

Andrew Webster, *Strange Allies. Britain, France and the Dilemmas of Disarmament and Security, 1929–1933*, London, New York (Routledge) 2019, XIV–386 p., 12 tabl., 1 b/w fig. (Routledge Studies in Modern European History, 69), ISBN 978-1-138-01934-8, GBP 115,00.

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The historiography of the inter-war years, especially the failure of pacifism, disarmament, appeasement and the League of Nations, connected as it is with »the origins of the Second World War«, is among the largest in twentieth-century history, with a constant flow of new analyses. On top of »Strange Allies«, 2019 offerings in English include Tim Bouverie's »Appeasing Hitler. Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War«, Nicholas Milton's »Neville Chamberlain's Legacy. Hitler, Munich and the Path to War«, and Adrian Phillips's »Fighting Churchill, Appeasing Hitler. How a British Civil Servant helped cause the Second World War«.

Andrew Webster is well known among specialists of Anglo-French relations for his numerous articles on the difficulty of arriving at a common policy between the two governments *vis-à-vis* Germany between 1919 and 1939. With this new book, he explores the question in detail, and avowedly (p. 2, 4, 333) drawing on Zara Steiner's definition of the period 1929–1933 as »the hinge years«, he focuses on two separate, but inevitably linked, phases of these »hinge years« : the period of the Labour Government under Ramsay MacDonald (1929–1931), when Aristide Briand was still active (he was Foreign Minister from 1926 to January 1932, though now »a man in decline« (p. 225) – he died in March 1932), and the period of the first months of the so-called »National Government« – a coalition with a majority of Conservatives in the Commons ostensibly formed in September 1931 to »save the pound« (it did not) after the crash of the Central European economies in the spring and summer of 1931 – these key weeks or months forming the subject of Webster's central chapter 9, entitled »Annus terribilis: 1931 as a year of crisis«.

The first phase – in fact since 1919 – is neatly summarised on page 21: »British policymakers [...] consistently overestimated France's power to sustain its artificial predominance and underestimated the strength of Germany's resurgence. [...] Anxious French policymakers strove to safeguard national security amidst genuine uncertainty over how to balance policies of deterrence and of conciliation with regard to Germany.«

Contrary to Winston Churchill in »The Gathering Storm«, his first volume of war memoirs, Webster offers a nuanced view of MacDonald's distrust of the French – or at least its practical effects: »[W]hile he may have fulminated privately about their apparent bad faith and small-mindedness, he never risked any kind of open breach« (p. 56). Webster also insists on the disastrous



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consequences of the collapse of the Labour Party at the General Election and the collateral elimination of Arthur Henderson (who lost his seat): »With the fall of the Labour Government and departure of Henderson as foreign secretary, the expansion of international arbitration had lost its main advocate« (p. 272).

To make Anglo-French relations more complicated in the second phase studied by Webster, the *annus terribilis* (described as »a watershed« on page 341) coincided in France with the first Premiership of Pierre Laval (27 January 1931–20 February 1932) – and »Laval's priority was Berlin, rather than London« (p. 227). Not that Laval's tentative *rapprochement* with an inflexible Chancellor Brüning, also under pressure from his extreme nationalist Right, brought any benefits to France, however: »The Laval Government had gone as far in the direction of conciliation as was politically possible; yet it was not far enough for a meeting of minds with Britain, let alone Germany« (p. 278).

On the British side, Webster points out, »the essential issue had not changed« after the crisis of August-September 1931 and the change of Parliamentary majority: »The question facing policymakers was the same as earlier in the year: was Britain prepared to pay the price for reductions on French armaments and stabilising Europe by offering France some kind of security guarantee? It was not a question that anyone outside of the Foreign Office seemed in any hurry to confront« (p. 283).

Webster accordingly draws a distinction between the Foreign Office and others with an international outlook, like Lord Robert Cecil of the League of Nations (one can also think of Churchill), and the immobility of the National Government generally, with an interesting quote from a letter sent by Cecil to »the elderly Lord Reading« (Foreign Secretary 25 August–5 November 1931) on 13 September 1931: »we shall get nowhere with the French in any of these questions except by selling them so much of what they call security in exchange for disarmament and goodwill« (p. 283–284).

Even more fascinating, the book gives a passage from a Foreign Office policy paper drafted in November 1931 and finally submitted to the Cabinet on 2 December which provides the neatest evaluation of the central problem of the inter-war years which one can think of: »World recovery (the aim of our policy) depends on European recovery; European recovery on German recovery; German recovery on France's consent; France's consent on security (for all time) against attack« (p. 284).

The key which would unlock everything, therefore, was that guarantee or commitment to France which precisely met with »the resistance of public and governmental opinion [...], not to mention the certain hostility of the Dominions« (p. 285). The rest of the story is well known – though we are grateful to Webster for documenting it in such informative detail: Sir John Simon as Foreign Secretary from November 1931 to June 1935 »continually hedged and wavered« (p. 286), the other strong men – or emerging strong men – in the National Government: Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain were possibly even more averse than Simon to any idea of »compensating the French with an offer of new security mechanisms of any sort« (p. 298).



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Interestingly the same aversion held good as far as definite commitments in the field of disarmament were concerned on the eve of the opening of the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva in February 1932: »the Government worried that an activist stance would commit Britain to specific measures that it was unwilling to carry out« (p. 290). In contrast, Webster argues, »French policymakers had at least definitely accepted the draft convention as a pragmatic basis for a settlement and were ready to participate in the conference with defined positions and specific figures on which to negotiate« (p. 296). He again provides an excellent summary of the »paradoxical situation« on the eve of the Geneva Conference: »An apparently all-powerful France [financially and militarily] demanded assistance from an imperial Britain that appeared likely to have its government and possibly even currency collapse, against a disarmed and nominally inferior Germany that nonetheless seemed able to drive the diplomatic agenda« (p. 299).

His excellent discussion of the actual proceedings of the Conference only documents the further estrangement of the two countries – for which he largely blames MacDonald, Simon and the National Government while he insists on the unrequited moves of goodwill from the new French President of the Council (Prime Minister), Édouard Herriot, from June to December 1932. Before the narrative of the Geneva Conference ends on the sub-chapter entitled »30 January 1933« – a date which speaks for itself – Webster concludes his analysis of Anglo-French relations in 1932 on a note of gloom: »The year's diplomatic agenda and its terms of debate had effectively been set by Berlin, but this was at bottom only because Anglo-French stalemate had left a vacuum for the Germans to fill. This trend would continue into 1933, but changes to the German regime would ultimately mean the results were no longer merely frustrating, but catastrophic« (p. 320).

Webster's eleven pages of general conclusion implicitly refute the »Guilty Men« accusation and approve of Churchill's judgement in his funeral oration for Chamberlain in November 1940: »The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions«. For Webster, there is no doubt that in these fateful »hinge years« the policymakers of Britain and France, however wrong future events showed them to have been, objectively pass that test.

This meticulously researched monograph is evidently a magnificent addition to the literature on this inexhaustible subject, and future scholars will find its state-of-the-art classified 31-page bibliography, which includes archives, articles and theses, invaluable.



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