

# TWO ROADS TO WAR



**The French and British Air Arms  
from Versailles to Dunkirk**

**ROBIN HIGHAM**

*Author of 100 Years of Air Power and Aviation*

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*To Barbara, for sixty years of happiness,  
companionship, support, and faith.*





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## ABBREVIATIONS

AA	antiaircraft (Br.); for French, <i>see</i> DCA
AASF	Advanced Air Striking Force (Br.)
ACBEF	Air Component of the British Expeditionary Force
ADGB	Air Defence of Great Britain
AHB	Air Historical Branch (Br.)
AIR	Air Ministry and RAF Records (Br.)
AMSO	air member for supply and organization (Br.)
AMSR	air member for supply and research (Br.)
AOC	air officer commanding (Br.)
AOC-in-C	air officer commanding in chief (Br.)
BAFF	British Air Forces France, 1940
BCR	bomber-combat-reconnaissance aircraft (Fr.)
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
C <sub>3</sub>	command, control, and communications (Br.)
CAS	chief of the Air Staff (Br.)
CGPF	Confédération Générale du Patronat Français; general confederation of French <i>patronats</i> (Fr.)
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail; general confederation of labor (Fr.)
CH	Chain Home [RDF stations] (Br.)
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence (Br.)
CIGS	chief of the Imperial General Staff (Br.)
CSA	Conseil Supérieur de l'Air: supreme air council (Fr.)
CSDN	Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale; superior council of national defense (Fr.)
CSG	Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre; superior council of war (Fr.)
CSSAD	Committee for the Scientific Survey of Air Defence (Br.)
DAT	Défense Aérienne du Territoire; air defense of the territory (Fr.)
DCA	<i>défense contre avions</i> ; defense against aircraft (Fr.); for British, <i>see</i> AA

DCAS	deputy chief of the Air Staff (Br.)
EKW	Eidgenössische Konstruktions Werkstätte; Swiss federal construction works
FAA	Fleet Air Arm (Br.)
GQG	Grand Quartier-Général: army field HQ (Fr.)
GQGA	the HQ of the Armée de l'Air in wartime (Fr.)
GSAF	état-major de l'Armée de l'Air; general staff air force (Fr.)
HDAF	Home Defence Air Force (Br.)
HQ	headquarters
IFF	identification, friend or foe (Br.)
MT	motor transport (Br.)
NCO	noncommissioned officer (Br.); <i>sous-officier</i> (Fr.)
ORC	Operational Requirements Committee (Br.)
POL	petrol (gasoline), oil, and lubricants (Br.)
PSOC	Principal Supply Officers Committee (Br.)
RAE	Royal Aircraft Establishment (Br.)
RAF	Royal Air Force (Br.)
RAFVR	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (Br.)
RDF	radio direction finding, known after 1943 as radar
RFC	Royal Flying Corps (Br.)
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service (Br.)
R/T	radio telephone (Br.)
SBAC	Society of British Aircraft Constructors (Br.)
SD	secret document [ex., <i>SD98</i> ] (Br.)
SGA	Société Générale d'Aéronautique; general aeronautical society (Fr.)
SHAA	Service Historique de l'Armée de l'Air: air force historical service (Fr.)
SPAD	Société Pour l'Aviation et ses Dérivés; company for aviation and its derivatives (Fr.)
WA	Western Air (Br.)
WIS	wireless intelligence screen
ZOAE	Zone d'Opérations Est; air zone of operations east (Fr.)
ZOAN	Zone d'Opérations Nord; air zone of operations north (Fr.)
ZOANE	Zone d'Opérations Nord-Est; air zone of operations northeast (Fr.)
ZOAS	Zone d'Opérations Sud; air zone of operations south (Fr.)



## PREFACE

**T***wo Roads to War* is not about the defeat of France per se, but rather about how the air side of the two victorious allies of 1918, with the world's two largest air services, suffered such different fates during May–September 1940. In one sense this is a narrow presentation focusing on the badly neglected tale of the *Arme Aéronautique* (French air arm) of the *Armée de Terre* (French army)—after 1933, the *Armée de l'Air* (French air force). Within that framework this work briefly examines much of the French structure, including the geographic, social, political, economic, and technological base on which the aeronautical edifice was erected, as well as those who controlled its destiny, its enemies, the legacies of the Great War (World War I), and defense policies.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this history is not restricted to the French side. It also crosses the English Channel to compare what happened in Paris with the background and actions in London. Airpower should have been an important part of the defense of France during 1940, as it once had been in 1918, but it was not. That is what this book is about. It uses the British side of the story in a sense as a control to illustrate what could have been possible, not to denigrate the French. Hopefully, what I have to say herein will provide new insights and a middle ground.

The two major historiographical controversies of the interwar years—appeasement and the fall of France—are both peripheral to this book. In both debates the analysis has been cyclical as new generations view the two topics.

### **Comparative Studies**

The historians of modern France, especially those in Gaul, have not exercised due diligence in seeking explanations of the catastrophe, the calamity,

the defeat of 1940. There is no question that it was a military defeat, and for that the military undoubtedly deserves the blame, but that only explains the immediate cause.

France was a democracy and so the rulers of the Troisième République (third republic) have to shoulder at least their fair share of the burden because they, as the superior authority, did not prepare France for war or develop a viable alternative. Briefly during January–June 1932 there was a French defense minister, Édouard Daladier, who became defense minister from 1936 almost to the end of the war in June 1940, who was a veteran of World War I, as were others. But it was Daladier's responsibility to see that the armed forces, notably the Armée de Terre and the Armée de l'Air, had doctrines and the wherewithal that meshed and met the basic needs of French defense. That quarrelsome uncertainty affected the development and production of weapons, notably of tanks and aircraft, and the best modern conception of their use in Gallic circumstances.

Gen. Maurice Gamelin was only in favor of tanks as support for the infantry, not as de Gaulle envisaged them as an arm like the cavalry. He had even less use for aircraft, and his basic strategy of meeting the Germans far forward in Belgium with the Dyle/Breda plan so as not to fight on French soil was fundamentally flawed, even when seen as parrying the initial German thrust; that thrust, of course, came as a surprise, and he had no reserves to counter it. But as this work shows, Gamelin was a wet blanket where the Armée de l'Air was concerned, and the accession to the Boulevard Victor of Guy La Chambre, a Gamelin man from the Ministère de la Guerre (ministry of war) who favored Armée de Terre cooperation in all its forms, was retrograde and too late.

In that era of the Technological Revolution in aviation, a lack of doctrine stunted the evolution of modern aircraft. The result was that the Armée de l'Air in May 1940 did not have fighters equal to the German Me-109, and had few modern bombers and the engines to power them, certainly none equal in quality and quantity to the Do-17, the He-111, the Ju-88, and the Stuka. In addition, most of the Armée de l'Air's reconnaissance and observation machines were equal to the Luftwaffe's Hs-126. Neither did the Armée de l'Air have the necessary air and ground crew, nor anti-aircraft (DCA, *défense*

*contre avions*), the French flak. For those failings the chief of État-Majeur de l'Armée de l'Air (GSAF; general staff air force) must be blamed. These people lacked the training, the vision, and the skills to solve the problems.

The historiographic debate about the fall of France emerged immediately from 1940. Marshal Philippe Pétain, as the head of the Vichy regime, blamed the rulers of the Troisième République for leading the country down the path to ruin, and later added that France was being punished for the moral failure of the rotten République.<sup>2</sup> The Riom *procès* of 1942 tried unsuccessfully to pin the blame on the leadership; and then, too, Professor Marc Bloch, who had served in the Armée de Terre during 1914–1918 war and again in 1939–1940, stressed the loss of faith of the upper classes in the greatness of France after the Front Populaire (Socialist popular front) election success of 1936.<sup>3</sup> He thus had traced the decline to Fascism and defeatism. Even before Marc Bloch's manuscript, *Strange Defeat*, written in 1940 and published in 1946, foreign-policy journalist André Géraud under the pseudonym Pertinax had written *Les Fossoyeurs* (later translated as *The Gravediggers of France*), which accused the leadership of the 1930s of gross incompetence.<sup>4</sup>

After World War II, decadence (*la décadence*) was widely accepted by a whole spectrum of French politicians as a way of discrediting their rivals. Ignoring their own guilt, the Communists accused the regimes of being corrupt as well as decadent. From another quarter, the Gaullists excoriated the Troisième République as powerless. They argued that France had lacked a “man on horseback” like de Gaulle.<sup>5</sup> The historian Paul Renouvin and his adherents, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Maurice Baumont, cast the net wider, fishing in international waters where they found intense forces (*forces profondes*) to show, among other influences, that of domestic politics on foreign policy. Also, the short-lived cabinets and politicians' desire for personal aggrandizement left them little time for dynamic initiatives in diplomacy. The politicians had lost sight of the public interest in their handling of events of the 1930s.

In 1979 the well-known work by Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932–1939*, totally limned the Troisième République as cowardly, weak, and degenerate.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, in 1969, American reporter William L. Shirer in *The Collapse of the Third Republic* had emphasized the failure of the Paris leadership due to its

weakness, which included personal ambition and the ambition of the leaders' mistresses, as well as a different agenda by the vengeful Gen. Maxime Weygand, who was part of the Vichy regime.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Shirer noted the ineffective, manipulative General Gamelin, the devious politicians Pierre Laval and his puppet Philippe Pétain, as well as Paul Reynaud's controlling mistress, Countess Hélène de Portes.

Recent historians Talbot Imlay, Anthony Adamthwaite, and Nicole Jordan have accepted both the decadence view and the weakness of the pre-1940 Parisian leadership, while the Canadian Robert B. Young averred in his *In Command of France* that the defeat of 1940 was a military responsibility, for the politicians had done their best in the climate of the day.<sup>8</sup> Young has been followed by both French- and English-speaking authors such as Jean-Pierre Azema, Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, Martin Alexander, Eugenia Kiesling, and Martin Thomas, who believe that France's international weakness was due to the impact of the Great Depression and its delaying of Rearmament, and so no blame can be laid on the leadership for a failure to stand up to Hitler but rather must fall on decadence.

There is evidence in recent years that in spite of opposition the dynamic man on horseback, de Gaulle, is historically both alive and well, and that historians of France, still mostly the English-speaking, are beginning to once again reassess 1940.<sup>9</sup> Robert Gilda, an Oxford don, in his opening statements for *Marianne in Chains*, explains how he found that the French had still not come to grips with the many diverse facets of their history.<sup>10</sup> They still clung to ideological and political interpretations that colored their debates. The secrets needing to be revealed to enable the people to come to a restful solution still lay in the departmental, municipal, and church archives and still were protected on the grounds that 1940 was yet too close for "*la France profonde*" to be fully exposed.<sup>11</sup> And those views continue to afflict modern Francophiles.

However, the argument presented herein returns to a middle continental ground on which the leadership of both the Armée de Terre and the Armée de l'Air are held responsible for the defeat of 1940. Together, with both the political leadership and the turmoil in the aircraft industry in particular, and with the arrogance of the *patronats* (the wealthy capitalist French

class), the comparison and contrast is made with insular Great Britain to show that, generally, in the same circumstances viable solutions were possible. This work explains, then, why the courses adopted by the British led to victory in the summer of 1940 Battle of Britain. And this book is limited to the narrow, neglected—certainly in France—story of the air arms. Thus it is not concerned solely with explaining the defeat of the *Armée de l’Air*, except to note that the lack of doctrine, confusion in command, late start, and dearth of resources made the *Armée de l’Air* virtually impotent due to causes that stretched back before the 1920s. On the other hand, the question as to whether appeasement was the right policy for Britain is not the issue here. The point is that Neville Chamberlain saw the Royal Air Force (RAF) as the least expensive national defense, and thus ensured the supply of money needed for RAF Expansion, whereas across the English Channel (in French, the *Manche*) the *Armée de l’Air* was short of funding until 1938, in part because both a policy and a manufacturing infrastructure first had to be built and aircraft and engines designed and tested, and in part because of inflation.

Part of the background to understanding the state of mind in 1940 has to be the recognition that the interwar years saw a fundamental change in the context in which war and peace were waged, and stabilized the new doctrines in armored warfare, grand-strategic and tactical bombing, submarine warfare, carrier aircraft, and the development of radar (then known as radio direction finding, or RDF). All of these progressive actions impacted the budgets and mores of the armed forces, though the trends were different in each country. Historians Millett, Murray, and Watman in 1986 suggested questions to be posed in order to reach some elucidation, but thought that the answers for 1940 were more opaque, even if more complex.<sup>12</sup> For one thing, General Gamelin, in charge of the French military, had always thought the subject of armor needed more study, and thus the *Armée de Terre* reached no conclusions. The *École Supérieure de Guerre* (high war school), which should have taken a broad approach, instead formed and articulated doctrine based on the study of a few 1918 battles of World War I.

Murray and Watman in 1986 had studied military effectiveness and noted that it was achieved through the conversion of military resources

to fighting power, including physical and political assets. Victory was the outcome of battle and the result of organizational activity—political, strategic, operational, and tactical—taking into account the limits of the present. Thus victory requires the military to have the cooperation of the political élite once the services have specified what is needed to parry any threats, for to do so they must have the backing of the middle, the skilled, and the upper classes, as well as plans. Conversely, the political leadership has to ensure that grand-strategic goals are in harmony with the forces available. It must be kept in mind, however, that neither France nor Britain had an effective military in 1940.

*Two Roads to War* is also about planning uncertainties and managing technological change; because they are a matter of national security and grand strategy, the story has to start at the top in an attempt to find out why the Armée de l'Air did not and could not meet its obligations. This work continues the themes of Robin Higham and Stephen J. Harris' *Why Air Forces Fail*, and makes a detailed comparison of the Armée de l'Air with the RAF. The latter body went its own way from 1918 to 1940, though it emerged from the same World War I as did the Armée de l'Air across the Channel.<sup>13</sup> The roots of the answers as to why go back a long way.

Although it is common for comparative studies of enemies to appear, very little attention has been devoted to allies. *Two Roads to War* attempts to delineate as fairly as possible, in spite of the paucity of French records and secondary works, the two paths that took the allies of 1918 back to war together again in 1940. This is not a broad approach, but rather one focusing on the air arms because in the interwar years of 1918–1940 they moved from being ancillary forces to center stage. In fact, both Hitler and Chamberlain from different positions saw air forces as important, swift, and economical. Yet airpower cannot be built overnight, and therefore it is the approach by the French and by the British to that creative process that is the main theme of this book.

One of the contrasts and comparisons between the Armée de l'Air and the RAF was that the French force was always peripheral, whereas the British force was central. This situation is critical to the analysis presented herein. The dominant Armée de Terre expected the Armée de l'Air to be its

handmaiden; in Britain, however, army cooperation was low on the independent RAF's priorities, and in the war the Air Component of the British Expeditionary Force (ACBEF) was quite inadequate. In France, the whole question of ground support was debated and was divisive and unsettling militarily, whereas in Britain it was simply regarded as inferior to bombing the enemy's industrial will to make war.

Although the causes of the defeat of France in 1940 have been debated ever since, historians have paid zero attention to the role and place of the Armée de l'Air in that defeat. Granted, it could not have affected the war's outcome much, yet this lack of historiographical attention has no doubt been due to the fact that very few historians either have been trained in or have had an interest in the technological air service. Historians of France have been much more comfortable arguing about politics and the Armée de Terre, yet the story of the timing and development of the Armée de l'Air, its doctrine, and its equipment, personnel, and budgets allows a real insight into what ailed France before 10 May 1940.

*Two Roads to War* takes the debate about France in 1940 back to the basics—at least in the military, aviation, and technological worlds. It answers in a microcosmic way the question, Why did France fall? and reveals how the Troisième République acted in a field in which it should have been first, not a runner-up.

Much of *Two Roads to War* has as an undercurrent the response to the challenge of modernization in the leading-edge field of aviation. Yet much of the political decision-making—and then that at the top by military men—was made by Victorians born roughly between 1860 and 1885. The switch to the next generation—those born after 1885—did not come until about 1940, though in the air force staffs the younger generation's influence was apparent earlier.<sup>14</sup>

Technological decisions and defense policy are part of this work—how they were made and are made in a political, social, and economic context, very much as Elizabeth Kier conveyed in *Imagining War*, that they are formulated by the military in their cultural context.<sup>15</sup> Thus the issues between owner/managers and labor over shop-floor practices, and the introduction of women into the process, are of concern. In this field, as in others, the