²⁰⁴ See, for example, A J P Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), 88, 131, 133 and Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (London: Macmillan, 1969) 25, 27-29.

Torres Vedras by Wellington, perfectly sound from a military point of view.²⁰⁵

Indeed, as any future conflict with Germany would involve waging total war, the vulnerability of France's natural resources, population and industrial centres on the eastern frontier, ensured the French high command had little choice but to provide some sort of protection for those vital areas. Fortifications were consequently a logical and appropriate means of doing so.

The observations offered by the CIGS and secretaries of state in their reports after their visits to France of course do not present a detailed appraisal of the French army. Indeed, they were not intended to. Although the views offered are limited in their scope, they do demonstrate the assured confidence in which senior officials had in the French army. That the CIGS and secretaries of state did not go to greater lengths discussing France's land forces, their comments indicate that they believed there was no reason to doubt their faith in the French army's combat effectiveness. Moreover, the War Office's leadership had within their responsibilities, matters which were of greater and competing concern. For example, greater time had to be devoted to efforts to addressing worries of the British army's own condition and in studying the potentially hostile armies in Europe.

The greater attention devoted to the German army evidently paid off, as the War Office eventually produced accurate reports of the Nazi military's strengths and intentions. However, this was not always the case despite greater resources being diverted to studying the German threat. This has been shown by Wesley K. Wark in *The Ultimate Enemy*.²⁰⁶ Wark notes that despite the efforts of the British intelligence community, at times a flawed image of German power was formed which played a crucial role in the formation of British policy towards Germany. He shows that initially there had been overly naive misconceptions about the nature of the Nazi regime, which in turn led to an early underestimation of German progress in rearmament but which were then overcompensated for in judging the military balance. Indeed, predictions soon came to be hedged about a greater willingness to embrace a worst case-scenario. This saw an inflated image of German military power over the 1936-1938 period, which also coincided with a temporary dip in British confidence about France's strength following domestic political strife to the detriment to French rearmament. After the

²⁰⁵ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/11. 'The Autobiography of a Gunner,' 1946.

²⁰⁶ Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Munich agreement though the War Office became more optimistic of the military balance following a notable decrease in German manufacturing, including armaments. This course of forecasting the German military threat, was once more replicated with an increase in confidence in France's overall strength. Wark observes that in the various estimates of the German threat, the available archival material only reveals the final products of the processes of information gathering and departmental analysis. He notes that unfortunately the raw data and information on sources and inter-collection techniques with few exceptions survive.²⁰⁷ Research for this thesis shows that the same is also true of assessments of the French army, so this and subsequent chapters attempt to show the factors that influenced this 'process'.

Specifically on the German threat, Wark asserts that was a lack of joined-up thinking within Whitehall which led to the loss of an overall perspective on the danger that was posed over the course of the 1930s. Justifying this Wark notes that one officer who joined the military intelligence directorate in the War Office in 1933 found it to be 'hidebound, unimaginative, interpersonal and over populated'.²⁰⁸ He states that just as British defences were in a run-down and obsolete state in the early 1930s, so too were British intelligence resources. The costs of this were shown in a short spell of complacency regarding German rearmament. It is possible to surmise that this too impacted on the War Office's ability to judge as comprehensibly as possible the potential effectiveness of the French army. Indeed, it is possible to identify similar deficiencies that would have led to this. For example, John Cairns has claimed that British officials could have been more informed about France.²⁰⁹ He states that during the 1930s Whitehall was never too sure if France was 'too strong or too weak, too independent or too dependent'.²¹⁰ In part he attributes this to a lack of joined up understanding of France similar to which Wark noted of assessments of the German threat. Given the suspicions that British officials did not have sufficient background knowledge to help forecast the course of events on the continent it is perhaps not surprising that there was not a more complete understanding of the French army within the War Office. However, the lack of archival material showing precisely how intelligence was gathered and processed with only the final products of assessments surviving, ensures that it is difficult to judge the full extent to which this may have existed.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 11.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 81.

²⁰⁹ John C Cairns. "A Nation of Shopkeepers In Search of a Suitable France: 1919-1940". *The American Historical Review* 79 (1974). 740-742.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 729.

The character of the War Office's reports after the visits to France can also in part be explained by senior officials' concerns regarding the British army's weaknesses at this time. With France being able to deploy a much greater force in numbers compared to a future BEF beset with deficiencies, in the eyes of the War Office this made the French army appear stronger than it may have been. Evidence of this perception is seen in the numerous comments made by senior War Office officials as they noted the resources which their French counterparts had at their disposal. After Montgomery-Massingberd's visit to France in 1935, the CIGS reported to Lord Halifax that Gamelin had told him 'We in France believe it is better to spend millions in peace than to sacrifice thousands of lives in war for want of preparation', and added pointedly to his secretary of state that 'I only wish we thought the same in this country'.²¹¹ Similarly, after attendance at the Alençon manoeuvres, Deverell wrote that 'the French Army is undoubtedly in possession of far larger quantities of modern equipment than we are. For example, two infantry tank battalions were fully equipped and all infantry regiments appeared to have their full complement of anti-tank guns'.²¹²

Undoubtedly these comments by Montgomery-Massingberd and Deverell would have been used to add pressure for greater expenditure to be committed to the British army. However, their admiration appeared genuine at the way in which the French army's needs featured higher in their country's allocation of defence resources. This is underlined by remarks made by Gort when discussing the merits of a Franco-British alliance, in which he emphasised the French army's strength stating that 'we should stand to get more out of the French than the French would get out of us'.²¹³ When critically aware and concerned by the weaknesses of its own army and preparations for war, it is perhaps unsurprising that the War Office only saw strength when it enviously looked across the channel. This though is a dangerous perception which can be created when judging a stronger potential ally conscious of the limitations that a smaller ally can contribute. It would appear that the relative French superiority in terms of its army encountered on the visits across the Channel, helped sustain a lingering deference to the French in terms of ground forces.

The numerous visits undertaken to France were no doubt useful in further familiarising officials in their understanding of the French army. Nonetheless, visits to the

²¹¹ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Montgomery-Massingberd to Halifax, 17 August 1935.

²¹² TNA CAB 21/575. Field Marshal Sir Cyril Deverell, 'French and German Manoeuvres 1937,' report to Sir Thomas Inskip, September 1937.

²¹³ TNA CAB 53/10. Committee of Imperial Defence: Chiefs of Staff Committee, minutes of the 278th meeting, 2 March 1939.

French army of the nature that occurred could not compensate for the wider information gap that existed within the War Office on its future ally's forces. This was inevitable as official visits were limited to hours or days and could only offer a partial insight into the many complex aspects of the French army. Yet, these visits were of course never intended to be Whitehall's primary source of information on the French army. The comments made after the visits by the secretaries of state and the CIGS are enlightening though when trying to understand their views of France's ground forces. Their observations show that the visits resulted in confirming the War Office's pre-existing assumptions and confidence which it had in the French army. This must have been particularly reassuring to senior officers given that the viability of the French army was so important to their strategic calculations. It is for this reason perhaps that officials did not appear to have posed too many probing questions of their French hosts; rather there was an acceptance of what they were shown. This was a likely course of action though given that this high level engagement was not necessarily designed to delve deeply into the French army's many different facets or to provide detailed appraisals, this remained the responsibility of the military attachés. Yet, a more questioning approach on these visits could have provided greater insight given that the French army was unlikely to have volunteered exposure of its weaknesses in front of their senior military guests from across the Channel at a time when France was trying to induce a greater British commitment to the continent, and ultimately a formal military alliance. British acceptance and lack of questioning in this respect could be interpreted as a sign of inhibition. This again is an issue which can arise with ease for a potential junior ally. With an apparent level of deference already existing, it is clear how a sense of diffidence could then follow. Given the disparity in the size of the two nations' armies at this time, it is easy to conceive how a degree of inhibition could have arisen amongst British officials.

The overall paucity of the knowledge accumulated by the War Office on the French army is demonstrated by the value attributed to information gathered by accident rather than design. An incidence of this was revealed by information gained fortuitously by Lord Hailsham shortly after he left the War Office in 1935. In August of that year, whilst on holiday in the coastal town of Dinard in Brittany, Hailsham shared by chance a conversation over dinner with Vicomte de la Maitrie, a close friend of General Weygand, and cousin to his chief of staff. During this dinner Hailsham recalled that he learnt 'a good deal that is new to me' with regards to the latest developments in the French Army, concerning its equipment

and other matters.²¹⁴ This conversation was deemed so significant by Hailsham that he wrote to the War Office conveying what he had been told. Hailsham informed the War Office that:

the fact that my informant was describing what he had himself seen or learned within the last few weeks in actual service and that he is on these terms with Weygand, seems to make it worthy of serious consideration.²¹⁵

A reply to Hailsham's letter revealing how this information was received by the War Office appears not to survive in the available archival material. Given that this information was provided by a former secretary of state though, it indicates that it must have been of some value. This small episode shows to an extent how little insightful information was being received by the War Office during this time on the French army, in that dinner time gossip could be deemed to be so insightful. Although information gathering in an informal and unplanned setting can always be valuable, it could be considered that the War Office ought not to have had to be dependent on such encounters with parties not directly connected to the French army to acquire such knowledge.

Constraints on contact with the French army

A greater understanding of the French army would no doubt have been gained, had British officials engaged to a greater extent with the French military. Certainly the French government would have welcomed closer contact between the two nations' armies, as it sought to form a military alliance with Britain.²¹⁶ However, senior politicians and officials were keen to avoid such contact in the hope of, respectively, maintaining British diplomatic flexibility before war broke out and operational independence for the British army should this ultimately occur. This concern was based on the realisation that in a wartime alliance, the size of any assembled expeditionary force would be very small relative to that of the French army, and so the War Office fully understood the impact this could have in acting as a junior partner in ground operations. Consequently, the War Office was unwilling to engage in any early coordinated planning with France, fearing that the British army would be drawn into French plans from which it would inevitably be difficult to influence or withdraw from. This

²¹⁴ CAC HAIL 1/3/8A. Lord Hailsham, letter to Sir Herbert Creedy, 28 August 1935.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ See, for example, Raphaële Ulrich-Pier, "The 1930s" in *Cross Channel Currents: 100 Years of the Entente Cordiale*, ed. Richard Mayne, Douglas Johnson and Robert Tombs (London: Routledge, 2004), 85; Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*, 17.

was a position which the War Office believed the BEF had found itself in 1914. Although the War Office never doubted that a new BEF could be nothing other than a junior partner alongside the French army in war, it was determined to have as much operational freedom of manoeuvre as possible.²¹⁷ Therefore until March 1939, just a few months before the declaration of war, extensive contacts which could have led to early joint planning were deliberately avoided by the War Office.

Senior officials in Whitehall were well intentioned in seeking to protect its operational independence in any future conflict. Although they had faith in the French army's leadership, understandably the War Office sought as much independence of command as possible. In no way though did this imply that they were mistrustful of having to serve under French command. Instead, the War Office was eager to avoid some of the coalition experiences which the British army found itself on the Western Front during the First World War. For example, the War Office sought to avoid the type of circumstances that arose in July 1916 when the BEF under the orders of the French high command was instructed to launch its major offensive on the Somme to alleviate pressure on the French army at Verdun, before Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig believed that his 'New Armies' were sufficiently trained and ready for such an undertaking. The fact the BEF did so against Haig's better judgement was a reality of Britain's position as France's junior partner on the Western Front. Undoubtedly had the BEF been better prepared, then some of the extensive losses which it befell in July 1916 may have been less severe. Yet, the attack succeeded in diverting German forces away from the Verdun front, the French command were grateful for the BEF's contribution and no enduring damage was done to Franco-British military relations.²¹⁸ Nevertheless, the timing of the Somme campaign provided a clear example of the limits of the BEF's independence, and understandably was a position which the War Office sought to avoid if at all possible in a new war. However, in truth this was wishful thinking by those in Whitehall, as the prospective balance of Franco-British land forces would ensure that in reality a new BEF would face similar operational constraints, albeit with the right of appeal to the British government in certain serious objectionable situations.

²¹⁷ TNA CAB 53/4-5, 'Defence Plans', Chiefs of Staff (COS) Committee, 125th and 133rd Meetings, 4 May and 9 October 1934 and CAB 16/209 'Strategical Appreciation Sub Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), minutes of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd meetings, 1, 13 and 17 March 1939. See also Alexander and Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War", 60 and Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff*, 104.

²¹⁸ See Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London: Cassell, 2004), 15, 18 and 75.

These concerns show that the War Office was acutely aware to the downsides to being a junior partner in an unequal alliance. It shows that the War Office had correctly identified the lessons from the Western Front in the First World War in which it had its operational scope for manoeuvre limited. It therefore believed that in this respect distancing itself from the French army was a wise course of action. Attempting to protect its operational independence came at a cost though. Indeed, it prevented the War Office from having the valuable gains to be made in 'knowing your friends'. Any benefits derived from this were seemingly deemed secondary to the importance of operational independence. This was a trade off that ultimately backfired, with disastrous consequences, as the French army failed to withstand the German offensive in 1940.

The consideration of operational independence had to an extent to be put to one side as war edged ever closer in 1939, and as extensive planning between the two armies began in March of that year. Nevertheless, there were still hesitations on the War Office's part in getting too close to the French army. This was shown with the War Office keen to guard its operational security as closely as possible with concerns expressed that such plans might be shared with other nations with whom the French were attempting to construct alliances. Indeed, as John Colville explains in his biography of Gort there was a genuine concern within the War Office over whether the French army's high command could be trusted with sensitive British military matters without others also learning such details.²¹⁹ Even as late as June 1939, the Joint Intelligence Committee judged that 'it is advisable to handover as little as possible provided that the maintenance of good relations was not prejudiced'.²²⁰ Consequently, Gort and others in the War Office were fearful right up until the declaration of war about the ability of French leaks to potential allies to compromise British security.

Of particular concern in this respect to the War Office were efforts by the French government to secure closer military ties with the Soviet Union. The view in London was that any military alliance with the Soviet Union could only be of limited value, an opinion which endured until the ill-fated Franco-British military mission to Moscow in 1939.²²¹ With the

²¹⁹ J. R. Colville, *Man of Valour: The Life of Field-Marshal The Viscount Gort* (London: Collins, 1968), 110 and see also Martin S Alexander and William J Philpott, "The *Entente Cordiale* and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on French Military Cooperation, 1928-1939" in *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War*, ed. Martin S Alexander (London: Routledge 1998), 62.

²²⁰ TNA CAB 56/1. Joint Intelligence Committee, minutes, 30th meeting (7 July 1939), Cabinet Office, Joint Intelligence Committee, 1936-39 cited in Alexander and Philpott "The *Entente Cordiale* and the Next War: Anglo-French Views on Future Military Co-operation, 1928-1939" *Knowing Your Friends*, 72.

²²¹ For British displeasure at efforts of the government in Paris to seek an alliance with Moscow see, for example, Neville Waites, *Troubled Neighbours: Franco-British Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London:

French government keen to establish an alliance with Moscow, the War Office was alert to the possibility that details of its own sensitive affairs could have been passed on without its choosing. Although these concerns were more deeply felt when it came to the Soviet Union, it applied to other countries too such as Czechoslovakia and Poland which France sought to shore up its military ties with in the 1930s. Quite understandably the War Office was keen to protect its secrets from those nations it chose not to directly share them with.

Limitations on the War Office's contact with its French counterpart were also imposed by the wider government's sensitivity to British domestic opinion. Until very late in the decade, public opinion in Britain feared another European conflict, and was strongly opposed to any perceived attempts of the government to bring Britain closer to hostilities with Germany.²²² For much of the British public, and indeed many parliamentarians, the French army together with its government were identified as having the potential to draw Britain into an unwanted conflict.²²³ In particular, the prospect of entering into any military agreement with France was vehemently opposed by public opinion, based on the widely held view that the continental alliances that existed prior to 1914 had been a major contributing factor in the outbreak of the First World War. Furthermore, it was widely believed across the political spectrum in Britain that the Treaty of Versailles had imposed an unjust peace on Germany, and that it was France with its perceived unforgiving attitude to the Germans that was preventing a fair revision of the peace settlement thus risking a new war in Europe.²²⁴ This view was summed up by Lord Privy Seal, Anthony Eden, a firm believer in a Franco-British *entente*, who stressed that public and political opinion ensured that 'there can be no question of an alliance with France, or anyone else'.²²⁵ Successive secretaries of state for war, as politicians, were attuned and sensitive to public opinion on this point, a fact that undoubtedly played a part in inhibiting the closer Franco-British military talks that may have revealed weaknesses in the French army.

The War Office's contact with the French army was also inhibited the British government's desire to avoid giving Germany the impression of any strengthening of Anglo-French relations. Indeed, within Whitehall there was concern that if Germany perceived

Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), 147; Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 182 and Adamthwaite, *Grandeur & Misery*, 208.

²²² See, for example, Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff*, ed. French and Holden-Reid, 177; Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*, 7.

²²³ Tombs and Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 528.

²²⁴ Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 178.

²²⁵ Michael L. Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934-1937* (London: Praeger, 1997), 62.

Britain to have too close a relationship with France and its army that it could provide the Nazi regime in Berlin with a justification to feel threatened. In particular it was feared that close Franco-British military cooperation could lead to the French government to flaunt such a relationship and thus antagonise Germany at a time when Britain sought to placate Berlin.²²⁶ This was a particularly notable concern up until the time of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland when the Treaty of Locarno had remained relevant. Until that point, diplomatically the British government could not be seen to view the French army with any degree of special treatment because as signatories of the treaty, Britain and France were not entitled to hold any bi-lateral conversations with each other without informing Germany and Italy.²²⁷ Although the Locarno's restrictions of course needed adhering to, they were merely an extra justification to limit Franco-British military cooperation, as evidenced by a continuing distancing beyond the treaty's relevance.

Undoubtedly then concerns over domestic and international opinion restricted the War Office's contact with the French army and thus in turn limited a greater understanding of it. The extent to which the War Office and the wider British government were sensitive to this matter was seen in efforts made to ensure that under no circumstances could they be accused of fostering a close relationship with the French army. The War Office had been notably stung by media criticism that ensued following an inconsequential visit to Britain in 1934 by Weygand, which had been arranged in return for the hospitality bestowed on one of Montgomery-Massingberd's visits to France. During Weygand's excursion to Britain he was taken by Montgomery-Massingberd to both the Aldershot Military Tattoo and Royal Ascot. For this though the CIGS was castigated in some sections of the press, where he was accused of plotting a military alliance with France. In order to ensure that such criticisms did not escalate, various measures were taken which showed the extent of concern on how Britain's relationship with the French army was perceived. For example, at Trooping of the Colour, Weygand was removed from behind a window on a building overlooking Horse Guards Parade in fear of the slim chance he may have slipped into public view. Montgomery-Massingberd reflected later on Weygand's visit that 'much to my amusement the visit roused a veritable storm in the Yellow Press! I was accused by one correspondent of hatching a war

²²⁶ Tombs and Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 498 and Alexander and Philpott "The Entente Cordiale and the Next War", 61; Harris, "The British General Staff and the Coming of War, 1933-39," in *The British General Staff*, 95

²²⁷ Brian Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940* (London: Brassey's, 1990), 6.

and similar foolish fancies.’²²⁸ The French army’s leadership were sympathetic to British sensitivities on this with Gamelin assuring Montgomery-Massingberd ahead of a subsequent visit to France that ‘all arrangements would be made so that the visit should be kept strictly private under any conditions.’²²⁹ These instances appear to indicate an excessive anxiety on the part of the War Office, but they do emphasise further how both domestic and foreign audiences restricted senior officials’ contacts with their French counter-parts.

An enduring deference for the French army from the First World War

Playing a significant role in the War Office’s overall confidence in the French army was an enduring deference to its former ally from the First World War. This was a perspective which prevailed in the British army throughout the interwar period, and was a powerful and underestimated legacy of the two nations’ armies’ service alongside each other on the Western Front. The seeds of this sentiment were sown during the conflict itself, despite occasional, inevitable inter-alliance disputes. This was explained by General Sir William Robertson who as CIGS noted in 1915 that:

I believe [the French] are as good as allies as any country could have. I merely wish to emphasise the great difficulty there has been and always will be in operations conducted by allied armies. It is only natural.²³⁰

Notwithstanding an awareness in the British army of the 1920s and 1930s of these and other difficulties, the fact that the far larger French army had ultimately emerged victorious demonstrating perceived qualities of endurance and *élan* created a lasting admiration in the minds of the vast majority of British officers. This perception was formed during the conflict itself, encouraged even by British literature of the time when *élan*, spirit, dash and endurance were identified as French military attributes.²³¹ This was seen in the writings of the time and later by Rudyard Kipling and John Buchan which praised the French army and emphasised

²²⁸ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/11. Field Marshal Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, ‘The Autobiography of a Gunner,’ unpublished manuscript, 1946.

²²⁹ TNA WO 106/5137. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Heywood, ‘Personal Correspondence between CIGS and Military Attaché in Paris; note on conversations with General Gamelin,’ 1 July 1934-28 February 1935.

²³⁰ William Philpott. *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 161 cited in Tombs and Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 498.

²³¹ John Ramsden, “‘French people have a peculiar facility for being misrepresented’: British Perceptions of France at War, 1914-1918,” in *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale Since 1904*, ed. Antoine Capet (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18.

the dour endurance of its tough *poilu*.²³² Buchan wrote for example on France's struggle against the Germans at Verdun that 'The glib commentators who before the war praised French *élan* and denied French fortitude were utterly put to shame. It was fortitude and stoicism of the French that were their most shining endowments'.²³³ Kipling wrote in a similar deferential tone during the conflict stating that:

Even if France of to-day stood alone against the world's enemy, it would be almost inconceivable to imagine her defeat now; wholly so to imagine any surrender. The war will go on till the enemy is finished. The French do not know when that hour will come; they seldom speak of it; they do not amuse themselves with dreams of triumphs or terms. Their business is war, and they do their business.²³⁴

It was also difficult to ignore that by the time of victory in 1918, the French army was the largest and most powerful force of its kind in the world. This was certainly the view of most professional military observers of the time and believed to be the case by most officers in the British army. This is emphasised in Colville's biography of Gort. He explained this reflecting on the CIGS and his fellow officers stating that they:

with rare exceptions, looked upon the French Army as invincible. Gort's personal admiration of the French was epitomised by Marshal Foch, whose command of Anglo-French forces in 1918 seemed to him a model of military excellence and whose offensive philosophy appealed to him.²³⁵

By November 1918 the French army was 2.5 million men strong, employed the latest artillery, tanks and tactics, and held over half of the Western Front. It was truly a formidable force.²³⁶ The deference that endured during the inter-war years amongst the British army was typified by Winston Churchill, albeit a devoted Francophile, who served as an officer for a time on the Western Front, when he described the French army in 1933 as 'that sorely tried, glorious army upon whose sacrifices the liberties of Europe had through three fearful campaigns mainly depended'.²³⁷

²³² Robert Tombs and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France. The History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 498.

²³³ Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940*, 107.

²³⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *The Military Writings of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Mosaic Books: 2017) 158.

²³⁵ Colville, *Man of Valour*, 110.

²³⁶ David Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of The First World War* (London: Penguin, 2005), 442-443.

²³⁷ Winston Churchill. *The World Crisis 1916-18* (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1933) 364 cited in Anthony Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914-18* (London: Cassell, 2003), 5.

Even when French military deficiencies were more widely discussed in the inter-war years, with the memories of Verdun and the Marne enduring, the French army was still widely perceived as having been unconquerable. Moreover, all of those who served, particularly as junior-mid ranking officers during the First World War, would recall that the BEF of that era also had serious weaknesses, as exposed at the start of the Battle of the Somme in 1916. In contrast those officers might recall that whilst the British army suffered its worst losses in history on 1 July 1916, French army units that participated in the opening day of the offensive achieved all of their set objectives. Furthermore, the few relative British success that occurred on that day were largely the result of units benefiting from the support of powerful French artillery. Equally, many British officers would recall how French forces came to the aid of the BEF in March 1918 after Germany's *Kaiserschlacht* offensive which caused massive casualties and threatened to force the British army back to the Channel ports. Gamelin, for instance, was personally credited with having helped save the BEF in March-May 1918 while commanding the French 9th Infantry Division, and then an ad hoc corps around Noyon when the British and Canadians on his flanks were crumbling. It would have been remembered too that this tide was eventually turned following the appointment for the first time of an Allied supreme commander, in Marshal Ferdinand Foch, who then directed British and French forces to victory in November 1918.²³⁸

The awareness of such events was institutionalised in the British army during the inter-war period with the study of campaigns from the First World War in various training establishments and in staff rides to the Western Front. It should be noted that the study of battles was not limited to British involvement but also admiringly to French campaigns such as those on the Marne and Verdun. The regard for the French army which was felt by its British counterpart after the First World War was typified by Lieutenant Colonel R H Beadon of the RASC and military historian who wrote:

Thanks to her efforts...France has recovered her ancient and historic position as the first military power in Europe. Her fourteen hundred thousand dead attest the courage of the children defending their native soil...The higher direction of the French armies was not without its faults, but as the directing will of the nation at war it proved itself against no ordinary foe. And the loyal and devoted body of officers who served at

²³⁸ See Walter Reid, *Five Days From Defeat: How Britain Nearly Lost the First World War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2017), 3, 185-186, 202.

General Headquarters bore a worthy part during the four year agony that have glorified the history of France.²³⁹

It would appear that all of those who occupied the most senior positions in the War Office during the 1930s would not have been averse to this sentiment of deference towards the French army. This seems likely given that all of those in the position of secretary of state and CIGS had served on the Western Front alongside the French army. In rising to their appointments, all would have had a good understanding of the First World War, albeit undoubtedly coloured by their own experiences in France and Flanders. It therefore seems inconceivable that such a prevailing strong admiration was absent in fostering their views on the French army. This would certainly be the case of the CIGS who were ever present in the British army in the inter-war period when this feeling towards the French endured. Although all of those who served as secretary of state during the period in question left the army after the First World War, their formative military experiences on the Western Front are likely to have ensured that their admiration was similar to that of their CIGS.

This is not to say that admiration of the French army's record in the First World War was universal in the British army. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, for example, was keen to downplay the role played by the French army and emphasise instead the important contribution of his BEF to allied victory, as we might expect. Whether this stance, shared by a small number of other commanders at the time, was born of a wish to write history in a favourable light or, as Philpott and Elizabeth Greenhalgh have argued, an inadequate study of France's contribution to victory in 1918, it illustrates that that deference to the French army and its record was not universal.²⁴⁰ The actual value of the contribution of the French army during the First World War probably rests somewhere between the opposing views of those who held the most senior posts in the British army during 1914-1918 and those in more junior and middle ranking appointments.

The reason for this difference of opinion on the French army is likely attributable to a generational divide. Indeed, Haig and his peers had spent most of their time in the British army in an era in which the French were seen as a more likely enemy than an ally. In contrast more junior officers such as those who became CIGS and secretary of state for war during the

²³⁹ Lieutenant Colonel R H Beadon, "French General Headquarters During The Great War," *Royal Army Service Corps Quarterly* 9 (1921): 529.

²⁴⁰ See William Philpott, "Unequal Sacrifice? Two Armies, Two Wars?" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 47-61 and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, "1918: The Push to Victory" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars*, eds. Tombs and Chabal, 63-80.

1930s came of age militarily fighting alongside the French during the Great War. Consequently the French army's undoubted might in 1918 and the glory of a shared victory created a potent impression on mid and junior ranking British officers. Whereas the long-held suspicions of the French from the likes of Haig endured, younger officers were less susceptible to this view and developed a great admiration for the French army which remained throughout the interwar years. It is inevitable then, that this sentiment appeared to play a significant role in the assumption that the French army was a formidable force that Britain could have confidence in. It is worth noting that this Francophile tendency amongst British officers was detected by French observers. This was revealed in a report compiled by the French military attaché in London in 1934, which noted that 'in general English officers are very Francophiles...and makes them consider favourably the eventuality of a Franco-British alliance'.²⁴¹ It was noted by the same French officials though that this sentiment did not extend to wider domestic political and public opinion with it stated that whilst this opinion 'would hold true for that of the great majority of the army, it would be very far, on the contrary to be so in general political circles'.²⁴²

The same could be said of British public opinion, with a few notable exceptions. For example, on Armistice Day in 1918, a service of thanksgiving for British parliamentarians at St Margret's Church in Westminster was interrupted by crowds and bands outside enjoying *la Marseillaise*.²⁴³ Similarly, in the late 1930s the headmaster of a school in Worthing in Sussex insisted his pupils sing *la Marseillaise* in assembly each week in tribute to the French army whom he had fought alongside in the trenches.²⁴⁴ Yet, a more common sentiment at this time was a degree of Francophobia where a dislike or mistrust of France was prevalent amongst the majority. There is though no evidence to suggest that the French army featured highly in the thoughts of the public, but where it did so it was viewed suspiciously, as was the government in Paris, which was feared would lead Britain into an undesired war.

In this respect opinion within the War Office and the British army was out of step with the public mood. Yet, although there was great admiration within the War Office and British army for their French counterparts, it should not be assumed that there was a strong

²⁴¹ SHD 7N 2806 dossier 1. Despatch from Général Voruz to *Ministre de la Guerre*, 'Note su Capitaine Duplessier sur opinions britanniques', 20 December 1934, 1-4.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Guy Cuthbertson, *Peace at Last: A Portrait of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918* (London: Yale University Press, 2018) 118-120.

²⁴⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Derek Armitage (Retd.) RCT. Interview with Hefyn Gareth Mears. Deepcut, 11 April 2014.

feeling of Francophilia within their ranks. In all likelihood the army is likely to have shared a similar opinion to British society where a degree of Francophobia prevailed in the majority, although perhaps not to the same extent. Yet, the War Office and British army, unlike the public, were also capable of viewing their French counterpart from a dispassionate professional military perspective, detached from any subjectivity of Gallic ways and its culture. It is for this reason that the War Office and army were able to retain their deference for the French army throughout the interwar years.

Naturally the public mood in this matter was also reflected in opinion across the political spectrum. Moreover, it was likely that public opinion constrained politicians from diverging from this populist sentiment. However, there was a body of opinion in Westminster, albeit in a minority, which did share a similar view on the French army to that which existed in the War Office. Indeed, from the mid 1930s the likes of Sir Robert Vansittart, Sir Edward Spears MP, Chair of the Britain-France Association, and its Patron Winston Churchill, all began to press for closer military ties with France to help take a firmer line against German aggression in Europe.²⁴⁵ Churchill even declared on the floor of the House of Commons ‘thank God for the French army’²⁴⁶ in frustration at the lack of resources being committed to Britain’s own military. As with the senior positions in the War Office, such political opinion was significantly derived from a lasting admiration towards the French army from the conflict of 1914-1918. Yet, the War Office was on the whole still some way apart from the majority of political opinion with its reverence towards the French army, as appears to have been the case with the public too. This is not necessarily surprising as throughout its history the British army can often be preoccupied by its own thoughts and affairs, sometimes detached from that of civilian life.

Signals and communications weaknesses in the French army and minor criticisms of aspects of France’s ground forces

Confidence in the wider war effort that would be waged must have made the War Office to a degree less inclined to question the effectiveness of the French army. Nevertheless, there were rare occasions where senior officials at the War Office did express

²⁴⁵ Tombs and Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 523.

²⁴⁶ Roy Jenkins. *Churchill: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 2001) 268 cited in Colin Smith, *England’s Last War Against France: Fighting Vichy 1940-1942* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009), 33.

doubts about certain aspects of France's land forces. Importantly though, when these were commented on they did not place into doubt the French army's ability to withstand a German offensive. One aspect which was subject to a rare note of criticism was the French army's equipment. An example of this infrequent observation was offered by Deverell who expressed concern about some of the large quantities of old equipment present in the French Army. As CIGS he wrote that:

a good deal of equipment is apparently the same as in 1914-1918. The first line transport of infantry battalions still consists of the two-wheeled or four-wheeled cart drawn by horses or mules. The medium artillery (other than that with the material division) is unchanged.²⁴⁷

Deverell also had some minor less than positive comments about French armour. Similar remarks were also made by his predecessor Montgomery-Massingberd. It should be noted though these observations were made in the earliest part of the period in question, were rare and did not call into question the overall effectiveness of the French army.

Yet, during his time as CIGS, Montgomery-Massingberd did make one highly accurate and pertinent critical observation of France's ground forces which was to prove more important than he foresaw at the time. This concerned radio communications in the French army. On this the CIGS wisely informed his secretary of state, Lord Halifax, that 'as regards wireless, we are definitely ahead of them'.²⁴⁸ The lack of adequate radio communications in the French army was a weakness which endured after the declaration of war, and the importance of which was exposed in the defeat of June 1940. Communications at all levels of the French army's commands from its higher headquarters to its smallest units on the battlefield were shown to be severely inadequate, not allowing the French army to respond with sufficient speed to German movements in the campaign. Credit must be given to Montgomery-Massingberd for being one of the few British observers to identify such a weakness. However, the CIGS appears not to have highlighted or considered the seriousness of the consequences that could follow for France's ground forces in possessing such a shortcoming. Furthermore, there appears to have been no attempt by senior officials in the War Office to investigate this issue further.

The importance of effective signals communications together with that of other roles and functions such as logistics and engineering is often overlooked in military history with

²⁴⁷ TNA CAB 21/575. 'French and German Manoeuvres 1937,' September 1937.

²⁴⁸ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Montgomery-Massingberd to Halifax, 17 August 1935.

inevitably a focus on the teeth arms in operations. The critical importance of signals communications is stressed in the War Office's official history of the Second World War stating:

In modern war, communications are just as much a weapon as anything else with which an army is equipped; furthermore, they are the only weapon the operation of which directly affects the control of operations by a commander; without good communications, no commander can hope for success in battle.²⁴⁹

Although Montgomery-Massingberd correctly noted the inadequacies of French radio communications, the absence of any detailed reference to signals and communications is the most notable of all aspects of the French army not reported on given the importance that weaknesses in this area had in the outcome of the Battle of France. So what precisely did British observers overlook in this area? French shortcomings in this facet would be exposed throughout its command and control at both a tactical and operational level during the 1940 campaign. Even though the French army had broad deficiencies in radio equipment, on a tactical level this was particularly notable amongst French armour with a lack of radios which would allow tactical control and fast coordinated manoeuvre. That is not to say though that the French army did not own effective radio communications equipment, it simply lacked enough of them.²⁵⁰

One particular weakness in French signals and communications was a lack of fast, impregnable field signals security. This has been shown by Alexander who has noted that the French army sought an especially high level of signals security which entailed coding and decoding of messages, orders and combat reports.²⁵¹ Whilst this was not a weakness in itself, such were the level of security procedures that it led to delays in response times and troop deployments. In contrast the German army used a lower level of security in its communications systems, opting to transmit orders and situation reports without losing time encoding and decoding them. Consequently, the German army gained a relatively greater degree of operational efficiency despite the reduction in communications security. Although the reduction in security presented opportunities which the allies could exploit because of delays caused by their own security measures, French commanders were often unable to seize

²⁴⁹ T. B. Gravley, *The Second World War 1939-1945: Signal and Communications* (London: War Office, 1950), 32.

²⁵⁰ Martins S Alexander, "Radio Intercepts, Reconnaissance and Raids: French Operational Intelligence and Communications in 1940" *Intelligence and National Security* 28 (2013), 345.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 348-350.

these opportunities in time. As a result, when it came to the Battle of France, signal intelligence seldom afforded the French or the BEF significant help to counter German actions on the field of battle. Furthermore, French command and control lacked inbuilt procedures to furnish information regularly and in real time to supporting units. Nor was it effective at providing information to the reserves further to the rear, under corps and army direction. When communications collapsed or were outpaced by the rapid operational tempo that the Germans imposed, higher French formations were paralysed. Thus without situational awareness of the tactical locations, casualties and ammunition supply stores of units on their front, French officers could not confidently or speedily make decisions and regain the initiative. This led to situational blindness or at best a lack of clarity on situational awareness.

Deficiencies in this area were accentuated by the French army's heavily centralised command and control structure, which was undermined by the insufficient quantities of modern signals equipment. With only small numbers of modern devices the French command was overly reliant upon telephones but also motorcycles together with despatch riders and liaison officers travelling by car. When the German offensive eventually began the French command was therefore quickly overwhelmed by the pace of operations. The resulting lack of direction and control that ensued in the Battle of France itself led to the disintegration of command and control and communications above divisional level. Frequently divisional commanders were left for hours, sometimes several days without instructions unaware of developments unfolding within the area of operations lacking an understating of the wider battlefield situation. Indeed, during the German attack it became evident that the French army had an insufficiently supple command, control and communications procedures which proved to be fatal flaws. The pace of operations no longer allowed for the preparation, writing and transmission of orders. This disoriented French commanders at all levels who had expected to receive and to offer continual written guidance during the course of the battle.²⁵²

Although these weaknesses were eventually fully exposed during the campaign, how realistic was it for British observers to foresee that such flaws existed in the French army's signals, communications, command and control? Clearly Montgomery-Massingberd noted that these could be matters for future concern. However, there is no evidence that this concern extended to their possible catastrophic consequences. Furthermore, it seemingly did

²⁵² Martin Alexander. 'After Dunkirk: The French Army's Performance against 'Case Red', 25 May to 25 June 1940', 260.

not prompt other British officials to extend this observation more broadly into the French army and certainly not at its operational command and control. In part this was the result of the various factors which led Britain to view the French army with deference which are explored throughout the thesis. Yet, it can be argued that the British army's own serious deficiencies in similar areas, shown by French, prevented British officials from appreciating the extent and possible outcomes of these French weaknesses.²⁵³ French highlights that the British army at this time was similarly weakened by its 'command, control and communications doctrine with its commitment to an inflexible and autocratic management system which was ill suited to 'new tactical methods''.²⁵⁴ In particular French notes that the British army was too reliant upon written orders and cable communications, together with poorly trained and organised staffs with a selection system that produced senior officers who were professionally or temperamentally ill prepared for battle command and had little opportunity to practice commanding large formations in manoeuvres. With, as French notes, an 'inability or unwillingness' for British commanders to move into forward areas to command, a special premium was placed on effective communications. However, the effective flow of information up and down the chain of command was greatly hampered by Britain's own flawed signals and communications systems:

By 1939 British army radios were still far from being completely reliable and there was much reluctance outside the tanks and artillery to rely on them as the primary means of communication. More often than not, therefore communications both in front and to the rear of divisional headquarters relied largely on cable. Furthermore, in practice the use of radios at the tactical level was limited to armoured and artillery units. Infantry divisions had so few radios that if they ever became dependent upon them for communications, each divisional headquarters would have to try to command three brigades using a single set. The unevenness of the distribution of radios across the army had important repercussions for all-arms cooperation.²⁵⁵

These problems, afflicting both nations' armies, remained unresolved during the period known as the Phoney War. Indeed, by the start of the German offensive the BEF was still overly reliant on telephones and continued to have too few radio sets and trained operators with which to deploy with them. Furthermore, as with the French army, the BEF exercised a

²⁵³ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 161-183.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

high-level of signals security which would lead to serious delays in the speed of transmissions.²⁵⁶

Although French explains how these weaknesses inevitably impacted on the BEF's readiness for operations in 1940, he does not extend this to show this also blinded British observers to these same critical shortcomings in the French army. Although the War Office cannot be expected to have forecast the course of events in May-June 1940 and the critical role played by French signals and communications precisely, it could be expected that greater attention should have been devoted by officials to the War Office to these details. Not least it would have proved valuable for Britain to identify lessons it could apply to its own forces. The fact that the War Office was seemingly blind to many of its own weaknesses in signals and communication helps explain why similar deficiencies in the French army failed to be investigated in any depth. This was an error of judgement and foresight that would have serious consequences come the Battle of France. It will also be shown in Chapter 6 how the overlooked signals and communications weaknesses led to the breakdown of effective liaison between the BEF and French army with their ensuing consequences on the battlefield.

While it could be argued that French weaknesses in signals and communications could only be revealed under the stresses of high intensity operations, this argument belies the fact that the French were themselves aware that their communications systems had considerable room for improvement, something greater British attention may have revealed. In his study of French command, control and communications, Vincent Arbabarétier, claims that amongst the roots of French weaknesses in this area, the French high command did not sufficiently value the importance of signals in the interwar years relative to that of other arms and services.²⁵⁷ Yet, despite this claim, the imperfect nature of French signals and communications is documented amongst the French army's records regularly at various stages throughout the 1930s, indicating the issue was considered important. A paper circulated by the *Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale* in 1935 highlighted many shortcomings in this area. In particular it pointed to ineffective equipment stating 'devices such as the ER17 are mediocre...They are unstable and unsuitable for operation in dense networks...The ER12 devices...give impure emissions interfering with neighbouring

²⁵⁶ See, for example, R. F. H. Nalder, *The History of the British Army Signals in the Second World War* (London: Royal Signals Institution), 32.

²⁵⁷ Vincent Arbabarétier, *L'école de la guerre, Sedan 1940: Ou la failite du système de commandement français* (Paris: Economica, 2012), 33.

networks...The ER 13...is an obsolete device...Motorised, mechanised units lack suitable radio communications equipment'.²⁵⁸

French awareness of the need to improve their strategic signals and communications is also evident from the large construction programmes in the 1930s to build underground communications across France and to its overseas territories. The critical need for these programmes was described in 1938 by Gamelin in a note to the French air and naval chiefs in which he stated 'the extension of the national network of long-distance telephone cables is of undeniable interest for the...needs of the government and national defence upon mobilisation...the minimal program is essential to these needs' and stressed 'the urgency of the proposed extensions'.²⁵⁹ These programmes extended beyond the declaration of war and even beyond the start of the German offensive. Although these programmes had been active throughout the 1930s, French awareness of the incomplete nature of them was described by General Jullien, *Inspecteur Général Technique des Transmissions de la Défense Nationale*, in February 1940 urging that they continue stating that 'The proposed works and arrangements...constitute a minimum program, the implementation of which meets imperative and urgent need for national defence'.²⁶⁰ These programmes cost millions of French francs and were reported on in French newspapers. This does not appear to have caught the attention of British observers. Yet, had greater attention been paid to these programmes, the weaknesses of French communications would have been clear and the need for closer attention to this subject self-evident.

French awareness of difficulties with their signals and communications continued after mobilisation and to the start of the German offensive in 1940. Throughout this period senior French officials received regular warnings of shortages in signals personnel and equipment. For example, the French First Army's headquarters and the *Ministre de la Défense Nationale* were repeatedly warned by the *Centre d'Organisation d'Artillerie* at Vannes that they faced a situation 'of extreme urgency' with a shortage of instructors 'essential for the proper functioning of the centre' in addition to various radio equipment that

²⁵⁸ SHD 2N 262 dossier 1, *Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale*, 'Approvisionnement de l'Armée d'Terre, en matériel de TSF', 15 November 1935, 2-4.

²⁵⁹ SHD 2N 262 dossier 3. 'Câbles téléphoniques souterrains à grande distance' Gamelin to Chefs d'Etats-Major Generals de la Marine et de l'Air 27 June 1938 1-2.

²⁶⁰ SHD 2N 262 dossier. 4, 12 February 1940, 3. Note from General Jullien to *Président du Conseil, Ministre de la Défense Nationale et de la Guerre*. See also further correspondence from Jullien dated 25 May 1940 and 6N 352 dossier 3.

was ‘urgently needed that had previously been requested but not supplied.’²⁶¹ Similarly the *Centre d’Organisation d’Artillerie* at Nimes wrote to Paris in January 1940 with anxieties about signals equipment which ‘does not exist’ at their establishment and described the situation as ‘urgent’.²⁶² The *Centre d’Instruction des Transmissions d’Orange* also contacted senior officials to voice similar complaints during the Phoney War period.²⁶³ Wider issues of manpower shortages in specialist signals posts were confirmed by Colonel Goetschy, *Directeur des Transmissions* at *GQG* who observed on 18 September 1939 to the *Colonels Commandants des Transmissions* across the army groups and armies that ‘it appeared that the assignment of personnel from various specialties to the units of the special corps of military telegraphy provided for in the war manpower tables was not respected.’²⁶⁴

Signals deficiencies after the declaration of war were also evident in frontline formations. Indeed, General Alombert, the First French Army’s chief of staff, wrote on 8 September 1939 that there were shortages of all kinds of signals material and had equipment in ‘urgent need of repair’. His chief signals officer, Colonel Coussillan, stated further that these problems needed to be addressed ‘as soon as possible’.²⁶⁵ Shortages of equipment were also reported in the Cavalry Corps, one of the French army’s strongest formations, which its headquarters described as ‘significant...that could seriously compromise the employment of troops or the functioning of services’.²⁶⁶ Although some of these shortages in signals equipment were addressed some of the devices received had to be returned ‘due to their poor condition...for overhaul.’²⁶⁷ The situation concerning signals manpower and equipment issues within the First French Army and the Cavalry Corps in the period of mobilisation and later is significant in that these were formations adjacent to the location of the BEF. Although British observers could claim that some of the earlier matters of concern within the French army about their signals and communications were out of their sight or proximity, such a claim could not be made about the French First Army and Cavalry Corps given their closeness

²⁶¹ SHD 7N 3997 dossier 3. Letter from HQ 11th Military Region to *Ministère de la Défense Nationale*, 21 January 1940.

²⁶² SHD 7N 3997 dossier 7. Letter from HQ 15th Military Region to *Ministère de la Défense Nationale*, 27 January 1940. 1-2.

²⁶³ SHD 7N 3997 dossier. 7. Letter from *Centre d’Instruction des Transmissions d’Orange* to the *Ministère de la Défense Nationale*, 6 March 1940.

²⁶⁴ SHD 29N 18dossier. 2. Colonel Goetschy to *Colonels Commandants des Transmissions des groupes d’Armées, des Armées*, 18 September 1939.

²⁶⁵ SHD 29N 18dossier. 2. Note from Colonel Coussillan to Alombert, 8 September 1939.

²⁶⁶ SHD 30N 264, dossier. 6. Letter from Prioux to Blanchard, 26 September 1939.

²⁶⁷ SHD 30N 264 dossier 11. *Corps de Cavalerie, Note de Service*, 11 March 1940.

geographically to the BEF and regular liaison visits.²⁶⁸ Greater attention to this area could have alerted British observers that all was not well with French signals communications.

While the French army had some concerns about their signals and communications prior to the outbreak of the war, we should keep this in perspective. Other aspects pleased senior commanders. For example, in a report on the French army's telegraphy and signals in 1938, it was stated that 'the overall impression gathered...was very satisfactory...and serious efforts are being made at all levels to give them maximum efficiency'.²⁶⁹ However, more critically the report judged that improvements were required 'with regard to radio equipment of the armoured and mechanical units' and that 'it is time for a considerable budgetary effort to be made to move on to the full realisation of both training and mobilisation'.²⁷⁰ This varied assessment was also reflected into a report produced on signals exercises carried out at Courtine in the Limousin region between 24 and 27 July 1939 with the aim of experimenting with the most recent signals equipment still under trial or in service. Positively, it was judged that the exercise proved that 'technical progress is achieved is considerable, and this success has generated remarkable progress...and among users, a new confidence in the efficiency of the electrical means of transport'.²⁷¹ Less positively the report concluded that the exercise 'did not tackle the problem of creating radio links inside the large mechanical units'.²⁷² More generally the report stated French signals were a work in progress noting that 'a whole lot of work of organisation and adaption remains to be done, based on the tactical needs of each arm of service, while striving to achieve the maximum of unification and simplification'.²⁷³

A similarly mixed picture emerged after exercises undertaken in the Spring of 1939 with the aim of experimenting with new radio equipment and to study specific questions concerning their technical and tactical use with armoured forces. Indeed, a report into the exercises judged that due to problems encountered in the exercises that it was not possible to judge the effectiveness of signals in the operation of armoured units. It concluded that due to low monthly fuel allowances, the lack of sufficiently large exercise grounds near garrisons, and relatively small number of tanks and armoured vehicles participating it was 'difficult to

²⁶⁸ See chapter 5 for the visits of British officials to these formations.

²⁶⁹ SHD 9N 325 dossier 2. Report by General Riegel, *Inspecteur Technique des Transmissions*, on the subject of the inspection of *Telegraphie Militaire and Transmissions*, 1938, 27.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²⁷¹ SHD 7N 3983 dossier. 1. *Section du Material de Transmissions*, report by Captain Romon 'au sujet des manoeuvres des Transmissions de 1937', undated 1937, 3.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

draw definitive lessons from these too small exercises' and that they did 'not allow for generalisation or criticism of these systems' which ensured that 'conclusions cannot be drawn from this...concerning the employment and the organisation of signals of a division or of a large group of tanks'.²⁷⁴

Given this mixed picture of French officers' confidence in the effectiveness of their own signals, it was not inevitable that British observers would have been able to deduce the critical French weaknesses that existed in this area. Nevertheless, greater interrogation and study of French signals and communications would surely have provided a much greater knowledge than the paucity of that which they held. Yet, it would certainly have been possible for British officials to have devoted greater scrutiny to French signals. After all, records reveal that the French army invested a great deal of study into the signals and communications of other nations' armies including the British army. These studies were undertaken throughout the interwar period with not only nations with the potential to disturb the peace such as Germany and Italy but also countries such as the United States, Poland, Switzerland, the Soviet Union, Romania as well as Great Britain.²⁷⁵

These studies were not just undertaken by French military attachés based in various overseas capitals; the *Centre d'Etudes de Liaison et Transmissions* examined them and they were used by instructors. The reports and studies produced were technical, detailed, critical and analytical. They contrast greatly with the absence of such comparable reports compiled by British officials. The value of these reports can be seen in how they reported on British signals and accurately understood the weaknesses that the British army had in this respect. The reports were not always critical but were balanced and recognised strengths in addition to shortcomings. For example, in a report compiled by the French military attaché in London the value of British signals in a European war was questioned. The report concluded that 'The regular army, trained by the elite active and reserve formations of the Royal Corps of Signals, will have excellent signals communications, which should be able to adapt very quickly to the conditions of this war.' However, less positively it judged:

It is doubtful whether it could be the same with the territorial army and even less with a national army obtained by conscription. In fact, the means and the methods of signals communications of the English army show a precision, a speed and a discipline of use which one can only ask of a long

²⁷⁴ SHD 7N 3997 dossier 11. Report by General Martin, *Inspector General de Chars de Combat, Commandant le Groupement d'Instruction 'Rapport sur des Exercices de Transmissions'*, to *Ministère de la Guerre et la Défense Nationale*, 17 May 1939, 2.

²⁷⁵ See, for example, SHD 7N 3984 dossier 2 and 7 N 3986 dossier 2.

trained army of trade. To obtain satisfactory results with formations poorly trained, it would be necessary to return to more methodical procedures and to means that are slower to put into action, perhaps, but more diverse and more reliable. This would pose an important material and time problem.²⁷⁶

Although for most of the 1930s British officials did not compile such similar detailed reports on their future Gallic ally, the opportunity did arise in the months immediately preceding the war from which to learn more of the French army's signals and communications. This arose following the establishment of the Franco-British Military Committee on Telecommunications in July 1939. The committee was created at a time of increasing Franco-British governmental cooperation in many facets in the lead up to and subsequent to the declaration of war. In the terms of reference in setting up the committee it outlined the need for this body stating: 'The necessity for this cooperation is as essential for the communication services as it is for any others, in fact, in some respects it of greater importance'.²⁷⁷ The scope and composition of the committee was to include representatives of the two nations' three armed services to meet periodically and initially to seek cooperation in general non specified areas. In the constitution of the committee the aim was to:

study all questions of common interest concerning telecommunications and to propose all measures which will ensure, in close co-operation, the best employment of the methods of communication according to the different situations which may arise during hostilities...To allot to the British and French signal services of all arms, the frequencies which they are to use, with a view to reducing, operating signals, etc...To exchange all military and technical information of common interest concerning telecommunications.²⁷⁸

More specifically, in terms of the Franco-British ground forces this amounted to 'Arrangements for dovetailing the frequencies required by the British Field Force into the framework of the French army system. [For example] Landline requirements of the British army in France'.²⁷⁹ It did note though that 'signals questions in the zone of the field armies will be settled by direct communication between the Commanders of the armies in the field'.

²⁸⁰ It would appear that for this reason that in the early meetings greater discussion was

²⁷⁶ SHD 7N 2850 dossier. 3. Report by office of French military attaché in London, '*Les Transmissions dans l'Armée Britannique*', January 1933, 16.

²⁷⁷ SHD 2N 261 dossier. 6. '*Note sur la creation projetée d'un Comité Interallié des Transmissions*', 18 July 1939, 1.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

devoted to air and naval matters rather than matters relating the BEF and French army. Nevertheless, there was evidence of British satisfaction at early cooperation with the French with Brigadier G. G. Rawson, Deputy Director of Staff Duties at the War Office, noting after the committee's first meeting his 'appreciation of the valuable assistance which this officer had received from the French authorities in connection with the installation of lines for use by the British army'.²⁸¹

Although not specifically its prime purpose, the committee had the potential to enable French and British forces to gain a greater understanding of each other's signals and communications. In continuation of its practice throughout the inter war years, the French army sought to exploit this and continue to gain detailed insights into British signals. This was shown by the enthusiasm and detailed reporting which occurred after the committee established exchange visits in Britain and France. One such visit occurred in November 1939 which led to detailed reports produced by the French army's *Section du Material de Transmissions* for the *Ministère de la Guerre et la Défense Nationale*. The reports were based upon visits to the Signal Experimental Establishment at Woolwich, the Signals Equipment Study Laboratory of the Air Ministry at Farnborough and the factories and laboratories of the Standard Telephones and Cables Ltd at North Woolwich. From the French perspective the value of the visits were explained in the report written by the head of the delegation which praised 'the exchange of technical information, reciprocal knowledge of the resources available to the communications equipment study departments' and 'the lessons learned on both sides are already sufficiently fruitful for it to be possible to stress the absolute necessity of regularly continuing the initial contacts'.²⁸²

In keeping with the reports earlier in the decade, they too were detailed. For example in the reports of the November 1939 visits one dossier was produced on the British No 8 Infantry Radio. French officers judged that:

it appears to be a well-designed device, without however presenting sensational performances. It is heavier and more complicated than the French ER 40 or ER 17 devices; handled by trained men, it can give good results; put in the hands of average operators, it may happen that the results obtained are much worse. It should be noted that most British devices have very good modulation, due to the good quality of the microphones used.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

²⁸² SHD 7N 3983 dossier. 1. Report by *Chef de bataillon* Labat, 'au sujet d'une visite d'Officiers Français auprès des Services Techniques des Transmissions du War Office, et de l'Air Ministry', 6 January 1940, 5.

²⁸³ SHD 7N 3983 dossier. 1. Annex IV, 'Notes sur l'appareil émetteur-recepteur portatif d'Infanterie de l'Armée Britannique (Poste Radio no. 8)', 6.

As can be seen by this detailed overview, French observers gave close scrutiny to what they observed of British signals equipment and judged that their visits gave ‘a very clear idea of the material used by the Royal Signal Corps in the field’.²⁸⁴ British officers also made reciprocal visits in November 1939 but, tellingly, and in the interwar tradition, do not appear to have offered reports offering insights of the kind which French officials did. The potential effectiveness of this committee was obviously limited by the relatively short duration of the Phoney War. Yet, there appears to have been made greater efforts made on air and naval cooperation than that with land forces. Moreover, British elements of this committee do not appear to have made the same effort as their French counterparts to seek to learn of the capabilities of its ally’s signals and communications. There were reciprocal British visits were arrangements that were made in November 1939, but according to the minutes of meetings and records available appear to not have resulted in the same level scrutiny as exhibited by the French, but ultimately in keeping with the decade before.

In addition to not monitoring weaknesses in the French army’s communications, so too there was an absence of scrutiny on other potentially important issues. For example, senior officials in the War Office appear to have not paid too much concern to matters such as doctrine, training or the morale of the French army and wider civilian population which would serve in France’s vast conscript force. The absence of a more comprehensive analysis of the different aspects of the French army and wider issues relating to it can in some ways be understandable. After all, it must be remembered again that within the War Office’s brief it had to prioritise its main responsibility of preparing the British army for war, whilst devoting greater urgency to the study of the armies of Germany, Italy and Japan which it was likely to have to confront in the event of war. In this sense, for the all of the French army’s importance, it is easy to acknowledge why it featured lower down the War Office’s list of priorities.

It was in the context of the threat faced by the German armed forces in which a further serious critical observation of the French army was made. This time the comments were from Deverell whose fears of potential equipment deficiencies in the French army were heightened after attending the annual German army manoeuvres held at Warnemünde in

²⁸⁴SHD 2N 261 dossier 6. Report by General Jullien, ‘*Première reunion à Londres du Comité Militaire Franco-Britannique des Télécommunications*’ to *Président du Conseil Ministre de la Défense Nationale et de la Guerre*, 22 October 1939, 5.

September 1937. After returning from the large exercise in Germany he recorded that ‘the difference in equipment in the French and German armies was most noticeable’ and that the Germans were ‘in advance of anything in possession of France and Britain’.²⁸⁵ This concern may be seen by many as to have ultimately proved to be an accurate statement given the course of the Battle of France in 1940. However, rearmament in France had ensured that many of the equipment qualitative deficiencies in the French army had been resolved by the start of the German *Blitzkrieg*. Equally, although Deverell expressed this concern he did not anticipate that the perceived disparity in equipment between the Allies and Germany would lead to defeat.

Indeed, despite these more negative comments made by the likes of Deverell and Montgomery-Massingberd, at no time did either CIGS or other senior officials in the War Office believe that the French army would be unable to resist a German attack in the West. This is clear in the surviving records in which the French army’s defeat on the battlefield was never seriously considered. Nonetheless, in the manuscript of his unpublished memoir, ‘The Autobiography of a Gunner’, written after the Second World War, Montgomery-Massingberd’s judgements of the French army have been somewhat revised to offer a more negative assessment. For example, his praise of the Maginot Line when CIGS appeared to have been forgotten as he stated ‘The Maginot Line...was nowhere near completion’.²⁸⁶ Similarly, other positive appraisals made during his time at the War Office were contradicted by his assertion that the French army was suffering from insufficient resources being ‘desperately short of modern equipment and the government was very short of money’. Furthermore, he believed that ‘French defeatism’ that ‘dated from the mutinies of 1917’ had permeated ‘a considerable part of the army’.²⁸⁷ Unfortunately, these views are absent from Montgomery-Massingberd’s observations made whilst in post as CIGS, although clearly they seemed more obvious to him after the French army’s defeat in 1940. It would appear then that the former CIGS evidently enjoyed hindsight in writing his memoir.

Conclusion

Franco-British relations in the decade preceding the declaration of war in 1939 are often characterised as tense with regular disagreements in foreign affairs. However,

²⁸⁵ TNA CAB 21/575. ‘French and German Manoeuvres 1937,’ September 1937.

²⁸⁶ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/11. ‘The Autobiography of a Gunner,’ 1946.

²⁸⁷ LHCMA MONTGOMERY-MASSINGBERD 10/4/2. Montgomery-Massingberd to Halifax, 17 August 1935.

studying the narrower relations between the two nations' armies shows us that this was not true for all of those actors in Franco-British foreign and defence policy. Indeed, a close focus on relations between the leadership of the War Office and the French army reveals that they were consistently amicable during that time. This was evident throughout the engagement of the War Office's most senior officials with the French army throughout the 1930s. Playing a significant role in the nature of the relationship between the leadership of the two armies was the high-level of respect and deference held by the War Office and wider British army towards their French counterparts.

This perspective from the British side was founded in a confidence in which the War Office's leadership viewed the French army's potential combat effectiveness. The reasons for this confidence are, as discussed in this chapter, multifaceted. The confidence was of course in part the result of reports which the War Office received from the British embassy in Paris, and from direct contact which the likes of CIGS and the secretaries of state for war had with the French army on visits to France. However, due to the inefficacious value of the despatches received from the embassy, and the constrained nature of the visits to France, this was a limited basis for the War Office to believe that it possessed an accurate appreciation of the French army's strengths and weaknesses. No doubt the War Office would have been able to have gained a more informed view of the French army, had it engaged with it to a greater extent in the decade preceding the Second World War. Yet, constraints imposed by domestic and overseas opinion restricted the freedom to which senior officials could instigate greater contacts with their French counterparts.

Also playing a formidable role in the War Office's confidence in the French army was enduring deference that was held in the British army towards its former ally from the Western Front. In continuing to view the French army as the world's most preeminent military force, this led the War Office to not feel compelled to closely and critically scrutinise the effectiveness of France's ground forces. The perception of the French army as a powerful fighting force was accentuated further by the awareness within the War Office of the weaknesses with which the British army was beset. With this in mind, the French army was perceived to be that much mightier than it was. Furthermore, the War Office's strategic outlook encouraged, if not required, wilful confidence in the French army. Without such confidence, its continentalist strategy could not have been justified.

Another characteristic of the relationship between the War Office's leadership and the French army was the acute realisation in Whitehall that in army terms Britain would firmly

be the junior partner in any future alliance. This was shown by the War Office's determination to not engage too closely with the French army for fear of surrendering any more operational independence than it would need to if war ensued with Germany. In so doing the War Office provides an important example of how a potential junior partner, when considering a future coalition, can avoid subservience as far as it possibly can to the larger ally. It did so after identifying lessons from the First World War where the British agreement felt that too much planning with the French had lessened their scope for operational independence. However, in seeking this course of action in the 1930s, it came at the price of not familiarising itself with France's ground forces. Most critically, as a result, the War Office was seemingly blind to the weakness in the French army's signals, communications, command and control that proved so important in shaping the outcome of the Battle of France. Had the War Office had a greater awareness of this it could not only have been used in its calculations for future operations but could also have sought to identify lessons to remedy the British army's own serious shortcomings in signals and communications issues. In this sense the War Office's perception of and relationship with the French army in the 1930s provides a valuable case study of the options available to a potential junior partner in an unequal alliance. At the heart of the considerations of a junior partner is the decision of how close or distant to position itself to the larger ally. However, the War Office's course of action in the 1930s demonstrates that there is no option to a junior partner which is devoid of disadvantages. In learning the lessons from the Great War, the War Office appeared to be content with the path it chose with the French army. It did so at the price of blindness to its future partner's serious weaknesses that would be exposed and exploited at great cost in battle.

Chapter 4

Close liaison, September 1939 – 10 May 1940

With the outbreak of war, Britain's relationship with the French army shifted from one of limited engagement to a fully operational wartime alliance, the latter presenting far more opportunities to observe at close hand the French army's strengths and weaknesses. As this chapter will demonstrate through its examination of Britain's two most important liaison missions during the period known as the Phoney War, British confidence in the French army continued to follow the pattern of the preceding two decades. The first elements of the BEF arrived in France in the north-west ports of Brest, Saint-Nazaire, Saint-Malo and Cherbourg. These ports in Brittany and Normandy were used as opposed to the likes of Calais and Boulogne, which were a shorter distance from British coastline, so as to be out of the range of potential German air attack during the vulnerable phase of disembarkation. The main combat formations of the BEF were deployed on the left flank of the French lines along the border with Belgium, as part of the First French Army Group. From March 1940, some British units were also tasked with short deployments to the French sector on the Maginot Line in order to gain experience of exposure with the frontline with Germany and to raise their profile further in France. The British army's new presence on the continent though extended beyond their front-line positions with a significant part of its overall strength deployed along their long lines of communication in logistical roles and functions stretching back from the Belgian border to the western ports.

In order that Britain's military contribution could operate as effectively as possible within the alliance with France, formal structures of coordination and control were established between the two countries. At the highest governmental level this was done with the formation of the Supreme War Council, a forum attended by the most senior ministers and military officials from Britain and France. A similar arrangement was also created for the two countries' general staffs which liaised through the Allied Military Committee. Below these highest echelons of the Allied war machine were also a large number of liaison missions and posts that were created at the headquarters of senior army formations down to the level of small units. This new interaction between the two allies presented an opportunity for British military observers to view the French army at close quarters in a way in which had not been possible during the interwar period. As a result this offered the potential for British

officials to gain a much better understanding of the French army than they had been able to garner prior to the outbreak of war.

Within the new apparatus of close liaison established between the two allies, most notable were the British missions created to liaise with the French army's two most senior commands. These were established with the head of the French army, General Gamelin and with the headquarters of General Georges who commanded the French north-east area of operations in which the BEF was to serve. The two missions were formally titled Military Mission No1 and Military Mission No 2. They were though more commonly referred to as the Howard-Vyse Mission and the Swayne Mission, taking the names of their commanding officers, Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse and Brigadier Sir John Swayne respectively. These two missions, which offered the British a vital and unparalleled window onto the highest echelons of the French army, merit special attention as we examine British assessments of its ally's ground forces in the opening stages of the war.

The observations of these two missions are especially valuable given that failures in the French army's command and control at senior levels during the Battle of France proved to be one of the important factors in the defeat of June 1940. Yet, prior to the German offensive in the West concerns were not expressed by either the Howard-Vyse or Swayne Missions which were deemed to be sufficiently serious to jeopardise the French army's operational effectiveness. Given then the importance of the positions occupied by the two missions, this chapter will firstly reveal their observations of the French command, why they reported on the matters that they did, how they analysed them and how they operated as a reporting mechanism. In doing so it will be explained why the two liaison missions had such confidence in the French high command, just weeks before it suddenly collapsed.

Within the machinery of the wider Franco-British alliance of the time, the two liaison missions represented two relatively small cogs. The same is true of liaison positions in any coalition organisation. However, within the context of an unequal alliance, beyond carrying out the necessary liaison duties, liaison posts particularly at elevated levels of command can offer value to the junior partner that is greater than the sum of their parts. Indeed, liaison at senior levels of command can at least offer the potential opportunity for insight into key areas of an ally's leadership which would otherwise be unseen. If utilised effectively, 'knowing

your friends²⁸⁸ can allow the junior partner in an alliance to adapt and operate more efficiently and with greater impact. This chapter therefore also intends to analyse the role of what was then Britain's most senior army liaison apparatus to understand how this activity impacted upon the BEF's junior position to the French army.

The work of the principal liaison missions has been overlooked by historians who have studied the period of the Phoney War and the Battle of France.²⁸⁹ When the missions are featured discussion usually focuses on instances of their commanding officers being noted as being present at conferences or meetings and in conveying instructions or news. Even these occasions though are extremely rare.²⁹⁰ Beyond these though, records of the liaison missions are rarely cited. With the work of the liaison missions not having been studied any further, the closest British observations of the French army's command and control have been overlooked. This is an important oversight given that French weaknesses in these areas were of great significance in the defeat of June 1940. Moreover, these were weaknesses that were witnessed and reported on by the liaison missions. While not deemed at the time as potentially catastrophic as these weaknesses in command and control turned out to be, the fact they were noted by the liaison missions and the questions this in turn raises are important issues to examine and understand.

The broader subject of liaison itself is also to an extent understudied by historians. Although memoirs have been published detailing officer's experiences in liaison roles,²⁹¹ they are few in number. The only published memoir from those that served in either liaison mission is Miles Reid's *Last on the List*.²⁹² Reid served on the staff of the Swayne Mission and originally wrote his memoir as a prisoner of war in 1942. As part of his memoir, Reid

²⁸⁸ See Martin S. Alexander, *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²⁸⁹ See, for example, Jackson, *The Fall of France*; Nick Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phony War: Before the Balloon Went Up* (London: Praeger, 2003); Clarke, *Blitzkrieg*; Ernest R May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I B Tauris, 2009); Brian Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940* (London: Brassey's, 1990); Eleanor M Gates, *The End of the Affair: The Collapse of the Anglo-French Alliance, 1939-1940* (London: George Allen and Urwin, 1981).

²⁹⁰ For example Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phony War*, 171 and Gates, *The End of the Affair*, 104 and 206. Martin Alexander does refer briefly to Brig Davey who served on the staff of the Swayne Mission in an unpublished memoir cited in Martin Alexander. 'Fighting to the Last Frenchman. Reflections on the BEF Deployment to France and the Strains in the Franco-British Alliance', 1939-1940; in John Blat (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940. Reassessments*, 312. Alexander also references an interview with Col Redman who was based at No 1 Military Mission in Alexander. 'Fighting to the Last Frenchman' in Blat (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940*, 308.

²⁹¹ For example Ferdinand Frazer Jelke, *Letters From A Liaison Officer* (London: Lucknow Books, 2014); Sir Edward Spears, *Liaison 1914: A Narrative of a Great Defeat* (London: Pen and Sword, 2014).

²⁹² Miles Reid MC, *Last on the List* (London: Leo Cooper, 1974).

provides a narrative of his time as a liaison officer and although he wrote that he did have concerns about certain matters he observed in his work prior to May 1940 he does not appear to indicate that these were sufficiently serious to bring to the attention of his chain of command. Moreover, he does not offer an explanation for not having foreseen the problems that arose in the French headquarters during the Battle of France.²⁹³ Reid claims that his account of events has particular value as it reflects his opinions as a civilian who found himself projected into the higher ranks of the military hierarchy, a viewpoint he claims which allowed him to see the problems of the war in a different light to that of a professional soldier. However, we should note that this claim is not entirely accurate as Reid had served in the army both before and during the First World War, attaining the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel.²⁹⁴

The study of the operation of military alliances is of course extensive, including that between Britain and France during the period of the Phoney War.²⁹⁵ However, within these studies, the work of liaison officers is overlooked. This is a significant omission given the importance of liaison missions as the mechanisms which linked the two countries militaries and allowed information and messages to flow in both directions, a role vital to the viability of the functioning of the alliances. In this sense study of the work of the liaison missions is important given their significance as actors and institutional entities within the understanding of the Phoney War and the Battle of France. This chapter will therefore widen the historical lens on the study of the Phoney War period by analysing the role of Britain's two most senior liaison missions and their view of a key component of the French army which would have such an important impact on the outcome of the Battle of France.

Neither Howard-Vyse nor Swayne produced memoirs or deposited their papers in an archive. Furthermore, the only officer who served on the staff of the two missions to have a consolidated collection of papers is the Duke of Windsor at the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle. These papers are not fully in the public domain although restricted access was granted to this collection in research for this chapter in addition to the papers of his brother, the Duke of Gloucester, who served as a liaison officer for the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the BEF.²⁹⁶ However, it would appear from these records, they contain little of note to the Duke

²⁹³ See Chapter 6 for more on Reid's observations during the Battle of France.

²⁹⁴ Reid, *Last on the List*, xi.

²⁹⁵ For example, Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phony War*; Gates, *The End of the Affair*; Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940*.

²⁹⁶ See Chapter 5.

of Windsor's role as a liaison officer and views of the French Army.²⁹⁷ Nevertheless, there are still sufficient records available which offer a detailed insight into the work of the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions. These consist of the missions' war diaries located in the WO 167 record series at the National Archives and a range of reports, correspondence and memoranda produced by the missions for the War Office including its Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS).²⁹⁸ The two missions' faith in the French army is evident in these records and forms the basis for analysing why Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their staff reported on France's ground forces as they did.

This chapter will firstly explain the context in which the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions operated. It will do this by providing an outline of the composition of the missions, their specific duties and how these were carried out. It will then be explained how a strong working relationship with the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges, in addition to their approval of the work undertaken by its staff officers, contributed significantly in Howard-Vyse and Swayne's confidence in the French command. It will then be shown though that both missions did indeed make critical observations of the two French commands but that, crucially, these were not deemed serious and thus did not undermine confidence in the two headquarters. This was the result of the nature of the way the two liaison missions reported on the work of the French headquarters with the possible consequences of the criticisms offered seemingly not considered further. This will also shown to have been the case with the highly perceptive negative assessments made by the Duke of Windsor on French defences in the area of the Ardennes. This, it will be argued, was in part symptomatic of the way in which the British government was pursuing the war at this stage of the conflict. It would appear that the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were not exempt from an apparent overconfidence, lack of urgency and lacklustre manner which existed in a significant part of Britain's war effort during this time. Finally it will be shown that the two missions' confidence in France's ground forces was reinforced further by the limited contact it had with the wider French army in the field.

²⁹⁷ See below for further details of the Duke of Windsor's role with the Howard-Vyse Mission.

²⁹⁸ These records are found in the following record series at TNA: CAB 21, 104; WO 106, 193, 197, 202, 208.

The operation of the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions

Both the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were established as Germany began its invasion of Poland. As the German *Blitzkrieg* continued in the east, the two missions travelled to France aware that Polish resistance would not likely endure for long and that in due course Hitler's armies would inevitably turn their attention to the West. In being aware of this, an urgency ought to have been created in the minds of the mission's staff as they settled into their new roles in September 1939. The first of the two missions to become operational was that of Howard-Vyse's Military Mission No1. This mission had been created by the War Office in order to act as a channel of communication between the newly appointed CIGS, General Sir Edmund Ironside, and Gamelin in his capacity as both head of the French national defence organisation and as head of the French army. The Howard-Vyse Mission based itself in three villas at Nogent-sur-Marne, just over one mile away from Gamelin's headquarters at the Chateau Vincennes in a suburb to the east of Paris. The mission had an initial staff of nine officers and an additional twenty-one other ranks and civilians. For the duration of the Phoney War, the mission's establishment was only modestly increased in size. In addition to its liaison role with Gamelin's headquarters, the Howard-Vyse mission also had a secondary series of duties in France to fulfil. Amongst these was the task of working with the British naval and air representatives of the Supreme War Council when they visited the Anglo-French Section of the War Cabinet in France.²⁹⁹

For the duration of the Phoney War period the Howard-Vyse Mission had Ironside as the sole CIGS it served.³⁰⁰ In fulfilling its role, the mission is likely to have been influenced by Ironside's views on the French army, which remained unchanged from before the war. Ironside held a high level of faith in the French army's capabilities although appears to have had a degree of dispassion for France and his perception of the French people. Indeed, in his diary on 20 December 1939 he reflected on a meeting between the British and French governments stating that 'the Supreme War Council lasted from 9am till after 1pm. Going all the time. All went well, but then there is no adversity to make the French more feminine than

²⁹⁹ TNA WO 193/828, Directorate of Military Operations and Plans, Organisation of French and British Missions and French Command, 1 September -31 October 1939.

³⁰⁰ Ironside was initially disappointed to have been appointed CIGS in September 1939, as he had held ambitions to be GOC BEF. Ironside believed that the post of CIGS did not suit his temperament and found himself frustrated by what he perceived as endless meetings accompanied by a lack of power to decide key questions and decisions.

usual.³⁰¹ This though is a comment isolated in its nature through his diary. More evident is his enduring respect for what he perceived as the world's most powerful army and admiration of French military ways. An example of this was shown by Ironside in his reflections on a grand military ceremony that was held for him and Gort to receive the Grand Cross of the *Légion d'honneur* in January 1940. He commented admiringly that 'the French know how to run these shows so much better than we do...I don't think that a British General could have done the thing gracefully. I know that I should have felt a fool'.³⁰²

This outlook extended to Ironside's awareness of Britain's status as a junior partner to the French in terms of ground forces and admitted candidly that there was 'a complete subservience to the French point of view'.³⁰³ Notwithstanding the occasional limited criticisms during this time,³⁰⁴ Ironside was also greatly encouraged by what he saw of the French army in terms of its leadership and units he encountered on his several visits to France during the Phoney War.³⁰⁵ Ironside's overall view of the French army and Britain's subordinate position to it is clearly summarised in a diary entry at the end of 1939 when he wrote:

I tried in my mind to sum up the state of the French Army and its fighting value. I must say that I saw nothing amiss with it on the surface. The Generals are all tried men, if a bit old from our view-point. None of them showed any lack of confidence. None of the liaison officers say that they have seen any lack of morale after the long wait they have had after the excitement of mobilisation. I say to myself that we shall not know until the first clash comes. In 1914 there were many officers and men who failed, but old Joffre handled the situation with great firmness. Will the Blitzkrieg when it comes, allow us to rectify things if they are the same? I must say I don't know. But I say to myself that we must have confidence in the French Army. It is the only thing in which we can have confidence. Our Army is just a little one, and we are dependent upon the French. We have not even the same fine army we had in 1914. All depends on the French Army and we can do nothing about it, but it is up to us to back it and not deny it...The issue is in the lap of the gods and can do nothing to alter things we must remain loyal to the French.³⁰⁶

³⁰¹ Roderick MacLeod and Denis Kelly, eds., *The Ironside Diaries 1937 – 1940* (London: Constable, 1962), 173.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 199.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁰⁴ See, for example, MacLeod and Kelly, *Ironside Diaries*, 107, 201, 173-174.

³⁰⁵ See, for example, MacLeod and Kelly 171, 199, 201, 204; TNA WO 193/1005. Report on visit of CIGS to France, 8-11 January 1940 and WO 193/1005. Notes on CIGS visit to the Luxembourg frontier, 22 March 1940.

³⁰⁶ MacLeod and Kelly, *Ironside Diaries*, 203-204.

Howard-Vyse and his staff though were not to be the channel of communication for operational or administrative matters affecting the BEF. This was instead the responsibility of Brigadier Swayne's Military Mission No 2, which was established to represent the BEF's Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gort, at the Headquarters of Georges. In the same way that Ironside framed the context for the work of Howard-Vyse and his staff, so too did Gort and the leadership at GHQ for the Swayne Mission. Fundamentally, there was little difference in the outlook of Gort and Ironside to the French army and so the broad parameters for the Swayne Mission in reporting on the French army were similar to that of Howard-Vyse and his officers.³⁰⁷ The Swayne Mission was conveniently located close to Georges' Command at the Château des Bondons near La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, forty miles east of Paris. In spite of the importance of the Swayne Mission's role, it had a smaller establishment than that led by Howard Vyse, with an initial staff of just five officers and four other ranks together with three clerks that were recruited locally. Although both the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions had different responsibilities the two staffs would occasionally work closely with each other when Military Mission No 1 dealt with matters concerning the BEF's area of operations in North East France.³⁰⁸

In order to carry out their duties effectively the two missions' staff attended meetings and conferences held by the two French headquarters. In maintaining liaison with their respective French commands both missions were expected to help smooth out any difficulties that would arise between the two parties with which they interacted. To do this effectively the missions' staff had to be on good terms with their French headquarters to ensure that they were received freely and frequently. This did prove to be the case with Howard-Vyse meeting Gamelin regularly, together with his Chief of Staff, General Louis-Marie Jamet and *Chef de Cabinet Particulier*, Colonel Jean Petibon on a daily basis. Likewise Swayne and his officers were able to do the same with Georges and members of his staff. Although the two missions had daily contact with Gamelin and Georges' headquarters, their role and location meant that Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their staff would only have limited contact with the wider French army. In being located at Nogent-sur-Marne and La Freté-sous-Jouarre both missions were based over two hundred kilometres from the Franco-British forces on the North East flank of the Allied line where it was expected the German offensive would take place. The two

³⁰⁷ See chapter 5 for Gort's details of Gort's views of the French army in the context of his work as GOC BEF.

³⁰⁸ TNA WO 193/828, Organisation of French and British Missions, 1 September -31 October 1939.

missions were also only a slightly shorter distance from the Ardennes border area where the main weight of the German attack would actually occur.

In carrying out their liaison duties between their respective commands the principal subject dealt with over the period of the Phoney War was the build up of the BEF in France. For the most part these discussions were relatively uncontentious and were heavily focussed upon the logistical aspects of the BEF's arrival and deployment on the continent. As the build up of forces continued, simultaneously plans were developed between the two countries' commands on how they would respond to the German attack which they realised they could expect to face anytime following the defeat of Poland on 28 September. Through various modifications and refinements, the plan anticipated a German attack towards the North East of the Allied front with French and British forces advancing to the river Dyle in Belgium to take up defensive positions to meet the enemy advance. Very little outside of this area was dealt with by the Swayne Mission in liaising between the BEF's GHQ and Georges' headquarters. It also constituted the principal focus of matters with which the Howard-Vyse Mission contended. Howard-Vyse and his staff though were also involved in liaising on discussions of wider strategy too reflecting the broader responsibilities of Ironside and Gamelin. The role of the liaison missions in these discussions was limited. Effectively they acted as the messenger between the various commands and did not take any active role in decision making on the refinement of the plans. Nevertheless, the missions fulfilled an important function in ensuring that the various headquarters were provided with all information necessary from each side to enable the plans to be formed. The brief of the missions was therefore restricted, but in being party to the Allies' plans in their totality and in being embedded with Gamelin and Georges' headquarters they were positioned in a place to potentially offer a rich insight of the operation of the French command.

In addition to fulfilling the basic liaison function, the various contacts with the French command were also used as basis from which to provide reports to the War Office on the two missions' meetings and other observations. Most of these reports were sent directly to the general staff's Director of Military Operations (DMO) with the exception of technical intelligence which was transmitted to the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI). Where appropriate, the mission's reports were then passed to the CIGS, who when necessary would place them before the War Cabinet. Occasionally the CIGS also personally requested reports from Howard-Vyse and Swayne through the DMO.

Given the relatively small size of the two missions, it was inevitable that their work would largely be shaped by the two officers who led them. The two Commanding Officers, like the military attaches discussed in chapter 2, were influenced by their earlier careers, and in particular the formative experience of the First World War, that understandably influenced their outlook at their respective liaison missions. The ranks which both Howard-Vyse and Swayne attained prior to the Second World War demonstrate that both had enjoyed highly successful careers in the British army. Howard-Vyse had been commissioned as a cavalry officer in 1902 into the Royal Horse Guards and served during the First World War initially on the Western Front and later in the Middle East. After the Great War, Howard-Vyse continued to enjoy a distinguished career with notable appointments as Inspector of Cavalry and Chief of Staff to the Duke of Gloucester. Like Howard-Vyse, Swayne had also served on the Western Front but as an infantry officer in the Somerset Light Infantry before being taken prisoner of war. Seemingly, the shared experience of the Western Front that Howard-Vyse and Swayne had in common would have also helped shape their outlook towards the French army.

Yet this was one of the few commonalities in the two men's careers prior to their liaison appointments. Whereas Swayne continued to serve throughout the 1930s in a number of staff officer posts and as Chief Instructor at the Staff College in Camberley in 1937, Howard-Vyse retired from the Army in 1935, before being recalled to service again four years later. Although like most retired Major Generals, Howard-Vyse would have continued to have been well informed of military affairs, he could not have been to the same extent as Swayne who remained at the heart of the British army's affairs until being appointed to command his military mission.³⁰⁹

Important to Howard-Vyse and Swayne's postings to the two missions was that both men were sufficiently fluent in the French language to have attained the first class army translator qualification.³¹⁰ This was obviously very important in their suitability for their positions. However, it seems that Swayne's continuous service made him a stronger appointment to lead his mission than Howard-Vyse who spent the four years preceding the war as a Justice of the Peace. It would appear that Howard-Vyse's rank as Major General played an important factor in his selection as CO of Military Mission No1. Clearly such

³⁰⁹ For details of Howard-Vyse and Swayne's appointments in the British Army see various editions of the *Army List* for 1918-1939 and see also obituary for Howard-Vyse, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 6 December 1962, 54.

³¹⁰ Howard-Vyse and Swayne's army translator qualification is recorded in the 1939 *Army List*.

seniority was a necessity in order to liaise with Gamelin as the most senior officer in the French Army. Yet few officers of similar rank would also have possessed Howard-Vyse's fluency of French required for the role and would have been available to take up such an appointment.³¹¹ There would seemingly therefore have been a very limited pool of candidates who would have been appropriate to serve in this position at Gamelin's headquarters.³¹²

To aid the effectiveness of liaison with Georges' headquarters, Swayne took advantage of his general staff officer, Bill Williams. According to Reid, Williams had great knowledge of France and French character and was able to introduce a degree of spontaneity in the mission's dealings with the Georges and his staff. This was an attribute which Reid believed Swayne lacked, with only having a limited knowledge of France despite his linguistic attributes.³¹³ In spite of this shortcoming, Swayne appears to have had a greater suitability to the appointment to command one of the liaison missions than Howard-Vyse. This seems to have been borne out by the recognition which Swayne received from the War Office for his service in this role. In acknowledgement of his work, Swayne was promoted to Deputy Chief of Staff to the BEF in late April 1940, a post though he was unable to take up due to the German invasion which followed shortly afterwards. Further recognition for Swayne was given with the award of the CBE by Lord Gort upon his return to Britain after the fall of France.³¹⁴ In contrast following Howard-Vyse's return to Britain after the French defeat he was placed back on the reserve list never to serve in the British army again. Although there is no evidence to show that this action was taken punitively by the War Office, it does indicate that Howard-Vyse's appointment was not considered in Whitehall to have been a wholly successful one.

Positive working relationships between the liaison missions and the French command

One striking feature of the operation of the Howard-Vyse and Swayne missions was the warmth and strength of the working relationships that were established with the two

³¹¹ The relatively small number of officers of appropriate rank with the required linguistic abilities is revealed by consulting the relevant editions of the *Army List* of the period.

³¹² Given the importance of Howard-Vyse's role, his appointment is curious having left military service for several years. It would appear that rank and linguistic attributes were judged as the most important attributes for the post.

³¹³ Reid, *Last on the List*, 16. Swayne's knowledge France of was limited after being taken prisoner of war in 1914, spending the remainder of the First World War in captivity. Swayne's contemporaries were of course able to gain a familiarity of France throughout their service on the Western Front.

³¹⁴ TNA WO 373/15 Pt.3. Recommendation by C-in-C BEF for award of CBE to Brigadier Sir John Swayne, 11 July 1940.

French commands. Throughout the Phoney War period it was clear that a high level of trust and friendship existed between the two missions and the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges. Such was the extent of this that it undoubtedly played a significant role in generating the confidence that Howard-Vyse and Swayne shared in the French army's leadership. In the case of Howard-Vyse he noted that relations between his staff and French officers at Vincennes were extremely positive and that 'nothing could have been more frank or more friendly.'³¹⁵ Similarly the officers at Gamelin's headquarters were described by Howard-Vyse as 'charming...with a very heartening view of the situation'.³¹⁶ This feeling was reciprocated as the French liked Howard-Vyse very much, and gave him the affectionate nickname "the Wombat". The extent of the strength of the relationship between Military Mission No 1 and Gamelin's headquarters is demonstrated by the way in which it lasted beyond the fall of France. After his return to Britain in June 1940, Howard-Vyse wrote to the DMO at the War Office on his fondness of his time working with Gamelin's officers, remarking that 'we were treated throughout with the greatest kindness and consideration and we all have the happiest possible recollections of our contacts with the French Staff.'³¹⁷ Given the bitterness and recriminations that arose in some parts of the Franco-British alliance at that time, this was not unremarkable.³¹⁸

The experience of the Howard-Vyse Mission was replicated in Swayne's relationship with Georges' headquarters at the Château des Bondons. Throughout the war diary of the Swayne Mission there are frequent references to the high degree of trust and friendliness in the way in which the two sets of staff cooperated with each other. One example of this is just a week into the mission's time in France when it was recorded that Georges and his officers had a 'desire to cooperate to the full. The French seem prepared to tell us everything whether it redounds to their credit or not.'³¹⁹ Later that month the Swayne Mission also noted that 'the French were being both frank and helpful and were giving us all that that they had got in way of information.'³²⁰ Georges in particular was rated highly by the Swayne Mission. Brigadier

³¹⁵TNA WO 202/3. Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse, report to DMO, 10 September 1939.

³¹⁶ TNA WO 202/3, Howard-Vyse to DMO, 21 September 1939.

³¹⁷ TNA WO 202/2 . Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse, Report on Howard-Vyse No1 Military Mission, 2 July 1940.

³¹⁸ See, for example, Martin S Alexander "Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 98-102 and P M H Bell, *France and Britain 1940-1994: The Long Separation* (London: Longman, 1997) 22-25.

³¹⁹ TNA WO 167/40. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 12 September 1939.

³²⁰ TNA WO 167/40. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 15 September 1939.

Swayne noted of Georges that 'As a commander Georges was immensely admired and respected' and that the mission had 'the highest opinion of his military qualities and also felt considerable personal affection for him'.³²¹

The Swayne Mission also observed that this feeling was shared with the wider BEF stating that 'All British officers have said how extremely helpful the French are in every way...We have not been too easy to deal with, and they have helped throughout'. A further example of French goodwill and the excellent Franco-British working relationship was observed by Brigadier Swayne at one particular conference held between Gort and Georges. Swayne reported that:

The conference was most successful and once again showed the good-will and mutual confidence which was felt by both the French and British. The BEF is under the orders of General Georges who could therefore issue orders to them as to any other army, but General Georges is always at pains to discuss his projects with Lord Gort before issuing an order and to make any possible amendments to suit the conditions of the BEF whilst the latter is always prepared to do its utmost to fall in with the wishes of General Georges. In this atmosphere it is easy to come to an agreement which is satisfactory to all concerned. One receives the impression that everyone is prepared to discuss matters on their merits and that there is no question of mutual suspicion or of questions being dealt with on the basis of French v British. It is very different from the beginning of the last war and it is most encouraging.³²²

Nonetheless, for all the warmth that existed in these relations, in the course of their highly pressurised work it was inevitable that disagreements between the British and French staffs would arise. One such occasion occurred in early 1940 when there was a disagreement on whether the BEF should extend its dispositions to the north or to the south. In this case even though differences of opinion did exist, serious disagreement was overcome in large part due to the strength of the working relations that were established. This was explained by Brigadier Swayne who wrote that 'Once again this conference showed the excellent relations between the French and British. A difficult problem has been settled to the satisfaction of everyone concerned and General Georges who is always most anxious that the BEF should be satisfied was clearly very pleased.'³²³

³²¹ TNA WO 167/41, Swayne Mission War Diary, 21 February 1940.

³²² TNA WO 167/50, Swayne Mission War Diary, 16 November 1939.

³²³ TNA WO 167/40. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 29 January 1940.

Undoubtedly, the strength of the working relationship that was such a characteristic of the liaison between the military missions and the French high command was in part the result of a genuine chemistry and a desire to work closely and effectively together. Yet, from the missions' perspective it was also in part the result of the preconceived positive view of the French army that existed amongst British officers and that had prevailed since the end of the last war. It seems very likely that that this pre-existing favourable impression of the French army must have ensured that the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions engaged with the Gamelin and Georges in a positive manner from the very start. The strong working relationship also appears to have been the product of French relief at having finally secured a British commitment to the continent early in 1939 which ensured that officers at Vincennes and the Château des Bondons were likely to be accommodating and fully cooperative with their respective British liaison missions. With seemingly so much goodwill on both sides it should therefore not be a surprise that this warmth endured for the duration of the Phoney War. However, there is no question that the strength of the relationship was protected by the absence of any major crisis during this time, which could have tested the warm cordiality between the two allies. Indeed, with the exception of occasional invasion scares the quietness on the new Western Front helped contribute to an environment which was conducive to minimising tensions in the work of the liaison missions with their French headquarters.

Such was the extent of the good relations that existed between the two missions and the French high command that it could justifiably be claimed that it may have helped colour the positive way in which Gamelin and Georges' headquarters were reported upon. Clearly French officers made considerable efforts to accommodate the British missions in their work and it is entirely possible that this could have influenced the reporting of Howard-Vyse and Swayne. This could be considered to be especially the case given that both missions believed that the French command was being candid with them and prepared to divulge any information that they sought. It is certainly true that for the duration of the Phoney War that the records of the two missions reveal an assured confidence in the work of Gamelin and George's headquarters. At no point did either mission believe that they witnessed any weaknesses which could jeopardise future operations.

Confidence in the operation of the French headquarters

In the reporting of the two missions it is understandable that the function of the two commands was the subject of greatest comment. The locations and restricted role of the missions ensured that other important aspects of the French army remained largely out of their sight. The reports despatched to the War Office by Howard-Vyse and Swayne are marked by the absence of serious doubts on what they witnessed at the French headquarters and also for their observations which approved on the work of that they saw take place. Although these do not amount to detailed accounts of how the staff of Gamelin and Georges operated, they do demonstrate the relaxed confidence which the two missions held in them. Typical of this was Swayne's comment on Georges' command which noted that 'every staff officer seems to know his job thoroughly...one cannot help being impressed by the general efficiency and their calmness.'³²⁴

Notwithstanding that the two missions were clearly content at the way in which French officers carried out their duties at Vincennes and the Château des Bondons, there were occasions when Howard-Vyse and Swayne observed matters which they did not always perceive as conventional. For example, the Swayne Mission described the organisation of Georges' headquarters as 'hardly logical.'³²⁵ This view was formed by Swayne as he was surprised to learn that some of Georges' staff officers were also shared with Gamelin in his role as commander of French ground forces. This was an arrangement that was noted with a degree of scepticism by other observers of the French high command including the Howard-Vyse Mission. Even though this was a command arrangement alien to the British army, the Swayne Mission concluded that it did not compromise the effectiveness of the French Command and actually noted that it operated 'extremely well.'³²⁶ This shows an open-mindedness on the part of the Swayne Mission in being prepared to consider that just because French military ways may have been different, that this was not necessarily perceived to be to its detriment. It demonstrates that the Swayne Mission at least was able to judge the French army on the basis of its own methods, and not against a preconceived British way of operating. It is also therefore evidence of an outlook with a willingness to view the French army as objectively as possible.

³²⁴ TNA WO 167/40. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 12 September 1939.

³²⁵ TNA WO 167/41. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 21 February 1940.

³²⁶ Ibid.

Critical observations of the French command

In spite of the faith that both the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions had in the French command, a number of critical observations were made in reports to the War Office. In some ways this is not particularly surprising as the close study of a military command by a foreign observer would likely lead to views that were not always positive, as every major power would feasibly have had aspects of its senior headquarters with certain deficiencies. Moreover the criticisms highlighted by the two British missions were not deemed at the time serious enough to place into doubt the French army's leadership's ability to respond effectively to a German offensive. Nevertheless, they were warnings that there were problems being experienced in the French army's high command.

Most of the concerns expressed by the two missions related to structural aspects of the command at both Georges and Gamelin's headquarters. Of particular concern to the Howard Vyse Mission was its view that the French high command was 'not altogether well balanced'.³²⁷ In this respect Howard-Vyse believed that there was an awkwardness in Gamelin's position as chief of staff of national defence that placed the navy, army and air force under his command, which in effect meant that he issued orders to himself in his capacity as head of the French army.³²⁸ Similarly, Howard-Vyse considered that the next level of command below Gamelin in the French army was unnecessarily ill-conceived. This related to Gamelin's immediate subordinates being the Commanders-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the armies of North-East France, South-East France, North Africa and the Levant. Of these Commands, Howard-Vyse correctly identified that the army of the North-East, whose front ran from Switzerland to the English Channel, was incomparably the most important. He therefore believed that it was inevitable that Gamelin would interfere in the functions of the Commander-in-Chief of the North-East and ultimately command the forces there. The plausibility of this seemed even more certain to the military mission when it was realised that Gamelin shared staff with the C-in-C North East. Based on this understanding Howard-Vyse doubted whether the C-in-C North-East was a necessary echelon of command and consequently also the other C-in-C Army Commands. He judged that this command structure

³²⁷ TNA WO 202/2. Report on Howard-Vyse Mission, 2 July 1940.

³²⁸ Ibid.

had the potential to create friction, delay and even a lack of grip at the time when operations in the West would finally begin.³²⁹

Also of concern to the Howard-Vyse Mission in Gamelin's headquarters was the position of the *Cabinet Particulier*. This was an office headed by Colonel Petibon at Vincennes which provided a support function to Gamelin. The *Cabinet Particulier* was well established within the French command, but an equivalent position did not exist in the British Army and so was considered atypical to British observers. Howard-Vyse formed the view that this office occupied a position that held too much influence for one that was headed by an officer only at the rank of full Colonel. The degree of influence was considered to be excessive particularly when compared to that exerted by Gamelin's chief of staff, General Jamet, who held greater rank and was considered more able. According to Howard-Vyse this disparity in potential influence was the result of the *Cabinet Particulier* being located at Vincennes, in contrast to the chief of staff who was based twenty miles away and only saw Gamelin for an hour or two each day. Although Howard-Vyse enjoyed an amicable relationship with Petibon, he doubted 'if he was an altogether wise counsellor; he saw little or nothing of the armies; and obtained his full share of odium which always attaches to an individual who possesses influence beyond his rank.'³³⁰

Similar disquiet about the function of the French command was shared by the Swayne Mission in how it viewed Georges' headquarters. Swayne expressed this view to the War Office following a structural change made at the headquarters in January 1940. Ironically this change corrected the previously identified 'hardly logical' arrangement in transferring some of Georges' staff officers to a newly established headquarters at Montry, where they would be located more conveniently to assist Gamelin at Vincennes. Although the nature of this change did not alarm Swayne's Mission, the initial impact that it had on Georges' staff, who opposed the change, did so. Swayne noted that:

There is no doubt that, in accordance with General Georges' instructions, the staff did their best to facilitate the new organisation, but its effect on morale was evident...It was felt that the reorganisation meant not only the breaking up of a very happy family and the creation of many practical difficulties, but also the lowering of the status and prestige of General Georges. Though some of this may have been due to partisanship and to a natural loyalty to their own immediate and extremely popular chief, its result was of a creation of a feeling of uncertainty and

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

the lowering of morale which showed itself by occasional outbursts of irritation between officers who previously had been in complete harmony. As the reorganisation gradually developed and more and more individuals were transferred to the new GQG the feeling was intensified.³³¹

Even though this raised concerns when the reorganisation initially occurred, Swayne was relieved to report that Georges' staff did eventually 'settle down again' to the new arrangements.³³²

At the time that these structural changes were made, Brigadier Swayne also began to perceptively report on strains that existed in the relationship between Gamelin and Georges when the two commanders interacted with each other. The Swayne Mission was not unduly worried by these tensions and considered them merely a 'domestic matter' for the French. Yet, he did become more concerned when the command and control of the BEF arose as an issue of contention between the two senior officers. Indeed, Swayne and the BEF's GHQ became alarmed at the prospect of Gamelin potentially acquiring a greater degree of operational and tactical control of the British army in France at the expense of that which was then exercised by Georges. This prospect worried Swayne as he believed that in the event of hostilities Georges was better positioned than Gamelin to issue orders in a more timely and effective manner. These concerns though ultimately proved to be unfounded as Gamelin, Georges and Gort later agreed that greater control of the BEF from higher in the French chain of command would only occur when the British forces in France were sufficiently large to form their own army group.³³³

There was also disquiet expressed about the occasional behaviour and mood that was witnessed in the French command. This was confined to that observed at Gamelin's headquarters by the Howard-Vyse Mission. In particular Military Mission No1 had important concerns about how Gamelin and his officers would react once a German offensive would begin. This was a situation that was extremely difficult to forecast with certainty, but nevertheless doubts did exist about this in the Howard-Vyse Mission. One instance of this was shown in Howard-Vyse's comments on how Gamelin's headquarters reacted when bad news was received on the course of Allied operations in Norway in April 1940. In a report on

³³¹ TNA WO 167/41. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 21 February 1940.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ TNA WO 167/41. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 26 March 1940.

this to the War Office, Howard-Vyse stated that he had being disappointed by the apparent initial panic and lack of resolve at the highest levels at Vincennes. He wrote that:

the atmosphere in the higher quarters somewhat tense. General Gamelin himself was looking worn and anxious. Colonel Petibon was polite but shaken. While I was there he had a telephone conversation with General Lelong in which he spoke with complete freedom over a line which cannot be 100% secure.³³⁴

Although Howard-Vyse had expressed his alarm at what he had witnessed, he did also report that his concern was eased in the more positive atmosphere that he noted amongst Gamelin and his staff a day later.

Similarly, the Howard-Vyse Mission also reported to London on anxieties that it perceived to exist within Gamelin's headquarters on the possible course that the war could take. In the initial months of the conflict when the Allies were insufficiently prepared for a German attack, the Howard-Vyse Mission informed the War Office on what it considered to be fear and confusion at Vincennes about the future. For example, on 29 September 1939, Howard-Vyse reported that Gamelin was:

evidently very anxious about a German advance...I think there is a certain amount of confusion of thought in the French appreciation of the situation. General Gamelin seems to think that a decisive land battle is imminent...But I cannot quite make out what form they think the first stages of the battle will take.³³⁵

Furthermore, when a German offensive did not materialise by late October 1939, Howard-Vyse believed Gamelin's headquarters began to doubt whether an attack would occur at all, and how, in that case they would finish the war. Howard-Vyse began to consider that the French high command feared a stalemate which would force them to initiate an offensive that they were reluctant to undertake. On this he reflected that 'I am quite sure that they disliked intensely, though they did not say so, the prospect of having to attack the Siegfried Line.'³³⁶

To demonstrate the difficulty which Howard-Vyse had judging the French mood at Vincennes, there were also times in which a more optimistic atmosphere was witnessed.

³³⁴ TNA WO 106/4989. Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO, 26 April 1940.

³³⁵ TNA WO 202/3. Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO 29 September 1939.

³³⁶ TNA WO 202/2. Report on Howard-Vyse Mission, 2 July 1940.

Indeed, the Howard-Vyse Mission also detected a growing confidence amongst Gamelin's staff that they could prevent a Nazi victory on the basis that the absence of an early enemy attack was considered to be a sign of German weakness. From February 1940 Howard-Vyse even thought that the French leadership were 'doubtful if an attack in the West would ever materialise'.³³⁷ This perceived increased confidence in the French leadership was shown further when Howard-Vyse noted that Gamelin and his staff were in 'gloomy depression' when an invasion alert in February 1940 proved to be only a false alarm.³³⁸

The occasional disquiet that the missions expressed on the French command were indicators that there were potentially ongoing problems in the function of Gamelin and Georges' headquarters. These concerns when taken in isolation could not be considered as signs that the French army was inevitably heading for defeat. It must be remembered, though, that command and control failings at senior levels in the Battle of France played an important role in leading to the Allied defeat. Yet, in no way could the two military missions be accused of failing to foresee the collapse of the French army on the basis of what they witnessed in carrying out their duties. Moreover, it was not the role of the military missions to forecast the possible course of operations. Nevertheless, the concerns which the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions expressed to the War Office deserved further consideration. The two missions had observed the French high command to be erratic in its mood and spirit, whilst also possessing a structure which was not as efficient as it could have been and had the potential to be unable to react to events in the swiftest possible way. Still, the two missions do not appear to have extended their considerations of the concerns that they reported to the possible consequences that they could have for when the Germans would finally launch their attack. The same is true of the War Office who did not appear to have asked the missions to report more closely on these matters after the concerns were raised.

To an extent it is understandable that the two missions did not appreciate any wider significance on the issues of concern that it commented upon. This can be justified by the constraints placed on the missions in being tied to their locations at Nogent-sur-Marne and la Freté-sous-Jouarre which did not allow the liaison officers to fully understand how what they had observed could impact on the wider French army. Indeed, the two missions were effectively cocooned in isolation from their ally's ground forces in the field which ensured

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ TNA WO 106/4989. Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO, 18 January 1940.

that they could not gain a sufficient understanding of how the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges interacted with them. As a result, Howard-Vyse and Swayne had merely witnessed symptoms of one part of the French army's serious structural and technical difficulties in command, control and communications which would prove critical in the defeat of June 1940.

Although the two missions had expressed concern at issues of command and control at the most senior levels at Vincennes and the Château des Bondons, they were unable to judge how serious these could be when interlinked with the severe technical communications weakness further down the chain of command in the French army. For example, as the missions' staff spent so little time with units in the field, they were unable to fully appreciate the French army's over reliance on field telephones and couriers rather than modern wireless radios. It could therefore be argued that Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their staff could not fully attribute any greater significance to the command and control matters that concerned them as they had witnessed them in isolation and without proper knowledge of their linkages down and throughout the wider French army.

A better understanding of these issues could have been acquired had the two missions been able to spend sufficient time with parts of the French army further afield. This, though, was not possible given the necessity of the missions being located close to Gamelin and Georges headquarters in order to fulfil their liaison duties. Moreover, even if the missions had spent more time in the field during the Phoney War period, it seems likely that the serious command, control and communications weaknesses could have remained hidden without their full exposure in testing operational conditions. This though was another consequence of Britain not having accumulated a more complete understanding of the French army in the inter-war period.

However, the two missions not considering the possible ramifications of their concerns on aspects of the French command also appears to indicate a lack of urgency to their reporting. There is a further sense of this in the nature and tone of the reports that they produced. That a greater sense of urgency was not present in their reporting is surprising given that both the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were aware that sooner rather than later the Allies would have to face the German *Blitzkrieg*. The two missions of course could not have predicted the precise date of the German attack, but after Poland's surrender and

regular invasion scares, it was only a matter of time before the long-awaited offensive would begin. Yet, there is little sign of intent to the missions' work to indicate that this would shortly happen. Indeed, the reports produced by the missions are seemingly relaxed in tone with a continuing large emphasis on how strong their working relationships were with the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges. At no point is there a sense of an impending battle of huge of consequence to the Allies' fortunes.

Impact of the wider British war effort on the work of the liaison missions.

The apparent lack of urgency at the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions can perhaps be regarded as symptomatic of the lacklustre way in which Britain was pursuing the war prior to May 1940. In Whitehall there was certainly a high level of confidence that Britain would win the war. This was largely based upon the strong economic advantage that the Allies would have over Germany to wage a war of significant duration. Yet, within the British government during the Phoney War there appeared to be an overconfidence with a belief that victory could be achieved in pursuing a conflict that was initially limited militarily, economically and in what it demanded of its civilian population. Militarily Britain's forces certainly did very little. Obviously the BEF would not be capable of offensive operations for some time as it began its build up in France. However, the RAF's plans to bomb the Ruhr after war had been declared were cancelled and replaced instead with sorties that dropped merely propaganda leaflets over Germany for fear of provoking *Luftwaffe* raids against British and French cities. The lack of urgency to Britain's war effort was probably aided by the fact that Hitler had not attacked in the West before May 1940. For some in Britain this added further to the complacency with even Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declaring that Hitler had 'missed the bus'.³³⁹

The lacklustre British war effort at this point of the conflict was also matched by the French government. The air of normalcy that existed in Britain was also replicated in Paris with the seemingly business as usual operation of government with the exception of measures that were taken to relocate civilians from areas close to the German frontier to southern France. The French army did initially launch a limited token nine division attack against the Saar region which began on 7 September 1939. Yet this action was constrained by its

³³⁹ Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phoney War*, 161.

ambition and upon reaching the defences of the West Wall, French forces withdrew back close to their start positions.³⁴⁰

With both the British and French governments seemingly unprepared, at least initially, to wage war in a more rigorous manner it is not surprising that drift, indecision and delay characterised the two countries joint planning for operations. The two commands did work closely together to plan how they would respond to the anticipated German attack in the West. With the French the senior partner in terms of ground forces, they naturally led on these matters. However, the planning for how and when the Allies should proceed with its wider strategy was ponderous and lacked clarity. This was best demonstrated by the delays and uncertainty that blighted Allied planning for operations in Scandinavia.³⁴¹ Similar confusion was also witnessed in Allied discussions for what would have been high-risk air attacks on oil refineries in the Caucuses to help deprive Germany of any resources it could acquire from the Soviet Union.³⁴²

The confidence and complacency evidently felt in government was also shared by wider British public opinion, which of course the military missions were not isolated from either. Although there was not the same eruption of patriotism that had been witnessed in August 1914 after the declaration of the First World War, most of the British population were united in agreement that it had become necessary to oppose German aggression with the use of force. Moreover, British public opinion strongly believed that Britain would emerge victorious in the new conflict. This was shown during the Phoney War in opinion polls that showed that eighty-four percent of Britons thought that the Allies would win the war.³⁴³ In part this confidence was passed down from the government and was echoed in the national press too, but it also reflected the patriotism of pre-war national life together with a faith that Britain would eventually win as it had always done so in the past.³⁴⁴

This lack of urgency and complacency would appear to be reflected in the work of the Howard-Yvse and Swayne Missions. Given the dynamic of the environment of the wider British and Allied war effort in which the two missions operated, it is unsurprising that there

³⁴⁰ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 44.

³⁴¹ See John Kiszely, *Anatomy of a Campaign: The British Fiasco in Norway, 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20-98

³⁴² Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 82.

³⁴³ Daniel Todman. *Britain's War: Into Battle 1937-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 274.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 274-276.

was not a greater sense of purpose in their reporting. It is also the likely explanation as to why the War Office and others in the British command did not press the two missions to study further what they reported on and to take advantage of their privileged position within the two French headquarters to seek a greater insight. As a result, Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their staff were not tasked beyond their limited liaison roles despite the potential that existed for additional commentary and analysis on what they observed. The two missions were therefore not inquisitive about what they encountered in Gamelin and Georges' commands. Instead they were reactive and did not enquire further or more comprehensively on what they witnessed. Had they done so, it would have gone beyond the brief of the missions, but it was nevertheless a missed opportunity to exploit further their unrivalled access to the two French headquarters.

Insightful reporting from the Duke of Windsor

Although Howard-Vyse and Swayne appeared to carry out their basic liaison duties effectively, the atmosphere created by a lack of urgent direction seems to have created a sense of drift in the wider work of the missions themselves in their reporting to the War Office. In this respect there was almost a haphazard way in which the missions operated which helped sustain the confidence in the French command and the wider army. One example of this of course was in the way in which the two missions failed to follow up on weaknesses it observed. It is also telling that some of the most perceptive reporting of the missions was produced by accident rather than design. This was most clearly demonstrated by some of the reporting of the Duke of Windsor and his military aide, who were attached to the Howard-Vyse Mission from September 1939. The Duke's appointment to the mission was not done so for any operational necessity, but rather to find him an appropriate military role, which given the sensitivity surrounding his position would not create any difficulties for either the British government or Royal family. It would appear that Howard-Vyse was not enthusiastic about the Duke's posting to his mission. At first he seems to have been sceptical of any value the Duke could bring to his staff especially in light of the possible difficulties that could arise from the delicate position he occupied in British public life. As a result, Howard-Vyse tasked the Duke with touring the French area of operations, a duty not relevant to role of the mission, but which would occupy his time and keep his potentially controversial presence away from the staff of Military Mission No 1. On this move Howard-Vyse expressed his 'great relief' to the Deputy Director of Military Operations at the War Office

(DDMO) at the news that Gamelin had no objection to the Duke of Windsor touring anywhere in the French area of operations thus removing the Duke from the principle work of the Mission.³⁴⁵

Yet, the Duke of Windsor's tours to French units produced results that unexpectedly impressed Howard-Vyse. The Duke visited extensively various parts of the frontline and wrote reports of what he witnessed. These were then submitted to Howard Vyse and then passed to the DMO at the War Office. Howard-Vyse described the Duke's reports to the DMO as 'valuable' and praised them to Ironside who in turn expressed his pleasure at the Duke's work. The Duke's freedom to tour French units throughout France brought a wider perspective to the officers of the Howard-Vyse Mission who found it difficult to leave the Vincennes area to gain a better understanding of the French Army in the field. This unexpected value that the Duke brought to the mission was shown in Howard-Vyse's comments to the War Office when he reflected on one of the Duke's reports that 'It will be realised that to give the French any sort of inkling of the source of this information would probably compromise the value of any mission which I may ask HRH to undertake subsequently.'³⁴⁶ Although these reports were produced under the Duke's name, it would seem that they were compiled at the very least with the assistance of others, most likely Major Edward Metcalfe, a former equerry and then *de facto* military assistant to the Duke. It is considered though that the reports were representative in the main to the Duke's own observations and conclusions.³⁴⁷

The most insightful of all of the Duke of Windsor's reports followed his visit to French defences in the Ardennes area. This of course was the sector of the front where the main weight of the German attack fell in May 1940, with devastating consequences for the defence of France. This was an area mistakenly not considered by the allied high command as a point where a major offensive could be launched by the Germans as the dense woodland of the Ardennes was deemed unsuitable for the operation of German armoured formations. However, after visiting the Ardennes, the Duke and his military aide perceptively understood the vulnerability of the area. Howard-Vyse summed up the Duke's observations in a letter to the DMO:

³⁴⁵TNA CAB 21/758, Howard-Vyse to DMO, September 1939.

³⁴⁶TNA WO 106/1678. Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO, 4 October 1939.

³⁴⁷Michael Bloch. *The Duke of Windsor's War* (London: Hachette Digital, 2012) 20-21.

There is little or no attempt at concealment. The revetment of anti-tank ditches is weak. Other anti-tank obstacles do not seem to be adequate. Wiring, against infantry, coincides in locations with anti-tank obstacles, so that the same bombardment would destroy both. Anti-tank crews seem to be insufficiently trained. Work does not seem to be carried on intensively and very few troops were seen.³⁴⁸

The serious danger posed by a German attack on the weak French defences in the Ardennes was accurately appreciated by the Duke of Windsor which he explained to Howard Vyse:

At present, once the crust is broken there is nothing to stop exploitation by armoured forces...after that, there will be nothing but a few demolitions and troops in the open to stop an advance to Paris. It is perhaps fortunate that the Germans did not attack through Luxembourg and Belgium in October and November.³⁴⁹

The Duke's comments on the Ardennes sector are arguably the most perceptive observations offered by the two liaison missions during the Phoney War period. The Duke not only identified the weakness of the French defences but also followed through on the possible consequences of the deficiencies of which he witnessed. This of course was something which the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions did not pursue in their concerns that they had noted on aspects of the operation of Gamelin's and Georges' headquarters. The Duke's views are extremely noteworthy for highlighting one of the important aspects which led to the success of the German *Blitzkrieg* and that they show him to be one of the few British observers to note this serious weakness in France's defence. Clearly he made a positive impact with the work that he carried out on behalf of Howard-Vyse, but the fact that he did so is evidence of the haphazard nature of the missions' work given that the tasking of the Duke was believed initially to be of no value to Military Mission No 1.

When it is considered how accurate the Duke of Windsor's fears proved to be on the weaknesses of French defences in the Ardennes area, it is surprising that his observations have not generated greater attention from those historians who have studied the Phoney War and the Battle of France. It is true that the Duke's observations have been recorded in a

³⁴⁸ TNA WO 106/1678. Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO, 4 October 1939.

³⁴⁹ TNA WO 106/1678. HRH Duke of Windsor, report to Major General Sir Richard Howard-Vyse, 28 September 1939.

limited number of studies including in biographies of him.³⁵⁰ When the Duke's work with the Howard-Vyse Mission is referred to, it is done so in isolation and not as part of a study of the work of the liaison missions. Moreover, credit is seldom attributed to the Duke or his military assistant for the foresight in their views which were unique in the British command. Given the course of events that ensued in May 1940, evidently greater prominence should have been given to the foresight of the Duke of Windsor's reporting on the Ardennes sector. It seems likely that the unsympathetic way the Duke has been judged in studies in terms of his wider public role and character has ensured that his observations of the Ardennes defences have not been given the acknowledgement that they would appear to merit. The same may also explain the failure of the Howard-Vyse mission and the War Office to act upon the Duke's observations. While the Duke's reports were well received, they were likely not given the serious consideration their contents merited in part because the Duke was a controversial figure with little military expertise.

Greater importance was instead placed by the War Office and the BEF's leadership in the French high command's firm belief that that the terrain of the Ardennes posed too difficult an obstacle for it to be an area where a significant German attack could be launched. Both the French and British leadership were of course aware that the Ardennes had proved to be the critical sector in France's defeat in 1870. However, Gamelin had judged that in 1939-40 any enemy attack through the Ardennes could only initially be limited in its scope, believing that it would take German armoured forces up to nine days to penetrate the area and to amass in sufficient strength to be able to cross the river Meuse. Even if the Germans were to attempt a large offensive through the Ardennes, Gamelin believed he would have sufficient time to counter this threat by repositioning his stronger forces from further north where the Allies expected to face the main weight of the attack. This was a view which was unchallenged anywhere in the British command. Indeed there is no evidence that British observers ever questioned as to how the French would adapt if the German attack did not comply with the preconceived ideas about its location, focus and strength. In the main this was the result of the British leadership realising that its scope to criticise or shape Gamelin's plans was limited by its role as a junior partner in the operation of Allied ground forces. Undoubtedly the British army's deference towards its French counterpart and a preoccupation

³⁵⁰ See, for example, Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (London: Harper Press, 2001), 408; Frances Donaldson, *Edward VIII*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1974), 351; Andrew Morton, *17 Carnations: The Windsors, The Nazis and the Cover Up* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2015), 153-154

with the BEF's own challenges also hindered a more critical assessment of Gamelin's plans.³⁵¹

British observers would have been more alert to the dangers posed by the weakly defended Ardennes sector had they been aware that shortly before the war there were a small number of senior French officers who believed that Gamelin's estimation of possible German progress through this area to be overly optimistic. Indeed, in map exercises conducted in May and June 1938 by General André-Gaston Prételat, then commander with responsibility for the Sedan – Montmédy region, it was concluded that the Germans could reach the Meuse with three of its corps in just sixty hours. Had Britain devoted greater scrutiny to matters within the French army prior to the declaration of war, it is possible that they would have known of such concerns which could have been considered later in preparing to face the German offensive. The British command though remained in the dark about these anxieties which were dismissed by Gamelin as being unduly pessimistic. In being unaware of Prételat's views it also made British observers not realise that Gamelin was seemingly only willing to use map exercises in a limited way to justify and refine his existing plans as opposed to challenge their overall soundness.³⁵²

The conviction that Germany would not launch a major offensive through the Ardennes was strengthened by the capture of secret German plans for the attack as they existed in January 1940. The plans which were passed to the Allies were captured from a senior *Luftwaffe* officer who made an emergency landing in the Netherlands on 10 January 1940 and showed that the Germans intended to attack through Belgium on the North East flank as Gamelin had predicted.³⁵³ Given this discovery it is not surprising that British observers were not unduly worried by the Duke of Windsor's report on the defences in the Ardennes sector, and why Gamelin placed his strongest forces on the north east part of his line. The Germans though of course adapted their plans after their capture so that the main weight of their attack fell through the Ardennes with a feint further north where Gamelin confidently expected the offensive to be launched. The planned German attack was not shaped in this form and adopted as the likely course of action until February 1940, so the Allied leadership were correct on their perceived forecast of events up until that point.

³⁵¹ See chapter 5 for more on the BEF's weaknesses and challenges in this respect and the BEF's leadership's acceptance of Gamelin's plans.

³⁵² Clarke, *Blitzkrieg*, 57.

³⁵³ May, *Strange Victory*, 315-319.

Furthermore as the new plan for the Ardennes offensive evolved in the German high command it even divided opinion amongst Hitler's most senior officers as to its viability. For example, in line with Gamelin's thoughts it was considered by some as 'crazy and fool hardy' with General Fedor Von Block, commander of German Army Group B, declaring 'I can't warm to the operation, because it has to bog down if the French haven't taken leave of their senses.'³⁵⁴ The Allies though were unaware of these German doubts on the wisdom of a large offensive through the Ardennes. Yet had they been so, no doubt this would have encouraged them further to concentrate their stronger forces in the north east and not heed the isolated warnings made by the likes of the Duke of Windsor and earlier by General Prételat.

Confidence in the wider French army

Sustaining the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Mission's faith in the French army was the impression created by France's ground forces in the field which the missions had sporadic contact with. As the focus of the two mission's work was on Gamelin and Georges' headquarters, Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their officers were not best placed to offer views on the French army outside of Vincennes and the Château des Bondons. Nevertheless there were occasions where both missions reported to the War Office on matters concerning the wider French army. The Duke of Windsor was able to do this following his tours across the French sector, but there were also opportunities where other staff of the two missions were able to do so after rare occasional visits to units in the field.

After their excursions to the front, the views of the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were sometimes mixed but on the whole positive about what they had witnessed. The aspect which was most commented on by the two missions were on the defences that they encountered. Quite often there was concern about the depth to defensive positions, or that works were incomplete. As with other British observers of French defences,³⁵⁵ some concern was expressed by Brigadier Swayne of the lack of depth to certain positions. In a visit to the Lille area Swayne noted that there was 'little depth at present...To the North of Lille where the frontier faces North there are no defences but the Lys...constitutes an important obstacle'. Equally, just to the South of Lille it was noted that 'the foremost line has only been completed' and that 'between Halluin and Armentières ...there are three lines of

³⁵⁴ Fedor von Bock. *The War Diary 1939-1945* (Atglen, PA:Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2004), entry dated 24 February 1940. 114 cited in Clarke, *Blitzkrieg*, 64.

³⁵⁵ See Chapter 5.

barbed wire (old pattern) but some of this barbed wire is close to the A/Tk (anti-tank) ditch and is thus liable to be destroyed by artillery fire on the ditch'.³⁵⁶

Nevertheless, on the whole there was satisfaction at what they had observed and that measures were in place to rectify deficiencies. Typical of this were the comments offered by Howard-Vyse after a visit in September 1939 when he reported that 'as far as Maulde, near Tournai, defences are first class. Thence to the sea they are less good but are now being improved by civilian labour.'³⁵⁷ Similarly, following a visit to French dispositions in front of the Maginot Line, Howard-Vyse remarked with concern on 28 September that 'I was rather alarmed at being told that one division has or had, sixteen groups of artillery, i.e. two divisional artilleries, in front of the Maginot'. He was reassured to report though that 'they say, however, that they are thinning out and echeloning in more depth'.³⁵⁸

In relation to the on-going work to improve defences, there were comments made by the two missions where it was believed greater effort was being made by the BEF in this area than that which they had witnessed with some French forces. After one particular visit to the BEF, Brigadier Swayne was impressed to find the units of the British II Corps heavily engaged in the digging of defences and rigorous physical training.³⁵⁹ This Swayne contrasted with a degree of indolence that he had observed amongst some French army units in which he said that 'the activity in the British front was very marked in comparison'.³⁶⁰

Concern over some of the defences mixed with British criticism of the perceived inactivity of the French army on this matter, became for a time a rare issue of tension between the army commands of the two nations in which the Swayne Mission was forced to become involved. In late March 1940, the GHQ of the BEF was dismayed to receive a request from Gamelin for British army labour to assist in the construction of secondary defensive positions in certain parts of the French sector. It was suggested by Gamelin that several of the recently arrived British Territorial and newly formed Dominion units could be used in a labour role to correct these weaknesses. As the official channel of communication between Gort and Georges, the Swayne Mission had to convey to the French that the BEF

³⁵⁶ TNA WO 167/40, Swayne Mission War Diary, 8-9 September 1940.

³⁵⁷ TNA WO 106/4989. Howard-Vyse, letter to DMO, 18 January 1940.

³⁵⁸ TNA WO 202/3. Howard-Vyse to DMO, 28 September 1939.

³⁵⁹ TNA WO 167/40. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 3 November 1939.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

was unwilling to agree to Gamelin's request.³⁶¹ Although both liaison missions and other parts of the BEF were aware of a lack of depth to certain French defensive positions they did not believe that these were sufficiently serious to justify British support in this area. The decision was therefore taken to concentrate in the further training of the recently arrived Territorial and Dominion forces and to prevent these men from engaging in work which they would have been unhappy to be tasked with. Swayne reflected on the request from Gamelin that it:

...bristles with difficulties. It will not be easy to call on Dominion and TA Divisions composed of men who have volunteered to fight to act as Labourers to prepare defences in a sector where the British will not be required to fight. Inevitably there will be a feeling that they are being employed because the French have not done the work themselves.³⁶²

In spite of Gamelin persisting to ask for British labour, Swayne was forced to relay diplomatically to Georges that the BEF would not be able to immediately assist with this request. The unwillingness of the BEF to acquiesce to these demands shows that although there may have been concerns expressed on aspects of the French defensive positions they were not deemed to be serious enough to jeopardise its own forces' training and morale. This incident in no way showed any serious lack of harmony between the British and French commands. It was merely typical of the minor disagreements which inevitably occur in the functioning of a complex military alliance. Further French requests on this matter, though, were curtailed by the start of the German offensive.

Although occasional visits to the front gave the two missions an overview of the frontline, opportunities to meet the officers and men of the French units in the field were very limited. As the Duke of Windsor spent more time than the missions' other staff touring the front, he was the officer who had greatest contact with French personnel and reported back to Howard-Vyse on what he encountered. Of those that he was able to meet the Duke reported back favourably. Typical of the officers he met was General Charles Huntziger, commanding officer of the French Second Army. On Huntziger the Duke informed Howard-Vyse that 'this reputed striking personality, and ability as a Commander were amply confirmed by meeting him. He looks at you in the eye, is alert and active with great charm and sense of

³⁶¹ TNA WO 167/41. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 26 March 1940.

³⁶² Ibid.

humour.³⁶³ The Duke of Windsor also reported approvingly on the quality of the other ranks of the French army that he witnessed. On these he observed ‘The Stocky, well-knit, healthy looking French peasant is still the prevailing type. Those who clearly are not of this class, though less robust looking, nevertheless leave an impression of good health’ that created a ‘general impression everywhere...of good heart, sturdiness and health.’³⁶⁴ On specific units the Duke noted that the men of the French 3rd Cavalry Division ‘created a very good impression, both in their bearing, their effective work with the spade and the quality of their officers and men.’³⁶⁵ Likewise he described the troops of the 71st Infantry Division as ‘efficient and to know their job.’ The French artillery units particularly impressed the Duke. He stated that ‘the artillery officers in general seem to know their tasks, to have command of their men and to be very efficient. They have superior intelligence, their men are good and intelligent.’³⁶⁶ In contrast the French infantry appeared to have created a less positive impression on the Duke as he wrote to Howard-Vyse that:

There is little doubt that personnel for the cavalry and artillery are selected for their intelligence and that the infantry gets the rest. The infantry officers may be efficient, but they seem to lack the confidence of the cavalry and gunner officers.³⁶⁷

Just as with certain parts of the infantry, it was certainly the case that not all of the French army’s units made a favourable impression on the Duke of Windsor and others in the liaison missions. For example, in a rare comment on French units by Brigadier Swayne, a negative view was offered after a visit to the Saar sector in January 1940. During this visit Swayne reported that the French third category infantry divisions he observed were even ‘of less value than our Territorial Divisions.’³⁶⁸ Too much though should not be made of either the Duke’s mixed opinion of the French infantry or Swayne’s remarks on units based in the Saar. Indeed, in a large conscript army it was inevitable that there would be a variation of the standard of the men. Moreover, these isolated more critical comments by the Duke and Swayne did not detract from the overall confidence which both missions had in the French ground forces.

³⁶³ TNA WO 106/1678. Windsor, report to Howard-Vyse, 17 December 1939.

³⁶⁴ TNA WO 106/1678. Windsor, report to Howard-Vyse, 29 February 1940.

³⁶⁵ TNA WO 106/1678. Windsor, report to Howard-Vyse, 17 December 1939.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ TNA WO 202/7. Brigadier Sir John Swayne, Notes on Conference between Gort and Georges, 27 January 1940.

The observations that the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions offered on the French army away from Vincennes and the Château des Bondons were limited in their scope and content. However, matters on the wider French army were not issues which the two missions were best placed to comment on, and nor were they expected to pass detailed judgements on them. Nevertheless, although the missions' reporting on the wider French army maybe cursory they are a further example of the widespread confidence that British observers had in their ally's ground forces. In the same way that these comments were limited in their detail there were also a range of other important matters relating to the French army on which the two missions did not report. For example, there is little mention of equipment, doctrine, training or about considerations such as the morale of the wider French population. Although these were all important matters to be considered in understanding the French army's overall effectiveness, these were not relevant to the work of the liaison missions.

Conclusion

As the Phoney War was about to end on 10 May 1940, the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were confident in the overall effectiveness of the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges which they had been liaising with for the previous eight months. During this time the missions' views changed little on the French command. The confidence in the French command existed for several reasons. Both missions would certainly have begun their work with a positive view of their new ally. Given that this belief had prevailed for two decades it would have been difficult for this preconceived idea to have wavered much in just a few months. The officers of the two French headquarters also appear to have gone to great lengths to accommodate Howard-Vyse and Swayne's staff in creating a warm working relationship reinforced by a candidness with which they shared information with the missions. This clearly then was an environment which was conducive to the two missions having a positive outlook on the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges and helped sustain British confidence. This harmonious atmosphere was sustained further by the lack of any major event or crisis during this time to test the strength of the relationships. More importantly the work of the French command was looked on approvingly by the two missions which provided confidence in how their ally's leadership operated. Crucially, however, the Howard-Vyse and Swayne Missions were denied the opportunity to witness the two French headquarters at work in an operational environment. Clearly had the two missions been able

to witness the staff of Gamelin and Georges operate under this test they would have been better placed to offer a more confident judgement on the commands' effectiveness.

Nevertheless, Howard-Vyse and Swayne occupied positions with a view of the French army's two most important commands that was unmatched by any other part of British military. Thus as command and control failings at the most senior levels in the French army played such an important role in the fall of France, the two missions potentially had the opportunity to warn the War Office and GHQ of the serious problems that lay ahead. To the credit of Howard-Vyse and Swayne they did report on difficulties that they witnessed in the two French headquarters. They did not however deem these to be sufficiently serious to undermine the French command's ability to operate effectively. These though were clearly warning signs for the British observers, as both missions identified weaknesses in the French command's structural efficiency which could have impacted on its ability to react to events swiftly. Equally an erratic mood in the French command was observed which it could be argued may have indicated that morale may have been more fragile than it initially appeared. Yet, there is no evidence that two missions and the War Office considered these matters further to the possible consequences that they could have if put under the strains that would occur under testing operational conditions. It would appear that doing so was a reflection of the haphazard and relaxed nature of the missions reporting that appeared to lack any sense of urgency which was surprising given that Howard-Vyse and Swayne realised that the Allies would shortly face being engaged in battle. This though was a symptom of the faltering wider British war effort at this time which was limited in nature and characterised by indecision. This was certainly how the conflict was being pursued at the highest level of the British government and it seems likely that complacency and overconfidence that victory would ensue filtered down to other levels in the war effort. It would appear likely that this not only influenced the work of the two missions but was also significant in the War Office failing to pursue concerns raised by Howard-Vyse and Swayne.

Nevertheless, even had the missions' occasional criticisms of the French command been considered further to their possible consequences, it is unlikely that this would have altered the course of events that followed during the German *Blitzkrieg*. Indeed, it would likely have had the same no consequence as the Duke of Windsor's warnings on the defences in the Ardennes sector. Yet, had the consequences of these concerns been considered further by the missions and War Office, then the collapse of command and control at the highest

levels of the French army would not have been quite as shocking as they were when witnessed in the Battle of France. However, in being tied to locations far from units in the field the military missions were unsighted to other factors and wider problems that would prove critical to the French defeat. It would therefore be difficult to state that Howard-Vyse and Swayne should have foreseen the catastrophic events that followed the end of Phoney War, irrespective of their privileged view of the French command. After all, their role was not to forecast the course of events but to liaise and report on what they observed at Georges and Gamelin's headquarters. Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight it is clear the two missions were witness to continuing problems in the French command which would have serious consequences once the German attack in the West began.

This point indicates that despite the relative size of the two missions in the context of the machinery of the wider Franco-British alliance, Howard-Vyse, Swayne and their staff had the potential to be greater than the sum of their parts. The potential offered by their elevated positions in the French command remained unfulfilled. Under these circumstances Britain's military leadership missed an opportunity to exploit this insight to maximise awareness which could have augmented its power and influence as far as was feasible as a junior partner to the French army. It would appear then that the work of the two liaison missions is a lesson from history on the importance of seeking the optimum effectiveness of actors and institutions, no matter how small, to seek marginal gains which combined across the apparatus of a coalition could act as a multiplier to influence and efficacy. When a junior partner in an alliance naturally has few means by which to increase its power, in order to reach the limits of potential influence it must ensure that the various mechanics of its coalition machine operate close to their optimal effectiveness. In this sense although the role of liaison is an important one and was seemingly carried out competently by the Howard-Vyse and Swayne missions, they had potential to add further value to the operation of the British army's alliance with France's ground forces.

Chapter 5

The leadership of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF),

September 1939 – May 1940.

As the various liaison missions settled into their roles embedded close to their respective French headquarters, from early September 1939 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was deployed to France to take its place in the field alongside the French army. In so doing the leadership of the BEF faced an enormous challenge to position, supply and administer its combat formations at the Belgian border and thus to ensure that they were operationally ready to resist the anticipated German attack. This task was the responsibility of the BEF's General Headquarters (GHQ) led by its commanding officer, Field Marshal Viscount Gort. In facing such a momentous mission, it would have been reassuring to those officers at GHQ that they had great confidence in the larger and more powerful army of its French ally that would shoulder the greatest burden when Hitler eventually decided to launch his forces against the west. This was a belief which permeated down the BEF's chain of command to those officers who would refine and put into place the orders it received from GHQ.

This chapter will examine the views of those officers who led the BEF from GHQ and those who commanded its combat formations. In so doing it will scrutinise the first British officers to be deployed to France to serve alongside the French army in the field since 1918. These were the officers who were at the sharpest end of Britain's evolving relationship with the French army as it moved from one of limited engagement to a war fighting alliance. In contrast to the officers in the liaison missions examined earlier, these officers offered a view of the French army under wartime conditions. Although the BEF's leadership shared the liaison missions' confidence in the French army, through their lived experience in France during the Phoney War, this was gained from a less elevated position. The confidence generated and sustained from this different vantage point illustrates further the depth of Britain's faith in the French army.

The BEF's GHQ was ultimately responsible for the command of all British ground forces that were deployed to France and until 10 January 1940 also the RAF's modest air component that supported the BEF. Although GHQ issued orders to the various British formations and units in France, the BEF in-turn came under the command of General Georges as commander of the North-East area of operations. Even though the BEF received orders from Georges' command, GHQ had the right of appeal to the British government, to refuse to enact an order from which it was perceived that the BEF would be placed in an untenable position. As an organisation the BEF's GHQ was vast. It was centred on the town of Arras in the Artois region but was spread amongst ten surrounding villages covering an area of about forty square miles. By the middle of September 1939 GHQ was comprised of over five hundred officers and 2,000 other ranks, increasing further in size as the BEF grew throughout the Phoney War.³⁶⁹

Specifically, this chapter will analyse the views of those officers posted to GHQ, the commanders of the BEF's three Corps and those positioned at divisional command down to middle level appointments. This chapter will focus on the most senior of its officers that had greatest influence on Britain's war effort from within the BEF. Naturally, the views of GHQ's two most prominent figures Gort and the BEF's Chief of Staff, General Sir Henry Pownall, will be examined. However, also featuring significantly are the opinions of some of GHQ's less well known officers such as Lieutenant General Douglas Brownrigg, the Adjutant General of the BEF, Lieutenant General Wilfred Lindsell, the Quarter Master General and Major General Ridley Pakenham-Walsh, the BEF's Engineer-in-Chief. Below GHQ in the BEF's chain of command were its three corps, Britain's largest combat formations in France. These were led by General Sir John Dill, Lieutenant General Alan Brooke and Lieutenant General Sir Ronald Adam. These officers' views will also be examined. These three officers in turn led those who commanded the BEF's divisions, brigades and battalions. Those at the level below corps command down to middle-ranking officer appointments numbered into their hundreds. Although it is obviously not possible to study every officer at this level, from the surviving archival material it is still possible to gain a good appreciation of the nature of the views held at those positions and consider their wider importance.

³⁶⁹ Lt-Gen Sir Douglas Brownrigg. *Unexpected: A Book of Memories* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1942), 139-140.

The work of the BEF during the Phoney War has attracted extensive study. Much of what has been written by historians in the past decades on the BEF has focussed upon its combat arms and their preparations to respond to the German *Blitzkrieg*.³⁷⁰ This is natural given the enormity of the events that would ensue once combat operations began on 10 May 1940. Equally, in the work of these historians, significant attention has been devoted to how the BEF's position in the French-led plan to resist the German attack evolved over the period of the Phoney War. However, the way in which the BEF's leadership viewed the French army has not been extensively analysed. Indeed, as Martin Alexander states, it is notable how the attention of historians to the questions of how the two armies viewed each other 'has been conspicuous in the main by its absence'³⁷¹ and that 'historians have been shy into extending their researches into French and British policies to include an inquiry into the military and strategic appraisals that each nation explicitly made about the other.'³⁷² Although Alexander does this in a chapter of his book *The Republic in Danger*,³⁷³ a detailed analysis the views of the BEF's officer corps of the French army was beyond the scope of his research in this instance. This is even the case for prominent officers of GHQ such as Gort and Pownall. The same is true at the next level of seniority with the officers that led the BEF's three corps. The observations of Dill and Adam have been virtually ignored, although the views of Brooke following the publication of his diaries have been given greater attention.³⁷⁴ In particular, Brooke's diaries have been used by many recent historians to highlight worries about the French army's potential effectiveness. In so doing it has been claimed that Brooke was seriously concerned about the French army and inferred that other senior British officers may have felt the same.³⁷⁵ Yet, as will be shown below, Brooke's concerns were not necessarily as serious many historians have stated. The views of those at divisional level and middle ranking officer appointments have also not been fully examined. To explore their views, this chapter will offer new details from the reports and unpublished memoirs of several of these

³⁷⁰ See, for example, Nick Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phoney War: Before the Balloon Went Up* (London: Praeger, 2003); Clarke, *Blitzkrieg: Myth, Reality and Hitler's Lightning War – France, 1940* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), 54-56, 58, 70-71, 82-85; Brian Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940* (London: Brassey's, 1990), 43-92.

³⁷¹ Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 240.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 236-278.

³⁷⁴ Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, eds. *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001).

³⁷⁵ See, for example, Michael Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France, 1936-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 147-148; Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man* (London: Viking, 2006), 18-19 and Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 160.

middle ranking officers. The chapter also explores the challenges faced by military commanders at the operational level when serving as junior partners in a coalition. The chapter therefore examines the struggle that a force's leadership, in this case that of the BEF, has in being able to exert influence and shape operational plans in an unequal alliance. In this respect, it will be shown how British perceptions of the French army shaped the BEF's leadership's approach to French planning during the Phoney War for the anticipated German offensive in the west.

There is an abundance of archival material available from which it is possible to examine the BEF's leadership's perspectives of the French army. Amongst the official records there are the War Diaries for GHQ and the BEF's units in the field together with an extensive series reports and memoranda from all levels of the BEF from Gort's despatches to London down to situational reports produced by brigades posted to the Saar region. For the senior officers at GHQ a combination of diaries, memoirs and papers survive for Pownall, Brownrigg, Lindsell, Pakenham-Walsh and GHQ's chief liaison officer the Duke of Gloucester. The same is true of those who commanded the BEF's three Corps, Dill, Brooke and Adam, whilst of the large number of those that served at middle ranking officer appointments there is a sizeable quantity of similar material available to be consulted.

The views expressed though by no means offer a comprehensive understanding of the operational effectiveness of the different aspects of the French army. Indeed, most of the observations made tend to be of a personal nature or are not extensively detailed. To an extent this is understandable as the BEF's officers' duties necessitated a significant concentration on the British army's considerable needs in France, not to present a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of French forces. Moreover, although the observations made by the BEF's leadership are not extensively detailed they do sufficiently demonstrate the faith that Gort and his officers had in the French army's abilities. The absence of more detailed accounts of the French army in the BEF's records also indicates that Gort and his staff were sufficiently relaxed about their ally. Had these officers had any serious doubts about the French army, it seems likely that this would be revealed in the surviving archival material.

Those officers commanding units in the field down to middle ranking appointments had a narrower focus than those at GHQ in carrying out their duties. The officers who led the

various formations concentrated solely on the roles of their units and their specific functions in the deployment and later operation of the BEF. As a result, these officers did not concern themselves with the wider Allied plan to counter the German offensive or indeed win the war itself. It is true that these officers would have been aware of these aspects in their broadest terms, but attention was generally devoted intensely on their unit's tasking. Given this focus, it is understandable that the French army featured even less prominently than it did for those at the very highest levels of the BEF. Yet, these officers still held views on the French army which merit examination. Indeed, these officers still encountered and experienced the French army, but often in instances different and less formal to those higher in the chain of command. In having contact with the French army in a differing way, it therefore presented an opportunity for those officers in the field to view France's ground forces in circumstances that could not be viewed by the like of those at GHQ and therefore potentially offer additional insight.

Those who occupied the most senior positions at GHQ had all enjoyed highly notable careers in the British army. For most service during the First World War proved to be the formative event for their future service. As will be shown below, evidence of these officers holding strongly held views on France and the French, which in turn had an effect on their judgements on the French army, is not always apparent. The most high profile of these officers who had the closest links to France was the BEF's II Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Alan Brooke, having been brought up in Pau in South-West France. However, it would appear that Brooke's upbringing did not lead to any love of France and he was anxious to distance himself from French ways of life. This was shown in comments made by Brooke when he remarked:

Having learned French before English and having spent the first sixteen years of my life in France I was in continual apprehension lest I should look like a Frenchman, speak as a Frenchman and possibly earn the name of "Froggie".³⁷⁶

Of the several hundred of those officers that served in the BEF's chain of command from divisional level down, most have not left collections of papers or memoirs to be consulted by historians. As a result accounting for the full career paths and outlook of these officers is not feasible. It is possible though to garner an understanding of the prevailing attitudes and

³⁷⁶ Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, eds. *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), xiv.

general understanding of these officers at this level. Undoubtedly in such a large group of officers there existed a wide range of values, assumptions and prejudices which reflected different backgrounds and life experiences. Within this group there were certainly officers who could be identified as Francophiles and those with a less generous understanding of France and the French. However, it would appear that as was the case in wider British society, Francophobia was the sentiment which prevailed in this large group of officers. Although explicit evidence of this is often difficult to find, it can be inferred from the large number of accounts offering unenthusiastic descriptions of the French population and those civilians who many officers were billeted with.³⁷⁷

This chapter will firstly reveal how the BEF's leadership's perspective of the French Army was significantly shaped by how it judged its own forces under its command. It will be shown that the acute awareness of the BEF's unpreparedness for war with serious deficiencies made the French army appear especially strong when contrasted to the British forces deployed to France. Furthermore it will be shown that such was the enormity of the challenges faced by the BEF's senior officers in addressing their units' weaknesses that it severely limited their capacity to give extensive consideration to other matters including the French army and its plan to counter a German offensive. It will then be acknowledged that critical assessments were made of the French army during the Phoney War period but that these did not cast doubt on the overall viability of France's ground forces. In so doing negative judgements made retrospectively after the Battle of France by some officers will be analysed. In several cases after the French defeat officers claimed to have observed aspects of the French army which were indicators of an impending defeat. It will be shown that although some of these claims may have had a degree of validity, the issues identified proved inconsequential to events on the battlefield, for example fears of a Fifth Column within France. Finally, it will be questioned to what extent certain preconceived ideas that senior officers held about France and the French army may have had in forming their perspectives on France's ground forces as the BEF readied itself for the future German attack. This chapter will not examine the impact that positive working relations between the BEF's leadership and their French counterparts had on reaffirming confidence in France's ground

³⁷⁷ See, for example, LHCMA CLARKE 1/1. Colonel Frederick Clarke, unpublished memoir, 'The Memoirs of a Professional Soldier in Peace and War', 29 April 1968; LHCMA DAVIDSON 3/3, Brigadier Francis Davidson, account of I Corps BEF 1939-1940 and LHCMA CHURCHER 1. Major General J B Churcher, unpublished memoir, 'A Soldier's Story', October 1984.

forces. This very much replicated the relationships enjoyed between the senior liaison missions and the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges demonstrated in Chapter 4, although this is a prominent feature in the archival material relating to the BEF's leadership.³⁷⁸

Weaknesses of the BEF

Playing an important role in how the BEF's leadership perceived the French army was the way it saw its own forces. Indeed, the extensive weaknesses of the BEF in equipment and training, acted as a prism in which senior officers viewed the French army. The BEF's unpreparedness was evident from its, in some instances, disorderly disembarkation in France.³⁷⁹ The first four divisions of the BEF to take their place in the front-line were the British Army's strongest formations. The BEF also benefitted from being a fully motorised force, even down to logistical support, unlike the armies of France and Germany. However, their effectiveness was seriously undermined by inadequate equipment and shortages of transport vehicles, the latter requiring large numbers of trucks and vans to be requisitioned from civilian businesses.³⁸⁰

The poor condition of the BEF on its arrival in France was not due to the efforts of those who led Britain's forces in France. Indeed, before the war, Gort and other senior officers had argued strongly during their time in the War Office that more should have been done to prepare a field force for service on the continent. Instead the BEF's unpreparedness for war was largely the result of the British government's unwillingness to agree to these demands made by senior officers and for instead waiting too long before rearming and increasing the size of the army. This it did not agree to do until February 1939 after the start of joint staff talks with the French. Consequently, a lack of expenditure on the army for almost twenty years together with its sudden expansion ensured that the forces at the BEF's disposal in 1939 were insufficiently ready for operations.

³⁷⁸ See, for example, Brownrigg, *Unexpected*, 139, 143, 144; TNA CAB 106/246. Field Marshal Gort, Despatches of the British Expeditionary Force, 25 April 1940; RA GVI/PRIV/RF06. Letter from Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, letter to King George VI, 20 September, 13-14 October 1939; LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. General Sir John Dill, letter to King George VI, 29 March 1940; TNA WO 282/7. General Sir John Dill, letter to General Blanchard 18 April 1940; Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 4, 7, 12, 37; LHCMA ADAM 3/10, 4. General Sir Ronald Forbes Adam, unpublished manuscript of autobiography, 1946; Brian Bond, ed. *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), 234, 239, 240, 249, 255

³⁷⁹ RA HDGH/DIARY/2. Diary of Major Howard Kerr, September 1939.

³⁸⁰ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 56.

During the Phoney War there was also a widespread feeling amongst GHQ's officers that the BEF was being weakened further by a lack of direction from the War Office. In part this was a continuation of the resentment from before the war felt by many senior officers towards the War Office's secretary of state, Leslie Hore-Belisha, who they believed was reluctant to argue in government for greater resources for the army.³⁸¹ However, also of particular concern was a feeling that the War Office was distracted by other theatres which deprived the BEF of important resources to face Germany in the west. In this respect GHQ believed that unnecessary amounts of men and equipment were retained by the British army in India and the Middle East, a situation which was exacerbated by the demands which arose from operations in Norway that began in April 1940. On this specific point Pownall recorded in his personal diary that 'there is no sense in it all, it seems that the War Office is going on like a cage of monkeys, there's no co-ordination'.³⁸²

The BEF's leadership was at the sharpest end of Britain's effort and in arguably the most challenging British position at this point of the war. The difficulties which it faced were significant in having to deploy a force which was far smaller and limited its capabilities than it knew was operationally required, whilst having to establish a logistical system of great length and complexity from France's most westerly ports to the Belgian border. Whereas other parts of Britain's war effort could exist in a degree of isolation from the new front in France, the officers of the BEF lived with and constantly faced the challenges presented to its force. That is not to say though that all officers' work was always fast paced, for example there were visits to the battlefields of the First World War in Picardy and its officers at times were able to enjoy their share of French hospitality. Moreover, those in Whitehall and elsewhere also faced great burdens placed on them by Britain's entry into the war. Yet, given that the Allies knew that the German assault in the west would soon take place, the BEF's leadership undoubtedly endured the greatest strain at this stage, especially given the absence of offensive operations or great activity in other areas. The enormity of the responsibilities especially at GHQ therefore gave little time for detailed consideration of other matters, including the French army. The extent to which the BEF's own difficulties and challenges dominated the activity, outlook and mindset of Britain's leadership in France should not be understated and it certainly appears to have played a significant role in shaping its perception of the French army.

³⁸¹ See Chapter 3.

³⁸² Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 305.

An example of the serious concern at the BEF's fitness for war was shown in a comparison made by Gort between the BEF of 1940 and its predecessor of 1914 to the newly appointed secretary of state for war, Sir Anthony Eden, in April 1940: 'The British army contains today very few regimental officers and other ranks who fought in the last war; much that was common knowledge and accepted practice then, must therefore be learned again.'³⁸³ Equally, Gort thought the BEF was far behind the army of 1914 in terms of its training. In the same despatch he wrote that:

The military efficiency of the five regular divisions has improved in the last six months...Even so I am doubtful whether the standard is as high as in 1914...In August 1914, the regular army went overseas fully equipped and trained for war in Europe, in accordance with a clear cut policy which had been in force for some years. The situation in September 1939 was totally different. The rearmament of the regular army was far from complete and, as a result, little training with the new equipment had been possible, whilst the Territorial Army still in the throes of reorganisation consequent upon the decision to double its strength, possessed little more than token equipment.³⁸⁴

In particular it was the BEF's shortage of ammunition and equipment which generated most alarm for Gort and his staff. He wrote further to Eden that:

It is the shortage of war material, however, which is causing me the chief concern and I have drawn attention, on a number of occasions to difficulties that exist not only in war reserves but also in front-line equipment...I would specify in particular the serious shortage of tanks, of ammunition for certain natures of equipment and of many vehicle reserves and spare parts. To conduct a protracted defensive battle it is essential to have immediately available the approved scales of ammunition and reserves: without them many lives must be needlessly sacrificed and the successful outcome of the battle will depend as has so often happened in the past on the British refusal to admit defeat.³⁸⁵

Gort's views on this were shared by his Chief of Staff, Pownall, who described the BEF in February 1940 as being 'dangerously underequipped and untrained'.³⁸⁶ Similarly, the BEF's Adjutant General, Brownrigg, complained to Hore-Belisha saying that 'it was important to let him know that one battalion had come to France with only one officer in its four companies

³⁸³ TNA WO 197/136. Gort, Despatches, 11 April 1940.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 283.

with over one year's service'³⁸⁷ and that 'a great many men ... had been drafted into the Labour Corps without any sort of training in military discipline.'³⁸⁸

Serious concerns at the BEF's weaknesses were also frequently raised by the commanders of Britain's three corps in France. In commanding units beset with deficiencies, Brook Dill and Adam are likely to have felt this more acutely than those officers not in command positions at GHQ. For example, Dill repeatedly expressed his fears in this respect. Just a few days after arriving in France, he reported his concerns to Gort reporting that 'we have no tanks capable of meeting and defeating the German tanks'.³⁸⁹ Dill wrote to the BEF's commander further on his forces' weaknesses on 8 March 1940 and stated:

Instead of the Corps under my command being generally tuned up against the advent of the campaigning season it is gradually being reduced in efficiency by the replacement of regular units by other units in a low state of training and by the withdrawal of experienced officers and NCOs from the remainder...of even greater importance is the fact that the deficiencies both in equipment and in new units which were reasonably expected to be made before this Spring have not been made good...our organisation is, in my view unbalanced and we shall be severely handicapped if called to undertake the operations that have been planned.³⁹⁰

The BEF's weaknesses were further emphasised when contrasted to elements of the French army that were encountered. This was expressed for example by Dill in correspondence with King George VI in which he noted of the French that 'the men look a very fine type-big and strong...The French infantry march much longer distances than our men and carry much greater weight including a spare pair of boots strapped onto the packs'.³⁹¹ In contrast Dill informed the King of the BEF that 'the men are well and cheerful but they are not yet anything like as hard as the French soldiers'. If accurate, Dill's observation can be explained by the fact that, having rode everywhere in motor transport, BEF soldiers were not as used to hard marching as their French counterparts. Only twelve French divisions, the *Divisions d'Infanterie Motorisée*, were fully motorised.³⁹²

³⁸⁷ Brownrigg, *Unexpected*, 146.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁸⁹ LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. General Sir John Dill, letter to Field Marshal Lord Gort, 17 October 1939.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. Dill to George VI, 28 February 1940.

³⁹² LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. Dill to George VI, 29 March 1940.

The understanding of British weaknesses was fully appreciated by mid-ranking officers and those with less senior officer appointments in the BEF. For many, amongst the most serious of the BEF's deficiencies was a lack of equipment about which there are many accounts from despairing British officers. One example of this was recorded by the compiling officer of the 1st Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade's war diary who complained that:

Regiments were then asked to give up several vital parts of their equipment, including locks for VMG to Lothian and Border Yeomanry who were being sent to the Saar. These were never replaced, so the regiments concerned had to go into action incompletely equipped. The other important equipment lacking from the regiments when they eventually went into action were:- hand grenades, smoke bombs, land mines. None of these were ever issued.³⁹³

Such were the shortages of equipment in the BEF that it was not uncommon to have to resort to acquiring kit from the French in order to make-up for their shortfall. One officer who experienced this was Major John Churcher, a staff officer in the supply branch of the BEF's GHQ, who wrote of his service during the Phoney War that:

I spent my entire time trying to sort out the equipment problems with the BEF. Amongst other things we were woefully short of every sort of anti-tank gun and in the end we had to obtain some little two-pounders from the French.³⁹⁴

The same was also true for many British units that were deployed alongside the French army on the Saar Front. This was explained by Major Williams, a liaison officer attached to the Third French Army, in one of his reports to GHQ in which he wrote that 'One point is rather excising my mind. We are continually borrowing from the French. Tommy guns, grenades, signals, material etc and I do not know of any steps being taken or offer made to pay for them.'³⁹⁵ The French army's willingness to compensate for British equipment shortages was gratefully accepted of course by the BEF. Undoubtedly though this dependency added further to British faith in their perceived strength of the French army.

A further serious weakness in the BEF was the standard of some of its leadership below divisional command. These were concerns not so apparent in the highest levels of GHQ where the calibre of officer was seemingly more assured. They were though more

³⁹³ LHCMA PRAIN 1. Copy of War Diary of 1st Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade, 30 May 1940.

³⁹⁴ LHCMA CHURCHER 1. Churcher, 'A Soldier's Story', 15.

³⁹⁵ TNA WO 197/43. Major W Williams, letter to GHQ G Ops, 4 May 1940.

noticeable further down the chain of command. The seriousness of this problem was highlighted by Montgomery, GOC of the BEF's 3rd Infantry Division, in a letter to his Corps Commander, Brooke, on 11 April 1940. In particular Montgomery singled out in this correspondence four officers under his command who he did not believe were adequate to carry out their duties but made the wider point to Brooke that:

I would like to bring to your notice the low standard of the commanding officers that have been appointed to my division during the past few months. If the COs that have recently been given to me are typical of what we are now to expect, then I suggest that the outlook is bleak...We shall not win this war unless we have commanders to lead our units in battle who are men of character, personality and drive – who have enthusiasm – and who will 'smack it about' in different and unpleasant situations and we should do more than we appear to be doing in the way of picking the right man for the right job. Seniority might count less, and suitability for the job count for more.³⁹⁶

Of similar concern to Montgomery was his belief that infantry command posts were unwisely being filled by officers from non-combat arms of the BEF. He wrote to Brooke on this matter on 23 April 1940 stating that:

I would like to bring to your notice certain dangers that arise when officers are given command of Infantry Brigades who are not infantry soldiers. I consider that at present time such appointments are inadvisable...It is not time when we can afford to have commanders who have to be taught their jobs, and who have to learn at the expense of their troops. I feel in wartime, when men's lives are at stake we do not want infantry brigades commanded by officers who are not infantry soldiers.³⁹⁷

Although there were isolated concerns amongst British officers about morale and discipline within the French army,³⁹⁸ many believed that there was a much greater problem in the BEF. For example, Colonel Frederick Clarke, Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the British 4th Infantry Division, recorded that 'pilfering was rife from the Army stores and depots'.³⁹⁹ The discipline of troops also worried more senior commanders such as Montgomery. Indeed, in a memorandum to his subordinate commanders he wrote that:

³⁹⁶ IWM BLM Special Miscellaneous QQ. General Bernard Law Montgomery, letter to General Alan Brooke, 11 April 1940.

³⁹⁷ IWM BLM Special Miscellaneous QQ. General Bernard Law Montgomery, letter to General Alan Brooke, 23 April 1940.

³⁹⁸ See section below.

³⁹⁹ LHCMA CLARKE 1/1. Clarke, 'The Memoirs of a Professional Soldier in Peace and War', 9.

I am not satisfied with the general standard of discipline, turnout, smartness, soldierly bearing and so on that I notice in the Division! I see men lounging about in the streets with their tunics open, hats on the back of their head, cigarettes behind their ears. Today in Seclin I saw some parties of soldiers being marched through the streets in all sorts of kit; in the same party some men wore steel helmets, some soft caps, some no headgear at all with hair disgracefully long. NCOs are very slack about calling men to attention when a senior officer appears. At night there is a certain amount of café life resulting in a good deal of drunkenness and a great deal of shouting and singing in the streets. We have got to keep the men in hand...The cars of commanders flying flags are not saluted...These things have got to cease.⁴⁰⁰

Worryingly for the BEF some of its junior and mid-ranking officers were also susceptible to deficiencies in morale and discipline. This is admitted to by Captain A C Geddes of the Royal Artillery who honestly reflected that:

I was so strung up to do or die, I have seemed to have no moral strength to spare for the ordinary problems of life. Not only did we over-drink, we overate, our conversations reached the abyss of bawdiness and filth and even in the little things, washing, brushing our teeth, changing our clothes, we became exceedingly slack...we did not have the instilled discipline of the regular soldier and our civilian world having disappeared overnight, we were adrift in a strange sea without anything or anyone to guide us.⁴⁰¹

The preoccupation with the practical difficulties facing the BEF also drew time and energy away from critically assessing the BEF's role in the Allied plan for when the German attack came. Of the BEF's senior officers in France planning the response to the anticipated German attack those at GHQ at Arras were principally responsible. Right up until the start of the *Blitzkrieg*, Gamelin's plan was refined to advance his strongest forces, including the BEF, into Belgium in the direction to which the Germans were anticipated to invade. Meanwhile, Gort was to lead the BEF to form defensive positions on the River Dyle in Belgium.

Throughout the joint planning that occurred between GHQ and the BEF on this strategy, at no point did Gort or his officers sufficiently question the proposed course of action. Furthermore, few doubts concerning Gamelin's plan appear to have been expressed to the French. It is true that some within the BEF's leadership, notably Brooke and Dill, had reservations about the plan. They would have preferred to have met an advance on either the

⁴⁰⁰ IWM BLM Special Miscellaneous QQ. General Bernard Law Montgomery, memorandum to commanding officers in 3rd Infantry Division, to General Alan Brooke, 13 October 1939.

⁴⁰¹ TNA CAB 106/253. Captain A C Geddes, unpublished account of service with the BEF, 'Crowded Hour', 38-39.

Belgian border or on the River Scheldt as originally proposed. However, at the time of planning all ultimately agreed to the decision to advance to the Dyle.⁴⁰²

The lack of sufficient questioning of the French-led plan no doubt can be partly explained by Britain's position as the junior partner in Allied ground operations. With the BEF so small in numbers compared to the French army, it seems likely that this would have inhibited Gort and limit the degree of influence which GHQ could exert on the plan. Indeed, Britain's limited contribution to ground forces did not give GHQ the right to interfere in any substantial way in Gamelin's strategy.⁴⁰³ Indeed as Alexander has observed Gort was 'left deferential to Gamelin and Georges - and was arguably too embarrassed by the BEF's smallness to question French capabilities or French plans'.⁴⁰⁴ As a result the BEF were the passive recipients of information from the French army's leadership rather than partners in the joint planning of operations.⁴⁰⁵ Yet, Gort had a right of appeal to the British government if he felt the BEF was being placed in jeopardy. As the events of May 1940 ensued, Gamelin's plan did of course place the BEF's survival at great risk before its evacuation from France. However, at no point in the planning stages for the Allied response did Gort or anyone else at GHQ raise any concerns with London of the strategy proposed by the French. Although understanding the BEF's place as a junior partner partly explains this, it must be judged that such were the BEF's weaknesses and difficulties which Gort and his officers had to address, that it also led them being unable to have the capacity to challenge Gamelin's plan which almost led the BEF facing destruction after its encirclement by German forces in the Battle of France. It seems especially surprising that Gort chose not to question Gamelin's plans after the capture of the original German invasion plans in the neutral Netherlands following an air crash involving a German officer.⁴⁰⁶ With the German command realising that the Allies had full knowledge of the then intended offensive, it seems inconceivable that the *Blitzkrieg* plan would not have been changed. Gamelin though refused to believe that this would be the case and Gort did not express doubts on the wisdom of this, or even raised it as a concern to the

⁴⁰² For further details see Smart, *British Strategy and Politics During the Phoney War*, 86-89; Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940*, 29 and J. R. Colville, *Man of Valour: The Life of Field-Marshal The Viscount Gort* (London: Collins, 1968), 153-154.

⁴⁰³ Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 82.

⁴⁰⁴ Martin S. Alexander. "'Fighting to the Last Frenchman'?: Reflections on the BEF Deployment to France and the Strains in the Franco-British Alliance, 1939-1940' in Joel Blatt (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 308.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁴⁰⁶ See Chapter 4.

British government. It would appear that the all consuming nature of the BEF' challenges constrained GHQ's capacity from so doing.

Playing its role in keeping the BEF's leadership in a subservient position to their French counterparts was, as Alexander describes, that Gort 'scrupulously respected the view that, as an operational field commander, strategic high-policy with a political as well as military aspect such as the Dyle Plan was outside his remit'.⁴⁰⁷ This led, it is argued, to the Dyle Plan and its future revisions being accepted virtually by default and certainly not disputed.⁴⁰⁸ In relation to this Captain Miles Reid remarked that in carrying out his liaison duties between the two nations' commands that from the British perspective on the Dyle Plan that 'I heard no doubts expressed as to its flexibility'.⁴⁰⁹ Claims that Gort could have acted differently and been less deferential to the French command were made by Brooke after the Second World War. In part Gort's background prior to his appointment as CIGS led to this view as until then had never commanded a unit larger than a brigade. Indeed Brooke's biographer Arthur Bryant wrote of Brooke's view on Gort that believed that:

though he possessed the right of appeal to London, he was far too loyal to exercise it except when disaster was starring him in the face. His very straightforwardness and Guardsman's feeling for obedience tended to neutralise his natural shrewdness and to silence any doubts he may have had. Instead of challenging the fallacious assumptions of his superiors, he loyally and cheerfully accepted them. The French high command, General Spears has since written, regarded him as a kind of friendly and jovial battalion commander always willing and anxious to please and ready to do anything he was told.⁴¹⁰

Brooke also wrote retrospectively on Gort that 'I had no confidence in his leadership when it came to handling a large force. He seemed incapable of seeing the wood for the trees'.⁴¹¹ Despite this retrospective criticism it should be noted though that such views are absent from his diaries of the time and it is not possible to point to significant criticism of the Dyle plan at the time other than a perceived 'vagueness' in how it was being conceived.⁴¹² Similar criticism of Gort is offered by General Adam, commander of the BEF's III Corps who stated

⁴⁰⁷ Alexander. 'Fighting to the Last Frenchman', 312.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Miles Reid MC, *Last on the List* (London: Leo Cooper, 1974), 20.

⁴¹⁰ Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide: A Study Based on the Diaries and Autobiographical Notes of Field Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke KG MO* (London: Collins, 1957), 53.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴¹² Ibid., 85.

later in 1961 that ‘Jack Gort, who had always preached for unified command, was the last person to question the orders he received from above’.⁴¹³

A key enabling factor in this dynamic was confidence in the French army. If the BEF’s perception had not been tinted by so much deference and an almost sense of inferiority then the BEF would have been better positioned to scrutinise not only French plan but its ally’s ground forces more broadly. Furthermore, there was the continuing incomplete understanding of the French army from the interwar period which was noted by the historian John Cairns that even after ‘nearly ten months of military collaboration had left astonishing areas of ignorance among the men at the top. Possibly this made collaboration easier’.⁴¹⁴

Nevertheless, despite this apparent subservience towards the French command, there is evidence of GHQ’s officers exerting influence despite their junior status to their Gallic counterparts. For example in the second half of September 1939 GHQ resisted a French contingency plan to swing the BEF forward on to the river Scheldt in the event of a German attack in Belgium. In this instance the GHQ successfully argued that such a manoeuvre would jeopardise the BEF’s railway communications which ran parallel to the front in a zone only twenty-five miles deep to the Channel which stretched five hundred miles back to the Brittany resupply ports.⁴¹⁵ Similarly Gort was able to resist French demands for British infantry to be transferred for use as labour on French defences.⁴¹⁶ These examples of the British successfully exerting influence were achieved through amicable discussions with the French army’s leadership. They can also be claimed to be a vindication of Gort’s alleged subservient approach being rewarded with influence, following a ‘hug them close’ approach to a junior partner’s behaviour in an unequal coalition alliance.⁴¹⁷ Moreover, such incidents do show that junior partners, particularly at the level of operational command, need not be impotent in the exercise of influence. It could also be argued that Britain had leverages with the French high command that they did not fully exploit. For example, the French requested a greater RAF component to be based in France and for the creation of greater British armoured formations to address French weaknesses in these areas.⁴¹⁸ To ascertain if French

⁴¹³ Roger Broad, *The Radical General: Sir Ronald Adam and Britain’s New Model Army 1941-1946* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2013), 70.

⁴¹⁴ John C Cairns. ‘A Nation of Shopkeepers In Search of a Suitable France: 1919-1940’. *The American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 742.

⁴¹⁵ Alexander. ‘Fighting to the Last Frenchman’, 311.

⁴¹⁶ TNA WO 167/41. No 2 Military Mission War Diary, 26 March 1940.

⁴¹⁷ See Peter Riddell, *Hug Them Close: Blair, Clinton, Bush and the Special Relationship* (London: Politico’s Publishing, 2003).

⁴¹⁸ Alexander, *Republic in Danger*, 252.

demands in these areas could have been exploited to gain greater influence for Britain would unfortunately though be to engage in counterfactual analysis of how events developed in 1939-1940. Equally, it would seem that the amicable, relatively placid nature of Franco-British relations during the Phoney War means such military-diplomatic manoeuvrings would have been wildly out of keeping with the relationship between the two countries' governments and armed forces at that time.

The capacity of the BEF's leadership to focus on other matters beyond their own immediate challenges was not helped by becoming engaged in political controversy with Hore-Belisha at the War Office. This was in part initiated by positive perceptions in London on the work of the French army. This related to the view that the secretary of state for war gained after a visit to France in November 1939 in which he judged that the French army were constructing defences at a greater rate than the BEF. Hore-Belisha was of the belief that Gort ought to have been instigating greater efforts from his forces in this area and seeking to emulate the French army's work. On this matter Hore-Belisha wrote to Gort that:

I really think that pillboxes should spring up everywhere. The Dominion representatives and Anthony Eden commented on their absence...Gamelin told me in Paris that they could make them in three days apiece... He hoped you would send down some officers to study their methods.⁴¹⁹

Such was the perceived disparity in defences that Hore-Belisha notified the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, on the matter and on one occasion the War Cabinet after CIGS Ironside had left the room. Once news of this reached the BEF's leadership a huge row erupted. Hore-Belisha's judgements caused great anger amongst the senior levels of the British army, and the BEF in particular. Hore-Belisha maintained that his attitude was one of endeavouring to help rather than one of criticism, but Gort threatened to resign. As the increasingly sour relations festered through December 1939, Chamberlain formed the view that Hore-Belisha had lost the confidence of his senior officers. The Prime Minister concluded that it was time to move Hore-Belisha from the War Office and offered him the post of President of the Board of Trade. Hore-Belisha declined this offer and left the government. In becoming embroiled in such disputes of high-political stakes, Gort and his staff were further limited in the wider matters that they could engage with. Ironically in this instance it was perceptions of the French army's strengths in the construction of defences which added to this difficulty.

⁴¹⁹ R J Minney, *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (London: Collins, 1960), 259-260.

Setting aside GHQ's preoccupation with its own difficulties, it is possible that greater scrutiny may have been given to the French army had they been aware of any indicators of issues that warranted concern. From GHQ's perspective in Arras though, this was not the case. Indeed those who had closer proximity with the French army and were in contact with Gort's officers did not highlight anything disquieting which they felt merited the attention of GHQ. This was certainly the case of the senior liaison missions with which GHQ had regular encounters.⁴²⁰ If those who were closely liaising with the French army on a daily basis did not express any doubts of what they witnessed, then it is understandable why GHQ did not have any concerns about the French army, focusing instead on its own serious problems.

Positive views of the wider French army

The positive view that many officers in the BEF had of the French army as a whole was in part the result of what they were able to observe of their ally's ground units whilst in France. Indeed, in the various visits, planning and numerous liaison activities that took place, many aspects of the French army were looked upon favourably by officers of the BEF. There were also occasions when the BEF's leadership were able to visit parts of the wider French army not directly linked to the command of their units in France. These occasions occurred sporadically, but each time they happened, more often than not, the impression created by the French army was a positive one. Among the aspects of the French army that were observed with praise by visiting officers were many of the defensive measures that were encountered. In particular the strength of the Maginot Line impressed. Like many British officers, Pakenham-Walsh was in awe of what he saw on his visit there. He noted in his diary on the scale of the Maginot defences that 'one can read all about these works in illustrated works etc, but they actually defy description'⁴²¹. Similarly, other French defensive positions were also praised by Pownall who noted of the front near le Quesnoy in his diary that:

The French First Army have done a lot of work here. There are two continuous lines of AT obstacles covered by concrete pill boxes, a number of supporting concrete works, quite a lot of wire...and a third line just started. I think we can accept this sector, liable, though it is to attack, without a qualm.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ See Chapter 4.

⁴²¹ LHCMA PAKENHAM-WALSH 1. Pakenham-Walsh, diary, 18 December 1939.

⁴²² Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 273.

The French army's equipment witnessed on these visits was also viewed favourably. On the specific issue of French armour, Pownall observed that 'I think *Char B...* can knock spots off any German tank'.⁴²³

A further aspect which was judged positively was the state of morale in the French army. While French morale does not seem, from the surviving records, to have been commented on by the highest levels of the BEF, it was noted by middle and lower appointment officers. For example, Captain Gerard Koch de Gooreynd, a liaison officer with the Third French Army, noted: 'The French here, as far as we are able to judge, are at times resigned to waiting and at times impatient. They seem to hope that in Spring we shall either attack or be attacked. They seem confident that once things begin to move we shall win.'⁴²⁴ Similarly he observed that 'many people say that the French turn will come when the Germans make their expected big offensive on the Western Front: the French will crush them and the war will be over in six months'.⁴²⁵

Morale was also judged to be good away from front-line units, in the headquarters of those who would command the French army in battle. This was certainly the view of liaison officer Colonel Audley Archdale, who observed of Billotte's headquarters that:

The HQ was undoubtedly a happy one, due chiefly to the characters of the individuals themselves. For General Billotte and his chief of staff there was respect but none of that deep personal attachment which may, without becoming sentimental, be termed affection.⁴²⁶

Although most British officers were reassured in what they could judge of the French army's morale, it was impossible to assess just how durable this would prove to be in the high-intensity combat operations that would eventually take place. Most British observers would have of course understood this, and so it would be wrong to claim that reports of sound French morale were more significant than they ought to have been in shaping British confidence in the French army.

Like its morale, the French army's overall combat effectiveness was also difficult to judge at a time of relative inactivity. However, there were opportunities presented by minor actions which occurred on the Franco-German border throughout the Phoney War to witness

⁴²³ Ibid., 256.

⁴²⁴ TNA WO 197/48. Captain Gerard Koch de Gooreynd, Report to IB from Saar Sector, 17 February 1940.

⁴²⁵ TNA WO 197/48. Captain Gerard Koch de Gooreynd, Report to IB from Saar Sector, 19 April 1940.

⁴²⁶ IWM ARCHDALE 78/52/1. Archdale, Liaison with the 1st Group of French Armies, 2.

the French army under fire. The BEF became more aware of these actions following the deployment of brigades, and later a whole division to the Saar Front to serve alongside the French from January 1940. When these actions took place, the British officers who observed them were usually full of praise of how the French army performed. This is shown by the award of gallantry medals to French officers and soldiers who took part in these minor combat operations alongside British units. One example of this is a recommendation for the award of an OBE to Commandant Koch, a French artillery officer, which was written by Brigadier E R Kewley the commanding officer of 144 British Infantry Brigade in April 1940. The recommendation stated that:

During the last twenty-four days he has been under my command, and has shown the greatest keenness to support us to the fullest extent and to take on targets day or night. This prompt firing went a long way to the successful conclusion of the attack on Grindorff on 4 April. This determination and drive has set a fine example to all who have come in contact with him, and he has inspired all to the complete confidence in his ability and sense of duty, and in the efficiency of those under him.⁴²⁷

Members of the French army's other ranks were also decorated for their actions alongside the BEF in the Saar. One instance of this is the award of the Military Medal to Serjeant Georges Lecointe. The recommendation for Lecointe's award stated that:

On the morning of 16 April the Germans attacked on the Grossenwald. This *Agent de Liaison* was in the inter-allied post in command of a detachment of French and British soldiers. There was a violent bombardment and this *Agent* was wounded, but continued to command his post, giving clear and good orders to his men, and setting a fine example to the soldiers placed under his command.⁴²⁸

Although these gallantry awards were in part issued to help facilitate good relations between the two allies, they do demonstrate that French officers and soldiers were able to perform effectively under-fire, and that this was observed and recognised by men of the BEF. However, these actions on the Franco-German border only amounted to small-scale operations, and could not present an accurate understanding of how the wider French army would perform under the different circumstances of a large-scale German attack. Nevertheless, they were yet another factor in reaffirming the wider confidence that officers of

⁴²⁷ TNA WO 197/50. Brigadier E. R. Kewley, recommendation for award of OBE to Commandant Koch, 20 April 1940.

⁴²⁸ TNA WO 197/50. Recommendation for award of Military Medal to Serjeant Lecointe, 20 April 1940.

the BEF had in the French army. The extent of the BEF's faith was shown in reporting back to London and was reflected in the comments of CIGS, General Ironside, who remarked on the correspondence which he received from Arras that 'Gort has given me no inkling that he finds anything serious amiss in the French Army. None of his staff have even whispered any doubts'⁴²⁹.

Criticisms of the French army

As can be expected of any large conscript force, the quality of French units and formations varied, as was noted by some BEF observers. However, as we have seen in other fields of reporting covered in this thesis, such criticism was fleeting and did little to shake overall confidence in the French army. Of the officers at GHQ, Pownall was most critical. In common with the liaison missions and other British officers who observed the French high command closely, Pownall was not impressed by the complex operation of command and control between the headquarters of Gamelin and Georges. Indeed, Pownall referred to this as 'a clownish arrangement'.⁴³⁰ Equally, Pownall agreed with other British officers outside of GHQ who were disappointed in the French 51st Division located adjacent to the BEF. In particular Pownall and others were dismayed by a lack of effort in the creation of defensive positions. On this matter Pownall observed that compared to British units:

In the British sector there are hundreds of men working, in the 51st Division I saw precisely nine! It is true that they are very thin on the ground...and they really need training...but they really are showing no signs of getting down to their problem for their commander, General Gillard, who hasn't attempted to tackle it and has, in effect thrown his hand in.⁴³¹

As the Phoney War continued Pownall criticised further the French 51st Division and its commander. He wrote in his diary that:

General Gillard was about as effective as usual and grouched that his men were in the front line all the time and didn't get relieved. It is a patent lie, they've had a very cushy time and indeed it is notorious that there has been a lot of absence without leave among them, many of the men being locals and prefer sleeping with their wives to sleeping in their billets.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Roderick MacLeod and Denis Kelly, eds., *The Ironside Diaries 1937 – 1940* (London: Constable, 1962), 204.

⁴³⁰ Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 277.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 257.

Although critical observations were made by Pownall, when placed in their wider context with other more positive observations, they were relatively minor, rare, and not thought to be able to undermine the French army's ability to withhold a German attack. Moreover, despite Pownall being the most critical officer at GHQ, his diaries are also testimony to British confidence in the outcome of future land operations in the West, which of course would be fought in the main by France's ground forces. Pownall believed that if Hitler were to attack that 'he ought to take a pretty heavy knock if he pokes his nose too far'⁴³³ whilst 'our own preparations all the time make [German] victory in the Spring most improbable'.⁴³⁴ More confidently still Pownall asserted that 'only on the Western Front can the war be lost on land – But it won't be!'⁴³⁵

Although not a direct criticism of the French army, there were occasions when senior officers had their patience tested by their Gallic counterparts. In the main this related to matters of logistical and administrative planning. Despite the importance of logistics, the issue is often overlooked by historians and certainly has been done so in the case of the BEF's time in France in 1939 and 1940. This is partly because the subject is an especially complex military matter and not perceived as dramatic or glamorous as the role of an army's combat arms. As a result greater attention has been devoted to the kinetic part of the BEF and the plans prepared for its role in the campaign ahead, whilst important areas of supply, movement and administration have not been given the historical study they merit.⁴³⁶ Yet, a military force is only able to sustain any deployment on the basis of its established logistical system. Such was the complexity of the logistic arrangements that needed to be put in place in France that it is understandable that this led to occasional frustrations between GHQ and its French counterparts. In this regard, Pownall observed that 'French Generals are rather apt to deal in wide sweeping projects which don't amount to much when the time comes'.⁴³⁷ He expanded further on this point later in the Phoney War when he observed that:

the French are apt to deliver themselves of the idea of a big 'project' without having examined sufficiently all its implications, particularly in

⁴³³ Ibid., 246.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁴³⁶ Logistical roles and functions are well covered though in the relevant regimental/corps histories. See, for example, Institution of the Royal Army Service Corps, *The Story of The RASC 1939-1945* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1958) and Brigadier A. H. Fernyhough. *A History of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, 1920-1945* (London: Royal Army Ordnance Corps, 1967.)

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 248.

administrative difficulties. There is a certain tendency in their 'G' Staff towards 'Q' will arrange'. They find us, on the other hand, rather sticklers for detail, perhaps anxious over what seem to them unimportant details which must be overcome somehow. But the net result is, as the French admit that if we say we will do a thing it means that we will and *can*. We don't let them down afterwards by saying that we're sorry but we found we could not do it after all.⁴³⁸

This frustration with French logisticians was also shown in difficulties that Lindsell, GHQ's Quarter Master General, experienced in attempts to improve the BEF's supply and transport arrangements. This concerned anxieties that the BEF had over the length of their lines of communication which stretched from Cherbourg and the Breton ports to the most advanced formations located close to the Belgian border. To shorten the lines of communication, GHQ, with the backing of the Admiralty, sought from the French the use of the more easterly Normandy ports and to create an advanced logistic base in the Somme Valley. However, as Lindsell reported to the War Office, he found the French reluctant to help the BEF in this matter. Lindsell wrote that:

At first the French were very averse to our using the port of Havre or to putting any installations in the area north of the Seine. This was due to political pressure in the first instance and the desire to protect the northern ports, particularly Havre, from possible air attack and also to the fact that in the area north of the Seine there were French military installations for the 7th Army on the left of the BEF that passed through this area. The valley of the Somme was definitely barred against us by *GQG* and the areas which we sought to establish depots between the Somme and the Seine were a matter of protracted negotiation with the French.⁴³⁹

These comments from Lindsell demonstrate the frustrations that the BEF's logisticians encountered with the French command, who in the eyes of GHQ were unwilling to put their own interests second to efforts to improve the British logistical situation in France. It was certainly true that the French command were initially reluctant to share any of its 7th Army's area of manoeuvre with the BEF, and were also unwilling to offer the use of the more easterly ports to Britain for fear of attracting air attack from the *Luftwaffe* which would lead to the reduction of France's port capacity. French intransigence on these matters was not helped further by pressure applied by the Admiralty on GHQ who were emphatic that more ports and land further to the east had to be opened to the BEF, to reduce the turn-round of ships

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁴³⁹ LHCMA LINDSELL 1/14. Lieutenant General Sir Wilfred Lindsell, report on movement and maintenance in the BEF, 23 June 1940.

travelling between Britain and the base ports. Nevertheless, although difficulties were encountered with French planners in this area, the problem was ultimately resolved after lengthy discussions, and the BEF was finally permitted to establish an advance logistic base north of the Seine shortly before the start of the German offensive. Furthermore, the matter did not threaten to seriously undermine the good relations enjoyed by the Franco-British commands, even though it did test the patience of the likes of Lindsell at GHQ. Such was the complexity though of the logistical arrangements that needed to be put in place, difficulties between the two commands in this area were always likely to have occurred at some stage.

Away from GHQ, criticisms similar in nature were also made by the corps commanders. This was certainly done so by Dill and Adam. Dill for example informed the King that ‘the French troops that one sees...vary considerably’.⁴⁴⁰ In the case of Adam, criticisms were made of isolated incidents of certain behaviour or of a small number of individual officers. For example, Adam wrote to Pownall about the conduct of French Army guards posted to aerodromes in the III Corps’ area of operations. Adam told Pownall that ‘till now these anti-sabotage guards have been provided by the French Territorials, but these show distinct signs of drifting away (usually without warning!)’. Adam also held some concerns of a small number of senior officers. Amongst those who he had negative observations of was Gamelin who he described as ‘not a convincing chief of staff’⁴⁴¹ and that he had ‘not much opinion’ of him.⁴⁴² Similarly, Adam did not highly rate General Fagalde who commanded the French Corps on the left flank of III Corps. Adam believed Fagalde to be ‘a fine upstanding figure and pleasant to meet but did not inspire great confidence in his fitness for modern war’.⁴⁴³

In contrast to Dill and Adam the BEF’s other Corps Commander, Brooke, appears to have made criticisms of the French army that were more extensive and serious. This is certainly the claim of some historians who highlight concerns expressed by Brooke to infer that he considered that the defeat of the French army was a likely outcome of a German attack in the West.⁴⁴⁴ The principal source of these concerns are Brooke’s diaries and much has been made of some entries by several historians. This is particularly evident in two

⁴⁴⁰ LHCMA DILL 3/1/2. Dill to George VI, 28 February 1940.

⁴⁴¹ LHCMA ADAM 3/10, 4. Adam, unpublished autobiography, 1946.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴ Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*, 147-148; Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 18-19 and Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 160.

biographies of Brooke by Bryant and David Fraser, who both made use of his diaries and autobiographical notes written by Brooke in his retirement.⁴⁴⁵ In the context of Brooke's time with the BEF during the Phoney War and his perception of the French army, Bryant summarises the diary, saying: 'it mirrors a sense of impending disaster –a terrifying awareness of the moral rot that was sapping the courage of Britain's ally and of her own unpreparedness and lack of realism.'⁴⁴⁶ Furthermore, Bryant writes of Brooke that:

Unlike the British government and War Office and his own gallant, unquestioning Commander-in-Chief, he had no faith in the French higher command. He could see that the Supreme Commander was old and tiered, that his lieutenants who entertained their British colleagues so hospitably were more interested in gastronomy than fighting and that the dapper ageing generals in their gilded *képis* and immaculate breeches who had been staff officers under Foch were living on the glories of the past and ignoring the present.⁴⁴⁷

Bryant's characterisations of Brooke's views are in keeping with the general scholarship on the French army of the era when he wrote these comments in 1957 in interpreting France's defeat as being a product of a decadent Third Republic. Historians have of course moved on from this interpretation whilst Bryant's perceptions of Brooke's views are not in keeping with the diary as a whole.⁴⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in Fraser's more recent biography a similar portrayal of Brooke's view of the French army persists. Indeed, Fraser writes that Brooke 'was sceptical of the capabilities of the French army'.⁴⁴⁹ In particular, Fraser asserts that Brooke was concerned at the contrast between the French army of the Phoney War to that which he had encountered in the First World War. He wrote of Brooke that 'he had visited Verdun...and had been impressed by the depths of the indomitable character of the French army and people - at that time. The contrast shattered him'⁴⁵⁰and that he 'had been shattered by much of what he had seen of the soldiers of France he loved – so different from what he remembered'.⁴⁵¹

It is true that throughout the Phoney War Brooke expressed numerous anxieties about the French army in his diary. Indeed, only two days after his arrival in France, Brooke visited

⁴⁴⁵ Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* and David Fraser *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins 1982).

⁴⁴⁶ Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* 13.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴⁸ See Chapter 1; see below.

⁴⁴⁹ Fraser, *Alanbrooke*, 137.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

the French garrison at Laval and noted 'French slovenliness, dirtiness and inefficiency are I think worse than ever'.⁴⁵² Similarly, although as seen above, Brooke judged positively the French army's senior command, in his diary he still offered occasional criticisms of certain officers. For example, the commander of the French 22nd Division, General Hassler, was described by Brooke as 'a fire eater with curled up moustaches, constantly acting and I should think unreliable and useless'.⁴⁵³ General Fagalde also did not impress Brooke who he described as 'a pleasant ruffian and an amusing companion but does not inspire one with unbounded confidence as far as his efficiency is concerned'.⁴⁵⁴

One particular aspect of the French army which did not please Brooke was an apparent lack of work carried out on fixed defensive positions close to the BEF's sector. This was a concern to many British observers who observed this part of the front. Brooke stated of the area between Armentières, Halluin, Tourcoing and Lille that 'French defences are to all intents and purposes non-existent on this front. When I see this state of affairs and think what might have happened if the Germans had attacked before the winter makes me shudder'.⁴⁵⁵ More generally on the French units he had observed, Brooke recorded in his diary on 29 January 1940 that he had 'a feeling of depression as to the lack of real finish in the French Army. A very amateur appearance which compares unfavourably with the utter efficiency of the Germans even as exemplified by types of German prisoners in French hands'.⁴⁵⁶

Brooke's concerns were expressed further after two visits to the Maginot Line in December 1939 and February 1940. Whereas most British visitors to the Maginot Line expressed great admiration about the defences they were shown, Brooke was less enthusiastic. Although he was impressed by the Maginot Line as an achievement in military construction, he questioned if it made the best use of resources that France had at its disposal. After one tour of these defence he described them as:

Most interesting...and all round an astonishing engineering feat. But I am not convinced that it is a marvellous military accomplishment. Millions of money stuck in the ground for purely static defence, and the total firepower developed by these works bears no relation to the time, work and money spent in their construction. Their most dangerous aspect is the

⁴⁵² Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 4.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

psychological one, a sense of false security is engendered, a feeling of sitting behind an impregnable iron fence; and should the fence perchance be broken then French fighting spirit be brought crumbling down with it!⁴⁵⁷

What Brooke was evidently missing in his analysis is a recognition that it was precisely because the Maginot Line was a purely defensive project that many French left-wing and centrist parliamentarians agreed to vote for it between 1929 and 1935. A comparable investment in tanks and aircraft, or other efforts to remedy deficiencies in France's armed forces, was politically impossible.⁴⁵⁸ Furthermore, in making these judgements Brooke appears to not fully appreciate the strategic value of the Maginot Line. Indeed Brooke does not properly acknowledge that these defences were intended to prevent German forces from attacking directly France's eastern frontier with its important population and industrial centres at the expense of relatively little military manpower. In so doing the French army would then be able to deploy in greater numbers to meet the anticipated German outflanking manoeuvre through Belgium. It seems, however, that the strategic importance of the Maginot Line, albeit gained through huge expense, was not valued properly by Brooke. After all, had the Maginot Line not existed in 1939-1940, then the Allies, including Brooke's corps, would have had an even more difficult challenge in defending France's borders. Given that Brooke's strategic thinking later as CIGS played an important role in the Allies' victory, it is surprising that he did not see greater merit in the Maginot Line.⁴⁵⁹ Brooke though was not without oversights in his strategic judgements. For example, later in the war he was one of those in the British high command that was reluctant to pursue the opening of the 'Second Front' with a cross channel invasion. Instead Brooke favoured the Allies pursuing a strategy which sought to confront Germany in greater strength in the Mediterranean and Balkans. Brooke was of course over ruled on this by Britain's US ally who believed with justification that a large scale assault on the northern coast of France was the most effective means of defeating Germany on the Continent. Brooke's lack of value that he attributed to the Maginot Line therefore appears to be another rare strategic miscalculation on his part.

Even though some of the assessments offered by Brooke are critical of certain aspects of the French army, he was in no way prophesising on the outcome of the Battle of France.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵⁸ See Martin S. Alexander, "In Defence of the Maginot Line: Security policy, domestic politics and the economic depression in France" in *French Foreign and Defence Policy, 1918-1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, ed. Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 1998), 163-193.

⁴⁵⁹ A statue commemorating Brooke in Whitehall is engraved with large letters on its plinth which declares him 'Master of Strategy'.

Indeed, Brook did not expect the French army to collapse or be defeated at all in the manner which it was. It should also be remembered that as seen above, Brooke was not always an admirer of French ways, and it is possible that this may have coloured some of his observations, particularly with his comments about ‘French slovenliness’ and ‘very amateur appearance’ which did not amount to judgements of general military efficiency. Furthermore, as has also been shown Brooke had much to say that was positive about the French army and he went far further with his criticisms of the BEF which he believed to be in a far worse condition. It is also worth noting the Brooke diaries in tone can be described as downbeat at best and more accurately extremely pessimistic. This is true not only of the Phoney War period, but throughout the Second World War as a whole. In his dairies few senior figures of the Allied war effort are not singled out for strong criticism, and Brooke is frequently unhopeful about many aspects of the course of the war. This included Britain’s prospect of being able to resist a German invasion and the possibility of success in the Normandy landings. It is interesting though that most of these anxieties are absent from official records, and perhaps reflects the nature of personal diaries where inner doubts and worries are revealed in a way which they are concealed in other forums. Brooke was of course placed in a senior position of enormous pressure and it seems likely that his diaries became a forum for him to release some of the strains which he must have endured in carrying out his duties. Indeed, this was acknowledged by Brooke who noted that ‘a diary is necessarily an impulsive and therefore somewhat unbalanced record of events’.⁴⁶⁰ Furthermore, Bryant also described the diaries as ‘a safety-valve for repressed irritation, anxiety and frustration’.⁴⁶¹ Therefore, the worries expressed by Brooke in his diaries and his retrospective criticisms should be seen in the context of his more positive judgements and also in his overly pessimistic forecasts made during remainder of the war.

Although criticisms of the French army were made by senior officers of the BEF at GHQ and corps command level, to their credit none of them claimed in the aftermath of the Battle of France to have witnessed issues with France’s ground forces which they considered would lead to defeat in June 1940. However, a number of officers from divisional command down to mid-ranking levels claimed to have done so. It should be noted that at this level there is no evidence to support the idea that these officers observed matters during the Phoney War

⁴⁶⁰ Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide*, 7.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

which led them to doubt the French army's ability to resist a German attack in the West. Indeed, prior to the German offensive, official records, diaries and letters written or compiled by these officers are, with a few exceptions, absent of such criticisms or predictions. These instances of retrospective wisdom are accurately summarised by the historian P M H Bell who notes that 'after the French defeat many British observers remembered hints during the Phoney War that the French did not have their hearts in the conflict that there was a danger of exaggerating these in retrospect as they had been minimised at the time'.⁴⁶²

One of the best examples of an officer claiming to have predicted the French army's demise is that of General Montgomery, who commanded the BEF's 3rd Infantry Division. Montgomery's papers and indeed the wider 3rd Division's records are honest and clear about the BEF's strengths and weaknesses. They do not, though, contain any serious reservations about the French army's ability to perform effectively in future operations. Montgomery though claimed in his memoir published in 1958 that he was unimpressed at his first impressions of the French army during the Phoney War and appears to claim that he anticipated its defeat just a few months later. He wrote of his first visit to the French frontline:

That was my first experience in the war of the French army in action; I was seriously alarmed and on my return I went to see my Corps Commander, and told him of my fears about the French Army and what we might have to expect from that quarter in the future...The popular cries in the Maginot Line were: *Ils ne passeront pas* and *On les aura*. But the general attitude did not give any confidence that either of these two things would happen. Brooke and I agreed not to talk about it to our subordinates.⁴⁶³

Such a bold assertion is not supported by the surviving archival material available today. Furthermore, Montgomery's account of the Normandy campaign of 1944 shows that this was not the only time he would claim to have foreseen events precisely as they would occur, contrary to the evidence of the time. Even one of Montgomery's more sympathetic biographer's, Nigel Hamilton, admits that Montgomery did not anticipate the defeat of June 1940. Indeed, Hamilton states that 'it is unlikely that Bernard Montgomery foresaw in September 1939 the utter debacle that was to befall the BEF'.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² P. M. H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1974), 9-10.

⁴⁶³ Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1958), 59.

⁴⁶⁴ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General 1887-1942* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), 319.

Montgomery is just one of the BEF's officers who claimed after the French defeat that they witnessed evidence during the Phoney War pointing to the inevitable defeat that followed. Another officer was Brigadier Francis Davidson, who served as the chief artillery officer for the BEF's I Corps. Although Davidson offers some accurate critical observations, less credible are several 'pointers' which he claimed to identify as signs that the French Army was heading to an inevitable defeat. One criticism which Davidson directed at the French army was the condition of its artillery which he believed compared unfavourably to that within I Corps in which he served. Davidson claims that this came to his attention following his visit to Colonel Voisin, the senior artillery officer in the French III Corps at Valenciennes. Davidson wrote of his visit to the French artillery that:

Two things came out troubling: (i) The French positions shocked me. No protection: untidy, ammunition left lying about uncovered from the weather; virtually no camouflage. (ii) With us the reverse in every item. Colonel Voisin often expressed his admiration of our own positions and the poor state of his own. It was one of the many pointers to the poor state of the French Army.⁴⁶⁵

As I Corps' chief gunner, Davidson was rightly proud of his own artillery. This pride was not misplaced as in 1939 and 1940 the artillery was the strongest of the BEF's combat arms. Criticism of the French artillery that he observed should therefore be understood in the context that the British gunners were amongst the very best to be judged against. However, the artillery arm was also one of the French army's strongest. Therefore although criticisms of untidiness may have been justified, these observations are in no way sufficiently significant to be considered a 'pointer' to the defeat of the French army.

The same is also true of another 'pointer' identified by Davidson, which he believed to be a lack of saluting observed within the French army. Although saluting is an important aspect in maintaining respect and acknowledging authority within an army, it clearly does not act as a key indicator of likely combat effectiveness. Nevertheless, this was not the view of Davidson who stated that:

The route from our officers' 'A' mess in Douai passed through the barracks of a French Reserve Unit, whose personnel rarely saluted one. So I asked General Dill his experience. He said that if he first saluted the French soldiers they would usually respond: otherwise no. Another pointer.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ LHCMA DAVIDSON 3/3, Brigadier Francis Davidson, account of I Corps BEF 1939-1940.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

One other common example of officers being troubled by relatively trivial issues concerned the apparent untidy appearance and demeanour of some French soldiers. This was remarked upon by Colonel Frederick Clarke. He observed that:

Wherever I went either in the Lille district in the early days, or during long tours in the L of C Area, I never saw French troops training. They lounged about the villages, living in uncomfortable billets, very badly turned out and ill shod. One wondered what the real French army was, and did not realise at first that pacification and politics had well nigh-destroyed it.⁴⁶⁷

Similarly, Brigadier Fryer recalled the first French units that he encountered near Auch which he described as ‘most pretty scruffy looking, and apparently just aimlessly wandering around the roads’.⁴⁶⁸ Clearly the appearance of French soldiers troubled many British officers. One reason for this is that presentation and saluting were highly valued in the British army. Indeed, this is shown in the November 1939 war diary of the 2nd Infantry Division which stressed that ‘general smartness and good saluting are essential features’ in an army.⁴⁶⁹ It is certainly true that these issues have a value within an army especially when trying to impose military discipline on non-career soldiers. However, occasional untidy appearance and a lack of saluting are not key indicators of an army’s potential combat effectiveness and clearly would not be decisive features in the battle of France. Moreover, the French army was not universally scruffy as demonstrated by many observations by the likes of Fryer who also encountered ‘smart French Gunner officers’.⁴⁷⁰ Evidently though, many British officers devoted too much concern to these relatively minor matters within the French army.

It is interesting that after the fall of France that those officers at the highest levels of the BEF at GHQ and corps command chose not to have claimed that they foresaw difficulties in the French army which questioned its operational viability. It would appear that this was only done so from those down from the level of divisional command in the BEF. One explanation for this difference would seem that had officers at GHQ or corps level made such statements they would have lacked credibility. These officers would have realised so and evidently saw no merit in claiming to have noted serious French deficiencies in being wise after the event. It would have been questioned why such concerns were not passed further up

⁴⁶⁷ LHCMA CLARKE 1/1. Clarke, ‘The Memoirs of a Professional Soldier in Peace and War’, 11.

⁴⁶⁸ IWM FRYER 92/28/1. Fryer, Brockenhurst and Back via Dunkirk, 8.

⁴⁶⁹ TNA WO 167/203. 2nd Infantry Division, War Diary, 28 November 1939.

⁴⁷⁰ IWM FRYER 92/28/1. Fryer, Brockenhurst and Back via Dunkirk, 8.

the British chain of command to the War Office and the government in London. Clearly officers at these levels had the opportunity to have brought these issues to the attention of the French and the British government even if had not been possible to remedy them. It seems though that the temptation to seek credit for having foreseen serious weaknesses in the French army was too great for some officers at lower levels of the BEF's command. The motivation for why some officers chose to make these remarks after the Battle of France is not obvious. There was no clear benefit for them in doing so other than the hope of being acclaimed to have been so perceptive. In this sense perhaps their claims reveal an insight to an aspect of the character of these officers.

Fear of a French 'Fifth Column'

One aspect which some officers in the BEF believed could significantly undermine the French army, but which ultimately proved unfounded, was the presence in France of a Fifth Column. British officers were concerned about the possible consequences which could ensue if an effective and widespread Fifth Column was operating within France. Fears from this threat created alarm throughout British society during the early years of the Second World War, and officers of the BEF were not exempt from it. One such officer was Colonel Frederick Clarke. When based in a village north of Lens, Clarke suspected, although was never able to prove, that the local mine manager in whose house he and several others were billeted, was passing intelligence on the 4th Division to the Germans through wireless transmission.⁴⁷¹

One officer who was adamant that there was an extensive Fifth Column operating in France was Major John Churcher, a staff officer in the supply branch of the BEF's GHQ. During the Phoney War, Churcher declared that 'at that time my suspicions were beginning to rise on the question of infiltrated Fifth Columnists into our area and no doubt other areas of the BEF'.⁴⁷² Later he was convinced that 'the whole area was riddled with German Fifth Columnists and spies and these were dressed as French Officers or civilians'. In particular, Churcher was aggravated by a French civilian who used to loiter near his headquarters in Roubaix. He wrote that 'there was a certain young woman who seemed always to be hanging

⁴⁷¹ LHCMA CLARKE 1/1. Clarke, 'The Memoirs of a Professional Soldier in Peace and War', 7.

⁴⁷² LHCMA CHURCHER 1. Churcher, 'A Soldier's Story', 15.

about our headquarters and never talking to anybody, just walking by and watching, always watching. I at the time was deeply suspicious'.⁴⁷³ Churcher believed he had his suspicions confirmed when he later saw the same lady over 160 miles away in Rouen as France fell. He recorded that 'then when I saw this same woman again. There was a mutual recognition and the quickest disappearance of a woman I have ever seen'.⁴⁷⁴ Churcher's views on this matter were understandably not aided by the fact that the French liaison officer with whom he worked most closely was Le Comte René de Chambrun, who was later appointed by the Vichy regime as its ambassador to the United States and also the son-in-law of the French Collaborationist prime minister Pierre Laval. When Churcher learnt of de Chambrun's appointment it confirmed his earlier suspicions and remarked 'I believe even that Fifth Columnists or pseudo Fifth Columnists were beginning to be rife amongst not only our army but also the French army'.⁴⁷⁵

Officers worried about such a threat and continued to speculate about any possible impact after the defeat of June 1940. Churcher was again one such officer and was adamant that the French army contained such an element. Churcher described one incident which illustrated this claim:

a French Commandant...always appeared at our headquarters a few hours before we were due to blow our demolition belts. This happened on the crossings over the Seine and more important still the crossings over the Risle...The story was always the same: "When are you going to blow the bridges? Oh, you can't do that we have some French armour to bring over from the other side". The interesting point was that the French armour never materialised but the Germans did. On the next river line West of the Risle, the CRE and I had organised a 20 mile demolition belt. The same procedure with the French Commandant occurred. I informed him that the bridges would be blown at midday and that if the French armour was on the wrong side, then it could damn well stay there. The bridges went up, there was no French armour left on the wrong side...That French Commandant never appeared again in France at our headquarters but after we were evacuated from France on 17 June and detained at Waterloo...[amongst] a military mass of soldiery French, Belgian and British, I saw this tall man again. He saw me and again made the quickest disappearance act I had ever witnessed.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., Appendix A, 3.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., Appendix A, 4.

Churcher's account should not be considered untrue, as undoubtedly there were isolated examples of those who acted in the manner of the Commandant described in this account. However, Churcher's story is not evidence of there being a widespread Fifth Column present in the French army. Furthermore, Churcher appears to have a tendency to embellish some claims he makes of the defeat of the French army. Almost all would agree that June 1940 did not show the French army at its most effective, but Churcher's claim that 'the French army was useless and I personally never saw them fire a shot'⁴⁷⁷ appears exaggerated. Moreover, although other British officers did accuse the French army of being undermined by a Fifth Column from within, they provided little evidence to suggest that this was present in any sizeable or meaningful way.

Some officers though were more rational about the threat posed by any subversive element. For example, Captain Geddes undoubtedly believed that a Fifth Column existed in France. In particular he thought that they were present amongst the female company available in night clubs and other establishments frequented by the men of the BEF. However, Geddes did not believe that this in any way posed a threat to the campaign ahead noting that 'girls by the score sprang overnight...Many of the girls undoubtedly in German pay, but it is very doubtful if the enemy learned anything through them that they did not already know'.⁴⁷⁸

Despite these fears of the Fifth Column, it would appear that the concerns of British officers were misplaced. Indeed, it has been convincingly shown in Louis de Jong's study of alleged German Fifth Column activity in the Second World War that there were no such subversive operations undertaken.⁴⁷⁹ Instead de Jong concluded that 'Fifth Columns' are born in the minds of people at times of fear throughout history. In his investigation, de Jong examines if there were any grounds to the belief held by many that German successes in the first part of the war were in any part due to the operation of a vast and well armed German Fifth Column in Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and even in Great Britain and the United States.

De Jong provides examples of how widespread the belief in a Fifth Column was during the Phoney War and Battle of France noting that 'Not a journalist, not a refugee, not a soldier landed in England who was not full of tales about the Fifth Column and treachery'.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ TNA CAB 106/253. Geddes, 'Crowded Hour', 1 January 1939- December 1940, 23.

⁴⁷⁹ Louis de Jong *The German Fifth Column: In the Second World War* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 96.

That the Germans achieved such success in a short time in their campaigns of 1939 and 1940 seemed for many proof that the use of such exceptional means as a Fifth Column led to the unexpected course of events. De Jong explains that:

the fact itself of the rapid collapse of four countries in just over a month seemed proof enough of the use of exceptional means. A normal war did not develop like that! It could not possibly have been only a superior force of tanks and aircraft that had enabled Hitler to reach the Channel in ten days, so people felt.⁴⁸¹

The fear of such a threat was real in the minds of many fuelled by reports from the likes of minister, ambassadors, experienced business men and journalists across Europe claiming even to be eyewitnesses of such activity. The British Ministry of Information even announced that Fifth Columnists were making signals to guide German aircraft.⁴⁸²

De Jong does not specifically examine the claims of British officers in the field about their belief in a Fifth Column. It is clear though that these officers referred to above were not exempt from the fears shared by many in this issue in Britain and across Western Europe. De Jong's research shows that these concerns were baseless and that there is no evidence for Fifth Column activity, certainly not in any large numbers. Furthermore de Jong notes that the official British history of the campaign makes no mention of the term 'Fifth Column' whilst in the French military literature of the struggle of 1939-1940 there is not one single truly convincing Fifth Column case described. Although evidently the fear of the Fifth Column proved to be misplaced it is notable how in the secondary literature this is seldom referred to despite the widespread concern as the accounts of officers with the BEF above demonstrate. This clearly then has been an oversight as it was a notable feature of the period especially given the attention devoted to it almost daily at the time by radio and the press together with its reoccurrence in the personal accounts of British officers.⁴⁸³ Indeed, even though any impact of a Fifth Column amounted to nothing tangible; it is still a notable feature of personal British accounts of France and the French army at that time.

How then is the belief of British officers in a Fifth Column in France to be understood? On one level, BEF officers were simply exhibiting the same fears evident in the wider population. This is convincingly explained by de Jong to be a psychological reaction to

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 196.

the high tension and drama of the time. De Jong states that belief in a Fifth Column is borne out of fear, aggressiveness of the enemy and helplessness and uncertainty. Part of an irrational but natural process that, in fact and understandable way of assimilating a part of reality felt to be unbearable, a process in which is almost inevitable in times of great tension.⁴⁸⁴ Indeed, it should be noted that similar such fears has existed throughout history with examples stretching back to 1789 before the storming of the Bastille, to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, during the early stages of the First World War in Europe and even in the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴⁸⁵ Clearly then the fear of a Fifth Column was another aspect of their perception of the French army that troubled many officers at divisional level and below, most of which proved either unfounded or trivial.

Preconceived ideas of France, the French army and the new conflict

The lived experience of the BEF's leadership during the Phoney War undoubtedly played a major role in shaping its perspective of the French army. Additionally, though, a series of preconceived ideas about France and its ground forces were held by many senior officers as they crossed the Channel after the declaration of war which also played a role in forming their judgements on their Gallic ally. One idea or attitude which appears not to have been of great significance in forming the BEF's leadership's perceptions of the French army is that of the antagonistic view held towards France in many parts of British society at this time. Although much has been made by recent historians of this attitude in explaining Franco-British relations in the 1930s and 1940s, such a sentiment does not feature significantly in an explanation of the BEF's leadership's views of the French army.⁴⁸⁶ If a degree of Francophobia did exist amongst senior officers it appears to have been well hidden in their assessments of their French ally. Moreover, it would appear that at least some in the BEF's command evidently had an enlightened and un-prejudiced view of France. This certainly seemed to be the case with Brownrigg. Indeed, with the approval of Gort he published in GHQ's Routine Orders an article produced by André Maurois in *le Figaro*, titled

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 255-56.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 250-251.

⁴⁸⁶ See Dockrill, *British Establishment Perspectives on France*; Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 1-26; P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente and Estrangement* (Longman, 1996), 178-180, Robert & Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: Britain and France, the History of a Love-Hate Relationship* (Pimlico, 2007), 520-524 and Richard Davis, *Anglo-French Relations Before the Second World War: Appeasement and Crisis* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), 13-16, 188-189.

‘Ten Commandments’, which was purported to have been compiled by a British officer for the guidance of his men in their relations with the civil population of France. In taking this course of action Brownrigg and Gort were explaining the cultural differences between Britain and France to counter any prejudiced sentiments that existed towards the French. In so doing of course they were acknowledging the degree of suspicion held towards the French by the wider British public which would have been reflected in the other ranks of the BEF. The order stated that officers and soldiers should:

be careful not to judge the French too hastily. Their ways are not ours, but it does not follow that from that they are bad ways...Remember that things which seem to us natural because they are British may unknown to us, shock and even wound the French. We like human beings to treat each other with a certain offhandedness. Our allies feel differently. Therefore, go a bit further for a French friend than you would for an English one...It depends on you that ten, twenty, a hundred Frenchmen should look upon the Englishman as an ally worthy of his confidence and his affection.⁴⁸⁷

In publishing this view it does suggest too that perhaps Brownrigg and Gort had a predisposed favourable impression of the French indicating a degree of Francophilia. Evidence of a definite sense of this is difficult to prove, but the publication of Maurois’ work in ‘Routine Orders’ appears to show a degree of unconscious bias towards the French way of life which in the case of Brownrigg and Gort could have played a small role in shaping their favourable view of the French army. On balance though the publication of these extracts indicates a need at GHQ to try suppress less positive attitudes towards France that was likely to have been held amongst the BEF’s rank and file. If this was not the motivation behind the publication of Maurois’ work then why else would this have been presented in the ‘Routine Orders?’

Nevertheless, it appears that there were less generous feelings towards the French that were held amongst the BEF’s leadership but which were masked by the cordiality of Franco-British relations during the Phoney War. This appears to have been the case with Pownall, which was later revealed under the stress and tension created by the German *Blitzkrieg*. Indeed, on 19 May 1940, nine days after the start of the German attack, he despaired ‘my God how awful to be allied to so temperamental a race!’⁴⁸⁸ Similarly, writing a short while after the end of the Battle of France he speculated that there was ‘something in the French

⁴⁸⁷ Brownrigg, *Unexpected*, 145.

⁴⁸⁸ Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 323.

temperament maybe which makes them unable to bear the uncertainties and anxieties of defeat.⁴⁸⁹ These diary extracts demonstrate that although strongly held antagonistic personal views of the French existed amongst certain British officers, these opinions could and indeed were put to one side to form objective judgements of the French army. It therefore would seem that personal views as Pownall demonstrates, be they favourable or otherwise to France, were not significant in shaping the assessments of the BEF's leadership on the French army.

More significant in explaining the BEF's command's confidence in the French army was the high regard that many of its officers had developed and retained from France's victory in the First World War. The majority of those who occupied GHQ's most senior posts had served on the Western Front and had been able to view the French Army closely. It seems likely that the generation of officers that led the BEF during the Phoney War were not exempt from this. The extent to which this sentiment and a reverence towards France's ground forces endured in the British Army in the inter-war period has been analysed in Chapter 3. Nevertheless there are notable examples of this which merit attention when looking at the BEF specifically. An instance of this lasting admiration of the French army from 1914-1918 was seen amongst those at GHQ in the routine orders, referred to above. In these on Brownrigg's insistence it was stated that the BEF's officers and soldiers were to 'Remember the last war and the part that the French Army played' as a means of engendering good will and respect to the French.⁴⁹⁰ The lasting effect of the admiration from the French army's victory in the Great War that was felt by the BEF's leadership was also described by Pownall who wrote that:

We of the British Army are supposed to be amateurs compared to them, the great military nation whose officers spend their whole lives in study, undistracted by the pursuit of sports and games. The French in the nicest way were a little condescending to us at our own efforts in soldiering- and we thought they had the right to be.⁴⁹¹

The way in which the BEF's leadership looked upon the French army in the context of the First World War is typified by Brooke. Indeed, the influence that this had on Brooke is particularly evident and it would seem that he is a clear example of how the positive influence of the French army from the First World War coloured his outlook until the

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.,367.

⁴⁹⁰ Brownrigg, *Unexpected*, 145.

⁴⁹¹ Bond, *Chief of Staff*, 366.

German *Blitzkrieg* began. Brooke of course had earned his reputation as one of the army's leading artillery officers of the Great War in planning barrages that were exceptionally effective and in the British context innovative too. Brooke's success in this field though was the result of his study of French artillery during the conflict which he sought to emulate for the benefit of the British Army. Through careful study of his French gunner counterparts, Brooke was able to successfully replicate what he had learnt. This was first seen during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, with Brooke as the senior artillery officer in the 18th Division being credited with introducing the first form of creeping barrage used by the British army, an innovation that he copied from observing the French.⁴⁹²

Brooke's study of the French army did not stop in 1916 though. Following the seasonal cessation of major operations in December 1916, the British army sought new means to avoid further attritional trench warfare that they had experienced on the Somme. To do so the British command attempted to identify lessons from the French army for the own benefit. As a result in January 1917, Brooke was part of a study group from the British First Army that travelled to Verdun to attend a detailed briefing from the French Second Army on lessons learnt from operations conducted there. Brooke was one of those who were interested in Nivelle's tactics and accordingly Brooke sought to replicate further what the French had found effective at Verdun. This Brooke did when posted to the Canadian Corps later that year and put the lessons he had learnt at Verdun into practice in formulating the Canadian artillery plan at the attack on Vimy Ridge on 9 April 1917.⁴⁹³ Such was the success of Brooke's artillery barrage at Vimy, that it was considered a model for future British and Imperial forces' operations in the war.⁴⁹⁴

Brooke's achievements on the Western Front together with his subsequent successful career ascent were owed in significant part to the study of the French army and the adoption of their methods. Given this background, it is perhaps not surprising that Brooke continued to view the French army as a force of great strength at the time of the Phoney War. It also offers

⁴⁹² Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 20.

⁴⁹³ Mark Osborne Humphries, "'Old Wine in New Bottles'" A Comparison of British and Canadian Preparations in the Battle of Arras' in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* eds Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Michael Bechthold (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: 2014), 67.

⁴⁹⁴ Patrick Brennan, 'Julian Byng and Leadership in the Canadian Corps' in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* eds Hayes, Iarocci and Bechthold, 98-100. It is also worth noting that the visit of Brooke and others to Verdun in January 1917 also led to the successful replication of other French tactics, beyond their use of artillery, which the British and Imperial Forces used to great effect later in the war, most notably in different aspects of infantry tactics.

an insight to comments he made in his diary in October 1939 when he wrote that 'I hope that they still possess the same fighting qualities which they showed in the last war'.⁴⁹⁵ Clearly for Brooke, as no doubt for others, a lasting admiration from the Great War remained at the start of the new conflict in 1939.

Conclusion

On the whole the surviving archive material reveals that aside from some trivial and ultimately inconsequential observations the BEF's leadership had few doubts regarding the combat effectiveness of the French army during the period of the Phoney War. The confidence in the French army felt by senior officers of course existed before they disembarked in France in September 1939 and was not likely to be easily eroded in the eight months of the Phoney War, especially with no operational test on the Western Front on which to judge the French army. Yet, the opportunity to work closely with the French command in joint planning also presented an opportunity to look at the French army afresh and revise the widely held assumptions about its strength. This though proved beyond the capacity of GHQ's officers who were overwhelmed by the severe challenges which they faced in deploying and readying the BEF for the future German *Blitzkrieg*. Such were the weaknesses of the BEF which needed to be addressed, coupled with the complexity of positioning and sustaining it in the field, that Gort and his staff had little opportunity to offer detailed scrutiny of the French army. The difficulty of this challenge ensured that its entire outlook at that stage of the war was shaped by the anxiety of the BEF's unpreparedness. Consequently, the all consuming effort that was necessary to ensure the BEF would be ready for the German attack meant that everything from senior officers' perspective was viewed through this prism, including how it viewed the French army. Not only did this mean that GHQ opposed the diversion of Britain's military resources to Scandinavia and the Empire, but it also ensured that when the BEF was contrasted to its Gallic counterpart, it ensured that the French army appeared to be a force of great strength.

In being unable to devote time and resources to assessing the French army in any systematic way, and potentially revising its opinion in light of what this might have revealed the BEF's leadership had no choice but to fall back on its previously held assumptions on the French army and accept the wisdom of what others such as the liaison missions reported.

⁴⁹⁵ Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 20.

With GHQ being able to consider very little other than the BEF's challenges, the British army and government lost an important chance to gain a more detailed and accurate assessment of the French army and perhaps, as a result, be better prepared for the possibility and consequences of its defeat.

The importance of understanding this general confidence in the French army is illustrated by way in which the BEF's leadership engaged with their French counterparts and the significance of such a dynamic. As noted above, the behaviour of Gort and his officers with the French army's leadership can be described as subservient in nature. Although this in part may have been the result of Gort's own personal positioning, a key factor in this subservience was the preoccupation with weaknesses in the BEF's position in comparison to impression of French military power and preparedness. It is of course true that the balance of power between the nations' armies would always ensure that the French leadership would always be dominant in influence and control of operations. Nevertheless, by viewing the French army as it did, the BEF's GHQ was never likely to be able to manoeuvre itself into a position to exert greater influence as a junior partner to the French army. Even though the likes of Brooke and Adam claimed retrospectively that Gort did not perhaps need to be as subservient as they perceived him, it seems doubtful if a more assertive attitude towards the French leadership was possible given the disparities between Franco-British ground forces.

This therefore gets to the heart of the dilemma which operational commanders of a junior partner in unequal alliances face about how they can most effectively exert influence on planning and operations. Clearly, Gort's deferential approach led to some minor successes, such as resisting calls for British troops to help construct French defences, but it was unlikely to have allowed him to wield influence to a greater extent. Moreover, the BEF leadership's preoccupation with their own problems inevitably led to more favourable comparisons being made with the French army, which in turn reinforced confidence in their ally's strength. Inhibited by an acute and all-consuming awareness of its own weaknesses, ultimately the BEF was in no position to undertake the detailed, critical assessments of its ally that may have alerted it to the risk of the fall of France.

Chapter 6

The Battle of France:

The views of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

The Battle of France began on 10 May 1940 with the German invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium. In accordance with detailed planning over the previous months the BEF alongside the French First and Seventh armies advanced into Belgium to counter the German attack. However, contrary to Allied expectations, the main weight of Germany's offensive took place further south with an attack through the Ardennes forest. By 15 May German forces in this sector had crossed the Meuse at Dinant, Monthermé and Sedan, achieving a breakthrough against the French army's relatively weaker Second and Ninth armies. With France's strongest formations and the BEF engaged in battle on the Belgium plain, the attack from the Ardennes drove to the Channel coast encircling these forces. The encirclement led to the evacuation of a total of 370,000 members of the BEF and French army from the Dunkirk area before German forces closed the Allied pocket there.⁴⁹⁶ The German attack then turned its attention against the French army south of the river Somme. As these forces were defeated the remaining elements of the BEF were evacuated from France's most westerly ports. The campaign ended with France signing an armistice with Germany on 22 June. The sudden defeat of the French army shocked observers, and exposed many of its weaknesses which had been overlooked. This chapter examines the collapse of British confidence in the French army as France fell and 70,000 British servicemen were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

This chapter will focus on the views of the leadership and officers of the BEF in France. Although British officials in London were kept abreast of the course of the campaign, information that was received on the French army and operations was naturally second-hand, delayed and often lacking the clarity of British officers in France. This was illustrated by Churchill's chief military assistant, General Hastings Ismay, who wrote that:

⁴⁹⁶ Lloyd Clarke. *Blitzkrieg: Myth, Reality and Hitler's Lightning War – France 1940* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), 388.

It is always difficult to get accurate information about a fast-moving battle, and for those who have to wait far from the scene, there is nothing for it but to exercise patience, and to remember that the commander in the field is preoccupied with the conduct of the engagement, and often has neither the time nor the knowledge to report details of its progress.⁴⁹⁷

It is for this reason that this chapter will concentrate on the views of the BEF's officers during and in the aftermath of the campaign, Britain's closest observers of the French army and those most immediately impacted by its defeat in the field.

The course of operations in the Battle of France has been extensively studied. In the most part historians have tried to offer explanations for the outcome of the campaign together with an understanding of Franco-British relations before, during and after the battle.⁴⁹⁸ Although British shock at the French defeat in these histories is widely acknowledged, British views of the French army and how they evolved during the campaign have not been as closely analysed. This chapter addresses this omission, contextualising and explaining the exasperation, despair and frustration noted in histories of the fall of France.⁴⁹⁹

As noted in Chapter 5, the available archival material on the BEF's deployment through the Phoney War period to the Battle of France is curtailed by the loss of records during the BEF's evacuation from the Continent. Nevertheless, a significant quantity of material remains in the form of operational records from BEF units and headquarters; BEF unit reports and dispatches related back to London; the diaries and private papers of BEF officers; and unpublished reports and memoirs of middle-ranking officers, some of whom have been referred to in previous chapters. Together these sources provide a unique window onto the collapse of British confidence in the French army during the Battle of France.

This chapter will firstly analyse how quickly British observers in France appreciated that the French army was being defeated, shattering the earlier confidence that officers of the BEF had in France's ground forces. It will then be shown how British observations reveal the signals and communications weaknesses that led to the breakdown of effective liaison

⁴⁹⁷ General Lord Hastings Ismay, *The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 129.

⁴⁹⁸ See, for example, Clarke, *Blitzkrieg*; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ernest R May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (London: I B Tauris, 2009); Eleanor M Gates, *The End of the Affair: The Collapse of the Anglo-French Alliance, 1939-1940* (London: George Allen and Urwin, 1981), Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man* (London: Viking, 2006); Brian Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium 1939-1940* (London: Brassey's, 1990) Brian Bond and Michel Taylor (Eds), *The Battle for France and Flanders Sixty Years On* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001); Philip Nord, *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (London: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁴⁹⁹ See, for example, Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 4-5 and Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 86-87.

between the BEF and French army with their ensuing consequences on the battlefield. The subsequent British criticisms of aspects of the French army in the campaign will then be examined together with the lack of recognition given to some French units' efforts in the Battle of France. At this point the chapter will then briefly contrast this with British observations of the French army in the Norwegian campaign. As criticism was the dominant feature of British observations in the aftermath of the French defeat, an analysis of the character of these negative judgements will be offered throughout. The observations of officers of the BEF, characterised by deep shock, are the ultimate 'warning from history' of not having a clear understanding of an ally's strengths and weaknesses and therefore an inability to consider the feasibility of a certain course of events with severe consequences for strategic outcomes and security. This shows that although there is a ceiling to the influence which a junior partner in a coalition can exert, by acquiring an accurate appreciation of its senior partner it can equip itself with an agility to react as effectively as possible to eventualities that are naturally difficult to foresee.

British understanding that the French army was being defeated and signal communications failings in the breakdown of effective liaison between the BEF and the French army

The sudden shock evident in British accounts of the defeat of the French army underlines the extent of confidence it had in its ally's ground forces and its fragility. At the start of the German offensive on 10 May, the leadership of the BEF at GHQ in Arras initially remained relaxed about the French army's ability to contain the enemy attack. Although GHQ did not expect the French army to be defeated, planning was undertaken in Arras for the considered worst case scenario. This work was carried out by a senior intelligence officer, Lieutenant Colonel P G Whitefoord within GHQ.⁵⁰⁰ In so doing Whitefoord assessed the least favourable conceivable conditions whereby Belgian resistance would collapse, roads would be choked with refugees and that enemy saboteurs would be effective behind allied lines. However, Whitefoord's estimates proved to be insufficiently pessimistic. For example, he anticipated that the Belgian defence fortress of Eben-Emael would at worst hold out for two days, when in actual fact German forces captured it within twenty-four hours.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ J. R. Colville, *Man of Valour: The Life of Field-Marshal The Viscount Gort* (London: Collins, 1968), 186.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

Consequently the speed of German progress in the campaign occurred at a rate which had been considered unfeasible by planners within GHQ.

Nevertheless, for the opening days of the campaign the prospect of a French defeat remained remote in the eyes of the BEF's leadership. This faith was supported by early reports from the frontline which indicated that the battle was progressing satisfactorily. At that time it appears that the progress of the French army was of little concern to most of the BEF's officers, who seem to have been preoccupied with the resistance of the Belgian army. British commanders proved to be slow to realise that the French army was facing serious problems. Some senior officers were in high spirits in the early stages of the campaign and oblivious to the military disaster that lay ahead. For example, on 11 May 1940 Major General Pakenham-Walsh, the BEF's Engineer-in-Chief, recorded in his diary that 'our show seems to be going well according to plan' and 'French 7th Army (Giraud) seem to be doing well north east of Antwerp'.⁵⁰² The atmosphere at GHQ's advanced headquarters at Wahagnies at the start of the battle was certainly confident together with seemingly enthusiastic excitement. This is certainly the impression created by the observations of Lieutenant Colonel A Jeffreys who was present there on the staff of the BEF's Adjutant General, General Brownrigg. Jeffreys wrote at the time that he:

found everyone in good heart. The C-in-C was greatly cheered by having seen his first dead German and young airmen. Three airmen – our first prisoners - were captured by Q Movements! Everything is going well, there is very little bombing and we are well up to the programme.⁵⁰³

There was no fear of a repeat of the Polish collapse in the face of the German Blitzkrieg. The French army was viewed as highly superior to the Polish army, underlining British confidence in their ally's ground forces.

Undoubtedly the long-held confidence accounted for the leadership of the BEF remaining optimistic at the start of the campaign. However, there were also other factors which contributed to these officers being unable to realise sufficiently quickly that the French army was facing difficulties on the battlefield. For example, the BEF's commanding officer, Lord Gort, decided to move with most of his senior officers from Arras to an advanced headquarters at Wahagnies, ten miles south of Lille.⁵⁰⁴ This proved to be an error as an

⁵⁰² LHCMA PAKENHAM-WALSH 1/10. Major General Ridley Pakenham-Walsh, personal diary, 11 May 1940.

⁵⁰³ TNA CAB 106/243. Lieutenant Colonel A Jeffreys, PA to Adjutant General BEF, diary 10 May 1940.

⁵⁰⁴ Colville, *Man of Valour*, 190.

already imperfect system of communications had a greater strain placed on it, resulting in communications between Gort and his remaining staff at Arras becoming severed and news of the deteriorating situation on the battlefield being received much later than it should have been.

It would take some considerable time after the French defeat for British observers to fully appreciate the extent to which French communications had undermined the Allies' response to the German *Blitzkrieg*. However, to the credit of some officers within the BEF this French weakness began to be accurately observed during the campaign. For example, Captain Miles Reid, attached to the headquarters of the First French army, observed after the commencement of the German attack that:

A great deal of the difficulty can be attributed to the inadequate system of communications. An Army headquarters has no recording apparatus either with its immediately lower or higher formation. Everything is done on the telephone and incoming conversations are recorded in a 2d exercise book. This book was in great demand and extremely difficult to see and (to me a foreigner) was frequently illegible. But the worst aspect was that frequently the book was removed altogether. On frequent occasions we had one telephone only provided for the operations section and access to this was practically surrounded with great difficulty.⁵⁰⁵

Reid's observations provide just a small insight into part of the difficulties that existed in the French army's communications, weaknesses that successive British observers failed to spot in the years leading up to the war and the Battle of France.

As the campaign progressed it became increasingly obvious to the BEF that the French army's communications were proving ineffectual, hampering the swift response to developments on the battlefield and leading to wider problems in coordination of action between the BEF and the French army. This was noted by Gort who wrote on this aspect that:

Experience had already shown the vital importance of close coordination of the allied armies in any operation...in practice the measure of coordination fell far short of what was required if the movements of the three armies were to be properly controlled.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁵ TNA WO 106/1678. Captain Miles Reid, report to Lieutenant Colonel P Gregson Ellis on First French Army, 29 May 1940.

⁵⁰⁶ TNA CAB 106/246. Gort, Despatches, 15 July 1940 cited in John Grehan and Martin Mace, eds. *The BEF in France 1939-1940: Manning the Front through to the Dunkirk Evacuation* (London: Pen & Sword, 2014), 60.

The breakdown of effective liaison between the nations' armies impacted the Allies' efforts to regain control of events from the middle of May after the initial German breakthrough. Not aiding the situation was that the BEF over-relied on telephones and the French national telephone infrastructure which collapsed early in the Battle of France. The BEF therefore had to rely on radio communications to a much greater extent than it considered before 1939 only to discover that it had too few of the right sets and too few trained operators and that its security procedures placed lengthy delays on the speed of transmissions. It soon became apparent that the British and French reliance upon cable communications had been misplaced. Indeed the two nations' headquarters were ill equipped with modern and rapid communications and instead relied on the existing land-lines of the civilian network. Although these arrangements had appeared satisfactory for the duration of the Phoney War, they proved totally inadequate once fast-moving operations commenced.⁵⁰⁷ The two nations' armies had judged that telephone communications would be safe because the main French trunk lines were carried by buried cables. Yet, many of these ran alongside main roads and were quickly cut by German bombing. The telephone system also restricted the movement of the BEF's GHQ because it could only move to where it could connect into the international telephone system.⁵⁰⁸

The possibility of such an outcome appears not to have been considered prior to the German attack. In his reflections on the 1940 campaign, liaison officer Miles Reid claims that he did have concerns on this during the Phoney War period, although these were insufficiently serious to bring to his chain of command. On the telephone system Reid wrote that 'you could get through to no one, you could beg, you could curse but nothing melted the cast-iron obduracy of the operators...it was odds on that you would be summarily and irreparably cut off'.⁵⁰⁹ Furthermore, French army headquarters, he concluded, were meagrely resourced in their *transmissions* section with an inadequate provision of telephones and that 'after the fifth day I was forced to abandon the telephone as a means of communicating with GHQ'.⁵¹⁰ The consequences of this were made clear by Reid stating that:

⁵⁰⁷ Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 359-360.

⁵⁰⁸ David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 180.

⁵⁰⁹ Miles Reid MC, *Last on the List* (London: Leo Cooper, 1974), 26-27.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27

The French wanted continually to know the British position and vice versa. And... at times none in either headquarters could give an exact static picture of the intensely dynamic scene...in the increased tempo of 1940 warfare it was quite impossible for one man to do both...The ineffectiveness of the telephone called for continual daily journeys backward and forward between 1st Army HQ and GHQ...At GHQ they felt my visits should be more frequent and at 1st Army they thought I should be there permanently.
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Reid's views were shared by other in the BEF who viewed the disintegration of the allies' communications. His fellow liaison officer Colonel Archdale 'complained bitterly of the lack of communications',⁵¹² whilst Brooke, still in his corps command role, became exasperated that not only was he cut off from his own base by a fast moving enemy but that the breakdown in communications also decreased the chances of maintaining any sort of coherent front with the bulk of the French army. Such was the paucity of communications that Brooke at times was only able to deploy his forces after personal visits to units with verbal orders.⁵¹³

It would also appear that communications problems led to difficulties for a senior command meeting scheduled for French, Belgian and British officers in the town of Ypres on 21 May. A meeting had been called in the Belgian town in order to coordinate the Allies' response to the deteriorating situation on the battlefield, with King Leopold of Belgium, Weygand the new French command-in-chief, Billotte and Gort in attendance. However, communications problems had led to Gort been given no notice of the meeting and was not present when the French and Belgian officers assembled. Furthermore, when the Franco-Belgian officers had tried to contact Gort to summon his presence it was not possible to track Gort down. Eventually Gort arrived at Ypres at 2000hrs that evening but one hour after Weygand had left. Although in the wider context of the events of the campaign this was an incident which had little impact, Gort's absence had been interpreted by Weygand badly. Indeed, as Julian Jackson records, Weygand had been:

convinced that Gort's failure to turn up was at the very least a slight. Later he came to believe it proved that Britain was already planning to betray the French...The fact that Weygand and Gort did not meet allowed Weygand to leave Ypres with an entirely false sense of what the British were able or (willing) to offer.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 29-30.

⁵¹² Ibid., 38.

⁵¹³ David Fraser *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins 1982), 152.

⁵¹⁴ Jackson, *Fall of France*, 62.

A similar confused situation exhibited itself at a meeting in an *estaminet* at the town of Cassel close to the Belgian border between Generals Adam, Pakenham-Walsh, Lindsell of the BEF and Admiral Abrial together with French Generals Fagalde, Blanchard and Koeltz. Adam recalls that at this meeting of senior officers Koeltz:

made a rousing appeal on behalf of Weygand that the time had come for us to stop our retreat and turn and attack the Germans everywhere. None said anything for a bit and then General Fagalde rose and said that he would return to his headquarters at once and order an attack on Calais driving the Germans before him. We British looked at him in astonishment, but the French applauded him and the party dispersed or rather we left as quickly as we could to get on with our job.⁵¹⁵

This meeting shows that the ability of the two nations' armies to meet and attempt to coordinate their actions still existed. However, more significantly the encounter also demonstrates that such was the breakdown in communications between the two allies that they were no longer united in how they viewed the reality on the battlefield. The breakdown in communications had led clearly to the breakdown in effective liaison between the BEF and the French army.

The difficulty in creating effective liaison due to the ineffective signals and communications infrastructure was explained by Brigadier L. H. Harris on the difficulties the Allies encountered as they withdrew through Flanders.

Since leaving the Escaut the communications had been almost entirely by despatch rider. Lines would have taken too long to lay and, until the end we were still thinking we should be eventually taking up a stable defensive position and wanted to conserve our stores for this.⁵¹⁶

Under such conditions on what was a fast-moving battlefield, effective liaison was almost impossible. This was exacerbated by the shortage of signals equipment. This is explained by Major General Nalder in his history of the Royal Signals in the Second World War. Nalder explains that 'The scale of sets, which had been cut to the bone by peacetime financial and manpower limitations, barely sufficed to provide the main command links and left nothing over for administrative and liaison purposes'.⁵¹⁷ The way in which the French army itself felt

⁵¹⁵ LHCMA ADAM 3/10, 4. General Sir Ronald Forbes Adam, unpublished manuscript of autobiography, 1946, 27-28.

⁵¹⁶ L H Harris, *Signal Venture* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1951), 133.

⁵¹⁷ R. F. H, Nalder, *The History of the British Army Signals in the Second World War* (London: Royal Signals Institution, 1953), 33.

cut off in terms of liaison from their British counterparts is described by Colonel de Cardes, an officer within the French liaison structures of the North East command who noted that as early as 19 May whilst trying to plan for the counter attack at Arras ‘from the date I lost all contact with the British and with the French liaison mission’.⁵¹⁸

The importance of the breakdown of liaison in the course of operations should not be overlooked. This was emphasised by one French liaison officer after the Battle of France who stressed that ‘liaison is actually an element of combat’.⁵¹⁹ With British and French commanders separated over large distances, effective communication via their liaison officers was essential to the effectiveness of their alliance. Indeed, as the War Office’s official history on signals communications states ‘where allies are involved, coordination becomes even more important, and often a matter of extreme difficulty, owing to distance or difference in language’.⁵²⁰

Historians have previously commented upon how the effectiveness of the Franco-British alliance had strain placed on it by the communications problems. Often though, this is not expanded upon.⁵²¹ It is also true that historians Martin Alexander and Robert Doughty have shown the paucity of French signals and communications.⁵²² However, the extent to which this impacted upon the effectiveness in liaison between the Franco-British forces, of which the failed Ypres and Cassel meetings are examples, together with the impact which this had on the alliance on the battlefield itself, has not been given its due importance and significance.

Although the BEF had initially been slow to grasp that the French army was suffering serious difficulties that could lead to defeat, GHQ understood that this was the likely outcome much more quickly than its military and political superiors in Whitehall. Indeed as the French army faced defeat, officials in London mistakenly believed that the Allies could continue the war in France. This even extended to considerations of placing the arrival of new British

⁵¹⁸ SHD 27N 188 dossier 5. Letter from Colonel de Cardes, *la Mission Française de la Liaison* to Lt Colonel Noiret, *Chef du 3eme Bureau N.E.*, 27 June 1940.3.

⁵¹⁹ SHD 27N 188 dossier 9. *Mission Militaire Française de Liaison*, note from *Capitaine Ciriez, Commandant le Détachement de Liaison du 2eme CAW* to *Capitaine Furby, Officier-Rapporteur*, Laval, undated 1940, 1.

⁵²⁰ T. B. Gravley, *The Second World War 1939-1945: Signal and Communications* (London: War Office, 1950), 45.

⁵²¹ See, for example, P. M. H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1974), 31.

⁵²² See, for example, Martin S Alexander, “Radio Intercepts, Reconnaissance and Raids: French Operational Intelligence and Communications in 1940” *Intelligence and National Security* 28 (2013) 337-375, Robert Allan Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine 1919-1939* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1985), 134 and “The French Armed Forces.” In *Military Effectiveness Vol. II: The Interwar Period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 57-58.

forces under new command and control arrangements where they would be independent of French command or even with French forces being placed under the control of a British field commander.⁵²³ Similarly, Whitehall wrongly judged that the French would seek an armistice on terms that could be much more amicable to British interests than was eventually agreed.⁵²⁴ These of course are judgements characteristic of the earlier overly optimistic perspectives of the French army seen in previous chapters. As a result, credit must be given to Gort and some of his officers for appreciating the dangerous situation earlier than those in London. Their quicker appraisal of events almost certainly saved a greater part of the BEF than would have otherwise been possible. Indeed in understanding that the French army faced defeat, Gort decided to ignore instructions from London to launch a major attack against German forces to its South around 20 May 1940. In so doing, the BEF was able to fall back with greater ease to the coast around Dunkirk even before orders to evacuate were authorised in London.⁵²⁵ Gort clearly was not prepared to stubbornly hold onto the earlier confidence in the French army.

Similarly, after the evacuation from Dunkirk the BEF's leadership were opposed to sending further British forces to France to assist the French army with defensive positions along the river Loire, or to form a redoubt in Brittany. The BEF's most senior officers were unanimous in this view, fully understanding that the French army's defeat was at that point inevitable. These senior officers who had just returned from France correctly argued that to have deployed more troops across the Channel would dangerously risk the future fighting prospects of the British army. Nevertheless, this deployment was authorised by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, not least as he hoped that this would aid French morale and deter a French surrender. Despite this order, Brooke who was appointed to command this 'Second' BEF objected to the embarkation of any further British troops to France, and made his opinion known in person to the Prime Minister. Brooke recalls that Churchill informed him that sending a new British force was necessary so that 'the French feel we were supporting them'. Brooke claims he responded by stating 'it was impossible to make a corpse feel, and that the French army was to all intents and purposes dead, and certainly incapable of registering what had been done for it'.⁵²⁶ Brooke's objections were rejected by Churchill and the force was ultimately deployed. However, in a similar approach to that which Gort had

⁵²³ See TNA WO 106/1717. DMO paper on Policy for British Forces Remaining in France, June 1940 and WO 197/123. War Office appreciation on possible developments of situation in France, June 1940.

⁵²⁴ Bell, *A Certain Eventuality*, 9-10 and 89-90.

⁵²⁵ See Colville, *Man of Valour*, 206 and Clark, *Blitzkrieg*, 254.

⁵²⁶ Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 81.

taken prior to Dunkirk, Brooke wisely ensured that without receiving any orders from London he withdrew significant numbers of troops back to the western French ports in order to expedite an evacuation back to Britain.

Criticisms of the conduct of the French army

The sudden and comprehensive way in which the French army was defeated quickly led to British criticisms of its ally's ground forces. Given these circumstances it was inevitable that British observers in France disapprovingly witnessed conduct from the French army common in routed armies. Nevertheless, such behaviour shocked the BEF which had hitherto had great confidence in the French army. In particular many British observers were horrified at the lack of urgency about deteriorating events witnessed amongst the French leadership. The commanding officer of the BEF's III Corps, General Adam, recalled that at the French First Army headquarters he 'did my duty by urging all to attack' but that he 'found very little of the offensive spirit here and a number of vague promises were made'.⁵²⁷ Brigadier Francis Davidson, chief artillery officer for the BEF's I Corps, added that 'the French High Command...had not shown itself capable of action or of taking decisions'.⁵²⁸ Such observations are vague but do reflect the frustration felt amongst the senior levels of the BEF at their ally being unable to turn the fortune of the events which they faced.

While it is difficult to ascertain if French officers did lack energy to push operations forward, it is clear that in some cases their behaviour left much to be desired in the eyes of many of the BEF and was accordingly criticised. It is certainly true that some French senior officers under the strain of the campaign were capable of erratic and temperamental behaviour, giving the impression that they were unable to meet the challenge before them. Brooke noted in his diary on 24 May 1940 of Blanchard that:

He was standing studying maps as I looked at him carefully and I soon gathered the impression that he might as well have been staring at a blank wall for all the benefit he gained from it! He gave me the impression of a man whose brain had failed to function, he was merely existing and hardly aware of what was going on around him. The blows that had fallen on us in quick succession had left him 'punch drunk' and unable to register events. I

⁵²⁷ LHCMA ADAM 3/10, 4. General Sir Ronald Forbes Adam, unpublished autobiography, 1946, 26.

⁵²⁸ LHCMA DAVIDSON 5/6/7, Brigadier Francis Davidson, unpublished account 'A Tribute to Lord Gort and the Retreat to Dunkirk', 9.

was badly shaken and felt that if he was to take the tiller in the current storm it would not be long before we were on the rocks.⁵²⁹

Blanchard was singled out for criticism by many senior members of the BEF. Pakenham-Walsh recorded in his diary that ‘Neither Billotte nor Blanchard inspire any confidence even among their own people ... the whole atmosphere as First Army headquarters was defeatist. Everyone was packing bags, and burning papers’.⁵³⁰ Similarly, Henry Pownall, Chief of Staff at the BEF’s GHQ also reported that Blanchard and his Chief of Staff, Alombert were ‘in hysterics and flapping like hens’.⁵³¹ Criticism of this kind was also offered of other senior French officers. For example, Major John Churcher, a staff officer in the supply branch of the BEF’s GHQ, wrote that:

I accompanied General Beauman to either a French Corps or Army Commander to enquire what our role was and what orders we were to receive from him. We arrived...and walked into the great man’s office to find him sitting behind a large desk weeping copious tears over a blotting pad. The only words I could get out of him were “*C’est la guerre. C’est fini.*”⁵³²

Officers of the BEF also claimed to witness similar behaviour at more middle and junior ranking levels within the French army. One such instance of this was observed by Captain Miles Reid who reported on a French liaison officer with whom he had worked closely that ‘the strain was greater than he could bear and in spite of the greatest possible goodwill on his own part he ceased effectively to function...and was evacuated with a nervous breakdown’.⁵³³

In addition to the sharp criticisms of officers of the French army during the Battle of France there was also widespread condemnation offered by the BEF of how its ally’s other ranks conducted itself during the campaign. Indeed many in the BEF were quick to highlight a breakdown in the French army’s discipline. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Thomas Stayforth reported to Brooke that he had seen a civilian shot dead by French soldiers as he had refused to share his cognac with them. Brooke commented on this report that ‘This gives some idea of the lack of discipline in the French withdrawal, which at times looked more like a rout’.⁵³⁴ Brooke noted further that the ‘French army became a rabble, and

⁵²⁹ Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 68.

⁵³⁰ LHCMA PAKENHAM-WALSH 1/10. Pakenham-Walsh, diary, 21 May 1940.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² LHCMA CHURCHER 1. Major General J B Churcher, unpublished memoir, ‘A Soldier’s Story’, October 1984, Appendix A, 4.

⁵³³ TNA WO 106/1678. Reid, report on First French Army, 29 May 1940.

⁵³⁴ Brooke diary in Danchev and Todman, *War Diaries*, 71.

complete loss of discipline. Troops dejected and surly and refusing to clear roads, panicking every time a Boche plane came over'.⁵³⁵ At Dunkirk the BEF's Quarter Master General, General Lindsell, reported that supplies and ammunition dumps were being looted by French troops making their way to the beaches.⁵³⁶ Equally, Brigadier Leese, serving with No1 Military Mission, informed the War Office that 'a lack of control' by French soldiers 'greatly increased the difficulties of the evacuation'.⁵³⁷

Similar observations were also made further away from the German advance in Normandy and Brittany. For example, Major Churcher reported seeing large numbers of drunken French soldiers near Caen as the Allied armies retreated further south and west.⁵³⁸ The breakdown of French discipline was also observed by Lieutenant Colonel J V McCormack at Saint-Malo on 16 June who recalled that:

Here I witnessed a scene that I can only describe as shameful. All the luggage of all the units had been dumped in the middle of the barracks square and left to the tender mercies of the French soldiers stationed in the barracks who were looking right and left. Every single box, every single case, every single receptacle of any kind and every sort was being strewn all round the place. The men helped themselves to what they liked.⁵³⁹

Inevitably frustrations grew within the BEF at some of the behaviour they witnessed and this certainly contributed to a break down in relations between the Allies as the campaign progressed. At times this led not only to expressions of temper and anger, but also more serious flashpoints. In one instance, late in the campaign, Brooke passed a message through his liaison officer that he would have the commanding officer of the 2nd *Division Légère Mécanique* shot if he disagreed with his orders not to withdraw for evacuation from La Panne. In another incident a French officer threatened to kill an Officer of the RASC if his unit was not allowed to move into the Dunkirk perimeter.⁵⁴⁰

In addition to the dangerous tensions that arose between the two allies, a degree of deceit also began to emerge at senior levels of the BEF towards the French. For example, Brooke admits to deliberately misleading the French government when responding to

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ TNA WO 197/112. Lieutenant General Wilfred Gordon Lindsell, report on Movement and Maintenance in the BEF 3 September 1939 – 31 May 1940, 23 June 1940.

⁵³⁷ TNA WO 106/1618. No 1 Military Mission to CIGS, Report on Evacuation of BEF from France: Plan Dynamo, 2 June 1940.

⁵³⁸ LHCMA CHURCHER 1. Churcher, 'A Soldier's Story', 19.

⁵³⁹ TNA WO 258/11. Lieutenant Colonel J V, McCormack MC RA, Account of the BEF's Evacuation.

⁵⁴⁰ David Owen, *Gallant and Distinguished Service*, (London: RASC and RCT Institution, 2006), 169.

enquiries why so many lines of communications troops were moving towards the Breton ports in the final stages of the campaign. Brooke informed the French government that these forces were not withdrawing even though this was of course the order he had given as the commanding officer of the Second BEF. The drastic loss of faith which developed amongst the senior levels of the BEF, inevitably spread to the lower levels of British forces in France. Indeed, it did not take long for bitterness and revulsion towards the French army's defeat to become evident amongst the other ranks of the BEF. Such sentiment even spilled over into official journals of the British army's regiments and corps. One example of this is shown in a poem in the journal of the RASC written by a lance corporal where there is a reference to the campaign in France with the British army being 'flanked by the French *sans* eyes, *sans* heart, *sans* brains'.⁵⁴¹

The critical perspective offered by many in the BEF was replicated by political and military leaders in London either from afar or after visits to France during the campaign. CIGS Ironside's frustration with French commanders was notably evident after he visited Billotte and Blanchard on 20 May at their headquarters. As he recorded in his diary:

I then found Billotte and Blanchard at Lens, all in a state of complete depression. No plan, no thought of a plan. Ready to be slaughtered. Defeated at the head without casualties. *Très fatigués* and nothing to do. I lost my temper and shook Billotte by the button of his tunic. The man is completely beaten. I got him to agree and Blanchard accepted to take Cambrai. There is absolutely nothing in front of them. They remain quivering behind the waterline north of Cambrai while the fate of France is in the balance.⁵⁴²

As this extract reveals, Ironside was particularly exasperated with Blanchard and made his feelings known to officers he dealt with in the BEF. One such officer was Miles Reid who believed that Ironside was disingenuous with his views of Blanchard. Reid wrote that Ironside told him:

in the clearest possible language what opinion he had formed of General Blanchard. Having lived for some time with Blanchard I had acquired an admiration and affection for him and inwardly I resented this criticism which seemed to be based on too short an acquaintance to justify the language used.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴¹ Lance Corporal T T Wright, Poem "Waggon Wheels", *The Journal of the Royal Army Service Corps* No 9, Volume LXV (July 1941): 70.

⁵⁴² Roderick MacLeod and Denis Kelly, eds., *The Ironside Diaries 1937 – 1940* (London: Constable, 1962), 321.

⁵⁴³ Reid, *Last on the List*, 46.

Although not directly reflecting on his earlier judgement of Blanchard, Ironside appeared capable of offering a more considered and generous reflection on the French command and its army on his return to London. This was shown even as France fell during one stormy Cabinet meeting in an exchange between Ironside and minister without portfolio, Arthur Greenwood. Of this encounter, Ironside wrote about how he objected to Greenwood's criticism of the French Army stating that:

I found that Greenwood was inclined to say "these bloody gallant Allies". I told him that we had depended upon the French Army. That we had made no Army and that it was not right to say "these bloody Allies". It was for them to say that of us.⁵⁴⁴

Clearly, the sudden and unexpected nature of the French army's defeat played a role in sparking particularly sharp reactions amongst British observers in France to their French allies. To expect a calmer reaction given the highly pressurised environment and far reaching consequences of what was occurring seems unrealistic. Ironside's more generous reflections once back in London would appear to indicate that outbursts of hostility were not necessarily perspectives that would inevitably endure. This is commented upon by P M H Bell who considered that:

it would be a mistake to attach too much hostility towards the French. If the bond of common interest between Britain and France had endured, such comments would now be either passed over or treated as the superficial utterance of men under strain, which in part they doubtless were. On the other hand, they cannot be ignored, and as the bond of common interest weakened, they assumed increasing importance.⁵⁴⁵

Bell's judgement seems a reasonable one. Clearly though with France's defeat on the battlefield being as complete as it ultimately proved, together with the terms of the armistice that followed, the conditions existed for such views to fester and endure.

It has been shown in previous chapters that British views of France's ground forces in the preceding decade were partly shaped by how these observers perceived the British army with its many weaknesses. Clearly, as the French army faced defeat the BEF witnessed much unflattering behaviour from all ranks of its ally. The views formed from these observations

⁵⁴⁴ MacLeod and Kelly, *Ironside Diaries*, 313.

⁵⁴⁵ Bell, *A Certain Eventuality*, 21.

have proved enduring and been used in a manner to be highly critical of the French army. Yet, it could be argued that these views are not entirely balanced in frequently failing to recognise that the BEF was also comprehensively defeated with British officers and soldiers during the campaign not always behaving with distinction. Moreover, many of those who highlighted less than flattering observations of the French during their time do not acknowledge similar conduct by the BEF. However, it is the conduct of British officers and men in defeat which many of the BEF seem to have overlooked in their observations. Indeed, although largely ignored by most British observers, behaviour similar to that which critics of the French army are quick to highlight was also exhibited by the BEF.⁵⁴⁶

Lack of recognition of the French army's effectiveness

A significant feature of British observations of France's defeat in June 1940 is the lack of recognition given to the role played by some parts of the French army in the campaign. This is of particular note as recognition of creditable contributions of the French army in operations would have to an extent demonstrated that earlier British confidence was not unfounded. Yet there is a notable absence of this in the views of British officers of France's ground forces in the campaign. This is particularly the case in a lack of gratitude shown for those French units which were largely responsible for shielding the BEF's retreat to Dunkirk and evacuation to Britain. Many British observers were quick to point out the French failure to hold the German offensive in the Ardennes sector, but in so doing failed to recognise that these troops were of a lower calibre than certainly those which flanked the BEF further north. Indeed, the BEF was fortunate that it was positioned between General Henri Giraud's Seventh Army to the north and Blanchard's First Army to the South which were amongst the best troops that France possessed. In particular the French First Army contained the strong French Cavalry Corps under General René Prioux and was equipped with a force of some four hundred tanks. Being located between formations of such quality undoubtedly contributed to the BEF being given an impression that the French army was stronger than it was prior to the German offensive. Yet, the performance of these troops alongside the BEF was largely unrecognised by most British observers.

⁵⁴⁶ For instances of such occurrences, see, for example, TNA WO 106/1652. No 17 Military Mission message to CIGS, 6 June 1940; WO 259/60. Sir Anthony Eden, report on conduct of Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Brownrigg, 16 July 1940; WO 258/11. Colonel McCormack, Account of the BEF's Evacuation; Saul David, *After Dunkirk: Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division* (London: Sharpe Books Ltd, 2018), 203-204; Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 198; Robin Prior, *When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940* (Padstow: Yale, 2015), 111.

There is no doubt that with the recriminations that took place after the defeat of June 1940, it has been overlooked by British observers of the time and indeed many earlier historians of the Battle of France that parts of the French army did perform to a level that British observers had earlier anticipated. For example, the French army played a pivotal role in shielding not only their own retreat to Dunkirk but that of neighbouring BEF formations. Equally, in the last week of May 1940 great resistance was displayed by French rearguards and most of the defence of the Dunkirk perimeter was largely manned by men of the French Army.⁵⁴⁷ Some of the most notable of the French army's resolve was demonstrated at Lille. Indeed on 23 May 1940 the 5th North African Division of General Augustin Agliani fought strongly after being deployed alongside General Jean-Baptiste Molincé's French 25th Motorised Division. Also serving adjacent to British elements in Lille was General Dame's 2nd North African Division and the 5th Motorised Division led by General Alphonse Juin. Both of these formations were well equipped, proved themselves to be highly disciplined, and together succeeded in delaying the German advance for several days. The French troops fought so tenaciously around Lille that the Germans allowed the survivors to keep their weapons for the ceremonial surrender parade. It was also reported that other French soldiers around Lille so feared being accused of cowardice that they fought on regardless of instructions to withdraw to the coast. Another example of great French tenacity was the 106th Infantry Regiment of General Guillaume Janssens's 12th Motorised Division. The formation was amongst the French army's best and intentionally sacrificed itself to hold the approaches to Dunkirk. The 106th Infantry Regiment resisted so strongly that according to one of its men 'the Germans only rarely mounted frontal attacks when our units were properly formed, they paid dearly when they did and with no great results'.⁵⁴⁸ With more balance, the historian Gregory Blaxland stated that the soldiers of the 12th Motorised Division 'showed themselves to be tough fighters' who along with the French 32nd Division 'fought with a spirit worthy of the army's brightest glory'.⁵⁴⁹

One French officer in particular who distinguished himself was General Jules Prioux. He had assumed command of the French First Army on 22 May, after leading the two light armoured divisions of the French mechanised corps, which was amongst the finest formations

⁵⁴⁷ Martin S Alexander, "Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 98.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁴⁹ Gregory Blaxard. *Destination Dunkirk: The Story of Gort's Army* (London: William Kimber & Co Ltd, 1973) 341, 345.

on either side in the battle and is reported to have ‘created enormous problems for the German army.’⁵⁵⁰ This formation fought with only limited resupply with little food or rest with the French IV Corps’ artillery defending it until it ran out of ammunition. French soldiers did indeed prove under the leadership of Generals Juin, Janssen, Fagalde and Fonet de la Laurencie that they could be extremely effective in battle and had vital roles in screening the retreat of the BEF. However, not even the most able commanders could have resolved the problems created by the spectacular early German successes which created the vast gaps in the Allied lines.

A lack of recognition of the French army’s efforts also applies to its effective defence in operations in the often overlooked second stage of the German offensive in battles fought south of the Somme. These operations have not only been overlooked by many British observers of the time but also by historians of the Battle of France who have focussed heavily on the first two weeks of the campaign on the initial German breakthrough, the encirclement of Franco-British forces and the evacuation from France’s most northerly Channel coast. However, as Alexander has shown the French army fought fiercely and effectively in countering German attacks on the Somme, Aisne, Moselle, Seine and the Loire. During these actions German casualties rose markedly from earlier in the campaign and in many instances their attacks were repulsed or faltered. As Alexander notes the French army had adapted from the start of the campaign and used better methods in defensive operations. He writes that even when forced to withdraw from the Somme, Aisne and Oise French units fell back to the Seine, Loire and Moselle in good order.⁵⁵¹ Alexander pays tribute to the French army’s effectiveness during this time by stating that ‘In June 1940 the French troops showed individual and collective valour that was the equal of the *poilus* in 1914-18’.⁵⁵²

Although British appreciation of French efforts in this second part to the campaign is difficult to find there is evidence of German acknowledgment of the stern opposition posed by French forces in these operations. For example, one German officer who took part in the attack across the Aisne claimed that this was where the German army ‘rediscovered “*le soldat*

⁵⁵⁰ Alexander, “Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories” in *Britain and France in Two World Wars*, 98.

⁵⁵¹ Alexander, “After Dunkirk: The French Army’s Performance against ‘Case Red’, 25 May to 25 June 1940”. *War in History* 14 (2007): 254.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 256-257.

de Verdun".⁵⁵³ For the part of British historians the lack of focus on this part of the campaign can be attributed to the lengthy national interest in the period of Britain's 'finest hour' and the unprecedented nature of the BEF's evacuation. However, a lack of credit offered by British observers to its French ally is less easy to explain. It is of course true that a substantial part of the BEF had been evacuated from the Dunkirk area at this point and were back in Britain. However, a substantial number of British forces remained in France south of the Somme stretching back along the long lines of communication to the ports in Brittany and Normandy. Whilst these officers and men were not necessarily direct witnesses to French operations south of the Somme, there were few British observers who looked on as France's ground forces suffered disastrous setbacks on the Meuse but many were forthcoming in their criticisms of their aftermath. Moreover, as this chapter shows, there are many accounts of British officers who offer their testimony on events for this period in France and in these regions south of the Somme. They are though conspicuous by the absence of praise for the French army during this time. In part this must reflect the disillusionment of the allied defeat. It is also likely true that most British thought at this time had moved onto the defence of Britain. It is notable though that this did not prevent many British observers being very willing to highlight French shortcomings at this stage of the battle. It would appear that this characteristic applied to British observers evacuated from France both north and south of the Somme.

It is interesting to contrast the response of British officers to the French army's defeat to the initial reaction in wider political and public opinion. In the final days of the campaign the Cabinet in its discussions noted that news broadcasts should make references to French achievements on the battlefield and to emphasise the role played by the French army, in part in an attempt to soothe French susceptibilities. Also at this point in June 1940 public and press opinion appeared to offer a sympathetic understanding of the position that France and its army found itself in.⁵⁵⁴ Indeed, criticism of France in the French press was almost non-existent. However, the press together with public opinion adopted a harsher tone from 24 June after the armistice was signed and its terms known.⁵⁵⁵ Yet, as the above demonstrates it would appear that many officers of the BEF had taken on this less understanding note from an earlier stage.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Bell, *A Certain Eventuality*, 112, 119, 121.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 121.

In contrast to the BEF's leadership, British officers serving alongside French units in the ultimately failed Norwegian campaign, proved more generous in their reporting on France's ground forces that took part in operations there. Indeed, British officers had observed and, in contrast to the Battle of France, commended the effective performance of French units in operations in Norway. For example, after a difficult start to the campaign, in which French units were beset by the same logistical challenges as the British and likewise struggled to adapt to the harsh conditions, General Piers Joseph Macksey who initially commanded the Allied ground forces in Norway, observed that the French 'were remarkably quick off the mark and made a very good impression'.⁵⁵⁶ This view was echoed by Lieutenant General Hugh Massy, who led the task force in central Norway, noting of the French *Chasseurs Alpins* that:

I have received...the highest reports of their efficiency, their cheerfulness and generally excellent bearing, and their hardihood under conditions of extreme discomfort which might well have shaken the morale of less highly trained troops. I have no doubt that they will have been, and indeed yet will be, far more than a match for the finest troops the Germans can bring against them.⁵⁵⁷

Macksey, in particular, admired the 'excellent and efficient French infantry tanks'⁵⁵⁸ and judged the French Foreign Legion who took part in the landings there to be 'a proper lot of officers and men'.⁵⁵⁹ Later, Lieutenant General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who succeeded Macksey in command midway through the campaign, wrote to the commander of French forces in Norway, General Antoine Béthouart, full of gratitude stating:

Please accept on my behalf and behalf of all ranks land forces' warmest congratulations on magnificent feat achieved by your gallant troops yesterday. At this time your exploit cannot fail to be an inspiration to all our armies wherever serving.⁵⁶⁰

Furthermore, Auchinleck reflected on the contrast between French and British forces in Norway after the campaign and despaired that:

⁵⁵⁶ TNA CAB 106/1176. Major General Piers Joseph Macksey, notes on first narrative of operations in Norway, 18 March 1943.

⁵⁵⁷ TNA DEFE 2/676. Lieutenant General H R S Massy, Report on Operations in Central Norway, June 1940.

⁵⁵⁸ TNA CAB 106/1168. Macksey, a brief account of the Narvik Expedition, June 1940.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ John Connell, *Auchinleck: A Biography of Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck* (London: Cassell, 1959), 138.

The comparison between the efficiency of the French contingent and that of British troops operating under similar conditions has driven this lesson home to all in this theatre...By comparison with the French or Germans, either for that matter, our men for the most part seemed distressingly young, not so much in years as in self-reliance and manliness generally. They gave an impression of being callow and undeveloped, which is not reassuring for the future, unless our methods of marksmanship and training for war can be made more realistic and less effeminate.⁵⁶¹

Despite its failure, the Norwegian campaign had indicated to the British that the French army possessed highly effective units which could perform to a high standard against German forces. Moreover it helps show that the British confidence in the French army was not entirely misplaced, even if officers of the BEF chose not to recognise this during the fall of France.

Nevertheless, even though there was generally little praise or credit given by the BEF for the French Army immediately following operations in France, there were aspects of it which were looked on positively in line with the earlier assessments made prior to the start of operations. For example, certain senior French officers were singled out for praise even as their army collapsed around them. Indeed, Brigadier Davidson recalled of General de la Laucencie:

I had got to know him well during the Phoney War and especially during the fighting since 10 May, in which his III Corps was on our right. He was a fine soldier and a brave and determined leader, right to the end of the Dunkirk operation. He, with great personal courage and decision brought the III Corps cavalry out.⁵⁶²

Davidson also singled out Prioux as a 'capable and gallant commander of the French Cavalry Corps'.⁵⁶³ It is interesting to note that at this time when Franco-British relations were breaking down on the battlefield there were rare examples of respect between field commanders. There was, for instance, mutual admiration between Gort and Prioux proving that good relations did endure the defeat. Prioux said of Gort 'I'd always admired...how he cut such a fine figure as a soldier, one speaking to his loyalty and candour'.⁵⁶⁴ Similarly, the commanding officer of the British Second Infantry Division, Major General Charles Lloyd,

⁵⁶¹TNA DEFE 2/675. Lieutenant General Claude Auchinleck, Report on Operations in Northern Norway from 13 May to 8 June 1940, 19 June 1940.

⁵⁶² LHCMA DAVIDSON 5/6/7, Davidson, Tribute to Gort, 5.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Alexander, "Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories" in *Britain and France in Two World Wars*, 98.

attempted to give some credit to the French army after the evacuation from Dunkirk. In doing so he urged the officers under his command not to be too critical of the French army as he was aware of ‘a growing feeling of mistrust in the fighting qualities of our Allies’ which he believed to be ‘utterly unfounded and unjustifiable complaints’. As a result, Lloyd instructed his senior commanders within his division that:

As regards our Allies, we did and do not fully realise the circumstances which successfully led to their withdrawal on our right flank in the early stages of the operations in Belgium and later to their mass arrival on the Dunkirk perimeter, but what we do know is that the Frenchman is a gallant and intrepid soldier and that we must stand shoulder to shoulder with him until victory is gained. We cannot therefore, in fact we must not, have any but the most loyal thoughts for our French allies without whom the war would be an even more dangerous adventure than at present, and with whom we look forward to sharing the fruits of final victory. I will be glad therefore if you will place the facts, as expressed above, four square before your men.⁵⁶⁵

However, the more generous comments towards the French offered by the likes of Gort, Davidson and Lloyd were rare and limited in the immediate aftermath of the battle. This arguably is surprising given the important role that their French ally had played in allowing the BEF to escape in sufficient numbers to be able to successfully continue British resistance in the war. Moreover, although most senior officers in the BEF were quick to highlight French failures and misconduct in the defeat, few commented on why just a few weeks earlier they had such confidence in their ally and were unable to have foreseen their defeat. Instead, with a few noted exceptions above, vitriol and recrimination was directed towards the French army. Indeed in all the BEF’s accounts in the aftermath of the battle of France it is striking how no explanation is offered as to why their previous views on the French had been proved wrong.

It also appears natural that in light of some of the French army’s conduct witnessed by British officers that some of the BEF’s leadership reacted in the way that they did. The extremely critical nature of these observations in their tone and language used, further demonstrates the extent of the shock and disappointment felt by British officers, but also illustrates the depth of the previously held confidence in the French army. Interestingly, the character of officers’ criticisms of the French army is similar to the views that were expressed by British observers of their own forces in the Norwegian campaign. Although these critical

⁵⁶⁵ RLC RLCA4852. Major General Charles Lloyd, Memorandum 2 Div No102/AQ, 6 June 1940.

observations were made by different officers the pointed nature of them are strikingly similar, reflecting perhaps the character of the British officer class of this era and the manner in which they commented and reacted to serious setbacks. Additional evidence of this was the similar reaction offered by some British officers and officials to the surrender of the Belgian army on 28 May which they perceived as being premature, a sentiment that was shared by the French command.⁵⁶⁶ The one thing that the British and French could and did agree on as May turned into June 1940 was that they would both blame and excoriate the Belgians and especially King Leopold.

Conclusion

Such was the high level of confidence in the French army which the leadership of the BEF possessed in May 1940, that most British officers in France were seemingly complacent about their ally's prospects at being able to hold the German offensive in the West. This apparent lack of concern reflected a long held deference towards the French army which was long established before the start of the Phoney War. This also contributed to the BEF being slow to appreciate the extent of the seriousness of the setbacks endured by the French army at the start of the Battle of France. This was also the result of Britain's longstanding failure to study its ally's ground forces which resulted in a serious unawareness of weaknesses possessed by the French army. Most serious of the BEF's limited knowledge of the French army's deficiencies was a failure to understand the extent to which its effectiveness was undermined by an inadequate system of communications which prevented timely responses to German actions on the battlefield. The failure to perceive these communications and signals weaknesses fully in the French army should not be underestimated as this led to the breakdown of effective liaison between the two armies which in turn led to the inability to adequately coordinate action on the battlefield, ensuring that there would be no way of reversing allied fortunes in France. However, to the credit of the BEF's leadership they understood that the French army was facing defeat earlier than their political and military masters in London. As a result of this awareness both Gort and Brooke were able to act contrary to orders from London and helped save more of the BEF than would have been possible in the evacuations that followed.

⁵⁶⁶ See Bond, *Britain, France and Belgium*, 92-96. Pownall even remarked that 'We don't care a bugger what happens to the Belgians' when asked if Belgian troops would be evacuated from France with the BEF.

Once the BEF finally realised that the French army was facing serious difficulties in the face of the German advance, the long-established confidence held in its ally suddenly disappeared. It did so as many in the BEF were appalled by some of the behaviour it witnessed at all levels of the French army as it disintegrated on the battlefield. British observers may have understandably disapproved of some of the conduct that they were exposed to. Yet such behaviour is not uncommon and almost inevitable amongst armies that were routed in the manner which France's ground forces were in 1940. Moreover, most British critics of French behaviour chose not to report similar conduct which the BEF also exhibited as Germany neared victory in the campaign. In this respect many of the BEF's observations proved less than evenly balanced in the manner in which they were quick to sharply criticise its defeated ally whilst being unable to acknowledge that British forces in France proved to be culpable of similar actions.

It could be argued that less generous still was a lack of acknowledgement from the BEF of the crucial role played by some of the French army's finest units in shielding the BEF's retreat and evacuation from Dunkirk. Indeed, had those French units not demonstrated the resolve which they did in defence at Lille and at the Dunkirk perimeter the BEF would have not escaped from France in the numbers it did so and seriously weakened the British army's ability to contribute as significantly as it could later in the conflict. The lack of recognition of this role accompanied by fierce criticism of its ally shows the bonds of Franco-British military amity were not as strong as they appeared in the less demanding times before operations began. In this sense it indicates that the earlier positive relations between the two armies were superficial and stable but certainly not resolute. Furthermore, many observers of the BEF were unwilling or unable to explain why their faith in the French army had been so misplaced prior to the German *Blitzkrieg*. Moreover, most British observers even failed to acknowledge that they had previously held so much confidence in the French army. To an extent British anger and dismay towards their French ally was understandable. Having had such faith in the abilities of the French army, it is not unremarkable that there was a sharp reaction to the unexpected and sudden defeat. Such a reaction could be all the more expected as the defeat of France's ground forces had placed the British army in great danger as well as the security of Britain itself. Given the gravity of the situation that ensued, it was inevitable that a strong and emotive response would be aroused amongst many British observers.

The blunt nature of British comments is of course also a reflection of the disappointment and shock of the defeat itself. There is a strong sense in the critical comments and the absence of more generous judgements that British officers felt let down by their French ally. Such a sentiment is likely to have been born from the British army's position as a junior partner to its French counterpart and accordingly allowing the French high command to lead in land operations. In occupying this role in the alliance, the BEF's leadership acquiesced, albeit with little other option, to this junior status in the Phoney War period by not challenging the French command's plans to counter the anticipated German offensive. By not challenging these plans the BEF's leadership clearly assumed that all was in order with the French army and so the subsequent defeat would have heightened the sense of shock and frustration. The nature of many BEF officer's reaction to the French army after its defeat can be considered surprising given that Franco-British relations appeared to be so positive during the Phoney War and the period of limited engagement in the preceding decade. The sharp reaction which occurred in many cases indicates that there would appear to have been a degree of superficiality to these earlier relations, even though the genuine sense of positivity seems to have contributed to the earlier confidence in the French army. Understandably it would have been easier to maintain positive relations in the more benign environment prior to the German *Blitzkrieg* and earlier to that. Yet, British officers maintained positive relations with the French army under the failure of the Norway campaign, although the creditable performance of French ground forces there no doubt prevented any British displeasure from being expressed.

Any suggestions that some of the more strident criticisms are evidence of a latent Francophobia are difficult to validate. Certainly any evidence of Francophobia was well hidden from view amongst British officers over the previous decade, even if amongst some it undoubtedly existed.⁵⁶⁷ However, during that time there was little opportunity for the ignition of these feelings in contact between the British and French armies. If such an attitude to France and the French had existed then the defeat of France's ground forces would likely provoke its emergence. Evidence of such an outlook is difficult to prove though given its previous lack of exposure. Instead the danger at which Britain and its army was placed following the French defeat in such an unanticipated state of events appears to have been the catalyst in generating British frustrations directed at the French army.

⁵⁶⁷ See Chapter 3.

A prominent characteristic of views of the French army prior to the Battle of France was the way in which British observers noted the serious weaknesses and limitations of the British army which coloured its perceptions of France's ground forces. Awareness of their own force's difficulties had of course enabled the French army to appear even stronger than its British counterpart especially also given the obvious limitations that Britain could at that point make in a Continental land campaign. However, during the Battle of France and its immediate aftermath, it is striking how these previously widely and repeatedly shared views of the British army's problems are absent in the observations of the BEF's officers. This reduction in self-criticism is notable not only in the absence of greater acknowledgement of poor British conduct during the campaign, as seen above, but also in the continuing serious weaknesses which the British army endured. Although these were not entirely absent, their prominence was not as heightened as they were over the preceding decade. In part it is possible that the exposure of the French army's failings in its defeat gave perspective to the British army's own weaknesses. After all, the French army was perceived as the senior partner in matters of land warfare and as they had been found to be undermined by serious deficiencies then it was perhaps not unexpected that Britain's ground forces had weaknesses that needed addressing.

The relative lessening in the criticism of the British army by its own leadership is also evidence perhaps that the earlier indication expressed was in part due to efforts to increase resources to the army. Although this may have played a role in the motivation of some officers, it should not be too overstated as an explanation given the obvious shortcomings of the British army and the fact that these concerns were genuinely expressed privately in addition to other forums where they could have added pressure to remedy various weaknesses. Moreover, the limitations of the British army could no longer be doubted given its clear failings in Norway and the little impact it was able to exert on operations in the Battle of France. In this sense senior officers did not need to highlight any further that the British army was beset with serious deficiencies which needed urgently correcting, especially given the precarious strategic position that Britain now found itself in following the fall of France. It would have been obvious to all in the British government that in the light of Europe's new strategic balance, the war would need pursuing with greater vigour and resolution with which the effectiveness of the army would need to improve. Furthermore the British army's leadership no longer had to struggle against the influence of the likes of Hore-

Belisha and Neville Chamberlain who in the past they had perceived were denying them the resources required to create an effective Continental land force.⁵⁶⁸ More significantly perhaps though Britain no longer had a continental ally to which it could unfavourably compare itself against. Indeed, with France defeated the British army was now unable either deliberately or inadvertently, as it has done previously, to judge its own force against its senior coalition partner, a land force vastly different in size and character, which in turn coloured perceptions of itself.

⁵⁶⁸ See Chapter 3.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

After the Battle of France the War Office's military intelligence section, MI3, studied the French army's defeat, seeking to identify lessons Britain could apply in the event of a German invasion.⁵⁶⁹ Morale in the French army, the report observed, collapsed swiftly.

Morale began to crack at the outset ... Dive bombing and the sudden and continuous assaults by German armoured columns, which caused a succession of withdrawals seemed to break their spirit. ... Few of the numerous French prisoners whom the Germans allowed to roam about loose in the 'bulge' ever tried to escape. They had had enough of war.⁵⁷⁰

A collapse in morale, however, was just as much a consequence as a cause of the defeats the French army suffered. Probing deeper, the MI3 report highlighted significant problems with the leadership, command and control in the French army. Having been surprised by the initial German breakout across the Meuse, senior French officers, it noted, lacked direction in command, whilst junior leaders failed to take the initiative in the absence of guidance from senior commanders.⁵⁷¹ This, it argued, was born of an over-confidence in the army's strategy and capabilities.

French strategy was based on the defence of fortified positions and the avoidance of casualties...This teaching led to a certain stagnation and a lack of training in mobile warfare, such as might be expected if tanks succeeded in breaking through. The correct deductions had been drawn from the invasion of Poland, but an over-confidence, bred of an assumed intellectual superiority resulted in a failure to take advantage of the lessons learnt from this campaign.... The French who have always shown themselves to be adept at improvisation, failed to put any manoeuvres into operation to stem the advancing German columns....Dispositions to stop gaps were always forty-eight hours too late. This was due to insufficient staff work, combined with interruptions of communications...French plans were thus thrown out of gear and a feeling of complete helplessness seemed to overcome the troops.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁹ TNA WO 193/176. MI3 paper on Collapse of France, 6 July 1940.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

These observations made by the War Office on the French army were seemingly well judged. They were though rather more obvious to state after the French army's defeat, while the MI3 report failed to address the question of why the British had shared this over-confidence and failed to spot critical weaknesses in its ally's ground forces.

This thesis has closely examined and analysed how the British observed and assessed the ground forces of their likely ally in the lead up to its calamitous defeat, seeking to make sense of Britain's own 'over-confidence' in and assumed superiority of the French army as it prepared to face the German onslaught. In doing so, this thesis has probed deeper than historians have before to understand the shortcomings in reporting and critical assessments of the French army made by successive British observers, from multiple vantage points. This has led to an exploration of the role of cultural and institutional factors in shaping British views of the French army, alongside more practical considerations, which together have added new insights to help understand the wider dynamic of Franco-British relations in the inter-war and Phoney War periods and how Britain came to find itself in such a strategic position of danger in June 1940.

How and why did Britain report on the French army in the way it did?

This thesis has not only explained why British confidence in the French army existed but has also extended its analysis to how Britain studied France's ground forces and the influences which shaped the ensuing assessments. Included in this analysis has been the impact of the limited diversity in the professional and personal backgrounds of those British officers that reported on France's ground forces. Equally, I have shown how British officers' views were formed in part by an incomplete understanding of their own army related to the limitations of the form of professional military 'education' that was then offered in the British army. It has been argued that the British army lacked rigour in the way its officers studied their profession. It has been shown that contributing to this was an emphasis on character and leadership, which was repeatedly referred to in the reporting on the French army's leadership, rather than on technical matters of logistics and signals communications. It has also been explained that the British regimental system contributed to the narrowing of the professional outlook of officers with the consequence that the British army seldom produced officers able

to think beyond their regiment, as noted in other studies.⁵⁷³ However, this thesis has extended this analysis, arguing that since many British army officers were insufficiently aware of their own wider armed service, it is unsurprising that they were unable to report effectively on many aspects of the French army.

This notably applied to the aspect of signals communications, shortcomings which proved crucial to the French army's defeat. As has been shown, the French army was aware of certain weaknesses in areas of their communications throughout the period in question, appreciating that their signals were a work in progress. Had greater effort to study this area been made by British officials, then it is likely that awareness of specific shortcomings would have been evident. In contrast, the French army undertook detailed studies of British and other nations' signals and communications. A similar approach by British observers would have been enlightening on the imperfect nature of French signals. Although an understanding of this is likely to have made no difference to the outcome of the 1940 campaign, mitigating measures could have been considered. Moreover, it would have led to a greater understanding of the potential for a breakdown in communications which did occur and led to the collapse of effective liaison between the BEF and French army, which greatly hindered a joint approach to respond effectively to setbacks on the battlefield in May 1940. Certainly an appreciation that this was possible could have led to contingencies being considered to ensure liaison did not become so strained.

Why Britain had confidence in the French army prior to 1940

In the aftermath of the June 1940 defeat, the War Office remained silent as to why British confidence had been so strong in the French army for the previous decade. Historians have also not provided a detailed analysis as to why this was the case. This thesis sets out a number of answers to this question, drawn from the experiences of successive British observers viewing the French army from a variety of vantage points. Firstly it has been shown that British confidence was partly the result of insufficient study of France's ground forces. Not doing so was in part symptomatic of Britain's inability to prepare effectively for war in the 1930s and reflected the lack of urgency with which the British government pursued the conflict during the Phoney War. It was also the result of greater efforts being

⁵⁷³ See, for example, David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59-63 and David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c. 1870-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145-179.

committed instead to study those armies that had the potential to disturb the peace in Europe such as Germany and Italy. An inability to acquire an accurate appreciation of the French army was also the result of the British government's efforts to distance itself from France's military for most of the 1930s. It did so firstly constrained by the sensitivities of public opinion which feared that France was attempting to draw Britain into an alliance which could contribute to a new war on the continent. Secondly, London was equally sensitive to opinion overseas, most notably in Berlin, and did not want to antagonise the Nazi regime into believing that Britain and France were forging a new military alliance. Britain's consequent limited engagement with the French military, inevitably therefore restricted the ability to acquire an accurate understanding of France's army.

Nevertheless, in the decade preceding the Second World War Britain did not exploit opportunities to learn more about the French army, most notably through its staff at the British embassy in Paris. Similarly, during the Phoney War when British engagement with the French army became extensive, insufficient efforts were made by British officials to further familiarise themselves with their Gallic ally in this respect. Moreover, this thesis reveals that British observers consistently reported in a cursory manner on aspects of the French army. Although details were provided on leadership, equipment and morale, it was seldom done so in a way that maximised possible insight. Furthermore, important aspects such as doctrine, signals communications and command and control rarely featured in British reporting. With ineffective scrutiny of the French army it seems evident that British confidence in France's ground forces rested upon an incomplete understanding of them.

Playing a significant role both in inhibiting study of the French army and in sustaining British confidence, was the sentiment widely held by British officers in the inter-war years which looked upon the French army with deference from its role in the Allied victory in 1918. Indeed such was the perceived strength of the French army in 1918 that it proved difficult for British observers to consider that its ally from the First World War did not continue to be an extremely powerful force during the inter-war years. This was evidently the case for many of those best placed to observe the French army between 1933 and 1940 who had developed this sentiment through their lived-experience as mid-ranking or junior officers on the Western Front.

Confidence in the French army also appears to have been partly the result of a degree of wishful thinking of many British officials during the 1930s. Indeed, it would seem that the

French army's perceived strength provided a useful additional justification for those in government that were reluctant up until 1939 to devote sufficient resources to prepare an expeditionary force for service in Europe. Similarly, those in senior positions in the War Office that argued for a continentalist rather than an imperialist strategic vision to Britain's defence policy, had to believe in the effectiveness of the French army. This outlook was only viable if there was another friendly nation with a large powerful land force to serve alongside in Europe, and the French army was the only feasible potential ally that could fulfil this role. Furthermore, with Britain only able initially to deploy a small expeditionary force insufficiently trained and equipped, the British government had to have faith in the French army as the only significant land force to oppose German aggression in the west.

An additional factor in sustaining confidence in the French army was the acute awareness many observers had of the British army's own weaknesses. The French army, by comparison, was viewed as far more operationally capable than Britain's smaller ground forces. Moreover, due to the significant differences between the two nations' armies, a high level of deference was generated in British officers towards their French counterparts. Such a development often arises in coalitions where one member is much stronger than the other, which can lead in turn to the weaker ally to becoming acquiescent and less critical. A further effect of the British army's significant weaknesses was that they limited British officers' capacity to devote attention to other issues, including the French army. This particularly applied to those at the most senior levels of the BEF following their deployment to France.

British officers in part also perceived the French army through how they perceived themselves. This is evident by a reoccurring tendency to base so much of their confidence in the French army on the character of its leadership, which it would appear was a quality they found important in their perceptions of themselves as British officers. This is repeatedly demonstrated in the nature of the language used to describe approvingly the French army's leadership which reflected the class-based affiliations of the British army's own officers.

This thesis has also explained that confidence in the French army was in part the result of what British observers witnessed at first-hand of France's ground forces. Despite the French army's sudden defeat, it possessed many attributes which were militarily sound and merited confidence. It was therefore understandable that British officials observed much to be positive about the French Army. Although after some encounters criticisms were offered on

France's ground forces, they were not considered sufficiently serious to undermine their overall viability. Furthermore, a consistent characteristic of British engagement with the French army prior to May 1940 was the warm relations that Britain's officials enjoyed with their Gallic counterparts. Given the importance of direct personal experiences in forming opinions, it is understandable that the positive nature of British engagement with the French army contributed further to the confidence in France's ground forces.

Could British confidence have been justified and could alternative views have been formed on France's ground forces?

British confidence in the French Army was of course shattered as France's ground forces were defeated. The comprehensive and swift nature of the defeat could lead to the view that this previously held faith was misguided. Yet, such a judgement would not be entirely justified. Indeed, in operations in Norway together with actions around Lille, the Dunkirk perimeter and in immediate operations south of the Somme, elements of the French army performed highly effectively against their German enemy. These engagements were evidence that the French army could perform well in battle and that the earlier held British confidence was not entirely misplaced. Furthermore, out of sight of British observers and outside of the scope of this thesis, the French army swiftly repulsed the attack of Italian forces on the Côte d'Azur following Mussolini's declaration of war in the latter stages of the Battle of France.⁵⁷⁴ Although occurring under different circumstances, French units under differing command and control arrangements also demonstrated their effectiveness subsequent to the campaign in France and Flanders. For example, French units under the command of the Vichy regime fought tenaciously against British forces in the Levant and Madagascar.⁵⁷⁵ Similarly, alongside the Allies once more, French units acquitted themselves well in the Italian and later North West Europe campaigns, albeit in circumstances even more different from the Battle of France.⁵⁷⁶ There is therefore legitimate evidence that the French army could perform to a high standard in battle and that there was nothing about its combat effectiveness which would lead to it being inevitably unable to resist a German attack.

⁵⁷⁴ George G. Kundahl, *The Riviera at War: World War II on the Côte d'Azur* (London: I B Tauris, 2017), 11-13.

⁵⁷⁵ See Colin Smith, *England's Last War Against France: Fighting Vichy 1940-1942* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009), 219-267, 299-345.

⁵⁷⁶ TNA WO 106/4408. 'History of Campaigns – First French Army', 31 May 1945.

British confidence was therefore not entirely without justification. Moreover, those British observers examined in this thesis were highly competent military officials. Indeed, those who served at the British embassy in Paris, the highest echelons of the War Office and those who led the BEF in France had, to differing degrees, enjoyed meritorious military careers. Although amongst these officials there was service not always without blemish, these were not military incompetents. Their confidence in the French army should not be entirely interpreted as a failure in foresight on their part, as clearly the examples above of creditable French operations demonstrate that their judgements were not wholly misplaced. In this sense highlighting the extent of confidence amongst senior British military officials adds further weight to the arguments of those historians that the French army of 1940 could be an effective fighting force and that there was nothing inevitable about its defeat.

Although there may have been merit to British observers holding confidence in the French army, the outcome of the Battle of France proved the extent of this faith to be mistaken. It is useful, though, to consider if British officials could have formed alternative views. By so doing it can help assess the claims of those who choose to attribute blame to officials for not having judged the French army more cautiously. It also helps further understand the difficulties that officials have in planning and forecasting military operations throughout history and in the present day.

Would it have been possible for Britain to have come to a different view of the French army? After all, most other military observers in other nations also shared the same perspective. Certainly there were opportunities for Britain to have devoted greater scrutiny to aspects of the French army. Could Britain also have been more questioning of the French army's leadership's line of thought on how it planned to counter a future German offensive? Equally, had the French army been scrutinised more closely, it is possible that information could have been gleaned to shed further light on the wisdom of French strategy. Not examining sufficiently the French army's communications in this respect was a particularly critical oversight. As discussed in this thesis, the French army at all levels was overly reliant on the use of telephones and were slow to consider the widespread introduction of radio communications. The vulnerability of telephone communications in an operational environment put the French army's ability to react as speedily as possible to events on the battlefield at great risk, both at senior headquarters and at the tactical level on the battlefield. Had Britain been more aware of French weaknesses in communications then it was possible it

could have extended its thoughts to the possible consequences of how this would inhibit the ability of France's leadership to be able to respond to events. It could then have been possible for British observers to consider France's ability to respond to an attack in a location other than where it was confidently predicted. It is of course by no means certain that British officers would have extended their thinking in this way. Indeed, given the relaxed attitude that appeared to prevail in studying the French army, this seems unlikely.

Yet, Britain ought to have been aware of the critical weaknesses in French communications. Moreover, this dangerous deficiency should have been within the capabilities of the military attachés prior to September 1939 and the likes of the liaison missions during the Phoney War period to detect. After all, 'signal and communication services' were identified in the War Office's instructions for the military attachés to report on in the 1930s.⁵⁷⁷ It would not have required extensive investigations to be aware of the overreliance on telephone communications, and the inability to report on this matter should be considered a serious oversight by the military attachés' and later by the liaison missions. With the attachés in particular not reporting on such matters, the War Office was left with no other source from which to garner this information. Had the War Office provided greater supervision of and direction for the attachés work, then it seems very likely that these matters would have been revealed. It would then have been for the War Office to judge as to how this awareness could have been best utilised in its further considerations.

In this respect Britain's confidence in the French army was the result of how it chose to study France's ground forces. There was throughout the period a tendency to comment and report principally on the French army's leadership and morale. By basing its study of the French army on these two narrow areas, it became difficult for British observers to form a view that was anything other than positive. It is evident that British observers were not asking the wrong questions of the French army, but rather not asking enough questions of France's ground forces. Had additional scrutiny been given to doctrine, equipment, training together with the French army's various arms, services, roles and functions, a more complete understanding of the French army would have been acquired. With a more comprehensive

⁵⁷⁷ See Chapter 3 and TNA WO 33/1387, 'Memorandum for the Guidance of Military Attachés' in 'Amplification of Instructions Contained in Letter of Appointment', August 1928.

understanding it is then possible that the confidence in the French army may not have been quite as robust, especially given the serious deficiencies in signals communications.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that acquiring a greater understanding of the French Army should have been expected. After all Britain was able eventually to gain an accurate appreciation of German military intentions despite the secretive nature of the Nazi regime. Given success in this respect British officials ought to have been able to present a more detailed picture of the French army. It seems, though, that the danger posed by the German military threat provided greater impetus to the work of the War Office and Britain's embassy in Berlin. Although the French army naturally posed no such threat to Britain, its importance as a bulwark to any German attack in the West ought to have created more urgency to acquire a greater understanding.

The significance of British views of the French army on wider Franco-British relations.

In analysing specifically the 'army' dimension of Franco-British relations for the 1933-1940 period this thesis has shed light on some of the bigger questions surrounding diplomacy and the military of this era. In particular, I show how various cultural and institutional issues within the British army impacted upon how Britain reported on the French army and by extension influenced the course of wider Franco-British relations during this time. Indeed, these cultural and institutional matters had an influence that extended beyond the direct outputs of the British army but also in turn helped form the course of Franco-British relations. In this respect this thesis has considered further issues raised by assessments about potential or actual allies, in that their results are not just shaped by the efforts put directly into this reporting but by the wider foundations of an army's culture, training and professional education.

Indeed this thesis demonstrates that the wider dynamic of Franco-British relations was shaped in part by calculations on the French army which were undermined by cultural and institutional weaknesses within the British army, whose officials provided the government with its professional advice on France's ground forces. Although the institutional and to an extent the cultural weaknesses of the British army have been considered by historians, notably on how this impacted operational effectiveness, they had not been analysed to show their wider impact in defence or foreign relations and by extension the potential they have on the opportunity to maximise influence with an important friendly

power. In this respect the thesis has demonstrated how aspects of the British army's officer corps, regimental system together with an imperfect form of further officer education impaired Britain's ability to gain an accurate understating of the French army which then fed into judgements on how the British government pursued its wider defence and foreign policy posture towards France. These cultural and institutional issues within the British army have to this point not been acknowledged in terms of how they impacted upon strategic considerations in Britain's alliance with France.

In addition, this thesis adds to the work of those historians who since the 1970s have moved away from viewing the Battle of France as the final stage of the Third Republic's inevitably terminal decadent decline. It has done so by demonstrating the extent of the confidence of those British officials with the greatest professional military expertise to judge the French army, thus providing additional evidence to illustrate strengths within France's ground forces. Given that this perspective on the French army was shared by Britain's most senior and able military officials, this thesis, by examining the extent to which this was believed and why, adds further support to acknowledging a degree of robustness to the French Republic, by indicating aspects of the French army's strength despite its defeat in June 1940.

Furthermore, in analysing British views of the French army this thesis emphasises in detail that in terms of the specific issue of land warfare, in Franco-British relations, Britain took a subservient position to France's ground forces, acknowledging its inferiority in its operational capabilities relative to that of the French army. It has been shown that British officials' deferential view of the French army adds further to those more recent studies which have stressed the relative strength of the Third Republic, showing that in areas of defence policy concerning France's ground forces, the French government was entirely independent of British influence. Indeed, by adopting a non-critical approach to the French army, British officials helped create a subservient relationship with France's ground forces. Consequently army matters were an area of foreign and defence affairs which France was effectively given a free rein from London to pursue a course entirely of its own choosing. This in turn ensured that the strategy for which Britain and France would decide to undertake ground operations in a future conflict would be determined exclusively by the French army's leadership. Although Martin Alexander has argued that this role was evident in Franco-British relations after the

declaration of war, this thesis shows that the nature of this relationship stretched back throughout the interwar years.⁵⁷⁸

Lessons identified for asymmetrical coalition relations

The demise of the Franco-British alliance in 1940 still has relevance to Britain's place in the world today in relation to how it engages with other allies. In 1939 Britain was only able to oppose Nazi aggression in coalition with France, and then in terms of land forces, as a junior partner. Similarly today, Britain is unable to undertake any operation against a potential adversary, even on a small scale without the support of allies. Britain has increasingly found itself as a junior partner in alliances since the Second World War, but this position has become even more apparent with the relative decline in the size of Britain's armed forces. Given this position, it is vital that Britain has an accurate understanding of its coalition partners to, as far as is feasible, mitigate against any potential setbacks in operations with their potential for far reaching strategic, economic and political consequences. In this respect an analysis of British views of the French army is intended in part to act as a warning from history for today's British defence policy makers on the potential hazards of being a junior partner in a coalition with trusted senior allies and the importance of being able to make accurate judgements on their potential operational effectiveness. This thesis has therefore provided a significant analysis of the difficulty of scrutinising the strength of a larger coalition partner, albeit in this context in terms of ground forces but something which is highly relevant to Britain's contemporary defence affairs. Specifically it has added to the field of study of asymmetrical coalition relations, notably in the largely overlooked area of 'knowing your friends', through analysing the effectiveness of Britain's reporting on the French army.⁵⁷⁹

Furthermore, although this thesis agrees with Robert Rothstein's principles that a junior partner will always have only a secondary influence in a coalition, it has shown that potentially an actor, be it a state, non-state or other institution can maximise its leverage in an

⁵⁷⁸ Martin S. Alexander. "'Fighting to the Last Frenchman'?: Reflections on the BEF Deployment to France and the Strains in the Franco-British Alliance, 1939-1940' in Joel Blatt (Ed). *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), 297-298.

⁵⁷⁹ See Martin S. Alexander, *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1998).

alliance if they are operating upon firm institutional foundations.⁵⁸⁰ In this context the thesis has shown that had the British army not been constrained by some of its cultural and institutional weaknesses, it might have developed a greater awareness of France's ground forces with their operational capability gaps and therefore have the potential to exert a greater, albeit limited, degree of influence.

There is no evidence that the War Office or elsewhere in the British government sought intentionally to study and identify lessons of its relationship and alliance with the French army during the Phoney War and in the preceding decade. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War though, Britain adopted a different approach to the French army than it had done prior to May 1940. It would appear that in the immediate post-war years and the advent of the Cold War that Britain was no longer prepared to place itself in a junior position in a relationship with the French army. Indeed, at this time Britain encouraged France to be a leader for smaller Western European nations' armies as part of the West's defence against the threat from the Soviet Union.⁵⁸¹ Simultaneously Britain also sought assertively to exert its influence in the development of the French army. This was seen for example in direction given in the development of France's airborne forces.⁵⁸² Indeed by the start of the Cold War, Britain was no longer inhibited in being a junior partner to France in army terms. Moreover the fall of France ensured that the French army had lost its perceived aura among Britons from 1918 and Britain would no longer be deferential to its ally across the Channel as the West planned its defence to a new continental threat.

Politically and diplomatically though it is very difficult for a junior partner to exert influence or critically question its more senior ally. In this sense British officials prior to 1940 were not unique as a junior partner in a coalition to not question the apparent superiority and wisdom of its perceived stronger ally. To do otherwise though risks disrupting good relations, so vital in coalition warfare. Yet, as the events of 1940 demonstrate, in not doing so, there can be serious consequences. Nevertheless, despite its delicacy in coalition relations, this is an issue that British military and political leaders need to consider in the present and the future. After all, as noted above, every military operation which Britain will contribute to will be a coalition effort in which in many cases British influence will be limited purely by the size of the personnel deployed. Greater efforts therefore need to be considered as to how

⁵⁸⁰ Robert L. Rothstein. *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968)

⁵⁸¹ TNA WO 216/674 Notes on Meeting between General Revers CGS French Army and CIGS, 21 June 1948.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

Britain can scrutinise and influence coalition partners to help mitigate risk and ensure optimal results in operations. Political realities though of statuses in coalitions make this extremely difficult. Yet, in not seeking to address this issue, Britain could risk replicating the passive role it took prior to May 1940 with the French army. Indeed, by accepting a subservient position in land operations, the British army and its future in the Second World War was placed at risk by being unaware of the possibilities that France's ground forces may not have been able to resist a German attack. A fuller understanding of a coalition partner's strengths may not alter a negative outcome to an operation. However, a greater awareness of this possibility can mitigate the risks of such an eventuality. This Britain was not prepared for in 1940. Consequently, the French army's defeat created widespread and unexpected shock for British observers. More seriously, however, Britain had been placed unexpectedly in a strategic situation of great danger which had been given insufficient consideration.

ABBREVIATIONS

BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BNA	British Newspaper Archive
CAC	Churchill Archives Centre
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
COS	Chiefs of Staff
DDMO	Deputy Director of Military Operations at the War Office
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DMOI	Director of Military Operations and Intelligence
FO	Foreign Office
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GQG	<i>Grand Quartier Général</i>
HLRO	House of Lords Record Office
HQ	Headquarters
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
RA	Royal Archives
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAOC	Royal Army Ordnance Corps
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
RLC	Royal Logistic Corps
SHD	<i>Service Historique de la Défense</i>
TNA	The National Archives
WO	War Office

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Foreign Office (FO) 371, 432, 800, 954.

Prime Minister's Office (PREM) 1, 3.

War Office (WO) 32, 33, 106, 167, 190, 193, 197, 198, 202, 208, 216, 258, 259, 260, 282, 287, 373.

Ministry of Defence (DEFE) 2.

Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, London (LHCA)

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Papers of Field Marshal Lord Alan Brooke (ALANBROOKE) 4, 5.

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Papers of Lieutenant General Sir Wilfred Lindsell (LINDSELL) 1.

Papers of Major General Ridley Pakenham-Walsh (PAKENHAM-WALSH) 1.

Papers of Field Marshal Sir John Dill (DILL) 3.

Papers of Lieutenant General Sir Ronald Adam (ADAM) 2, 3.

Papers of Brigadier Francis Davidson (DAVIDSON) 5.

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