Routledge Studies in the Modern History of France

FRENCH SOLDIERS' MORALE IN THE PHONEY WAR, 1939–1940

Maude Williams and Bernard Wilkin

French Soldiers' Morale in the Phoney War, 1939–1940

The collapse of the French army in 1940 is a well-researched topic in Second World War Studies but a surprising gap in the historiography emerges when it comes to the study of the French military prior to the German offensive of May 1940.

Using various public and private sources in different languages, this book aims to address this gap by studying morale on the frontline and its management by the French Government, the Grand Quartier Général, at the scale of the regiment and on a personal level. This research also investigates German and British propaganda in French and aimed at the French sector of the frontline in order to offer the first comprehensive comparative study of French army morale in any language.

Maude Williams is a French historian working at the University of Saarland in Germany. Her research looks at wartime propaganda and rumours, war evacuations in 1939–1940 and more recently at Franco-German music transfers in the 1960s. She has written several articles on these topics.

Bernard Wilkin is a Belgian historian working at the State Archives of Belgium. His research investigates wartime propaganda and the French army from 1799 to 1945. He is the author of *Aerial Propaganda and the Wartime Occupation of France, 1914–1918* and seven other books.

Routledge Studies in the Modern History of France

Series Editor
Rachel Utley
University of Leeds, UK

Titles in the series:

French Soldiers' Morale in the Phoney War, 1939–1940
Maude Williams and Bernard Wilkin

https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Studies-in-the-Modern-History-of-France/book-series/FRENCHHISTORY

French Soldiers' Morale in the Phoney War, 1939–1940

Maude Williams and Bernard Wilkin

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-23274-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-31149-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Galliard
by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

Contents

List of figures and tables

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the following people for providing support without which the realisation of this project would have been impossible: Alistaire Nicholas, who has been incredibly helpful and patient while correcting our chapters, Timothy Baycroft, our mentor and friend, James Connolly, a fellow propaganda enthusiast, and Niky Lambert, who agreed to read chapters of this book. We are in debt to Prof. Peter Jackson, who was kind enough to write the foreword. Let us not forget the staff of the *Service Historique de la Défense* and the *Archives de l'État en Belgique*. The support of our families proved essential as usual. We are also grateful to Phileas, the tiny terror.

Foreword

Peter Jackson
University of Glasgow

The legacies of defeat, occupation and collaboration have cast a long shadow over historical understanding of the period before the fall of France. The state of the French army is no exception. This excellent book by two exceptionally talented young scholars does much to clear away the stubborn undergrowth left by decades of historiographical neglect. What emerges is a nuanced and detailed picture of an army struggling to meet the unique and unprecedented challenges thrown up by the Phoney War. Memories of 1914–1918 weighed heavily on the army of the Republic. On the eve of the German invasion, the vast majority of French soldiers were nonetheless 'motivated to fight the Germans to secure peace for the next generations'.

This deeply researched study therefore calls into question long-standing assumptions about French resolve in 1940. For many years historians explained France's military defeat within the context of wider moral judgements concerning the state of French society between the wars. The Third Republic was characterised as a bankrupt regime in which parliamentary politics and narrow self-interest took priority over the national interest and a spirit of collective sacrifice. In contrast to the generation of the Great War, the leaders of inter-war France failed to marshal the energies of the nation in preparation for the inevitable war with Hitler's Germany. The French nation entered a war for which it was neither materially nor psychologically prepared.

For a long time accounts of the fall of France were thus predetermined by a teleology of defeat. France fell because its society was decadent, its political leaders were incompetent and short-sighted, its foreign and defence policies were flawed, its military leadership was deficient and its army was ill-equipped and lacked the will to fight. The defeat, along with the occupation and collaboration that followed, were interpreted as the inevitable consequences of a long process of national decay. These themes were central to the way the defeat was represented by the Vichy regime. After 1944, they continued to provide a general framework for interpretations of French politics and policy that have reverberated down the decades through to the early twenty-first century. Jean-Baptise Duroselle, the long-time *doyen* of international history in France, entitled his magisterial study of French foreign and military policy during this period *La décadence*.

Anthony Adamthwaite, Nicole Jordan, Eugen Weber and Talbot Imlay have all, to a greater or lesser degree, endorsed this line of interpretation.[1]

Since the 1970s this interpretation has come under increasing challenge by scholars who warn against interpreting the history of inter-war France through the lens of 1940–1944. Robert Young underlined the difficult choices facing French civilian and military elites and argued that their policies were rational given the challenges that they faced. Robert Frank's careful analysis of French rearmament policy under the Popular Front showed that on the eve of war France was out-producing Germany in both tanks and aircraft. Several historians identified a process of 'psychological recovery' within French public attitudes during the spring of 1939 that allowed the government of Edouard Daladier to declare war on Germany with the support of the vast majority of the French population. Fabrice Grenard argues that this recovery underpinned French commitment to resist German aggression during the Phoney War. The work of military historians Henry Dutailly and Robert Doughty underlined the inflexibility of French operational doctrine and errors of judgement by the high command in arguing that defeat could be explained without recourse to theories of societal decay. Scholars such as John Cairns, Philip Bell, Martin Alexander, Jeffery Gunsburg and Julian Jackson, meanwhile, present the defeat of 1940 as an Allied defeat rather than a specifically French collapse.[2]

The morale of the French army provides a fascinating window through which to revisit this wider debate while at the same time shedding new light on the experience of French soldiers on the eve of the Battle of France. Maude Williams and Bernard Wilkin have provided us with an original and important study based on extensive research in a wide range of archival and other primary sources. The detailed surveys of the army general staff's *Contrôle postal* are complemented by extensive use of diaries, letters, memoirs and a survey of various media sources. In addition to the national press, official and unofficial soldiers' newspapers have been consulted as well as newsreels from this period. The result is a highly nuanced account that makes fascinating comparisons with the way the French went to war in 1914.

French soldiers accepted war in September 1939 with the same combination of resignation and determination that had prevailed in August 1914. Desertions were a negligible 0.099 per cent of all those mobilised. Reports on the attitudes of French conscripts highlighted a widespread conviction that war was necessary to end to repeated German bids to disrupt the peace of Europe. But the peculiar character of the war made the struggle to maintain this resolve especially difficult. The great galvanising force of the Great War was that it was a struggle to liberate French soil from the German invader. This was not the case during the opening phase of the Second World War. As general Victor Bourret observed in January 1940: 'Officers and men accept the war without enthusiasm but with gravity. They feel its complexity, which is more difficult to understand than in 1914–1918 because the national territory is not occupied.' This, combined with months of inaction and winter weather, took a toll on the morale of French troops.

All of this adds colour and texture to the previous studies – in particular those by Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac and François Cochet – that have underlined the decline in army morale during the winter of 1939–1940. More revealing still is the evidence Williams and Wilkin have uncovered of a recovery in the fighting spirit of the army with the arrival of spring. Neither German nor communist propaganda were effective in sapping this new spirit. In fact, it is clear that the prospect of action against the Germans actually *revived* the fighting spirit of frontline troops. This evidence challenges the prevailing view that the French army was not fit to take the field in spring 1940. It instead adds a new dimension to growing evidence that French troops fought ferociously during the second phase of the Battle of France. As Martin Alexander has shown, the military catastrophe of May-June 1940 is best explained not as the inevitable product of a decadent society, but as 'a failure of command, conception and intellect'.[3]

One of the many strengths of this excellent book is that it highlights the need for more research into the causes of the Fall of France. Thanks to the work of these two rising stars of the next generation of historians, we have a much better understanding, not only of where we are, but also where we need to go in order to better understand this pivotal moment in European history.

Notes

1 J-B Duroselle, *Politique étrangère de la France, 1932–1939. La décadence* (Paris, Seuil, 1979). On this literature see P. Jackson 'Post-War Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy before the Second World War', *History Compass*, 4/5 (2006), 870–905.

2 Useful historiographical discussions are P.M.H. Bell, 'John Cairns and the Historiography of Great Britain and the fall of France: Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte', in M. Alexander and K. Mouré (eds.), *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918–1962* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2002), pp. 15–27; R.J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War*, (London, Macmillan, 1996), pp. 37–59; Jackson, 'Returning to the Fall of France: Recent Work on the Causes and Consequences of the "Strange Defeat"', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 12, 4 (2004), pp. 513–536 and P. Finney, *Remembering the Road to World War Two: International History, National Identity, Collective Memory* (London, Routledge, 2011), pp. 149–187.

3 M.S. Alexander, 'After Dunkirk: the French army's performance against "Case Red", 25 May to 25 June 1940', *War in History*, 14, 2 (2007), pp. 219–264, quote from p. 258.

Introduction

France and Britain declared war on 3 September 1939, but preparations for conflict on the Franco-German border had been made since 1 September 1939. On both sides of the border, civilians living in the 'red zone' wbere evacuated while mobilised soldiers moved to the front.[1] The area around the Maginot Line was occupied by the army and civilian workers and, on the German side, *Westwallarbeiter* who carried on fortification work.[2] Despite the declaration of war and the mobilisation, no great offensive was launched until May 1940. Except for a small incursion into German territory between 20 September and 12 October 1939, both armies remained static on the 300 km frontline.[3] This period is known in French as the *Drôle de Guerre* (Phoney War in English, *Sitzkrieg* in German).[4]

It would be incorrect to assume that nothing happened on the Franco-German border during these months. At various places on the frontline both sides lost soldiers. During the Phoney War, 10,410 French military men died (excluding the Navy), equivalent to around 20% of the casualties during May and June 1940.[5] Most died of disease (43%), but 12.7% were killed in action (10.4% in accidents and 3.8% by suicide).[6] Moreover, many soldiers were captured by both sides. However, the war on the Rhine and on the Maginot Line was largely fought with words, pictures and propaganda.

Questions

Who were the men facing each other across the border? How was the French army in the North-East theatre of operations organised? What was the daily life of a French soldier? What factors influenced the French army's morale during this unique period of the war? This book is an attempt to answer these questions and many more. Several short testimonies exist in various publications but no thorough study of French military morale has been attempted. The term 'morale', used in both military and civilian reports to define the psychological state of the soldiers, is difficult to grasp as it encompasses a range of different experiences and emotions.[7]

Studies have argued that the lack of fighting spirit in the French army explained the defeat of May-June 1940. This book refutes such a simplistic

explanation.[8] It has been proven by others that the defeat was triggered by four factors: the surprise German assault through the Ardennes, the dynamism of German troops, the misuse of French forces (tanks and planes dispersed, the lack of motorised reserves, too many troops dedicated to the Maginot Line), and outdated strategies based on First World War doctrines.[9] This research is not another strategic assessment but aims to put French soldiers at the centre to understand their world as well as their material and mental well-being.

To get a clear picture of what happened in the mind of an individual, historians rely on sources. Testimonies, written or spoken, are subjective by nature which made an evaluation of morale difficult and required thorough critical analysis. Another problem was the variety of soldiers' situations: serving in the Sarre region was not the same as fighting in the Moselle sector. Thus, a complex picture emerged which required great nuance to offer both a broad and representative study.

Sources

This book is based on several primary sources. The most important was undoubtedly the collection of reports written by the *contrôle postal* (or CP – 2nd Bureau of the *État-Major Général* (EMG)). Its organisation was rooted in the 10 February 1939 decree regarding the *organisation des services de contre-espionnage en temps de paix et en temps de guerre* inspired by the First World War.[10] The CP, originally designed to fight espionage, became a barometer of soldiers' morale. Starting in November 1939, the office released frequent reports about the morale of various units and armies. Precise topics were explored, including morale, operations, enemy propaganda, Alsatian soldiers or material conditions, and quotations extracted from private letters were reproduced.[11] Officers writing these reports were given freedom to introduce or remove categories.

Extracts of letters were particularly useful when trying to penetrate soldiers' thoughts. However, this collection of sources was far from perfect as it offered only a selective picture of life on the frontline.[12] CP reports did not reproduce full letters and said little about the social background of quoted writers. It is clear that the censor who selected quotations for the CP had his own feelings and background, of which we know nothing. Moreover, soldiers knew that their letters were read and, as a result, adapted their description of life on the frontline. They also wanted to protect their relatives, avoiding gruesome details; it is clear that a soldier rarely talked as openly about army problems to his wife than to a fellow military man.[13] To solve these concerns, we also used private diaries. More intimate, they let us follow various soldiers throughout the Phoney War. In recent years, several diaries and letters have been published, giving a voice not only to intellectuals but equally to men of different and more modest social backgrounds.[14] Although, on average, farmers and factory workers wrote less, fortunately, official reports made sure to study their morale.[15]

Frontline newspapers were also used in this book. These informative primary sources are not without their problems. In 1939–1940, they were written by

educated men such as priests, officers, or non-commissioned officers.[16] Moreover, they were scrutinised by the army and the government, just like the conventional press. In various issues, spaces were left blank after having been censored.[17] Frontline newspapers were nonetheless an excellent mirror of the daily life at the front and often reflect problems and worries.[18] Speaking to fellow soldiers, these newspapers were forced to stick to the reality of life in the army to be successful. As such, a certain level of authenticity was guaranteed.

To understand broad policies and decision-makers, we consulted administrative documents produced by civilian and military authorities. This type of primary source gave us fundamental indications on how commanders saw their men and what steps were taken to improve morale in the army. The French military did not work in a vacuum. External influences, such as the media, were also analysed. Radio broadcasts, newspapers and newsreels were all included in this study to understand how French soldiers interacted with the outside world. Was propaganda as intense in 1939–1940 as it was during the First World War? German psychological warfare was an important factor on the frontline. It has often been stated that it played a vital part in the defeat. This study will argue that German propaganda was not as effective as previously stated and was certainly not the main explanation for the French defeat of 1940.[19]

The historiography so far

Study of the Phoney War, especially on the Franco-German front, is still limited. As historians like Bruno Cabanes and Édouard Husson stated, 'we know too little about the soldiers, the war culture and the war memory, especially compared to the First World War'.[20] French historians working on the Second World War have often preferred the study of Free France or the Vichy Regime. Only a handful of books have been written on the Phoney War. Recently, Fabrice Grenard looked at politics and society in France, explaining that the population was fully committed to the war effort as soon as September 1939.[21] A few years before, Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac had released a fundamental study of French society during the Phoney War. This book is still the reference in French. Written in the 1990s, his two volumes explored in detail the political and social life of France (volume 1) as well as soldiers and workers in 1939–1940 (volume 2).[22] In addition, Crémieux-Brilhac as well as other French and British researchers, wrote articles in the 1970s about the Franco-British armies and the public opinion.[23] Another more recent book on French soldiers must be mentioned. François Cochet published in 2006 a study of the French army during the Phoney War.[24] This publication is useful to understand the context, but this study of propaganda was superficial. Reproducing several clichés, Cochet argued that French propaganda was weaker than that used by the Germans.

There have also been local studies. Henri Hiegel has looked at life in the Moselle region while others researched local aspects of the Maginot Line or specific French units.[25] Other books are useful for an understanding of propaganda, the British army, or the complex organisation of the French military.[26]

Many aspects of life on the Maginot Line remain nonetheless unknown.[27] We sincerely hope that this book will encourage others to look at this fascinating part of the Second World War.

Content

This book is made up of five chapters, each looking at a specific aspect of life on the frontline. The first studies the organisation of the French Army on the Franco-German front and its living conditions. It will be argued that soldiers faced difficult conditions and a shortage of military supplies. The authorities tried to improve the situation but the cold and the lack of food damaged morale.

The second chapter gives an overview of morale in the army during the Phoney War. Three phases have been identified, each reflecting a major change. Ultimately, it will be shown that French soldiers, despite difficult conditions, were motivated to fight the Germans to secure peace for the next generations.

The next chapter examines strategies used by military authorities to combat idleness and low morale in the French military. Caring deeply about the army's psychological state, commanders launched training campaigns, improved living accommodations and introduced various distractions.

The fourth chapter looks at a crucial aspect of the Phoney War: German propaganda and communist activities targeting the army. Looking at these forms of psychological warfare, this study will highlight their successes, but also their serious limitations.

Finally, the last chapter studies relations between French and British soldiers. The Phoney war was a time of interaction between men of different cultures. The French Government as well as French and British propaganda institutions tried to promote cooperation between allied troops on the frontline. However, French soldiers formed their own views based on personal experience. Using personal documents and military reports, this chapter will argue that French soldiers did not have a homogenous opinion of the British: suspicion, doubt, but also friendship, appeared between the two armies.

The names of the various institutions and units mentioned in this book have been kept in the original language (French or German). A glossary explaining their various roles can be found at the end of the book. Citations have been translated into English by the authors.

Notes

1 'Red zones' were areas along the border and the frontline. Civilians living there were evacuated to protect the population and facilitate the army's work. See: Nicholas Williams, *An 'Evil Year in Exile'. The Evacuation of the Franco-German Border Areas in 1939 under Democratic and Totalitarian Conditions* (Berlin, 2018).
2 On the topic: Nicholas Williams, 'Les évacuations de 1939 en Moselle et en Sarre : cadres et plans stratégiques pour la prise en charge des populations civiles', in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 128 (2015), pp. 91–104.

3 Henri Hiegel, *Ils disent drôle de guerre ceux qui n'y étaient pas . . . 3 septembre 1939–10 mai 1940* (Sarreguemines, 1983), pp. 219–254.
4 This name appeared for the first time in the newspaper *Gringoire* in October 1939. Roland Dorgelès, *La Drôle de Guerre : 1939–1940* (Paris, 1957), p. 9.
5 Jean Quellien, Françoise Passera, Jean-Luc Leleu, and Michel Daeffler (eds), *La France pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale: Atlas Historique* (Paris, 2010), p. 37.
6 Ibid.
7 Service Historique de la Défense – Armée de Terre (SHD AT): 27N69. This term was used by the CP (*contrôle postal*) and was already found during the First World War. Jean-Noël Jeanneney, 'Les Archives des Commissions de Contrôle postal aux Armées (1916–1918). Une source précieuse pour l'histoire contemporaine de l'opinion et des mentalités', in: *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, 15.1 (1968), pp. 209–233, p. 217.
8 François Fonvieille-Alquier, *Les Français dans la Drôle de guerre* (Paris, 1971).
9 Quellien, Passera, Leleu and Daeffler (eds), *La France pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, p. 41.
10 SHD AT: 7N2486. Décret d'organisation des services du contre-espionnage; Jeanneney, 'Les Archives des Commissions de Contrôle postal aux Armées (1916–1918)', pp. 209–233.
11 SHD AT: 27N69. CP reports from October 1939 to May 1940.
12 Jeanneney, 'Les Archives des Commissions de Contrôle postal aux Armées', p. 217.
13 Ibid.
14 Among others: Jean Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la Drôle de Guerre: Septembre 1939–Mars 1940*, ed. by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Paris, 1995); Georges Sadoul, *Journal de guerre: 2 septembre 1939–20 juillet 1940* (Paris, 1977); Eric Deroo and Pierre de Taillac, *Carnets de déroute 1939-1940 : Lettres et récits inédits* (Paris, 2010); Jean-Bernard Wahl, *Jours Tranquilles et Bruits de Guerre Au Mont Des Welches: Août 1939–Juillet 1940; (Petite) Histoire, La 'Drôle de Guerre' Sur La Ligne Maginot* (Huningue, 2007); Paul Tuffrau, *De la 'drôle de guerre' à la libération de Paris (1939–1944) : Lettres et Carnets* (Paris, 2002).
15 A notable exception is: Gustave Folcher, *Les carnets de guerre de Gustave Folcher, paysan languedocien, 1939–1945*, ed. by Rémy Cazals (Paris, 2000).
16 See for example: *Cambronne, Coup de Bambi, CQ, Hausse 400, Je passe partout, L'Isard de Metz, La rose Maginot, La voix de la voie de 60, Le cheval à vapeur, Le chic à Nied, Le cri du béton, Le pied Lourd, Rouge vert*: Archives Départementales de la Moselle (AD Moselle): 5 R 628.
17 Among others, see: *Isard de Metz*, 15 December 1939.
18 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Les soldats français et la Nation de 1914 à 1918 d'après les journaux de tranchées', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, 34.1 (1987), pp. 66–86, p. 69.
19 Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l'an 40. Tome 1. La guerre, oui ou non ?* (Paris, 1990); Max Gallo, *Et ce fut la défaite de 1940: la cinquième colonne* (Paris, 1980).
20 Bruno Cabanes, Édouard Husson, *Les sociétés en guerre: 1911–1946* (Paris, 2003), p. 12.
21 Grenard Fabrice, *La drôle de guerre – L'entrée en guerre des Français* (Paris, 2015).
22 Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l'an 40. Tome 1. La guerre, oui ou non ?; Tome 2, Ouvriers et soldats* (Paris,1990).
23 Colloque franco-britannique (ed.), *Les relations franco-britanniques de 1935 à 1939 : communications présentées aux colloques franco-britanniques tenus à Londres (Imperial War Museum) du 18 au 21 octobre 1971, Paris (Comité international d'Histoire de la 2ème Guerre mondiale) du 25 au 29 septembre 1972* (Paris, 1975); Comité international d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale (ed.), *Français et Britanniques dans la drôle de guerre : actes du colloque franco-britannique tenu à Paris du 8 au 12 décembre 1975* (Paris, 1979).
24 François Cochet, *Les soldats de la drôle de guerre* (Paris, 2004).

25 Henri Hiegel, *La Drôle de Guerre en Moselle, 1939–1940* (Sarreguemines, 1983); Jean-Bernard Wahl, *La Ligne Maginot En Alsace : 200 Km de Béton et d'acier* (Ellange, 2013); Roger Bruge, *Faites sauter la ligne Maginot !*, (Paris, 1975); Jean-Pascal Soudagne and Michel Mansuy, *Comprendre la ligne Maginot : Nord, Ardennes, Lorraine, Alsace, Savoie, Dauphiné, Alpes-Maritimes* (Rennes, 2009).

26 See: Maude Fagot, *La drôle de guerre: Une guerre d'influence. La propagande antibritannique allemande et la guerre psychologique française pendant la drôle de guerre du 3 septembre 1939 au 10 mai 1940* (Master's Thesis, Albert-Ludwig Universität/Université Lumière Lyon II, 2013); Maude Fagot, 'La guerre des ondes entre la France et l'Allemagne pendant la 'drôle de guerre'', in: *Revue Historique 671* (2014), pp. 630–654; Edward Smalley, *British Expeditionary Force, 1939–40*, 2015 (New York, 2015); Jean-Yves Mary and Alain Hohnadel, *Hommes et Ouvrages de La Ligne Maginot* (Paris, 2000).

27 Many topics deserve thorough studies, such as prostitution on the frontline and German prisoners of war.