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### Original Citation

Dodd, Lindsey (2008) Are We Defended? Conflicting Representations of War in Pre-War France. *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History* (12). pp. 1-13.

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# ARE WE DEFENDED?

## CONFLICTING REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR IN PRE-WAR FRANCE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines contradictions in the way that war was represented to the French population in the interwar period. It argues that an 'official' representation of war gave an impression of France as a secure nation; people were discouraged from questioning the dominant military doctrine of defensive warfare, and were denied access to information to stifle potential criticism. 'Unofficial' representations, on the other hand, combined to create an image of a country whose security was increasingly threatened, particularly by a powerful eastern neighbour. During the 1930s, a feeling of imminent catastrophe was in the air, not only as a result of representations of war in film, press and advertising, but also fuelled by the 'official' literature of civil defence. The article draws on archival material from the towns of Boulogne-Billancourt and Brest to show that conflicting representations of war led to such confusion when war broke out in 1939 that people were unprepared, psychologically and physically, despite a near obsession with war over the past twenty years. Further, the strength of the representation of war as imminent catastrophe contributed to the state of mind which caused between eight and ten million citizens to flee the invading German army in panic in the summer of 1940.

### KEYWORDS

France, interwar, World War II, popular culture, civil defence.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1939 *Somme-nous défendus?* ('Are we defended?', 1938) won the French national prize for documentary films. It opens on a map of France, followed by an aerial view of a village; a peasant padlocks his gate, doors close, shutters are drawn, keys turned; storm clouds gather and a hen leads her chicks to shelter. As the opening sequence ends, the voiceover assures the audience: 'France can shut its doors and shoot the bolts.'<sup>2</sup> The film's message is clear: France is defended by a strong and capable army, and there is nothing to fear from war. In the same year, *Le jour se lève* ('Daybreak') and *Le règle du jeu* ('The Rules of the Game') were released. Both echoed the increasingly sombre mood of the late 1930s, telling stories of defeat and social collapse. Neither was a box-office success. Early in 1939, France seemed happier to accept a vision of the world in which safety was assured.

Yet the image of France as strong and well defended was just one of many representations of war which confronted the population. This article explores the contradictions within these representations which created confusion and fear, particularly as the expectation of war grew. It will argue that conflicting representations of war led to a paralysis in the preparation of defence for war and contributed to the panicked reaction of between eight and ten million French people who fled the invading German army in summer 1940. The article makes use of archival sources from the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, home of the main Renault factory, and from the Breton naval port of Brest.<sup>3</sup> The representations of war it will consider are taken from film, newsreel, press, advertising and the literature of civil defence. Beginning with representations of past war, the article then looks at two conflicting representations of future war: the 'official' representation of future war as defence, as evoked by *Somme-nous*

*défendus?* and the ‘unofficial’ view, that of war as imminent catastrophe. It concludes with a discussion of the contradictory effects of cumulative representations of war on the population.

## I. PAST WAR

Throughout the interwar years, the French were constantly exposed to representations of a past war, a war in which victory had come at a high price. The aftermath of the Great War dominated post-war domestic and foreign policy, affected society at every level, permeated cultural production and was traumatically imprinted on a generation of survivors. Its representation kept memory alive, and was a powerful reminder of the consequences of war, fuelling a desperate desire to avoid another. Representations of past war also created the image of an ever-present enemy across the Rhine whose aggression made pacifism impossible to maintain.

The sweetness of victory in 1918 soon turned sour as the population counted the cost of four years’ struggle: 1.3 million dead, over a million ‘permanent invalids’, and three million ‘semi-invalids’; 900,000 buildings, 9,000 factories, 200 coal mines, 6,000 bridges and 2,400 kilometres of railway destroyed; international debt and inflation; and a lasting demographic problem.<sup>4</sup> Pain turned to anger, which the authorities sought to channel into official acts of commemoration. Such acts underlined the extent of loss, and thus represented war as devastation on a massive and pervasive scale. The ossuary at Verdun contained the bones of 130,000 men, cemeteries stretched and multiplied, and monuments to the dead sprung up, as Jean-Marie de Busscher writes, like mushrooms after a storm.<sup>5</sup> Over 38,000 such monuments brought loss into the heart of villages and towns, their long lists of names personalising death, and taking it deeper into home and family. While many depicted soldiers dying or dead, others featured women and children mourning their loved ones, bent double with grief.<sup>6</sup> This was war that brought physical pain and suffering on the battlefield, and psychological pain and suffering for years to come.

The First World War was a regular, if not constant, theme of films of the interwar period. Its popularity as a topic reflected the public mood. Early films such as *J'accuse* (‘I accuse’, 1919) represented the horror of war; in one sequence, dead soldiers rose and marched towards the audience. It appeared at a time when criticism of the war began to surface. Popular culture of the 1920s, however, soon attempted to shake off disturbing memories; a popular song of the early twenties called ‘People need to laugh’ (*On a besoin de rire*) implored people to stop dwelling on the past. But by the end of the 1920s, war films regained popularity as ten-year anniversaries of battles and the deaths of Marshal Foch and Marshal Joffre dominated the news; the memory would not go away.<sup>7</sup> *Verdun, visions d’histoire* (‘Verdun, Visions from History’, 1928), a documentary using battlefield footage, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the 1930 American adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque’s novel, were vivid evocations of soldiers’ experiences. Raymond Bernard’s harrowing *Les Croix de Bois* (‘Wooden Crosses’, 1932), a critical and box office hit, followed a community of French soldiers, slowly reduced to one survivor.<sup>8</sup> In the late thirties, the Great War was back in the cinema, with the success of Jean Renoir’s powerful pacifist film, *La Grande Illusion* (‘The Great Illusion’, 1937). However, war films of the late thirties began to move away from the pacifist critique of war, and swung back to celebrating the patriotism of the *poilus* and the nation at war. Films such as *Passeurs d’hommes* (‘Human Freight’, 1937), *Sœurs d’armes* (‘Sisters in Arms’, 1937) and *Le Héros de la Marne* (‘The Hero of the Marne’, 1938) rebuilt a picture of war as duty, where ordinary men and women were heroes. Films reflected and influenced public opinion, and the consistent success of First World War films – whether representing suffering, futility or heroism – maintained the memory of a past war that continued to haunt the present. The strong current of pacifism running through French society grew from the suffering borne out

of past war, developed and strengthened by representations of that war, projected onto a potential future conflict in which the scale and sacrifice would only increase.

Civil defence literature from the late 1930s shows France attacked by air from all directions. *La Petite Illustration*, designed for classroom use, showed planes crossing the French border from Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and flying over the Normandy and Biscay coasts. The *Manuel de la défense passive* taught readers how to identify planes from different European countries.<sup>9</sup> However, the legacy of past war had bequeathed France one certain enemy: Germany. Anxiety over the mistrusted eastern neighbour was strongly represented in feature films. Marianne Benteli notes that in all war and spy films of 1938 and 1939, Germany was the only enemy, and Germans were characterised as brutal barbarians who killed without reason.<sup>10</sup> France was haunted by the fear of German rearmament, and the need to restrain German military potential dominated foreign policy. During the Geneva Disarmament Conference, French insistence on limiting German potential left them increasingly isolated. For foreign observers, French concerns were irrational, given Versailles restrictions, but the concern was for the future. The press confirmed these fears. After Poincaré announced talks on the early evacuation of the Rhineland at the Hague conference of 1929, the French military used the press as a tool to mobilise opinion against the decision and gain support for defensive policies. The idea of a defenceless north-eastern border was expanded, and the threat greatly exaggerated.<sup>11</sup> German propaganda infiltrated the Paris press, emphasising German strength. A feature placed by the German press agency Interpress in the high circulation *Paris-Soir* in 1938 focused on the unassailable German border defences.<sup>12</sup> German civil defence was examined by the Ministry of Air and the results published in 1938; it was found to be extremely well organised, well equipped and well trained, the population well prepared for war.<sup>13</sup> The enemy, it seemed, was ready for revenge.

From past conflict, the French understood the nature of modern war. The mobilisation of nearly half of the adult male population between 1914 and 1918 had brought war into every home, and death or mutilation to many. The Great War, its horror and aftermath, were continuously represented to the population in acts of commemoration, film and press. Reluctance to enter the next war, whose consequences would likely outstrip those of the last, was everywhere. But the representation of German strength and vengefulness made avoidance appear less possible.

## II. FUTURE WAR – ‘OFFICIAL’ REPRESENTATION

It is in the representation of future war that the greatest contradiction arose. The French population was confronted with two conflicting images that created a deep confusion in its understanding of how to prepare for war, and ultimately how to behave when war broke out. The military leaders of the country put across an official representation of war as defence: France had a defensive military policy, and the population could rest assured that it was well defended. On the other hand, through almost all other channels, unofficial and some official, people received a representation of war as destruction, imminent and catastrophic. This was not a picture of borders defended, but of borders breached. How were these representations understood, and what effect did they have on the activity, or inactivity, of the population?

French military thinking during the interwar years was characterised at the higher levels by defensive planning. Military leaders faced enormous pressure to avoid another war so offensive ideas were off the agenda. There was a tendency to look back rather than forward, and to develop and restructure ideas from the First World War instead of conceiving new forms of war. It was not that the French were reluctant to develop new technologies – indeed, they began World War Two with the most sophisticated medium tanks in Europe.<sup>14</sup> However, the Vice-President of the Superior War Council, Marshal Pétain, and his advisors fitted new

technology into a pre-existing model of warfare that was defined by mass firepower and covered defensive positions. Mobile tank warfare, as advocated by a few lower-ranking officers like Charles de Gaulle, was rejected.<sup>15</sup> Unlike in Britain, where the Trenchard doctrine envisaged an independent, strategic air force as the prime offensive weapon of a great power, the French air force was designed to support the other services. Bombing civilian populations was morally abhorrent to French military leaders – it was not the way that a peace loving, lawful country fought a war. From 1921 to 1928 only two articles on bombing behind enemy frontlines were published in the journal *Revue de l'Aéronautique Militaire*. Although strategic bombing ideas of the Italian air expert Giulio Douhet gained currency during the 1930s, it was by then too late to build a bomber force capable of rivalling the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>16</sup> The Maginot line of defensive fortifications running from Luxemburg to Switzerland came to symbolise French defensive planning; more than a symbol, though, it was a means of channelling the expected attack through Belgium where the massed firepower of the army lay in wait. With man-made structures along the vulnerable border, and mountains and forest in the south-west and east, France appeared defended against invasion from land.

Attack from air was a different matter, and again the thinking was defensive. A sizeable air force, it was thought, would deter the enemy. However, the French aeronautical industry was dominated by medium-sized firms, and a 'policy of prototypes' in the twenties had led to the proliferation of non-standardised models, and factories unsuited to mass production. Although the partial nationalisation of the air industry in 1936 helped increase production, it was not enough to create a force so formidable as to be preventative. To protect the population from an expected air attack, the French military promoted *défense active* and *défense passive*.<sup>17</sup> It was through these concepts that the idea of war as defence was represented to the people.

The country's *défense active* consisted in the first instance of the fortifications and army installations that would prevent a ground invasion. The French population was told to have faith in the strength of the Maginot line, which became a 'star' of the newsreels. The *Pathé-Journal* of 30 November 1938 took viewers on a tour of the fortifications, the commentary stating that 'we can feel at safe in our homes' because of its effectiveness. The Maginot line turned movie star in the 1937 spy film *Double crime sur la Ligne Maginot* ('Double Crime on the Maginot Line').<sup>18</sup> The French army was a constant reassuring presence in the newsreels. Feature films exalting the army were popular, and were backed by government and military. Director Jean-Paul Paullin was permitted to film inside the elite military school of Saint-Cyr in production of his *Trois de Saint-Cyr* ('Three from Saint-Cyr') which followed the heroic fortunes of three graduates. The army assisted in the creation of realistic battle scenes and the premiere was attended by Prime Minister Edouard Daladier. Films extolling the wealth and loyalty of the French Empire and the strength of France's diplomatic alliances represented an active form of defence off the battlefield, where international diplomacy backed up military strength.<sup>19</sup> The support given to these films by high-ranking political and military figures demonstrated an active involvement in the creation of the public representation of a well-defended France.

The press contributed to an understanding of French security. The *Dépêche de Toulouse* reported that the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936 was in fact a setback for Germany, and its regular defence feature vaunted the power of the French army.<sup>20</sup> An article in *Le Miroir du Monde* described a new invention that used electric light beams and mirrors to provide 'a very real protection against aerial bombardments' by creating dazzling blankets of light over towns.<sup>21</sup> Civil defence literature of the later 1930s made it clear that active defence measures were in place and would be mobilised immediately if borders were crossed by aircraft. The *Manuel de la défense passive* illustrated the many obstacles active defence would throw in the path of enemy planes before they reached their targets: they would be detected by look-out posts and listening stations, intercepted by fighter planes, shot down by anti-aircraft

guns, and hampered by mobile barrage balloons.<sup>22</sup> France was defended on land borders, and prepared to combat attack by air.

For all that it tried to demonstrate the strength of France's active defences, and took pains to reassure the population, the government knew early on that 'active defence, no matter how well developed, cannot completely protect the population and the functioning of public services'.<sup>23</sup> The protection of the civilian population was under discussion throughout the interwar years, and a great deal of legislation was passed to establish the framework within which it would be organised.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the quantity of legislation made it difficult to implement, perhaps war did not yet seem close enough to worry about, or perhaps the pacifist spirit balked at a military-style mobilisation of the public; the fact remains that, although by no means non-existent, French civil defence was not fully prepared when war did break out. It is telling that a report on the 'Establishment of a plan of protection for the population' in Brest is dated 29 September 1939, while Boulogne-Billancourt's local civil defence complained in November 1939 that over half of the population lacked adequate bomb shelters.<sup>25</sup>

The French population was faced with a contradiction: on one hand it was reassured that national leaders were defending it from attack. On the other, it also had to participate in its own defence in the knowledge that the active defence was insufficient. *Défense active* required a passive acquiescence on the part of the people: you can rest easy, you are defended. *Défense passive* required an active engagement in preparation and collective responsibility for ensuring survival: you must defend yourself and your community. In combination, they should have created a solid and unified defence. As Alexander Werth reports, however, during the Munich scare of September 1938, 'Paris felt pretty helpless'. Lacking reinforced or gasproof shelters, gas masks, and sand, the population was also unconvinced by the adequacy of active defence: 'Perhaps the 'active defence' would have chased away the enemy aeroplanes; but no one could tell.'<sup>26</sup> The mixed messages of a country defended and a country vulnerable created confusion and mistrust, and permitted the intrusion of the unofficial image of future war, war as destruction, to gain currency.

### III. FUTURE WAR - 'UNOFFICIAL' REPRESENTATION

When the Exposition Internationale des arts et techniques de la vie moderne ('International Exhibition of the arts and techniques of modern life') opened in Paris in May 1937, the dramatically opposed pavilions of the Soviet Union and Germany showcased the modernity and warlike virility of these nations. But of the thirty million visitors who flocked to the exhibition, many would also have entered the Spanish pavilion where Picasso's *Guernica* depicted not 'modern life' but 'modern death'.<sup>27</sup> The enormous canvas, showing the horror of air war, was a graphic representation of the reality of modern warfare which the French had seen regularly on newsreels and in the colour photography of magazines like *Paris-Match* since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in June 1936.<sup>28</sup> The raid on Guernica in April 1937 by the Condor Legion of the German air force assisted by Italian bombers, targeting too its undefended suburbs, followed devastating air raids on Madrid and Barcelona and brought home to the French population the air power of their eastern neighbour, and the ruthless targeting of civilian populations as a technique in modern warfare.<sup>29</sup> The painting was seen as a vision of future horrors, Picasso the harbinger of a dreaded apocalypse.<sup>30</sup> Representations of past war were traumatic, but representations of present wars – Spain, China, Abyssinia – predicted a future war that would not only be catastrophic, but which was imminent.

### *Catastrophic war*

How did people understand the components of the catastrophe that awaited them? It was made clear that it would arrive by air, reach into their homes, and would comprise explosive bombs, fire and, perhaps most terrifyingly, poison gas. The representation of catastrophe in press, film and advertising was constantly reinforced by the work of civil defence organisations, striving to prepare a passive defence to complement the active defence provided by the military.

Ordinary French people may not have been abreast of technological developments in aircraft design or explosives, but, as images of present wars showed, the capacity to destroy by air had increased since the last war. The development of the French air force featured in newsreels where audiences saw new French planes in production and in flight.<sup>31</sup> Armed with the knowledge that the German air force was growing and that a French air force was likewise expanding, the expectation of air attack was evident. Civil defence literature of the later 1930s demonstrated the increased capacity of contemporary bombers. The first page of *La Petite Illustration*'s civil defence issue for secondary schools showed a map of France with planes attacking from all sides, no *département* out of reach.<sup>32</sup> Public information brochures compared capacity in 1918 with present capacity, and emphasised the increased speed, range and altitude of new aircraft.<sup>33</sup> The *Manuel de la défense passive* noted that during the whole of the last war, only 37 enemy planes reached Paris, between them dropping 303 bombs totalling 11.5 tonnes; today the enemy could send hundreds of planes to Paris and drop hundreds of tonnes of bombs in a single night.

The clearest manifestation of the bombers' power was in the destruction of buildings by explosion. Images of apartment buildings ripped apart in Barcelona and Madrid, possessions strewn and smouldering in the rubble, confronted the French in the news and in civil defence brochures.<sup>34</sup> Future war was not confined to well-defined battlegrounds, but entered homes – via the roof. This preoccupation with protecting one's home and family is reflected in commercial activities of the period. Insurance companies began to offer, for an increased premium, special protection against the effects of war, which included bombardment.<sup>35</sup> Companies manufacturing air raid shelters played on the fear of being crushed. Le Béton Industriel advertised its conical shelter capable of withstanding a 50 kilogram bomb:

If it was tomorrow, would you be ready? You're thinking straight away of your well-built cellar whose walls are over 40 centimetres thick. An illusion of security! What would you do if you were trapped in the cellar as the building above collapsed, especially if you have children?<sup>36</sup>

Civil defence literature dwelt on explosives, devoting a lot of space to their effects and how to avoid them.<sup>37</sup> Louise Weiss, who founded a propaganda centre in Paris to educate the public in civil defence, deplored official civil defence publications, although her centre's efforts, while informative, clearly demonstrated the impact of war on the home. Her training stands at the Salon d'Aéronautique in 1938 and at the 'Exhibition of Household Arts' (Exposition des arts ménagers), displayed a model house completely destroyed by bombs – although the safety-conscious residents had survived. Weiss estimated that her organisation taught around 500,000 women how to protect their homes; at the same time, those 500,000 women were now fully alerted to future war's destructive potential.<sup>38</sup>

The threat of incendiary bombs fuelled images of destruction by fire, and fire fighting was a central preoccupation of civil defence education. The *Manuel de la défense passive* highlighted the rapid spread of fire:

You can put out a fire in the first minute with a glass of water, in the second minute with a bucket of water, and in the third minute with a tonne of water.<sup>39</sup>

The leaflet *Français pour votre sauvegarde* illustrated the correct way to spray water at an incendiary bomb, and most leaflets gave first aid instruction for burns.<sup>40</sup> The imminent threat of fire was brought home to owners of apartments in Boulogne-Billancourt when sand was distributed in August 1938.<sup>41</sup> Advertising once more caught hold of a deepening fear. The manufacturer Stop-Fire<sup>42</sup> represented the dangers of being without one of its extinguishers:

Cries of terror! A clamour of fear! Then the sad cortège, unemployment, ruin, perhaps a terrible death. Against the scourge of fire, a certain remedy: the Stop-Fire extinguisher.<sup>43</sup>

Equally the Sans Rivale ladder promised a quick escape from a bombed building, the picture showing bombers overhead, flames and smoke billowing from upper storeys: 'There are many ways to put out a fire,' read the text, 'but only one fast means of escape'.<sup>44</sup> The next war would bring collapse and explosion, and if you survived that, it was entirely possible that your house would be burnt down, and you with it.

The final component of future war, and possibly the most frighteningly represented, was poison gas. The use of poison gas had been outlawed at the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, although this was violated by both sides during World War One. Its potential provoked much discussion between the wars, in military circles and elsewhere. Raymond Grenouillet, a specialist in chemical weapons, wrote in 1928 that 'future war will be an unlimited war between whole nations and all means available will be used to secure victory'. He added several years later the Great War was 'a modest preface' to the chemical war that lay ahead.<sup>45</sup> By the time of his second article, public awareness had grown. The International Red Cross set up a documentation centre on airborne chemical warfare in 1929, and had a regular feature on the subject in its journal.<sup>46</sup> Mysyrowicz cites a spate of novels in the early 1930s set in the aftermath of a chemical apocalypse, 'mediocre' novels, but catering to public interest nonetheless.<sup>47</sup> Poison gas represented the catastrophe to end all catastrophes, 'capable of destroying all forms of life in a big city like Paris in just a few minutes'.<sup>48</sup> Capable, it appeared, of bringing about the end of civilisation.

The reaction to the threat of poison gas was loud, and precautions caused as much worry as the threat. In 1934, the magazine *Je sais tout* ran a feature entitled 'Gas alert! We're not ready', its cover showing a person in full protective clothing carrying the limp form of a little girl. It categorically stated that 'bombs are going to fall on Paris', and lamented the unprepared state of the capital to deal with gas attack; no gasproofed shelters, too few masks, no disinfection services. What fate awaited gassed Parisians?

You cry, you cough, you suffocate, you burn, fall unconscious, and, if you don't die on the spot, you will have serious health problems and a short, unhappy life.<sup>49</sup>

Yet again, products were on the market, such as the Rideau Store Périnel, a 'curtain' for doors and windows that created a 'hermetically sealed gasproof shelter'.<sup>50</sup> Civil defence literature dwelt on different types of gas and their effects. Over a quarter of *La Petite Illustration's* issue for schools concerned gas, teaching students and teachers to walk away from the wind in a gas cloud, or how to handle contaminated clothes.<sup>51</sup> Readers learnt to identify gases by smell – garlic, mustard, geranium – and the horrible effects each had on the body.<sup>52</sup> The main protection against gas was the gas mask, which, when pictured, presented a frightening, dehumanised face. The poor provision of gas masks caused anxiety in France from the mid-thirties: in 1935 a small riot erupted outside a provincial supplier, which had to be suppressed by police.<sup>53</sup> Louise Weiss was extremely concerned about the government's instructions for 'make-your-own' masks, the effectiveness of which she doubted.<sup>54</sup> In 1939, the weekly newspaper *Le cri du peuple* published an exposé of the 'gas mask scandal', under the headline 'Warning, Parisians! Your wives and children will be massacred while you



defend your country!’ The masks on sale, it claimed, were ‘worthless’, and would do nothing to prevent a ‘long, atrocious death’.<sup>55</sup> Articles such as this, accurate or otherwise, politically motivated or simply hysterical, nonetheless reinforced that there appeared to be no protection against gas, the catastrophic weapon *par excellence*.

The French population was bombarded with representations of future war as imminent future catastrophe. Crushed, burnt or poisoned, the threat remained, and grew. In order to teach people to protect themselves, civil defence education had to explain graphically the scope and scale of the threat. It thus gave credence to unofficial representations of future war and ‘lent authority to the general jitters’.<sup>56</sup>

### *Imminent war*

Eugen Weber writes that after 1930, ‘catastrophe was in the air’<sup>57</sup> and this idea is certainly echoed in the diary of the writer Julien Green, resident in Paris. In 1930 he had resigned himself ‘to living in the expectation of catastrophe’; in 1932 he describes a Parisian preoccupation ‘which consists of predicting the war for the end of the week’, and the following year he feared the outbreak of war ‘at any minute’.<sup>58</sup> The tension in international and domestic politics fuelled the feeling of imminence, echoed in other media.

Apprehension over German rearmament and the likelihood of revenge mounted during the 1930s. The World Disarmament Conference at Geneva from February 1932 was a failure for French hopes of containing Germany. The principle of ‘equality of right’ of armament, through all countries disarming or German rearmament, was agreed. France knew that even if Germany rearmed to the same level, it would dominate because of its industrial and demographic strength. The following March, figures of the increased German military budget were published, and later that year the French ambassador in Berlin reported that Hitler was having difficulty housing all his new troops. By March 1935, Hitler had discarded all pretence of observing Versailles conditions: a peacetime army of 550,000 men was authorised, and the German air force assigned official status.<sup>59</sup> The German reoccupation of the Rhineland in March 1936 brought war a leap closer. Alexander Werth, touring France in April, noted in Strasbourg that there was ‘something of a panic’, while in Nancy the ‘feeling of the ever-present German menace’ was now ‘stronger than ever’.<sup>60</sup>

The escalation of German strength was not directly represented to the people, and news, radio and newsreels were subject to increasing censorship. From 1936, newsreel producers had to seek approval for the content of their films in advance. Knowledge would lead to questioning, which neither government nor military wanted. As Anthony Adamthwaite comments, any lack of interest in foreign affairs among the French population arose from a deliberate attempt to deprive it of information.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, censorship could not remove representations of imminent war entirely. Domestic politics mobilised the threat of war to discourage support for opponents. After the formation of the Front Commun in 1933, which aimed to unite progressive leftist opinion<sup>62</sup>, the Right issued posters dramatically illustrating what support for the Left would bring. One showed a stream of Nazi bombers dropping bombs on Paris, another a squadron of bombers crossing the Rhine.<sup>63</sup> France, the posters suggested, was on the very brink of war. Support for the Left would tip the balance, putting responsibility into voters’ hands. Omer Bartov suggests that as the Right was never explicit about how it could prevent armed conflict, this representation of war had ‘a devastating effect on morale’.<sup>64</sup> Support the Left or support the Right: either would precipitate war, according to the propaganda.

The Munich crisis of September 1938 did much to accelerate the expectation of war. The *Pathé-Journal* of 28 September 1938 entitled ‘Serious times’ (‘Heures graves’) reinforced the feeling of crisis with a dramatically solemn representation of the situation. A week later the newsreel was dedicated to the resolution of the crisis, yet by the following week, Munich only

received a few seconds' attention.<sup>65</sup> If the crisis passed so quickly in the newsreels, what accounted for the increasing edginess after Munich? Marie-Geneviève Chevignard and Nicole Faure have noted that during and after the Munich crisis war crept subtly into the women's press. The mass-circulation magazine *Confidences* encouraged couples to think about the impending separation:

Gentlemen, have you ever thought of what would happen if you disappeared abruptly?  
Is your wife up to date with your business affairs, your finances, your plans?<sup>66</sup>

War had not broken up the family – yet. Once again war was represented as reaching into the home, destroying not just bricks and mortar, but relationships too. There is an element of urgency about the article, as though the need to prepare for departure had grown. Perhaps the dark turn in French feature films post-Munich shows a shift of opinion. While films such as *Hôtel du Nord*, *La bête humaine*, *Le jour se lève* and *Le règle du jeu* did not deal explicitly with war, each represented a world where despair and defeat reigned.<sup>67</sup> In popular culture, as with news, explicit representation of the oncoming war was not common, but the increasing tension could be felt.

Practice civil defence exercises indicated that war was imminent. Mock emergencies to test the response of civil defence teams took place in Brest in March 1938. If people wanted a representation of what future war would be like, they needed only to step outside. On 4 March 1938, a full-scale air attack was simulated, with planes from the French navy posing as enemy bombers, others as defensive fighters. A practice blackout took place on 16 March, and in June 1938, an exercise in coping with gas drew a crowd of onlookers. In October air raid precautions were published in the press for readers to 'cut out and keep'.<sup>68</sup> The conclusion to draw was that they would soon be needed. In December 1938, the municipal authorities of Boulogne-Billancourt published a map of the town divided into 96 civil defence segments and a list of shelters.<sup>69</sup> There was also a spate of publishing on civil defence issues, some for public information and some aimed at the professionals who would be required to participate. This sudden flurry of civil defence activity towards the end of the decade showed that it would soon be necessary to put plans into practice.

By the end of the decade, France was on edge. The frenzied evacuation of Paris during the 'scare days' of September 1938 attests to the perceived imminence of attack. Alexander Werth describes the race to leave the city, the rising prices of hotels on escape routes and a rush on trunks and suitcases. Children were sent to the country, or told by the authorities not to return from their summer holidays. Werth himself was drawn into the panic, withdrawing his savings and stocking up on tobacco.<sup>70</sup> The French had spent twenty years dealing with images of past war, present war and future war, and, while the government tried to prevent panic (and criticism) through censorship, and the military urged trust in its defensive policy, the expectation of catastrophe continued to grow. The population was educated into an understanding of the shape and details of this catastrophe, and, as the 1930s passed, the question was not *if* it would happen, but *when* – and the answer appeared to be *now*.

#### IV. IMPACT

The cumulative effect of conflicting representations of war on French people was itself contradictory. War would either be withheld by defensive policies or would fall heavily on the civilian population. In either circumstance, there seemed little that could be done. In that light, the demands of civil defence seemed pointless, and were greeted in many cases with a lack of interest or derision. Alexander Werth's friend David thought that gas masks were 'a lot of British eyewash'. In his opinion, and no doubt he was not alone, 'you couldn't swamp

the whole of Paris with gas'.<sup>71</sup> When Louise Weiss's propaganda centre held demonstrations in hotels and factories, they persevered despite 'the mockery as we put on our masks and protective clothing'.<sup>72</sup> When the exercise in dealing with a gas attack took place in Brest, many of the large crowd could not take it seriously. The oilskin-clad firemen were 'a big hit' with onlookers, until more elaborately dressed disinfection teams began their work, 'to the great joy of the curious'.<sup>73</sup> Either people did not believe the catastrophic scaremongering or felt that civil defence could wait. The various representations of war led in this case to lack of interest, and through that to inactivity in preparing for war.

Government intervention in media output acted to anaesthetise public opinion, depriving people of information and replacing it with platitudes of security and the mundanities of celebrity, sport, popular music, quizzes and serials. The state controlled radio programming and did not permit controversial issues to be discussed in cinema newsreels.<sup>74</sup> Popular music urged people to laugh away their worries, a foxtrot of 1935 asking 'Why get worked up about nothing?' (*Pourquoi se biler pour rien?*). While seeing war represented in all its horrors, the idea of accepting the status quo also persisted. After all, as a song from 1936 put it, 'It's better than catching scarlet fever' (*Ça va mieux que d'attraper la scarlatine*) – things could have been worse.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, when things did get worse, people were still being told to forget their problems. The women's press encouraged readers to forget their troubles, a *Marie-Claire* horoscope of February 1939 reassuring them that 'We will not have a war with our neighbours', and later that year a story in *Confidences* told readers 'sing, dance, even if you don't really feel like it'.<sup>76</sup> Henri de Montherlant wrote that although the threat of war was hanging over the country, the French chose instead to 'bury their heads in the sand'.<sup>77</sup> Again, this attitude led to inactivity in preparing for an unwanted war.

Yet there was clearly also mounting fear and tension. War was a constant topic of conversation, and dominated political discourse. Whether dwelling on past horrors, looking apprehensively at a vengeful neighbour, putting faith in a policy of defence or falling prey to representations of imminent catastrophe, France was afraid and confused. For an elderly Parisian in 1936, the fear became too much and he attempted suicide, believing an air raid practice to be the real thing.<sup>78</sup> War seemed increasingly certain, and the panic of the 'scare days' of the Munich crisis foreshadowed the reaction in 1939 when war did break out. On that day, Louise Weiss records the telephone calls to her propaganda centre: 'What's your advice? Does wind disperse a gas cloud? Is my cellar bombproof?'.<sup>79</sup> Many Parisian children were evacuated, some finding themselves in villages unprepared to shelter them.<sup>80</sup> As the Phoney War progressed, life returned, in relief, to normal; it seemed that the threat had been exaggerated. Yet when the French army was defeated in May 1940, and the Germans invaded, people understood that the defensive policy which had long been represented as a bulwark against German aggression had failed. They were left, then, with the other representation of war, the expectation of catastrophe. Pursued by that thought, between eight and ten million took to the roads, desperate to escape the danger that they had anticipated for so many years.

In 1934 Eugène Dabit wrote that the stupidity of certain men would soon lead to 'the most infamous and terrible of all wars'. The nightmare of expectation gave way to the nightmare of war, and for French people living in places that, over the four years following the armistice, became targets for the RAF and the US Air Force, the catastrophic raids, heavier than imagined, surpassed (in every respect but poison gas) their pre-war representation. 'They are leading us there gently', wrote Dabit, 'in confusion and lies'.<sup>81</sup> Censored information, misplaced faith, inactivity, bewilderment and fear meant that France, despite twenty years of constant representations, did not know how to face war when it struck French soil in 1940.

- <sup>1</sup> This research forms part of a PhD on the allied bombing of France 1940-45, part of the AHRC-funded project 'Bombings, states and peoples in Western Europe, 1939-45' (AH/E00740/1). Thanks to the AHRC for its support for this article, Professor Andrew Knapp for his comments on a draft, and also to an anonymous referee for some useful insights.
- <sup>2</sup> Benteli, M., Jay, D. and Jeancolas, J.-P., 'Le cinema français: thèmes et public', in R. Rémond and J. Bourdin (eds.), *La France et les français en 1938-9* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris, 1978), p. 38.
- <sup>3</sup> Allied bombing claimed between 50,000 and 60,000 civilian lives in France during the war. Boulogne-Billancourt was raided four times, targeting the vast Renault factory. The factory manufactured lorries for the *Wehrmacht* and housed tank repair workshops. In total, Boulogne-Billancourt suffered 707 civilian deaths and a third of the population in 1944 was homeless. One of France's major naval ports, Brest expected air attack, and when war began was frequently raided by the German air force. After the armistice, the port became a regular target for Bomber Command, and suffered three intense waves of bombing. The targets were the warships of the German navy and the u-boat pens. Four hundred and forty-four *brestoises* were killed by allied bombs, a low death toll given the level of destruction, but one which reflects the mass evacuation of the town (Picaud, F., *L'épopée de Renault* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976); Hatry, G., 'Billancourt sous les bombes', *Bulletin de la section d'histoire des usines Renault*, 16th year, vol. 5, no. 30 (June 1985); M. Middlebrook and C. Everlitt (eds.), *The Bomber Command War Diaries: An Operational Reference Book, 1939-45* (Hersham: 1985, 1996, Midland Publishing)).
- <sup>4</sup> Sauvy, A., *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres* vol. i, *De l'armistice à la dévaluation de la livre*, (Paris: Fayard, 1965), p. 31.
- <sup>5</sup> Busscher, J.-M., 'A l'ombre des monuments des morts', in O. Barrot and P. Ory (eds.), *Entre deux guerres: la création française 1919-1939* (Paris: Ed. François Bourrin, 1990), p. 14.
- <sup>6</sup> Prost, A., 'Les monuments aux morts: Culte républicain? Culte civique? Culte patriotique?', in P. Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. i: *La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 200, in Rearick, C., *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 43-46, note p. 287.
- <sup>7</sup> Rearick, *French in Love and War*, p. 40, 63.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 60-66.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, *Le manuel de la défense passive* (1939), Archives Municipales de Boulogne-Billancourt (hereafter AMBB) 6H 3, pp. 4-5 ; and *La Petite Illustration*, 15 July 1939, Archives Municipales et Communautaires de Brest (hereafter AMCB) 4H 4.5, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Le cinema français', pp. 31-2.
- <sup>11</sup> Sinclair, A. B., 'The French perceptions and responses to German rearmament, 1932-1935', Univ. California at Irvine PhD thesis, 1990 (published by UMI Dissertation Information Service, Ann Arbor Michigan), pp. 12, 41, 55.
- <sup>12</sup> Adamthwaite, A., *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1995), p. 165; Crémieux-Brilhac, J.-L., *Les Français de l'an 40*, vol. i, *La guerre oui ou non?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 76-79.
- <sup>13</sup> *La défense passive allemande* (1938), in AMCB 4H 4.5.
- <sup>14</sup> Showalter, D. E., 'Plans, weapons, doctrines: the strategic cultures of interwar Europe', in R. Chickering and S. Förster (eds.), *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 64.
- <sup>15</sup> As Hew Strachan comments, the rejection de Gaulle's *Vers l'armée de métier* (1934) was as much for his proposals on the professionalisation of the army as his views on mobile warfare (Strachan, H., 'War and society in the 1920s and 1930s', in *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 44-5).
- <sup>16</sup> Baumann, T. and Segesser D. M., 'Shadows of total war in British and French military journals', in Chickering and Förster, *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 219-221.
- <sup>17</sup> For the majority of this article, I have translated *défense passive* as 'civil defence'. However it is useful in this context to consider as 'passive defence' defined in contrast to 'active defence'.
- <sup>18</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Cinema français', p. 37; Rearick, *French in Love and War*, p. 235.
- <sup>19</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Cinema français', p. 33.
- <sup>20</sup> Lerner, H., *La Dépêche: Journal de la démocratie* (Toulouse: Publications de l'université de Toulouse, 1978), vol. ii, p. 958, in Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery*, pp. 166-7.
- <sup>21</sup> *Le Miroir du Monde*, 5th year, no. 244, 3 Nov. 1934.
- <sup>22</sup> *Manuel de la défense passive*, p. 12.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Instruction pratique sur la défense passive contre les attaques aériennes', Ministry of the Interior, Nov. 1931, AMBB 6H 3.

- <sup>24</sup> *Procivil* lists the first legislative step providing for the protection of the population as the Provisional Instruction of the Ministry of War of 11 Feb. 1922. It goes on to discuss 12 more pieces of legislation from the period, mentions 15 others, along with 4 technical instructions on civil defence equipment. (*Procivil. Bulletin documentaire*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1939), pp.7-8, AMCB 4H 4.5.)
- <sup>25</sup> 'Etablissement du plan de protection pour la population civile', 29 Sept. 1939, AMCB 4H 4.14; 'Rapport du service local de défense passive au sujet de l'état de la protection à Boulogne-Billancourt à la date du 15 novembre 1939', 15 Nov. 1939, AMBB 6H 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Werth, A., *The Twilight of France. 1933-40* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1942), p. 264.
- <sup>27</sup> Lascaux, G., 'Guernica', in Barrot and Ory, *Entre deux guerres*, p. 428.
- <sup>28</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Cinéma français', p. 37 ; Diamond, H., *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 9
- <sup>29</sup> Maier, K.A., 'The Condor Legion: an instrument of total war?', in Chickering and Förster, *Shadows of Total War*, pp. 287-291.
- <sup>30</sup> M. Leiris, writing in *Cahiers d'art* (1937), quoted in Lascaux, 'Guernica', pp. 431-2.
- <sup>31</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Cinema français', p. 37
- <sup>32</sup> *La Petite Illustration*, p. 1.
- <sup>33</sup> *Manuel de la défense passive* (1939), p. 6; also *Français pour votre sauvegarde* (1939), p. 4, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>34</sup> *Procivil. Bulletin documentaire*, pp. 2, 302.
- <sup>35</sup> *L'Œuvre*, 22 Apr. 1935, in Mysyrowicz, L., *Autopsie d'une défaite: origines de l'effondrement militaire français de 1940* (Lausanne: Ed. L'Age d'Homme, 1973), p. 319.
- <sup>36</sup> Flyer advertising the Abris KZ-3 shelter, from the manufacturer Le Béton Industriel, undated, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>37</sup> Eighteen of the 63 pages of the *Manuel de la défense passive* were devoted to types of explosive, shelter and other forms of protection.
- <sup>38</sup> Weiss, L., *Mémoires d'une Européenne* (Paris: Payot, 1970), vol. iii, 1934-39, pp. 221, 225.
- <sup>39</sup> *Manuel de la défense passive*, p. 62.
- <sup>40</sup> *Français pour votre sauvegarde*, p. 12.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Note aux propriétaires et concierges d'immeubles à locataires', 14 Aug. 1938, AMBB 6H 4,
- <sup>42</sup> English in original.
- <sup>43</sup> Flyer advertising the 'Stop-Fire' extinguisher, from the manufacturer 'Stop-Fire', undated, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>44</sup> Brochure advertising 'La Sans Rivale' ladder, from the manufacturer Aumaitre et Mathé, undated, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>45</sup> Grenouillet, R., 'Contribution à l'étude de la protection de la population civile contre les gaz de combat', *Revue d'Artillerie*, 102, no. 51 (1928), p. 183; Grenouillet, R., 'Naissance de l'arme chimique', *Revue d'Artillerie*, 115, no. 58 (1935), p. 183, quoted Baumann and Segesser, 'Shadows of total war', p. 217.
- <sup>46</sup> Weber, E., *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: WW Norton, 1994), p. 238.
- <sup>47</sup> Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie*, pp. 305-8.
- <sup>48</sup> Ferrero, G., writing in *L'Europe*, 15 Sept. 1931, pp. 5-6 in Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie*, p. 319.
- <sup>49</sup> *Je sais tout*, June 1934, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>50</sup> Brochure advertising the 'Rideau Store Périnel', from the manufacturer Jean Périnel, Feb. 1938, AMBB 6H 3.
- <sup>51</sup> *La Petite Illustration*, p. 12.
- <sup>52</sup> *Manuel de la défense passive*, pp. 52-56.
- <sup>53</sup> *L'Œuvre*, 3 May 1935, in Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie*, p. 319
- <sup>54</sup> Weiss, *Mémoires*, p. 224.
- <sup>55</sup> *Le cri du peuple*, 9 March 1939, in AMBB 6H 6. Crémieux-Brilhac notes that *Le cri du peuple* was a German-sponsored paper; such articles were designed to encourage defeatism (Crémieux-Brilhac, J.-L., *Les Français de l'an 40*, p. 78).
- <sup>56</sup> Weber, *Hollow Years*, p. 238.
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241.
- <sup>58</sup> Green, J., *Les années faciles, 1928-1934* (Paris: Plon, 1960), pp. 28, 107, 168.
- <sup>59</sup> Sinclair, 'French perceptions and responses', pp. 54-5, 142, 235, 326, 401.
- <sup>60</sup> Werth, *Twilight of France*, pp. 79, 85,88.
- <sup>61</sup> Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery*, pp. 179-180.
- <sup>62</sup> Jackson, J., *France. The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 62.
- <sup>63</sup> Bartov, O., 'Martyrs' vengeance. Memory, trauma and fear of war in France, 1918-1940', in J. Blatt (ed.), *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn, 1998), pp. 78, 79, 80.
- <sup>64</sup> Bartov, 'Martyrs' vengeance', p. 76.
- <sup>65</sup> Benteli, Jay and Jeancolas, 'Cinema français', pp. 35-6.
- <sup>66</sup> *Confidences*, 9 Sept. 1938, in Chavignard, M.-G. and Faure, N., 'Système de valeurs et des références dans la presse féminine', in Rémond and Bourdin, *France et les Français*, pp. 44, 50.

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- <sup>67</sup> Rearick, *French in Love and War*, pp. 237-9.
- <sup>68</sup> *La Dépêche de Brest et de l'Ouest*, 5 Mar. 1938, 1 July 1938, 27 Oct. 1938, in AMCB 4H 4.15.
- <sup>69</sup> *Bulletin Officiel Municipal de Boulogne-Billancourt*, Dec. 1938, in AMBB 6H 6.
- <sup>70</sup> Werth, *Twilight of France*, pp. 251-268.
- <sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 266.
- <sup>72</sup> Weiss, p. 207.
- <sup>73</sup> *La Dépêche de Brest et de l'Ouest*, 1 July 1938 in AMCB 4H 4.15.
- <sup>74</sup> Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery*, 177.
- <sup>75</sup> Rearick, *French in Love and War*, p. 197.
- <sup>76</sup> 'Horoscope du 22 février au 1 mars', *Marie-Claire*, 24 Feb. 1939; 'Propos de Sylvia', *Confidences*, 21 July 1939, in Chavignard and Faure 'Systeme de valeurs et des références', pp. 50-51.
- <sup>77</sup> Quoted in Bartov, O., *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide and Modern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 50.
- <sup>78</sup> *The Times*, 23 Oct. 1936.
- <sup>79</sup> Weiss, *Mémoires*, p. 226.
- <sup>80</sup> A teacher from Boulogne-Billancourt protested to his mayor about the provisions for evacuated children in the village of Saint-Viaud in the Loire-Inférieure: the village, population 300 people, had not been warned that the evacuees were arriving and was unable and unprepared to house 250 extra people (M. Dufaut to the mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt, 31 Aug. 1939, AMBB, 6H 17).
- <sup>81</sup> Dabit, E., *Journal Intime 1938-1936* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 31 Oct. 1934, p. 321.