



Knowledge without power: France versus Germany in the 1930s

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Everything has been transparent in the rise of Nazi peril. The deep intentions, the methods, the order of battle, everything was known in detail by the French. Nothing was done to stop it until September 1939, largely because it was materially impossible.

In 1925, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described France as the main obstacle to his programme and considered a bloody war against it inevitable. The book was translated into French one year after the author's accession to the post of Chancellor with Lyautey's warning: "Every Frenchman should read this book". At that time, Germany had already become a complete dictatorship, had multiplied anti-Semitic laws and was rearming openly and at high speed. Lieutenant-Colonel de Gaulle then considered it necessary to create "an instrument of repressive and preventive maneuvering [...] such that it could deploy extreme power at the first blow and keep the adversary in a state of chronic surprise".

For two years, the French politicians, who knew nothing of the growing German threat thanks to Ambassador François-Poncet and the 2nd^{me} bureau (one of whose agents is the head of the cipher office of the German War Ministry [1]), multiplied incantations in the national assembly ("We are against national defence. We are the partisans of Lenin and revolutionary defeatism", Maurice Thorez 1932; "Against this danger [Nazism] there is no other possible means of guarantee than the death penalty", Maurice Thorez 1932. Against this danger [Nazism] there is no other possible means of guarantee than the disarmament of Germany, voluntarily accepted by it or which would be imposed on it by the unanimous agreement of all the other powers", Léon Blum, 1935).

On 7 March 1936, when no rearmament measures had really been taken on the French side, the Germans reoccupied the Rhineland militarily (with 30,000 men). This is in no way a surprise since the 2nd^{office} has been waiting for it since September 1935 and this hypothesis was presented to the British in January 1936 to ask them what their reaction would be.

When the day came, the president of the Sarraut council declared that he would never agree to see Strasbourg within range of German guns. He asked General Gamelin for his opinion, who replied that "to send a French expeditionary force, even if more or less symbolic, would be a pipe dream". Nothing could be done without mobilization, at least partial (i.e. a million men). A few weeks before the elections, nothing was done. In July, Daladier, Blum and Thorez are photographed together under the banner "For Disarmament". At the same time, de Gaulle wrote: "The hostile act of 7 March showed what method force will henceforth use to accomplish its work: surprise, brutality, speed. A people that wants to survive must therefore [...] organize its own force so that it can react under the same conditions as the aggressor will act...but we do not have the means to do so".

The Spanish War broke out on 20 July 1936 following a slow deterioration in the situation, which France was following very closely. The Popular Front government was very eager to intervene with the Spanish Republicans but did not do so, for political reasons and because, once again, it would be necessary to mobilize several army corps.

In the winter of 1937-1938, when there was concern about Hitler's growing ambitions for Czechoslovakia, a major simulation exercise was launched, which de Gaulle showed that the French army was unable to deploy large manoeuvre units in time to respond to German aggression and that it could do nothing without the British. General Vuillemin was convinced that the French air force would not last two weeks against the Luftwaffe. This did not prevent the president of the council (again Léon Blum) from assuring the Czechoslovakian ambassador that France would fulfil its commitments to his country (the 1937 convention provided for the sending of an air force). A few months later, in September 1938, Daladier ("the ruse of the buffalo, the force of the fox" according to his detractors), who could not rely on the threat of any land or air intervention force, was sent to Czechoslovakia. The Soviet Union is ready to go to war on our side), returns from Munich declaring that the agreement he has just signed is "indispensable for peace in Europe". In reality, he has just signed France's renunciation of its status as a great power.

In January 1946, recalling this period, General Juin declared: "the first of the ideas that comes to mind is that of an intervention force. In order not to see Munich again, in order to be ready for any eventuality in the Empire, and in order to meet our international obligations within the framework of the United Nations, it is important to have permanently available forces fit for war, which can be launched within a few hours".

1) In 1935, this agent transmitted in full the minutes of a meeting of senior Nazi dignitaries to discuss Germany's long-term plans.

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