

Munich

FRANCE'S ABANDONMENT of Czechoslovakia in late September 1938 has become a metaphor for short-sighted and even cowardly decision making. The Munich Agreement has served as a touchstone for historians who argue that French leaders surrendered to drift and indecision before the Second World War. This interpretation of Munich is based on two assumptions. First, that decision makers did not understand the nature of the Nazi threat. Second, that going to war with Germany over Czechoslovakia was the correct decision to take. Neither of these assumptions stand up to careful analysis, however. French civilian and military *décideurs* had few illusions about the nature of the Nazi regime. Most were convinced, however, that France could not make war on Germany in 1938.

The picture of the balance of power presented to decision makers by the intelligence services was central to France's Munich policy. According to Rivet, it was at this stage that 'the responsible chiefs at last sensed the need to go directly to the source of intelligence information . . . [and] . . . to bypass the many filters that stood between the organs of information and the organs of decision'.¹ Both Daladier (who became Premier in April) and Gamelin held face to face meetings with Rivet over the course of 1938 and intelligence was integrated more thoroughly into policy making than at any point since the Doumergue era. Throughout French intelligence continued to produce penetrating assessments of Hitler's intentions. Its evaluations of German capabilities, however, were increasingly overblown. Once again the tendency to overestimate German military power was linked to French self-perception. An acute awareness that France was neither materially nor psychologically prepared for war underpinned a series of 'worst case' assessments of the situation across the Rhine. This trend

¹ SHAT, Fonds Paillolle, 1K 545, Carton 1, dr. 3, 'Note du Général Louis Rivet: Rapports du SR avec le ministre', 1941.

culminated during the Sudetenland crisis, when military intelligence assessed the motivations and timing of Hitler's policy with startling accuracy but produced vastly inflated appreciations of the power of the Wehrmacht. Inaccurate intelligence on German military power did not, however, alter the course of French policy in any fundamental sense. In the autumn of 1938 France was in no way prepared for another European war. Intelligence provided decision makers with superb justification for the policy of pre-emptive retreat in the east that had been pursued since the collapse of the alliance with Italy in early 1936.

I

Through late 1937 and early 1938 the intelligence services continued to sound the alarm over the long-term objectives of Nazi foreign policy. In an overview of November 1937 intelligence chief Gauché had again predicted that a German grab at the resources of eastern Europe was imminent. Austria and Czechoslovakia were the states considered the most immediately threatened. Gauché warned that '[a]llowing Germany free rein [*champ libre*] in eastern Europe will only postpone the coming of a Franco-German war. . . . One would have to know nothing of the German mentality to believe otherwise.'² If France wished to challenge Germany's bid for European supremacy, war was inevitable. Several weeks later General Gamelin warned the CPDN to anticipate German aggression in east-central Europe in the coming year. Echoing Gauché, Gamelin submitted that once the Reich had achieved predominance in the east it would only be a matter of time before Hitler's ambition threatened France's status as a European power.³ But Gamelin and the military had been warning civilian leaders about the immediacy of the Nazi menace since 1933. It was Daladier's gradual realization of the seriousness of the situation in early 1938 that proved decisive. In February, the minister of defence began to campaign, for the first time since the summer of 1936, for further increases to France's rearmament effort. He warned the Chamber army commission that German people had been 'fanaticized' by a National Socialist government that was 'completely seduced by the idea of conquest and

² SHAT, 7N 2522-1, 'Réflexions sur un conflit éventuel en Europe', 9 Nov. 1937.

³ SHAT, 2N 25, *Procès-verbal* of CPDN meeting, 8 Dec. 1937.

domination'. France had no choice, he argued, but to increase its military strength 'to the maximum'.⁴

This bleak but unfortunately accurate interpretation of the inspiration of Nazi foreign policy did not become a central element in the making of French national policy until March of 1938. It was at this point that Léon Blum succeeded Chautemps and put an end to ten months of drift in foreign and defence policy. Although the Blum government was unsuccessful in its bid to form a coalition of 'national defence', it did adopt a number of crucial defence measures that inaugurated the period of *réarmement à outrance* that was to last through to the outbreak of war. March 1938 saw the creation of a *Caisse Autonome des investissements de la Défense Nationale*, the adoption of the first truly substantial air rearmament programme of the inter-war period, the approval of an ambitious supplementary naval construction programme, and the approval of an 'exceptional programme' aimed at accelerating the pace of land rearmament.⁵ These measures were then retained and even amplified by the ensuing Daladier government. On 12 April 1938 Daladier formed a government which would prove one of the most stable and durable ministries in the history of the Third Republic. By combining the portfolios of Premier and minister of defence, Daladier ensured that defence requirements received the highest priority. Presenting his government to the Chamber, the new Premier characterized his ministry as 'above all, a government of National Defence'.⁶ By obtaining wide-ranging powers of decree from Parliament, Daladier secured the authority necessary to implement a series of vigorous measures aimed at stimulating the economy and bolstering the rearmament effort.

The priority accorded to defence policy under Daladier was based on the conviction that Nazi foreign policy was aimed at European domination. In a summit with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in London on 27 April Daladier declared that Hitler desired 'nothing less than total domination of the European continent' and that 'Europe has not faced a threat of these dimensions since the era of Napoleon'. Seeking to disabuse Chamberlain of the misguided belief that Germany could be appeased by concessions over the Sudetenland, Daladier argued that to cede Germany a free hand in eastern

⁴ AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, Carton 16, Daladier audition, 9 Feb. 1938.

⁵ Frank[enstein], *Le Prix*, 85–9 and 178–87.

⁶ Édouard Daladier, *Défense du pays* (Paris, 1939), 9.

Europe would only increase the military capacity of the Reich. He warned that '[i]f Germany gains control of eastern and south-eastern Europe, it will be assured the resources necessary to turn against the west, which, out of weakness, will have provided her with the means with which to wage the long war which she is at present incapable of sustaining'.⁷ Nor was this merely alarmism for British consumption. Daladier advised the Chamber army commission several months later that '[f]or my part, I believe that if we stand aside and allow Germany to establish its hegemony [in east-central Europe] it is clear that in a relatively short period of time it will be the independence of France itself which is threatened with destruction'.⁸ Neither the Premier nor the military had any doubt about the dimensions of the Nazi threat.

II

Although the Deuxième Bureau was confident that Hitler intended to move eastward, the precise timing of this move remained uncertain in early 1938. Analysts continued to judge the German high command fundamentally opposed to an adventurist foreign policy. There was increasing evidence, however, that the Party had achieved considerable success in its efforts to 'nazify' the younger members of the officer corps. Renondeau observed in March of 1937 that '[d]uring the early years of the regime the officer corps was far from uniformly National Socialist and there was considerable repugnance for Hitler. But the situation has evolved to the point where now one would have to say that the great majority of the army is loyal to Hitler'.⁹ This analysis appeared to be confirmed by the events of the first week in February 1938. Hitler's purge of the army command structure on 4 February was the crucial stage in the *Gleichschaltung* of the armed forces (the ideological unity of the Party, the state, and the military). Defence minister General von Blomberg and army commander General Werner von Fritsch, along with sixteen other high-ranking army generals, were replaced and the command structure of the German military was completely renovated. Hitler assumed the role of Commander-in-Chief of Germany's armed forces and Fritsch was replaced as army commander

⁷ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 8, dr. 3, unedited text entitled 'Munich', 44–5. See also Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 336–7.

⁸ AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, Daladier audition, 31 Aug. 1938.

⁹ SHAT, 7N 2599, 'L'Armée et le national-socialisme', 16 Mar. 1937.

by General Walther von Brauchitsch, who assured Hitler that he was 'ready to do anything' to bring the army 'closer to the state and its ideology'.¹⁰

French intelligence interpreted the events of 4 February as a crushing victory for the Party over the high command in the struggle for control of the army. Colonel de Geffrier estimated that the military had 'lost forever the magnificent autonomy within the state that it has guarded jealously under a succession of regimes and which has until now allowed it to remain a state within a state'.¹¹ Renondeau concluded that the army had become 'a docile instrument in the hands of the government'.¹² François-Poncet echoed this point of view in his report to the Quai d'Orsay. He characterized the successful purge of the high command as the 'decisive stage in the process of achieving the complete subjugation of the state and all of its vital organs', and provided 'testament to the health, the vigour and the vitality of National Socialism, its self-confidence and its irresistible dynamism'. The net result of the crisis, according to François-Poncet, had been to 'concentrate all of the forces of the state under Hitler with the objective of providing added weight to German policy and to permit the Reich to pursue its grand designs'.¹³ These assumptions, which were endorsed by the Deuxième Bureau, and would condition the French response to rumours of opposition within the German high command to Hitler during the Czechoslovak crisis the following summer.

The Fritsch-Blomberg crisis heightened anticipation of an imminent *coup de force* which intelligence sources indicated was in preparation against Austria. In late 1937 French intelligence received increasing evidence of collusion between Germany and Italy in Spain. Renondeau speculated that the Axis had signed a military alliance. The Deuxième Bureau interpreted the tightening of the Axis as a necessary prelude to moves against Austria and Czechoslovakia. Shortly thereafter, the SGDN warned of an imminent threat to Austrian independence.¹⁴ Renondeau deemed that the extremism of Himmler,

¹⁰ K.-J. Müller, *Das Heer und Hitler: Armee und nationalsozialistisches Regime 1933-1940* (Stuttgart, 1969), 263, 255-89; Deist, 'The Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', 520-31; and G. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II* (Cambridge, 1995), 137-43.

¹¹ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'Réorganisation du commandement', air attaché report, 9 Feb. 1938.

¹² SHAT, 7N 2601, 'Crise de commandement: Dénouement', 5 Feb. 1938.

¹³ DDF, 2ème série, viii, no. 138, François-Poncet to Paris, 10 Feb. 1938.

¹⁴ For Renondeau's views, see SHAT, 7N 2600, 'Voyage du Général von Fritsche en Italie', 21 Dec. 1937. For the impressions of the Deuxième Bureau and the SGDN, see 7N 2514, RH, 15-22 Nov. 1937; Fonds Gamelin, 1K 224-8, 'Note sur les données actuelles du

Goebbels, and Ribbentrop had achieved ascendancy over the caution of the army in the counsels of the Führer on 4 February. He speculated that the temptation to use the army might now prove irresistible for the Nazi government and predicted a spring of increased international tension.¹⁵

Once again Renondeau's estimate proved accurate. Tension began to escalate between Berlin and the Austrian government of Kurt von Schuschnigg in late January. Austria was threatened with military occupation during a meeting between Schuschnigg and Hitler in Berchtesgaden on 12 February. Schuschnigg was forced to comply with Hitler's demands that a number of Nazis be placed in the Austrian cabinet. The Austrian government tried to project calm abroad, assuring the Quai d'Orsay that negotiations with Germany were proceeding on an equitable basis. But France's military and civilian leaders knew this was a bluff. Both the SR and the foreign ministry were reading high-grade Austrian diplomatic traffic and, through communications between Vienna and the Austrian Embassy in Paris, were aware of the real tone of negotiations in Berchtesgaden. Intercepts in mid-February revealed that the Austrian government was under intense pressure and anticipated further demands from Berlin. They also made clear that Austrian policy was based on the hope that Hitler would be deterred from using force to achieve an *Anschluss* by the prospect of a general war.¹⁶ Vienna was therefore trying desperately to avoid the appearance of collapse. The Schuschnigg government feared that evidence of capitulation would lead the Western powers to withdraw their support for an independent Austria. If this happened, the Austrian foreign ministry advised its ambassador in Paris, 'all hope would be lost and it will be too late for us to take any measures whatsoever'.¹⁷

Signals intelligence thus kept French decision makers well informed of the true status of Austria. A report summarizing Nazi demands on the Schuschnigg government was prepared for Delbos on 13 February.¹⁸ The weekly intelligence summary of 28 February predicted

problème militaire français', SGDN note forwarded to Daladier by Gamelin, 8 Feb. 1938 and 2N 224-1, 'Répercussions de la situation internationale', note from Daladier to Premier Chautemps, 1 Feb. 1938.

¹⁵ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'Crise du haut commandement: Dénouement', 5 Feb. 1938.

¹⁶ MAÉ, Collection de Télégrammes Interceptés, vol. 3, Autriche, Intercepts of 15 and 16 Feb. 1938.

¹⁷ MAÉ, Collection de Télégrammes Interceptés, vol. 3, Autriche, Intercepts 16 and 21 Feb. 1938. Quotation from intercept of 16 Feb.

¹⁸ MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Rochat, vol. 5, 'Note pour le Ministre', 13 Feb. 1938.

that the *Anschluss* was both imminent and inevitable. 'It might take some time,' the report concluded, 'but it is coming and this is the important point.'¹⁹ This impressive work by French code-breakers was in no way decisive. French policy towards Austria had been determined in advance. During the second week in February Daladier and Gamelin discussed the ramifications of an *Anschluss* for the strategic situation and agreed that there could be no question of unilateral military action. Neither official nor popular opinion considered preserving Austrian independence worth war with Germany. Indeed, news of the invasion and annexation of Austria found the French political elite pre-occupied with yet another cabinet crisis over the resignation of Chautemps. The reaction of the defence and foreign policy establishment was framed by its unspoken policy of pre-emptive retreat in the east. Thus, when the crisis broke, the Quai d'Orsay made a series of official protests and Austria became part of the Reich.²⁰

For the intelligence services, the German coup was a test of their system of surveillance in Germany. In the aftermath of the *Anschluss* the SR was censured in the press for having failed to provide advance warning of the coup. This censure was unjustified, however. The final decision to move against Austria was taken in Berlin only in the evening of 10 March and the SR received its first intelligence warning about Austria at 10:30 the following morning. Rivet's diary entry for 14 March reads: 'Annexion pure and simple of Austria. Good work by the SR.'²¹ There does seem to have been a failure in liaison between army intelligence and the foreign ministry however. The Quai d'Orsay was caught off guard by the precise timing of the *Anschluss* and Léger complained to Gamelin that the DAPC had not been kept informed by the SR and Deuxième Bureau.²² But this breakdown in communication was to have positive effects. It appears to have convinced the Quai d'Orsay to sponsor weekly information sharing conferences which

¹⁹ SHAT, 7N 2515, RH, 21–28 Feb. 1938.

²⁰ J. Bariéty, 'La France et le problème de l'*Anschluss*. Mars 1936–mars 1938', in Hildebrand and Werner (eds.), *Deutschland und Frankreich*, 553–75. See also Young, *In Command of France*, 156–9; Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 327–8; and Adamthwaite, *France*, 80–6.

²¹ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 14 Mar. 1938. See the entries for 17 and 18 Mar. 1938 in the same volume for Rivet's reaction to criticism in the press. On Hitler's decision making, see Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, 293–8. Paul Stehlin claims to have warned Paris of the *Anschluss* four days before it occurred: *Témoignage pour l'histoire*, 96–8 and Porch, *French Secret Services*, 140. Given the timing of Hitler's decision, this was clearly impossible.

²² Paillole, *Notre espion*, 125; Adamthwaite, 'French Intelligence', 203; and Porch, *French Secret Services*, 146.

convened from mid-April 1938 through to the outbreak of war. These were chaired normally by the head of the DAPC and attended by representatives from the army, air, and naval Deuxième Bureaux, the SR, the SGDN, and at least one representative from the ministry of the interior. The *Anschluss* also led to the implementation of the SR's proposal to station secret intelligence officers in French consulates inside Germany. In late April both Léger and Émile Charvériat (deputy director of the DAPC) finally agreed to this measure as a means of better monitoring preparations for mobilization in Germany.²³

In the weeks following the *Anschluss*, the Deuxième Bureau, like much of the rest of the world, correctly identified Czechoslovakia as the next target of German aggression. Once again, however, determining the precise timetable of Hitler's aggressive policy proved problematic. During the 'May crisis' of 1938 military intelligence endorsed reports emanating from Czechoslovakia of an imminent German invasion of that country. While these rumours proved to be unfounded, the reasoning of the Deuxième Bureau was fundamentally sound. Intelligence officials attributed tremendous importance to the military imbalance in their assessments of the likelihood of war. Time, they reckoned, was on the side of the rearmament efforts of France and Britain. It was assumed that Germany would be tempted to strike before it lost its military superiority.²⁴ This line of reasoning was to increase in importance within the French general staff and to underpin the phoney war strategy of 1939.

Rumours of an imminent threat to Czechoslovakia began to surface even before the annexation of Austria. Naval intelligence reported an imminent German attack on Czechoslovakia on 17 February. This intelligence, along with other rumours emanating from Prague, was dismissed by the SR.²⁵ On 8 April, however, Hans-Thilo Schmidt reported that Hitler was considering an attack on Czechoslovakia in the immediate future. He added that the German high command was said to be opposed to such an attack and sought its delay until the following October at the earliest. 'The final decision', the SR noted, 'once again depends entirely on the Führer.'²⁶ The hypothesis of a German

²³ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, entries for 1, 23, and 29 Apr. 1938.

²⁴ MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Fonds Daladier, vol. 1, 'Note sur la situation militaire actuelle dans le monde', 29 Mar. 1938.

²⁵ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 17, 18, and 19 Feb. 1938.

²⁶ Quote from SHAT, 7N 2522-2, 'Renseignement: Opérations contre la Tchécoslovaquie [Source Z]', 8 Apr. 1938. See also 7N 2522-2, 'Note sur la possibilité d'une action allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', 8 Apr. 1938 and *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 8 Apr. 1938.

coup de force appeared strengthened in mid-May by reports of the presence of an abnormal number of mechanized and motorized units near the Czechoslovak frontier at the same time as a resurgence in Sudeten agitation which was considered 'more or less fomented by Berlin'.²⁷ Rumours of the build-up of German aggression exploded into an international crisis several weeks later when Czechoslovak intelligence became convinced that Germany was about to invade. The Czechoslovaks had received detailed information, from a source that remains obscure, which alleged that Germany had deployed ten infantry and mechanized divisions along its frontier with Czechoslovakia.²⁸ This intelligence arrived in Paris early on the morning of 20 May. The same day the French military mission in Prague, citing Czech sources, reported German troop concentrations in Saxony and Bavaria.²⁹

Significantly, virtually all reports of German troop concentrations had come from the Czechoslovaks. The military attachés in Berlin, despite reconnaissance trips to Saxony and Silesia, could report no inordinate military activity inside Germany.³⁰ Reconnoitring by Renondeau, Réa, and the British and Belgian military attachés on 21, 22, and 23 May, supplemented by the aerial reconnaissance of de Gefrier and Stehlin, uncovered nothing out of the ordinary in terms of military preparations.³¹ But the Deuxième Bureau attached great importance to the information from the Czechoslovaks and warned the high command, the foreign ministry, and the Premier that Germany might attempt another Austria-like coup that weekend.³² In London, the SIS was of the same view and warned the Chamberlain government of the danger of an imminent European war.³³ Just after midday on 22 May, Daladier summoned Colonel Rivet to his offices on the rue St Dominique. Rivet described the situation as 'grave' and urged the Premier to consult with the entire high command.³⁴

²⁷ SHAT, 7N 2515, *RH*, 25–30 Apr. 1938.

²⁸ The most detailed consideration in English is Lukes, *Czechoslovakia*, 141–57. Until recently most analyses had assumed that Paul Thümmel was the source of this information. See Moravec, *Master of Spies*, 125–7 and Andrew, *Secret Service*, 552–5.

²⁹ SHAT, *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 20 May 1938; SHAT, 7N 3110, 'Note sur la situation militaire actuelle', 20 May 1938 and 7N 3097, General Faucher to Paris, 20 May 1938.

³⁰ SHAT, 7N 2601, Renondeau to Paris, 20 May 1938. See also *DDF*, 2ème série, ix, no. 407.

³¹ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'La Tension germano-tchécoslovaque—les aspects militaires', 24 May 1938.

³² SHAT, 7N 2522–2, 'Note pour le commandement', 20 May 1938.

³³ Andrew, *Secret Service*, 552–4. ³⁴ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 22 May 1938.

The governments in Paris, Prague, and London all took these warnings seriously. The Czechoslovaks called 200,000 reservists to the colours. The French and the British governments both made strong protests in Berlin, which alarmed and surprised officials at the Wilhelmstrasse because rumours of a possible invasion were unfounded. The troop movements reported by the Czechs were routine manoeuvres. The information received by Prague probably originated with Hitler's instructions to the German high command to prepare a list of divisions that could be ready to march against the Czechoslovaks within twelve hours. There were no finalized plans to invade Czechoslovakia at this juncture. The Germans denied any intention of moving against Czechoslovakia and by the late afternoon of 22 May the storm clouds, which had appeared so menacing over the weekend, had dispersed.³⁵

But the May crisis was a watershed in the history of intelligence during the inter-war period. It marked the first episode where both the French Premier and the British Prime Minister were paying close attention to intelligence and making decisions based on information received from secret sources. Clearly, Daladier's accession to the premiership had confirmed the importance of intelligence in the making of national policy. The chief effect of the crisis on French perceptions of the international situation was to increase the expectation that Germany would move against Czechoslovakia in the near future. In Berlin, Renondeau had at first dismissed the Czech information as entirely unfounded and advised that in the future information from Prague be treated with scepticism. 'Rash decisions taken on the basis of unconfirmed intelligence', he warned, 'might lead to the gravest of consequences.'³⁶ Eventually, however, he changed his mind and judged that Hitler had been contemplating intervention in Czechoslovakia but had been persuaded to put off the operation after the high command had warned that Germany was not yet ready to attack Czechoslovakia and hold off the French in the west at the same time. Renondeau considered that 'this does not mean that the Germans have not secretly made up their minds to resolve the Sudeten question militarily', and that 'there is no doubt the question will be raised anew'.³⁷

³⁵ On Czechoslovak policy, see Lukes, *Czechoslovakia*, 144–7. Lukes makes the argument that the misunderstanding was the product of Soviet deception. On the French side, see Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 338–9; Adamthwaite, *France*, 88–90; for German policy, see Messerschmidt, 'Foreign Policy', 655–6 and Weinberg, *Starting World War Two*, 367–9.

³⁶ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'La Tension germano-tchécoslovaque', 24 May 1938.

³⁷ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'La Tension germano-tchéque', 24 May 1938.

Once again, Renondeau proved the best informed of French sources on the situation inside Germany. The May crisis had, if anything, strengthened Hitler's resolve to settle matters with Czechoslovakia as soon as possible. The following week, expressing his 'unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action at the earliest possible opportunity', Hitler instructed the German high command to accelerate planning for an invasion of Czechoslovakia.³⁸ Plans for a revised *Fall Grün* (attack on Czechoslovakia) began immediately with the target date set for 28 September. Military intelligence was faced with the dual task of determining the timetable for the operation and judging whether Hitler could be deterred by a strong show of support for Czechoslovakia by France. The Deuxième Bureau proved capable of both tasks. It was able to provide the precise date which had been set for the operation and to correctly advise French decision makers that Hitler was not bluffing.

Through May and June the Deuxième Bureau remained vigilant for indications of an imminent German aggression. A clear picture of German intentions did not begin to emerge, however, until late June. The principal source of information at this time was Luftwaffe Deputy Chief of Staff General Karl Bodenschatz. Bodenschatz was a confidant of Hermann Göring and an important figure within the Nazi hierarchy. He had served as Göring's adjutant in the famous Richtofen fighter squadron during the First World War and had rejoined his superior at the air ministry shortly after the Nazis succeeded to power. Bodenschatz was considered an ambitious man of average intelligence but also 'inclined to share confidences'. He was responsible for liaison between Hitler and Göring and was therefore regarded as a prize source of information by French army and air intelligence.³⁹ At a party given at the embassy on 25 June, Bodenschatz purposefully struck up a conversation with assistant air attaché Paul Stehlin about the European situation. He informed Stehlin that the attitude of France and England during the May crisis had 'profoundly irritated the Führer'. Denying that Germany had harboured any aggressive intentions during this crisis, Bodenschatz declared that '[t]he Führer has decided to accept no further provocations from the Czechs and to respond by

³⁸ Quoted in P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (London, 1986), 237–8. See also R. Overy, 'Germany and the Munich Crisis: A Mutilated Victory?', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 10 (1999), 191–215.

³⁹ SHAT, 7N 2602–1, 'Compte-rendu d'une conversation entre le Capitaine Stehlin et le Général Bodenschatz', 25 June 1938 and Stehlin, *Témoignage pour l'histoire*, 141.

force to the next incident fabricated by Prague'. He then confided that, in order to defend Germany's western frontier against possible intervention by France, Hitler had decided to construct a system of fortifications along the Franco-German frontier 'the scale of which defies description'. At the same time Bodenschatz lamented that France and Germany should feel compelled to expend so much time and energy erecting fortifications 'on a frontier that the Führer has solemnly guaranteed'. He assured Stehlin that '[w]e have absolutely no interest in any French territory, we ask only that you allow us to settle purely German problems as we see fit'. A detailed summary of this conversation was prepared the very same evening by the embassy and forwarded to Daladier, Bonnet, Gamelin, and the Deuxième Bureau by diplomatic valise the following day.⁴⁰

Hitler was by now convinced that the time had come for the first of his short wars. Bodenschatz's confidences were part of a programme of disinformation and intimidation which the Germans mounted in the summer of 1938. The institution of civil conscription and the intense propaganda campaign which accompanied construction on the west-wall were other such measures. Similarly, the Wehrmacht made no effort to conceal its gradual mobilization over the ensuing two months. Stehlin and de Geffrier were not prevented from tracking German preparations from the air. Nor were Renondeau and his adjutants forbidden from travelling anywhere in Germany—with the predictable exception of regions where fortifications were under construction. The aim of this sustained campaign of deception was to intimidate Western decision makers into inaction.⁴¹

One week later the Deuxième Bureau produced an assessment of the situation for Daladier. According to this report expansion in the east remained the *idée directrice* of German foreign policy. The key consideration in determining the timetable of this expansion was the existing balance of forces: 'Germany's present [military] superiority is without doubt the principal reason it desires to precipitate a war sooner rather than later.'⁴² Contrasting reports on the progress of work on the westwall with the information received from Bodenschatz, the SAE concluded that Bodenschatz was exaggerating the strength of German

⁴⁰ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, 'Compte-rendu d'une conversation entre le Capitaine Stehlin et le Général Bodenschatz', 25 June 1938.

⁴¹ Weinberg, *Starting World War Two*, 366 and Messerschmidt, 'Foreign Policy', 658.

⁴² MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Fonds Daladier, vol. 1, Deuxième Bureau Report, 13 July 1938.

fortifications.⁴³ The ostentatious work on the Siegfried Line, along with frequent and voluble proclamations of the solidity of the Axis with Italy, were carefully orchestrated attempts to dissuade France from responding to the coming attack on Czechoslovakia. The time necessary to build a really formidable system on the scale which Bodenschatz had described would permit France to regain much lost ground with its rearmament effort. The Deuxième Bureau was convinced, however, that Hitler would not wait until the westwall was fully completed but would attempt to profit from the present military imbalance. An operation against Czechoslovakia, Daladier was warned, could come any time after the middle of August.⁴⁴

Intelligence on the timing of the anticipated German action against Czechoslovakia began to arrive in Paris in early July. On 8 July Daladier read to the French cabinet a message from François-Poncet which predicted that after mid-August Europe would face a 'particularly critical period' and that Hitler had decided on a 'lightning attack against Czechoslovakia' using the first available pretext.⁴⁵ Another intelligence scare emerged on the weekend of 21–23 July when the SR reported that the entire 1913 class of German reservists had been called up. At the same time, the normally reliable military attaché from Switzerland informed the general staff that long columns of army vehicles had been observed moving south from Dresden and north from Vienna towards the Czechoslovak frontier.⁴⁶ This alarm proved false. It was important nonetheless in that it prompted the SR to mobilize its network of Centres de Renseignements along France's northern and eastern frontiers and to amplify its exchanges of information with Czechoslovak and Polish intelligence.⁴⁷ This triggered a flood of daily messages reporting on the call up of reservists, that workers and material were pouring westward for construction on the Siegfried Line and that the mood in Germany appeared increasingly fatalistic at the prospect of war. The daily intelligence *comptes-rendus* increased in length from an average of two to three pages to an average of eight to

⁴³ SHAT, 7N 2602–1, 'Affaire tchécoslovaque et fortifications de l'Ouest', 29 June 1938 and 'Fortifications allemandes', 6 July 1938.

⁴⁴ MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Fonds Daladier, vol. 1, Deuxième Bureau Report, 13 July 1938.

⁴⁵ MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Fonds Daladier, vol. 1, Note from Reynaud to Daladier discussing the cabinet proceedings of 8 July, 8 July 1938. For François-Poncet's report, see *DDF*, 2ème série, x, no. 150, 5 July 1938.

⁴⁶ SHAT, 7N 2523–1, 'Comptes-rendus', 20 and 21 July 1938.

⁴⁷ SHAT, 7N 2486–3, 'Note sur la mobilisation des Centres de Renseignements', 24 July 1938 and *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 23 and 26 July 1938.

nine pages. The SAE also began producing daily intelligence summaries which were circulated to Generals Colson, Georges, and Gamelin.⁴⁸ Through the remainder of July, August, and September, the Deuxième Bureau provided decision makers with a remarkably accurate picture of the situation.

It was in late July that intelligence began arriving in Paris concerning unrest within the German army high command. A group of high ranking officers, including army Chief of Staff Ludwig Beck, opposed the timing of the operation against Czechoslovakia, did not share the Führer's confidence that France and Britain would stand aside and was convinced that Germany could not wage war on two fronts. After a failed attempt to organize collective insubordination to Hitler's orders by the general staff, Beck resigned on 21 August. Beck's successor, General Franz Halder, appears briefly to have considered the idea of a conspiracy against Hitler but this notion was quickly abandoned.⁴⁹ French intelligence received fragmentary news of the existence of determined opposition to Hitler's war plans from Renondeau, the SR, and from the Quai d'Orsay. In April Carl Goerdeler, Mayor of Leipzig, a German nationalist and future conspirator against Hitler, visited Paris and met with Alexis Léger. He informed Léger of the resistance to Hitler in Germany and advised that France adopt a firm policy towards future German threats.⁵⁰

But there was other evidence of dissatisfaction within the army high command. Through the spring and summer of 1938 Renondeau maintained the judgement that the army was opposed to risking a two-front war.⁵¹ His views were supplemented by information which reached the Quai d'Orsay from Roger Cambon, chargé at the London embassy, that unofficial emissaries from the German army high command had appeared in London to urge the British to take a firm stand over Czechoslovakia and hinted that this might facilitate the overthrow of Hitler's regime.⁵² These rumours were supplemented by an SR report

⁴⁸ These daily reports are in SHAT, 7N 2523-1.

⁴⁹ Müller, *Das Heer*, 342-77; Deist, 'The Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', 527-8; Messerschmidt, 'Foreign Policy', 659-60; and Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, 141-5.

⁵⁰ On this and other rumours of a coup against Hitler, see Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 503-4; P. Hoffman, *The History of German Resistance, 1933-1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 56-7; and K. von Klemperer, *German Resistance against Hitler* (Oxford, 1992), 95-6.

⁵¹ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, Renondeau to Paris, 20 July 1938; 'Situation générale', 27 July 1938; 'Situation générale', 17 Aug. 1938. See also the *Liaison hebdomadaire* of 9 June 1938 in 7N 2522-2.

⁵² MAÉ, Papiers Massigli, vol. 19, Cambon to Massigli, 9, 23 Aug. 1938. These emissaries

from an indeterminate source which related that in war counsels Hitler had insisted the situation was favourable for a move against Czechoslovakia and had refused to listen to any dissenting opinion. The report claimed that the German high command was 'highly agitated' by Hitler's views and 'are openly criticizing the bellicose projects of National Socialist policy'.⁵³ Further rumours of discontent within the army high command were communicated to Paris in early September through Dr Reinhold Schairer, a lecturer in international law at the London School of Economics and contact of Karl Goerdeler, Hjalmar Schacht, and other conservative opponents to the Nazi regime within Germany.⁵⁴

None of the rumours of a possible coup directed against Hitler were taken seriously by either the Quai d'Orsay or the Deuxième Bureau. Nor should they have been. The hesitancy of the German general staff in no way threatened Hitler's government.⁵⁵ Renondeau judged that Hitler's will would 'smash all opposition to his designs on Czechoslovakia'. Along with François-Poncet, he rightly dismissed 'whispered messages' urging a policy of firmness on the French government as unreliable and of suspicious origin.⁵⁶ The Deuxième Bureau agreed. An appreciation prepared for Gamelin which reached Daladier's personal staff judged that the Fritsch-Blomberg crisis had rendered the German high command 'incapable of opposing the violent policies of the Chancellor'.⁵⁷ Gamelin accepted this interpretation. In London in mid-September he advised the British Chiefs of Staff that, although the German high command was not enthusiastic about attacking Czechoslovakia, it would follow orders and its efficiency would not be gravely compromised.⁵⁸ The same view prevailed within the Quai d'Orsay. Karl Goerdeler's advice was treated with great scepticism because he was known to have close ties to both Göring and Hitler's adjutant

were General Ewald von Kleist and Colonel Hans Boehm-Tettelbach. These events are examined in Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, 394–7 and Andrew, *Secret Service*, 556–7.

⁵³ SHAT, 2523–2, 'Hitler et les chefs de l'armée et l'affaire tchèque', 27 Aug. 1937.

⁵⁴ MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Cabinet Bonnet, vol. 1, 'Note remise au Directeur Politique', 8 Sept. 1938. Dr Schairer was also in contact with Paul Reynaud, see the explanation in the Archives Daladier, 496 AP 11, dr. 2, sdr. b, 'Compte-rendu d'une conversation tenue par mon représentant avec M. X le 6 et 7 Novembre', undated but certainly Nov. 1938.

⁵⁵ Klemperer, *Resistance*, 105–10; Messerschmidt, 'Foreign Policy', 659–60; Deist, 'Re-armament of the Wehrmacht', 527–9; and Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II*, 142–3.

⁵⁶ SHAT, 7N 2602–1, Renondeau to Paris, 20 July and 22 Aug. 1938.

⁵⁷ SHAT, 7N 2602–1, 'Compte-rendu de renseignements', initialled by Gamelin and stamped 'exploité pour le ministre', 24 Aug. 1938.

⁵⁸ PRO, WO 190/686, 'Comments on General Gamelin's views', 26 Sept. 1938.

Captain Fritz Wiedemann. Nor, finally, did Beck's resignation have any effect on French policy. Indeed, the SR did not learn of his replacement by General Halder until 5 September.⁵⁹

By late August, however, the Deuxième Bureau was able to identify the end of September as the targeted date for the German offensive. On 24 August information arrived from a *très bonne* source (which, again, cannot be identified) that Hitler had 'declared his intention to occupy Czechoslovakia on the 28th of September' and was convinced that neither Britain nor France would intervene.⁶⁰ The following day Schmidt informed the SR that Hitler was in a highly nervous state and had decided on the 25th as the day the Wehrmacht would move.⁶¹ On 6 September Schmidt repeated that the attack would come at the end of the month.⁶² At the same time, the SR reported that many of its double agents had been advised that the settlement of the Czechoslovak question would come at the end of September.⁶³ These reports were complemented by intelligence on German troop concentrations throughout the month of September. In late August the Deuxième Bureau learned that the Wehrmacht had called up a number of Landwehr divisions. This led to the conclusion that Germany was in the process of a virtual mobilization.⁶⁴ On 15 September military intelligence informed the high command that the Germans had moved nearly all of their motorized and mechanized divisions to the Czechoslovak frontier.⁶⁵ Analysis of Wehrmacht radio traffic indicated the transfer of at least sixteen divisions from western Germany to Austria.⁶⁶ At midnight on 17 September Gauché and Rivet prepared a summary of the situation for Daladier to take with him when he left to confer with Chamberlain in London early the next morning.⁶⁷ On 19 September

⁵⁹ SHAT, 7N 2523-1, 'Compte-rendu de renseignements', 6 Sept. 1938 and *DDF*, 2ème série, xi, no. 40, 7 Sept. 1938 and Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 504-5.

⁶⁰ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, 'Compte-rendu', 24 Aug. 1938. This intelligence corresponds with the information which Thümmel provided Czechoslovak intelligence: Moravec, *Master of Spies*, 150-1.

⁶¹ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 25 Aug. 1938; SHAT, 7N 2523-2, SR report from 'Source Z' ('excellent' marked in pencil next to this appellation), 25 Aug. 1938.

⁶² SHAT, 7N 2523-1, SR report 'Source Z', 6 Sept. 1938.

⁶³ SHAT, 7N 2523-2, SR report, 7 Sept. 1938. Similar reports of 1, 7, 8, 16, and 17 Sept. in Dossier 1 of this carton also point to the end of the month as the time of the invasion. See also Young, 'French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany', 279-83.

⁶⁴ SHAT, 7N 2523-1, *BdR*, 30 Aug. 1938.

⁶⁵ SHAT, 7N 2523-1, *BdR*, 15 Sept. 1938.

⁶⁶ SHAT, 7N 2523-2, 'Note pour le Général chef de l'État-major de l'armée', 7 Sept. 1938.

⁶⁷ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 17-18 Sept. 1938.

the army Deuxième Bureau estimated that the Germans had mobilized seventeen to twenty reservist divisions and the forces on the Czech frontier would be ready to move in three days.⁶⁸

Significantly, intelligence analyses of the situation through the month of September remained convinced that Hitler was not bluffing, that he desired to settle the Czech affair militarily and that he could not be deterred from this course of action by a policy of firmness. Renondeau forwarded a penetrating analysis of German policy to Paris, judging that 'Hitler is counting on our inertia, our impotence and, if worst comes to worst, the protection of his defensive systems'.⁶⁹ He also deemed that '[t]he reason the Germans avoid outlining their demands openly is quite simple. The Führer and his entourage are not interested in negotiated solutions. The solution they desire is the most radical: the destruction of Czechoslovakia.'⁷⁰ During the first week in September Renondeau wrote directly to Dentz to express his conviction that Hitler had 'decided absolutely' to move against Czechoslovakia.⁷¹ On 23 August the Deuxième Bureau report to the weekly intelligence meeting concluded that, 'Hitler will be satisfied with nothing less than the complete dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and its removal as a factor in international politics'.⁷² Even Bonnet, the high-priest of French appeasement, understood that Hitler would not be satisfied with concessions over the Sudetenland, but instead desired to 'erase Czechoslovakia from the map of Europe'.⁷³

Moreover, the Deuxième Bureau combined the view that Hitler actively desired war with the familiar judgement that Czechoslovakia was only a stage in Germany's bid for European hegemony. An appreciation in July advised that 'the destruction of Czechoslovakia will be only the first episode' in Germany's drive to dominate the continent and that the Reich was seeking to obtain in eastern Europe the raw materials and foodstuffs it lacked and which would permit it to wage a long war and establish its dominance on the continent.⁷⁴ In fact, assessments were imbued with a sense of inevitability regarding the coming war: 'The force of Germany', Daladier was reminded in July, 'is driven by the most primitive of motives and guided by the powerful will of its

⁶⁸ SHAT, 7N 2523-1, 'Compte-rendu', 17 Sept. 1938.

⁶⁹ SHAT, 7N 2599, Renondeau to Paris, 22 Mar. 1937.

⁷⁰ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, 'Affaire tchécoslovaque et fortifications de l'Ouest', 29 June 1938.

⁷¹ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, Personal letter from Renondeau to Dentz, 6 Sept. 1938.

⁷² SHAT, 7N 2522-2, *Liaison hebdomadaire*, 23 Aug. 1938.

⁷³ Quoted in Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 337.

⁷⁴ SHAT, 2N 224-1, 'Note sur l'évolution du problème militaire français', 27 July 1938.

chief . . . [it] . . . cannot be broken by peaceful means.⁷⁵ Hitler's thirst for domination would not be satisfied by concessions over the Sudetenland. Sooner or later France would either have to submit or fight.

In sum, French intelligence supplied policy makers with detailed and accurate warning that Hitler had targeted Czechoslovakia long in advance of the actual threat in September of 1938. Intelligence reports also placed Czechoslovakia within the framework of a vast plan of expansion and domination which posed a mortal threat to French security. In addition, the Deuxième Bureau also underlined that the German high command did not feel ready to run the risk of a two-front war. Yet the Daladier government, to the enduring humiliation of France, abandoned Czechoslovakia and capitulated to Hitler at Munich. French policy evolved from retreat in advance to open retreat. A central element in this process was the perception that the strategic situation favoured Germany in 1938. The picture of German military capability outlined by French military intelligence in the spring and summer of 1938 was crucial in shaping this perception.

III

Nineteen thirty-eight marked a turning point in overall French naval policy as the naval staff's foreboding view of the strategic situation finally penetrated to the upper echelons of the government. Calculations of the future naval balance reached their inter-war nadir during the first months of 1938. In September of 1938 total German naval strength was estimated at 150,000 tonnes, including the three pocket battleships, four first-class cruisers, and twelve submarines suitable for missions outside the Baltic sea.⁷⁶ In the more important category of ships under construction, the Deuxième Bureau estimated that more than 250,000 tonnes in new warships were under construction in German shipyards. It reported that the 1939 naval programme would include a third 35,000-tonne capital ship that would probably mount eight 16 inch guns. The intelligence section also predicted that 83,097 tonnes in new warships would come into service with the German navy by the end of 1938, including the capital ships the *Gneisenau* and the

⁷⁵ SHAT, 2N 224-1, 'Note sur l'évolution du problème militaire français', 27 July 1938.

⁷⁶ SHM, 1BB2, 95, 'Situation des flottes allemande et italienne', 12 Sept. 1938. Only the 712-tonne Type IX class and the 500-tonne Type VII class were considered able to operate on the high seas.

Scharnhorst, nine destroyers, and as many as fifteen 'blue water' submarines.⁷⁷ Longer range estimations of the rate of German naval production concluded that by mid-1940 the German fleet would have two raiding forces, each comprised of two battleships, one aircraft carrier, three or four cruisers, and two squadrons of destroyers, available for use against French shipping in the Atlantic.⁷⁸ By 1943 the German fleet was expected to surpass 430,000 tonnes of modern warships and to be comprised of five large battleships, three pocket battleships, two aircraft carriers, fifteen heavy and medium cruisers, and at least sixty ocean-going submarines.⁷⁹ Typically, however, evaluations of the fighting power of these new vessels were not integrated into Deuxième Bureau assessments of the present and future naval balance.

This was probably due to a general lack of information about German naval *matériel*. While, the fragmentary state of the Marine archive makes it difficult to make unqualified assertions, it does appear that a serious dearth of technical intelligence on the ships under construction persisted into 1938. French naval intelligence assumed that both the *Bismarck* and the *Türpitz* were being built close to the 35,000-tonne limit imposed by the second Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1937. It also continued to estimate the size of the *Gneisenau* and the *Scharnhorst* battlecruisers as close to the 26,000 tonnes announced officially by the Germans.⁸⁰ But actual designs for German capital ships were much larger than French estimates. The *Bismarck*, for example, was to be a 42,000-tonne battleship mounting eight 15 inch guns. Meanwhile, the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were 20 per cent larger than French estimates assumed, both displacing more than 31,800 tonnes.⁸¹ Conversely, estimates of the rate of German shipbuilding were exaggerated. By mid-1937 a lack of shipyard capacity combined with chronic raw material shortages to produce a 'general crisis' in the German shipbuilding industry. This caused delays of between eight months and one year in

⁷⁷ SHM, 1BB2, 92, *BdR*, May 1938; SHM, 1BB2, 94, 'Le Programme naval allemand', 11 Oct. 1938 and SHM, 1BB2, 180, 'Situation internationale des armements navals', 20 Jan. 1938.

⁷⁸ SHM, 1BB2, 94, 'Les Marines allemande, italienne et britanniques', Feb. 1938.

⁷⁹ SHM, 1BB2, 94, 'Le Programme naval allemand', 11 Oct. 1938.

⁸⁰ SHM, 1BB2, 94, 'Les Marines allemande, italienne et britannique', Feb. 1938; SHM, 1BB2, 92, *BdR*, May 1938 and SHM, 1BB2, 95, 'Constructions pour la Marine de Guerre en Allemagne', 28 Aug. 1938.

⁸¹ Düllfer, *Marine*, 372–80. During the summer of 1937 the Soviets obtained accurate intelligence on some German naval construction and forwarded this to the British Admiralty. Unfortunately, either this intelligence was not shared with the French naval staff or it was rejected by the Deuxième Bureau. See Maiolo, 'Admiralty Intelligence', 40–1.

battleship and aircraft carrier construction. The *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* did not enter into service until the outbreak of war and the aircraft carriers under construction never became part of the German fleet.⁸²

The mistakes made in assessing the German naval threat at this stage stemmed from the familiar combination of a lack of information, on the one hand, and entrenched assumptions about the situation across the Rhine, on the other. Two central misconceptions about naval rearmament conditioned naval intelligence appreciations. The first, which contradicted initial analyses of German attitudes towards the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, was that Germany was adhering to the technical limitations imposed by its naval agreements with Britain. In February of 1938 the naval attaché reported that these limitations were considered as 'definitive and permanent' by German policy makers who wanted above all to avoid another naval race with the British.⁸³ The second was the by now standard failure to integrate reports of widespread raw material shortages into estimates of the pace of German shipbuilding. In November 1937, for example, naval intelligence reported correctly that 'the lack of raw materials remains the most pressing preoccupation of the Reich' and that 'the lack of metals concerns naval construction in particular'.⁸⁴ Although the *Deuxième Bureau* received a steady stream of information confirming this report, raw material shortages were never mentioned either in the studies of German naval production cited above or in overviews of the naval balance. Emphasis was instead placed on information that German shipyards were working in split shifts to accelerate production. Darlan complained that, while French construction was restricted by the 40-hour week, German shipyards were working at maximum capacity.⁸⁵

Grim estimates of the future naval threat from Germany were not enough to alter French policy, however. It was Mussolini's announcement on 8 January of a new naval programme that would include two more 35,000-tonne battleships that finally pried funds loose for large-scale rearmament. The naval staff was ready for the Italian proclamation because the *Deuxième Bureau* had reported the Italian intention

⁸² On the state of the German shipbuilding industry, see Dülffer, *Marine*, 566–71; Salewski, *Seekriegsleitung*, i. 37–63; and Deist, *Wehrmacht*, 82–3.

⁸³ SHM, 1BB2, 94, 'Les Marines allemande, italienne et britannique', Feb. 1938.

⁸⁴ SHM, 1BB2, 91, *BdR*, Dec. 1937; for subsequent information, see esp. SHM, 1BB7, 134, 'Le Potentiel de guerre allemand', 7 July 1938.

⁸⁵ SHAT, 2N 224–1, 'Situation actuelle', 17 Oct. 1938; SHM, 1BB2, 180, 'Politique navale', 20 Jan. 1938; SHM, 1BB2, 95, 'Constructions pour la Marine de Guerre en Allemagne', 29 Aug. 1938.

to build two new capital ships the previous November.⁸⁶ In a lengthy note of 20 January the naval staff warned that the new Italian programme, which would double the amount of naval tonnage under construction, had ‘demolished the equilibrium in the Mediterranean’. The combination of the accelerated German and Italian building programmes would mean that:

Up to 1939 the French fleet will be clearly superior to the individual German and Italian fleets. From the middle of 1939 up to 1941 the French fleet will be comparable to the Italian fleet and superior to the German fleet. From 1942 the French fleet will be clearly inferior to the Italian fleet and, in relation to the German fleet, it will be first comparable and then inferior.

The political consequences of this situation would be devastating:

Up to 1939 we can face one of the two continental naval powers. From 1939 to 1942 our fleet will not be capable of acting alone with success in the Mediterranean. After 1942 our fleet will constitute a heavy burden for an eventual ally and we could be defeated if we acted alone in any theatre. Our overseas possessions would be at the mercy of other powers.

The note ended with a reminder that ‘decisions taken in 1938 will condition the situation in 1942–1943’.⁸⁷ In a note to Campinchi, Darlan demanded a supplementary construction programme. He warned, in typically restrained fashion, that ‘if we continue to sleep, our country will be incapable of following a foreign policy of any kind’.⁸⁸

This ‘worst case’ picture of the strategic balance achieved its objective. In March the CPDN and the short-lived Blum cabinet approved plans for a tranche 1938*bis* aimed at funding all construction delayed by the austerity measures of the previous spring and summer. This programme was amplified by the ensuing Daladier government in the form of a 2 May decree authorizing the laying down of 98,375 tonnes of combat vessels including two more 35,000-tonne capital ships. In total six billion francs were to be invested in a five-year construction programme aimed at achieving a total of 743,558 tonnes of warships by 1943, thus ensuring France’s place as the strongest continental European naval power. Even Darlan expressed satisfaction with these results.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ SHM, 1BB2, 92, *BdR*, 8 Oct.–8 Nov. 1937.

⁸⁷ SHM, 1BB2, 208, ‘Politique navale’, 20 Jan. 1938. See also M. Nouschi, ‘La Puissance navale française en 1937–1938’, *RHA* 3 (1983), 53–9.

⁸⁸ *Lettres, notes*, no. 30, Darlan to Campinchi, 7 Jan. 1938, 72.

⁸⁹ SHAT, 224–1, ‘Situation actuelle’, 17 Oct. 1938. On naval rearmament in 1938, see

IV

The timing of the Sudetenland crisis could not have been worse for the French air force. The appointment of Guy La Chambre as air minister in January 1938 had marked the beginning of a new era in French air policy. By spring 1938 La Chambre did not need to convince his cabinet colleagues of the need for an immense effort to redress the situation in the air; the danger was all too apparent. And relations with the rest of the defence establishment were no longer confrontational. La Chambre was a close friend of Daladier and enjoyed good relations with both parliamentary aviation commissions.⁹⁰ Under these conditions air policy was able to make the kind of progress which had been impossible under Cot.

The new minister replaced air force chief of staff Féquant with General Vuillemin and he resurrected the Conseil Supérieur de l'Air, which had fallen into abeyance during Cot's tenure. He took further steps to re-establish the relationship between the ministry and the air staff by abolishing the structural reforms of the Cot ministry and reorganizing the air force once again.⁹¹ Most importantly, La Chambre was able to secure the funding necessary for an ambitious air rearmament programme. Before officially assuming his responsibilities, La Chambre had met with Daladier to discuss the situation of French aviation. Crucially, both agreed that major investment would be necessary to expand and retool the aviation industry in order to introduce effective mass production.⁹²

The foundations were thus laid for a massive effort to restore French air power. The rearmament programme introduced by the air ministry in March of 1938, Plan V, was formulated to meet the strategic requirements of French air power in the event of a war in which France and Britain were pitted against Germany and Italy with Spain neutral.⁹³

Frank[enstein], *Le Prix*, 90–1 and 177–91; Masson, 'Réarmement', 73–7; Coutau-Bégarie and Huan, *Darlan*, 135–43; and Nouschi, 'La Puissance navale', 55–7.

⁹⁰ Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 438–45; Chapman, *State Capitalism*, 144.

⁹¹ SHAA, Fonds Guy La Chambre, Z 12962, 'Le Plan V: Son origine, Son élaboration et son exécution', no date, probably written by La Chambre. See also Facon, *L'Armée de l'air*, 21–8 and 75–91; Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 435–69; and Chapman, *State Capitalism*, 154–5.

⁹² AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d, Daladier note on an interview with La Chambre in Jan. of 1938.

⁹³ SHAA, 1B 3, 'Rapport au Conseil Supérieur de l'Air', 7, 8, 9 Mar. 1938. See also Facon, 'Plan V', 55–6.

The objective was to equal estimated German air power in January of 1938. The rearmament programme aimed at providing France with a force with 2,617 first-line aircraft and 2,122 reserves by 1940. This force would consist predominantly of fighters, which were less expensive and could be produced faster than bombers. Plan V was to be achieved in two stages. In keeping with the defensive–offensive configuration of French grand strategy, priority was given to securing French airspace. Consequently, the first tranche would consist almost exclusively of fighters. Just as importantly, the new programme called for a major retooling and expansion of the aeronautical industry which aimed at increasing production to 330 aircraft per month (six times the target of the Cot regime) by June of 1939. In pursuit of these objectives, the new regime borrowed heavily from the British system that had been in place since 1936. In early March a British air mission came to Paris to discuss new strategies for modernization and mass production with representatives from the French air ministry and aero-industry. The air ministry was allocated a total of 16 billion credits to finance the new programme. Expenditure on air rearmament rose from 21 to 42 per cent of total defence spending.⁹⁴

Significant increases in credits, however, could not immediately transform the situation. Owing to the inability of the aviation industry to cope with the enormous demands of the new rearmament programme, Plan V was not expected to improve significantly the disparity between French and German air power until the spring of 1939.⁹⁵ In April La Chambre commissioned Senator de la Grange to begin negotiations for the purchase of up to 1,000 American-built fighters.⁹⁶ But the existing disparity in air power was not alleviated by these measures. During the summer of 1938 Plan V had yet to begin paying dividends, there was a desperate shortage of modern equipment and the Armée de l'Air was in the midst of the structural reorganizations decreed by the new team at the air ministry. France's vulnerability in the air at this stage made German successes in building the Luftwaffe all the more impressive and demoralizing. The resulting sense of impotence and

⁹⁴ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d, 'Les Armements français en 1938', undated. See also Facon, *L'Armée de l'air*, 81–7; Frank[enstein], *Le Prix*, 88–90; Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 438–42. On Franco-British technical cooperation, see P. Fridenson and J. Lecuir, *La France et la Grande Bretagne face aux problèmes aériens, 1935–1940* (Vincennes, 1976) and Thomas, *Britain, France*, 220–1.

⁹⁵ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d, 'Les Armements français en 1938'.

⁹⁶ See Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 469–77 and Haight, *American Aid to France*, 4–11.

inferiority conditioned perceptions of the situation in the air and underpinned the tendency to overestimate German air power.

In May 1938 Duvernoy was promoted to deputy chief of air staff and was replaced as chief of the Deuxième Bureau by Lt. Colonel Alfred d'Arnaud de Vitrolles. From one of the wealthiest and most influential families in France, de Vitrolles, like his predecessor, was originally a cavalry officer who joined the air force after the Rif War in Morocco, receiving relatively rapid promotion to the rank of Group Commandant by the summer of 1929.⁹⁷ De Vitrolles attended the École Supérieure de Guerre from 1932 to 1935 and was attached to the personal staff of air minister Denain upon his graduation. He headed air intelligence from 15 May 1938 until he was killed in a plane crash during the phoney war. Although he took over the Deuxième Bureau at a particularly bleak juncture in terms of assessments of the air balance, de Vitrolles would prove a very capable intelligence chief. His estimates of the situation in the air were consistently more balanced and less alarmist than those of his superiors, Vuillemin in particular.

By spring 1938 the air intelligence had concluded that most of the first-line aircraft of the Luftwaffe were products of the German air ministry's renovation programme of 1937. The quality of the aircraft introduced under this programme was impressive. The Messerschmidt Bf 109 had set the world speed record the previous November and was considered the finest fighter in the world. The new twin engine Heinkel He 111 and Dornier Do 17 medium bombers were capable of speeds from 390 to 440 km/h and were thus faster than all but a handful of French fighters. These bombers, according to the Deuxième Bureau, were also able to transport up to two tonnes of explosives as far as 1,000 kilometres.⁹⁸ As Europe hovered on the edge of war during the summer of 1938, the Deuxième Bureau estimated that the Luftwaffe possessed an operational strength of 230 squadrons and 2,760 aircraft—including 1,368 bombers and 524 fighters. Even more unsettling was the conclusion that 80 per cent of German first-line fighters and 87 per cent of first-line bombers, 1,766 aircraft in all, were considered to be products of the recent refurbishment programme and

⁹⁷ SHAA, uncatalogued 'État des services de Lt. Colonel de Vitrolles'. This personal dossier is incommunicable until 2017.

⁹⁸ SHAA, 2B 63, 'Note sur l'appareil de chasse allemand Messerschmidt Bf. 109', 1 Apr. 1938; 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; 2B 59, 'Dossier de campagne', 1 June 1938; SHAT, 5N 579-2, Daladier to Churchill, 11 May 1938. See also Stehlin, *Témoignage pour l'histoire*, 88, for impressions of German matériel in 1938.

superior to any aircraft in service in the French air force.⁹⁹ Added to this was the power of the air defence network developed by the Germans during the 1930s, which French intelligence considered the best in the world.¹⁰⁰

This estimate was significantly overblown. Once again, calculations of the total number of squadrons and first-line aircraft were accurate. The decisive flaw in French assessments was a failure to determine the percentage of modern and serviceable aircraft in the Luftwaffe order of battle. These were difficult issues which no foreign intelligence service was able to resolve at this point. In September of 1938 only 1,669 of 2,750 first-line German aircraft were fit to take part in operations. Less than half of these were modern.¹⁰¹ The importance of this inflated view of the Luftwaffe was magnified by the perception that German planes would begin bombing Paris from the outset of war.

In 1938 air intelligence expected the Luftwaffe to play an important strategic role in a Franco-German conflict. Aware of debate between army and air force representatives within the Wehrmacht over the use of air power, air intelligence judged that Göring's status as Hitler's lieutenant would secure for the Luftwaffe an independent role in German strategy. This was an important misperception on the part of the air force Deuxième Bureau. In reality, the primary role of air power in German war doctrine was one of tactical support for ground forces. Significantly, French analysts did not lack evidence which pointed to this conclusion. As early as December of 1935, an attaché report prepared by Poincaré had called for a reconsideration of the assumption that the Luftwaffe was first and foremost an independent force. Poincaré had noted that in the Wehrmacht command structure the commander in chief of the air force was subordinated to the army high command. This, he concluded, suggested that the first responsibility of the air force would be to provide close support for ground operations.¹⁰² This interpretation appeared to be confirmed by an analysis of the German manoeuvres of autumn 1936 produced by the air Deuxième Bureau:

⁹⁹ SHAA, 2B 59, 'Dossier de campagne: Allemagne', 1 June 1938; SHAT, 7N 2697, 'Ordre de bataille de l'armée de l'air allemande à la date du 1 Septembre 1938'.

¹⁰⁰ SHAA, 2B 61, 'Conférence sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Oct. 1937; 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; and 'L'Armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1939.

¹⁰¹ Overy, 'German Air Strength', 468–70. On the very similar difficulties experienced by British air intelligence at this stage, see Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 48–52 and 61–78.

¹⁰² SHAT, 7N 2596, 'Organisation de l'Aéronautique: Emploi de l'aviation dite indépendante', 11 Dec. 1935.

The structure of the German air force, the temperament of its chief and certain information garnered from the press all give the impression that German air doctrine will be inspired by a nearly absolute spirit of independence regarding the ground command. . . . But the latest manoeuvres have shown that this is not the case. The air command has proceeded with extreme care to collaborate closely with ground forces. The capital lesson to be taken from the manoeuvres of 1936 is that in all decisive action the air command is directly subordinate to the ground command.¹⁰³

These manoeuvres had further demonstrated ‘a particular preoccupation with coordinating aviation and army operations’ in German doctrine. In addition to heralding the appearance of close tactical co-operation between armoured and dive bomber units, the manoeuvres also revealed that ‘all bomber and dive-bomber planes intervene in the decisive phase of the battle in cooperation with armoured formations’.¹⁰⁴ A subsequent study based on a synthesis of attaché reports, reports on operations in Spain, and on a captured Luftwaffe manual entitled *Luftkriegführung* (Conduct of Aerial Warfare), stressed that the versatility of the new German medium bombers permitted them to either intervene in conjunction with fighters and dive-bombers on the field of battle or to be employed to disrupt enemy supply and communications systems and to prevent reinforcements from reaching the battlefield. The entire bomber fleet could therefore be expected to support the army during ground operations.¹⁰⁵ This was a comprehensive understanding of the role of air power in German military doctrine. It was supplemented by lessons taken from the war in Spain, which suggested that air power could play a key role in supporting ground operations. There were few instances, conversely, where large-scale bombing achieved decisive results.¹⁰⁶

Yet, down to the outbreak of war, air intelligence continued to focus on the ‘strategic’ threat posed by the Luftwaffe and ignored evidence that it would be placed at the disposal of German ground forces. The

¹⁰³ SHAA, 2B 57, *BdR*, 2ème trimestre 1937.

¹⁰⁴ Cited from SHAA, 2B 61, ‘Notice sur l’armée de l’air allemande’, Jan. 1938 and 2B 60, ‘Les Grandes Manoeuvres allemandes—1937’, 3 Feb. 1938. See also Young, ‘French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany’, 289–94.

¹⁰⁵ SHAA, 2B 62, ‘Étude sur la doctrine d’emploi de l’armée de l’air allemande’, Jan. 1939. See also 2B 62, ‘L’Armée de l’air allemande’, Jan. 1939.

¹⁰⁶ SHAT, 7N 2506, ‘Études: Enseignements de la guerre d’Espagne’, Mar. 1938. This lengthy summary cites air intelligence bulletins as well as air force and military observers in Spain. See also M. Astorika, ‘L’Aviation et la guerre d’Espagne: La Cinquième Arme face aux exigences de la guerre moderne’, in Hildebrand and Werner (eds.), *Deutschland und Frankreich*, 325–48.

air Deuxième Bureau held insistently to the conviction that 'the German air force is above all an offensive tool', and that its 'fundamental role is that of an independent strike force'. The chief argument for this interpretation was the preponderance of bombers, particularly Heinkel and Dornier medium bombers, in the Luftwaffe order of battle. Another argument was the fact that Göring was the only Field Marshal in the Wehrmacht and that he would therefore secure a decisive and independent role for air power in German war doctrine.¹⁰⁷ At the root of this analysis remained entrenched attitudes within the air force general staff regarding the use of air power in a future war.¹⁰⁸ Appreciations continued to be conditioned by the air staff's mirror imaging. Assessments and intelligence remained convinced down to the outbreak of war that the fundamental task of the German air force would be to undertake large-scale bombing offensives against France's *potentiel de guerre*. German bombers were expected to strike at airfields in France immediately (perhaps before hostilities had officially been declared) and to bomb French industrial and population centres heavily from the outset of a conflict.¹⁰⁹

This misreading of the role of air power in German military thinking undoubtedly contributed to the general terror which an air attack inspired in civilian officials responsible for French security. But the relative importance of this mistake should not be exaggerated. Historians Williamson Murray and Wesley Wark have argued persuasively that the preoccupation of British intelligence with the 'strategic' role of the Luftwaffe distorted perceptions of German military power and provided unjustified support for the policy of appeasement in London.¹¹⁰ The same argument does not apply in the French case. Although the Luftwaffe was incapable of mounting effective air raids on Britain without bases in the low countries, it was quite capable of mounting a sustained bombing offensive against northern France.¹¹¹ French air

¹⁰⁷ Cited from SHAA, 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938.

¹⁰⁸ On the tension between the army and air force high commands over the role of military aviation, see Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 58–71 and 364–86; Young, 'The Strategic Dream', 57–76; and M. Alexander, 'Force de frappe ou feu de paille? Maurice Gamelin's Appraisal of Military Aviation before the Blitzkrieg of 1940', *Colloque Air* (Paris, 1985), 65–80.

¹⁰⁹ SHAA, 2B 62, 'Idées allemandes sur l'emploi de l'armée de l'air indépendante', 8 Sept. 1938. See also 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; 2B 59, *Dossier de campagne: Allemagne*, 1 June 1938.

¹¹⁰ W. Murray, 'German Air Power and the Munich Crisis', in Bond and Roy (eds.), *War and Society* (London, 1977), 107–18 and Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 65–9.

¹¹¹ Murray, *Strategy for Defeat*, 12–13, 21.

intelligence was therefore correct in emphasizing that, should static warfare once again prevail on the western front, the large number of Luftwaffe bombers would provide Germany with an important advantage.¹¹²

Intelligence on the productive capacity of the German aircraft industry was equally alarming and equally misleading. According to the air force Deuxième Bureau, the aviation industry had more than doubled in size between 1936 and 1938. Appreciations of the number of workers employed in the manufacture of aircraft increased from 40,000 in January of 1936 to well over 200,000 by 1939.¹¹³ In January of 1938 air intelligence estimated that Germany was manufacturing 350 military aircraft per month. By June this figure had been raised to 450 with the prediction that output could be doubled if the industry was placed on a war footing.¹¹⁴ Estimates continued to rise during the summer of 1938. By August French, British, and American air attachés were duped into reporting that German factories were working two 10-hour shifts. This caused production estimates to rise to an incredible 1,000 fighting machines per month for the crisis months of August and September.¹¹⁵

In contrast to the massive acceleration reported by the air Deuxième Bureau, actual aircraft production declined during 1938. Germany produced only 427 military aircraft in September of 1938.¹¹⁶ The failure of air intelligence to provide accurate information on the German aircraft industry is strikingly similar to the errors made in estimating levels of armaments production by the army Deuxième Bureau. Intelligence analysts were unable to penetrate the Nazi façade to detect the organizational difficulties and the general scarcity of iron, steel, other essential raw materials, and, not least, labour, which combined to limit aircraft production. While periodic assessments made reference to

¹¹² SHAA, 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938.

¹¹³ SHAA, 2B 58, *BdR*, 1er trimestre 1936; 2B 62, 'Mémento: L'Industrie aéronautique allemande', 1 Dec. 1937; 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; 2B 62, 'L'Armée de l'air allemande', 11 May 1939.

¹¹⁴ 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; SHAT, 5N 579, Daladier to Churchill, 11 May 1938. Figures correspond roughly to those provided in Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe*, 190.

¹¹⁵ MAÉ, Eu 18-40, Allemagne, Carton 663, 'Accroissement du matériel de l'Armée de l'Air en Allemagne', 9 Nov. 1938; SHAT, 5N 579-5, 'Le Matériel et la production aéronautique du Reich', La Chambre to Daladier, 2 Dec. 1938.

¹¹⁶ Homze, *Arming the Luftwaffe*: 144-5, 159, 231 (figure cited from 231). See also Wagenführ, *Die deutsche Industrie im Krieg*, 74; Overy, 'The German Pre-War Aircraft Production Plans', 781; Deist, 'Rearmament of the Wehrmacht', in *GSWW*, i/2, 498-9.

these reports, there was no systematic attempt to measure the effect of these deficiencies on the aero-industry. Appreciations were based instead on the assumption that the general shortage of labour and raw materials in Germany would not be permitted to affect the aircraft industry. More important in shaping French perceptions was a declaration made by Göring in late 1937, quoted in three separate studies on the German aircraft industry, that 'material considerations' would not be permitted to interfere with air rearmament.¹¹⁷ The overblown analyses of German air power produced by the air force Deuxième Bureau during the summer of 1938 were a major victory for the German campaign of bluster and disinformation.

Numerous historians have attributed decisive importance to the mistakes made by air intelligence in 1938. Inflated estimates of the capabilities of the Luftwaffe, it has been argued, distorted perceptions of the balance of power and exerted an undue influence on decision making.¹¹⁸ This interpretation is misleading. It was the decrepit state of the French air force, rather than the power of the Luftwaffe, which was foremost in the minds of key policy makers. Moreover, the credulity with which French air intelligence officers interpreted German intimidation tactics can only be understood within the context of French weakness in the air. Unbelievable as it may seem, in September of 1938 the French air force possessed less than 50 modern warplanes. Moreover, only 700 of its 1,126 total aircraft lanes were operational—250 fighters, 320 bombers, and 130 reconnaissance planes. Of these, only a handful of Potez and Morane fighters were considered even roughly comparable to the latest Messerschmidts under mass production in Germany.¹¹⁹ There were no modern bombers. The best French bomber, the Bloch 210, had been designed in the late 1920s and was more than a generation behind the German bombers in technical terms. Most French bombers were constructed of wood and canvas rather than the steel and stressed aluminium used in the construction

¹¹⁷ See, in particular, SHAA, 2B 61, 'Notice sur l'armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1938; 2B 61, 'L'Armée de l'air allemande', Jan. 1939; and SHAT, 5N 579-5, 'Le Matériel et la production aéronautique du Reich', La Chambre to Daladier, 2 Dec. 1938. See also Vivier, *Politique aéronautique militaire*, 507-18.

¹¹⁸ Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 503-6; Buffotot, 'Réarmement aérien allemand', 280-2; Du Réau, 'Renseignement et la décision', 257-8; Vaïsse, *Diplomatie et outil militaire*, 389-91; Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 340-1; Adamthwaite, *France*, 238-51; Le Goyet, *Munich*, 363-5; and W. Murray, 'Appeasement and Intelligence', *INS* 2 (1987), 47-66; and *Path to Ruin*, 235-47.

¹¹⁹ SHAA, Z 11607, pièce 156, 'Rapport du contrôleur Thouvenot'. AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d, 'Aviation Française—Avril 1938', and 496 AP 32, dr. 6, 'État actuel des forces aériennes françaises', 2 Apr. 1938.

of the latest Heinkels, Dorniers, and Junkers.¹²⁰ The aircraft industry was in an equally dismal state. Production had not yet recovered from the breakdown which followed Cot's decentralization programme. During the first six months of 1938 the entire industry produced an average of 50 military aircraft per month. In July and August, at the very height of the crisis over Czechoslovakia, Daladier was informed that French factories had produced a total of 50 military aircraft.¹²¹

The summer of 1938 was thus the bleakest period in assessment of the German air threat. An acute sense of inferiority combined with a lack of reliable information generated an addiction to worst case thinking. The results were vastly exaggerated appreciations of Luftwaffe strength, the threat of mass bombing of urban centres, and the productive power of the German aircraft industry. The weaknesses that air intelligence had detected in the German air force since 1934, paradoxically, do not figure in the intelligence appreciations which were produced during the spring and summer of 1938. The focus was instead overwhelmingly on the numerical and qualitative disparity between the French and German fleets.

France's crushing inferiority in the air was the dominant preoccupation of General Vuillemin, the newly appointed Chief of Staff of the air force, during the months leading up to the Munich Conference. Vuillemin reiterated his apocalyptic prediction of mid-January, that the French air force would be wiped out within a fortnight in the event of war with Germany, before a meeting of the CPDN on 15 March and then to virtually anyone who would listen during the tension filled month of September. Vuillemin's determination to press his view upon civilian decision makers served to keep the disparity in air power in the forefront of the minds of La Chambre, Daladier, and the cabinet.¹²² Daladier was virtually bombarded with alarmist reports. Before departing for his first meeting with Neville Chamberlain in early April, Daladier was advised by the SGDN that '[g]iven the present state of our aviation it is absolutely essential that Britain agrees to deploy a

¹²⁰ Facon, *L'Armée de l'air*, 26–30 and T. Vivier, 'L'Armée de l'air et la révolution technique des années trente (1933–1939)', *RHA* 1 (1990), 34–5.

¹²¹ SHAA, Fonds Guy La Chambre, Z 12932–1, 'Production des avions de guerre'. These figures match those in SHAT, 5N 583–9, 'Information du Président: Production aéronautique', 17 Sept. 1938.

¹²² P. Facon, 'Le Haut Commandement aérien français et la crise de Munich', *RHA* 3 (1983), 10–16; A. Teyssier, 'Le Général Vuillemin: Un haut responsable militaire face au danger allemand', *RHA* 2 (1987), 105–6.

significant portion of its air power on French soil in the event of war'. Gamelin was equally direct when he advised the Premier that the French air force was, 'completely outclassed', and that 'aerial cooperation with Britain is indispensable'.¹²³ Upon his return from London, Daladier received a lengthy Deuxième Bureau report documenting the growth of German air power since 1936. By the end of 1938, he was informed, the Luftwaffe would comprise 'two thousand ultra-modern combat planes' and concluded that 'German air strength is without any doubt superior to that of any other Great Power'.¹²⁴

Predictably, Daladier took a bleak view of the air balance and its ramifications on the strategic situation. During an interview in May, US Ambassador William Bullitt queried Daladier as to whether France would make war in support of Czechoslovakia. 'With what?' was Daladier's reply. He went on to explain that 'the present air disparity between French and German forces' made war to protect Czechoslovakia 'impossible'. Quoting from the aforementioned intelligence report, Daladier informed Bullitt that Germany would soon be producing 500 aircraft per month while France was struggling to manufacture one-tenth that amount. Britain, the French Premier complained, was 'unwilling to engage in war on the continent for Czechoslovakia or any other purpose than the defence of their immediate interests on the channel coast'. The situation for the Czechs, he concluded, was hopeless.¹²⁵

General Vuillemin did everything possible to further darken Daladier's perspective on the balance of power. After a much publicized visit to Germany in late August, he returned with an even stronger conviction that the French air force would be wiped out in a war with Germany. A report Vuillemin submitted upon his return, which was circulated to the ministries of defence and foreign affairs, confirmed the intelligence the air ministry had received over the past several months. Contrary to what has been alleged by a number of scholars, however, neither Vuillemin nor his entourage were 'taken in' by

¹²³ *DDF*, 2ème série, ix, no. 230 and SHAT, 2N 227-3, 'Note sur la collaboration franco-britannique', 24 Apr. 1938. For Gamelin to Daladier, see Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d, 2 Apr. 1938.

¹²⁴ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 35, dr. 2, sdr. b, 'Forces aériennes allemandes en 1938', 27 Apr. 1938.

¹²⁵ Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1938*, i, Bullitt to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, 9 May 1938, 493-5. Daladier also opined that, although its air force comprised 5,000 aircraft, it was doubtful that the USSR would take the offensive in Europe because of the state of its army.

German deception tactics.¹²⁶ Both Vuillemin and air intelligence chief de Vitrolles, who also travelled to Germany, acknowledged that the German object throughout had been to ‘bluff’ the French with intimidating displays of the overwhelming strength of the German air force and to mislead them as to the capabilities of various German aircraft. Despite their acknowledgement of these efforts at deception, both concluded that the Armée de l’Air was clearly outclassed by the Luftwaffe.¹²⁷ Vuillemin reiterated this judgement again in an assessment prepared for La Chambre and Daladier of 26 September. He warned that the vast majority of French aircraft were ‘clearly inferior’ and reserves remained ‘for all intents and purposes non-existent’. More alarming still, the ‘extreme disproportion of forces in favour of Germany’, would render France’s demographic and industrial centres virtually defenceless against ‘massive and repeated air attacks’.¹²⁸ During a meeting with Daladier on the eve of the Munich conference Vuillemin became so overwrought at the prospect of war that the former became embarrassed and felt compelled to terminate their interview.¹²⁹

During the Czechoslovak crisis the air minister was unequivocally *munichois*. On 19 September the La Chambre read aloud portions of another exceedingly bleak report which Vuillemin had prepared upon his return from Berlin to a meeting of the cabinet.¹³⁰ La Chambre painted a dismal view of the situation to Ambassador Bullitt. German planes would be able to bomb French cities at will and ‘the destruction of Paris would pass all imagination’.¹³¹ In a post-Munich testimonial La Chambre submitted that ‘[i]n September 1938 the situation of French aviation was so deficient that it effectively deprived our country of its freedom of action in the international sphere . . . its restoration

¹²⁶ See, among others, Murray, *Path to Ruin*, 193, 211; Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 394–414; Barton Whaley, ‘Covert Rearmament in Germany 1919–1939: Deception and Misperception’, *JSS* 5: 1 (1982), 18–29; and Mihalka, ‘German Strategic Deception’.

¹²⁷ SHAA, Archives Vuillemin, Z 11272, 2 Sept. 1938 and MAÉ, Cabinet Bonnet, vol. 1, 3 Sept. 1938 and PRO, FO 371, 21710, C 8787/1425/18, de Vitrolles conversation with Colyer, 25 Aug. 1938. See also P. Facon, ‘La Visite du Général Vuillemin en Allemagne’, *Recueil d’articles et études (1981–1983)* (Vincennes, 1987), 221–62.

¹²⁸ SHAA, Fonds La Chambre, Vuillemin to La Chambre, 26 Sept. 1938 and AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 32, dr. 5, sdr. d. Daladier remarked that this note was ‘even more pessimistic than usual’.

¹²⁹ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 8, dr. 5, sdr. d.

¹³⁰ A. de Monzie, *Ci-devant* (Paris, 1941), 29.

¹³¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs*, vol. vii, documents 1306 and 1306A, Bullitt to Roosevelt, 28 Sept. 1938.

was the preliminary condition to any decision'.¹³² For Daladier, German air superiority was a *facteur primordiale* which limited his options during the crisis. He later submitted that '[t]he air situation constantly conditioned my thinking. When considering our options we always came back to the same problem, the inferiority of our aviation in relation to that of Germany.'¹³³ Colonel de Geffrier, air attaché in Berlin since the previous January, summed up the role of the air situation in a report prepared in the aftermath of the Munich Conference. 'The German air force', he concluded, 'has, by the sole threat of its power, held all of Europe breathless.'¹³⁴

V

Although the situation on the ground was not considered as disastrous, the assumption was that little could be done to prevent Germany from overrunning Czechoslovakia. Almost immediately after the *Anschluss*, the Deuxième Bureau began to produce bleak assessments of the strategic situation for Czechoslovakia.¹³⁵ Estimates of how long the Czechoslovaks could resist a German invasion ranged from several days, to several weeks, to several months. At the height of the crisis the Deuxième Bureau judged that the Czechoslovak army represented a 'formidable force' of thirty-five well-equipped divisions 'determined to give battle to the invader'. Nonetheless, it predicted that the Czechs could hold out for a maximum of one month.¹³⁶ Throughout the crisis

¹³² Cited in P. Jackson, 'La Perception de la puissance aérienne allemande et son influence sur la politique extérieure française pendant les crises internationales de 1938 à 1939', *RHA* 39: 4 (1994), 81.

¹³³ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 8, dr. 5, 'Munich'.

¹³⁴ SHAT, 579-6, 'Le Facteur aérien dans le conflit germano-tchécoslovaque', 10 Oct. 1938. De Geffrier report forwarded by La Chambre to Daladier. On the air question, see also Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 492-3 and Young, *In Command of France*, 197-204.

¹³⁵ SHAT, 7N 2522-2, 'La Tchécoslovaquie devant le nouvel empire allemande', 17 Mar. 1938; 'Note au sujet de la possibilité d'une action allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', 8 Apr. 1938; 'Aide soviétique éventuelle à la Tchécoslovaquie', no date; 'Considérations sur la forme que pourrait prendre une attaque allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', 23 July 1938; 'Note sur le problème militaire tchécoslovaque', 21 Sept. 1938; and 'Note sur les caractéristiques possibles d'un plan d'invasion de la Tchécoslovaquie', 23 Sept. 1938.

¹³⁶ The most common hypothesis during the tension-filled month of Sept. was that the Czechs could hold out for up to two months. On this question, see this author's 'French Military Intelligence and Czechoslovakia, 1938', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 5: 1 (1994), 99. For a well-researched study that reaches an opposing conclusion see R. F. Crane, *A French Conscience in Prague: Louis Eugène Faucher and the Abandonment of Czechoslovakia* (New York, 1996).

the French high command consistently advised that the only way to ensure the survival of Czechoslovakia was to avoid war.¹³⁷ This exceedingly grim interpretation of the strategic situation was not based on an underestimation of Czechoslovak military potential. Throughout the 1930s the Deuxième Bureau had produced invariably positive assessments of the quality of Czechoslovakia's armed forces.¹³⁸ It was based instead on a distorted perception of German military power.

In the spring of 1938 French military intelligence constructed an in-depth assessment of Germany's ground forces. It estimated that the regular army comprised forty-three divisions and 850,000 effectives including three light mechanized and four Panzer divisions. The Deuxième Bureau reckoned that the German army, after mobilization, could field another 1.5 million men in thirty-six reservist divisions and thirty-six Landwehr divisions. In total, French intelligence estimated that Germany could field 116 divisions seven days after general mobilization had been declared.¹³⁹ In an invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Deuxième Bureau anticipated that Germany would deploy forty-eight divisions, including all of its armoured and motorized divisions, against the Czechoslovaks. A defensive force of thirty divisions, composed primarily of reservists, would be deployed along the Franco-German frontier. The remainder of the German field army would be held in reserve.¹⁴⁰

This was a serious distortion of the size and capability of Germany's ground forces. In a magnification of the pattern of French appreciations of the German threat during the 1930s, the Deuxième Bureau proved efficient in estimating the size of the German regular army but very inaccurate in its assessment of the number of reserve divisions. In the summer of 1938 the German regular army consisted of thirty-seven infantry, four light mechanized, and three Panzer divisions. But the Reich simply did not possess the industrial capacity to outfit large numbers of reservist

¹³⁷ See R. Young, 'Le Haut Commandement français au moment de Munich', *RHMC* 24 (1977), 110–29; Alexander, *Republic in danger*, 279–80; and Facon, 'Le Haut Commandement', 13–16.

¹³⁸ Jackson, 'French Military Intelligence', 86–109.

¹³⁹ SHAT, 7N 2522–2, 'Considérations sur la forme que pourrait prendre une attaque allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', 23 July 1938 and AN, Fonds Daladier, 496 AP 35, dr. 5, sdr. a, 'Allemagne: Forces terrestres', 27 Apr. 1938.

¹⁴⁰ This would also leave a force of 14 divisions for deployment along the frontier with Poland and 15 divisions as a strategic reserve. SHAT, 7N 2676, 'Note sur les moyens et les possibilités de manoeuvre de l'armée allemande face à l'ouest, dans l'hypothèse d'une action offensive principale contre la Tchécoslovaquie menée avec le gros de ses forces', undated but pre-Munich and post-*Anschluss*. See also 7N 3715, 'Directive pour l'offensive entre Rhine et Luxembourg', 9 June 1938 and Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau*, 137–9.

divisions. In fact, mobilization could provide only twenty-seven additional reservist and Landwehr divisions. Nor was this force prepared to fight a war of attrition. The German army possessed ammunition for only six weeks of heavy fighting.¹⁴¹ Hence the Deuxième Bureau overestimated the number of reserve-type divisions by nearly 150 per cent and the size of the German field army by nearly 70 per cent. This error was not a purposeful exaggeration intended to secure increased expenditure on the military. Estimates drafted in view of securing more funds for the military budget were even more exaggerated. One of these, produced several weeks later for the ministry of defence and the CPDN, attributed nearly 200 divisions to the German army after mobilization.¹⁴² Behind this critical misperception was the continuing lack of crucial intelligence on German industrial output. In December of 1937 and again in February of 1938 Daladier admitted to the Chamber army commission, that accurate information about such critical factors as armaments production and stocks of strategic raw materials remained fragmentary.¹⁴³ The Deuxième Bureau was again relying on its exaggerated view of German industrial capacity and to estimate levels of armaments production. Thus, once again, intelligence analysts failed to make the connection between widespread shortages in raw materials and their inevitable affect on armaments production. The result was a series of grave miscalculations of Germany's capacity to wage war.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the French were completely overawed by the power of the German army. Military intelligence correctly identified a number of the Wehrmacht's deficiencies. Both regular and reserve formations were considered desperately short of trained officers.¹⁴⁴ Renondeau judged that 'grave deficiencies' remained in the armament of the peacetime army and that the field army was much worse.¹⁴⁵ The Deuxième Bureau reckoned that only

¹⁴¹ Murray, *Path to Ruin*, 219–22.

¹⁴² SHAT, 7N 3434–3, 'Note sur les besoins auxquels doit satisfaire l'armée française', note by the general staff of General Georges, 1 Apr. 1938. See also a general staff memorandum which censures the above document for exaggerating the number of divisions the Germans could put into the field in 7N 2522–2, 'Remarques sur la note du Général Georges', 8 Apr. 1939.

¹⁴³ AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, Daladier auditions, 1 Dec. 1937, 9 Feb. 1938.

¹⁴⁴ SHAT, 7N 2601, 'Degré d'entraînement de l'infanterie allemande', 17 Jan. 1938 and 2680–2, 'L'Armée allemande fin de 1937', 25 Apr. 1938.

¹⁴⁵ SHAT, 7N 2601, Renondeau to Paris, 26 Jan. 1938 and esp. 'Niveau actuel du réarmement allemand', 2 Feb. 1938. See also François-Poncet's report on 'La Crise intérieure allemande: Les Événements du 4 février', in *DDF*, 2ème série, viii, no. 138.

one-third of the regular army formations were equipped with heavy artillery. An appreciation of early 1938 judged that 'although one should not underestimate its force, there is no doubt that the German army has far to go before it reaches the level desired by its general staff'.¹⁴⁶ Another study prepared in September postulated that, although the Wehrmacht was 'a very powerful instrument, possessing modern material and able to undertake operations on extremely short notice', it was 'not yet ready to throw itself into a general conflict'.¹⁴⁷ Intelligence which the Deuxième Bureau had received about the divergence of views between the high command and the Führer appeared to reinforce this point of view. The Deuxième Bureau deemed that these weaknesses would make it imperative for Germany to smash the Czechs quickly and 'present the world with a *fait accompli*' before being faced with the prospect of a two-front war.¹⁴⁸ Nor, significantly, was the Wehrmacht considered capable of breaking through France's defences. German armour was deemed insufficient and unable to withstand the firepower the French army could bring to bear either in Belgium or along the eastern frontier.¹⁴⁹

These factors were never important considerations in the thinking of the high command. By 1938 France's military leadership was pre-occupied with their own impotence and had abandoned any intention of a swift offensive into western Germany. The French army was in no way ready for war. France's armaments industry had proved utterly incapable of coping with the massive demands placed by French rearmament. Widespread bottlenecks in almost every sector of this industry had set the timetable of French rearmament back up to fourteen months. Only one of three envisaged light mechanized divisions was operational while the planned heavy armoured division was far from ready. The renovation of the active army remained confined to its preliminary stages due to the chronic delays in the delivery of all types of

¹⁴⁶ SHAA, Fonds Guy La Chambre, Z 12968-1, 'Ministre de l'Air: Cabinet', 11 Feb. 1938. Summary of a report on the German army received from the army Deuxième Bureau.

¹⁴⁷ SHAT, 7N 2676, 'L'Armée de terre allemande', Sept. 1938.

¹⁴⁸ SHAT, 7N 2522-2, 'Considérations sur la forme que pourrait prendre une attaque allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', 23 July 1938.

¹⁴⁹ For the high command's conviction that Germany could not break through France's defensive system in 1938, see SHAT, 7N 1N 43-3, 'Note sur la situation militaire actuelle dans le monde', 29 Mar. 1938; 7N 3434-3, 'Note sur les besoins auxquels doit satisfaire l'armée française', 1 Apr. 1938 (study prepared by General George's staff); 2N 224-1, 'Note sur l'évolution du problème militaire français', 27 July 1938. For Daladier's views, see AAN, 'Commission de l'armée', 16ème législature, no. 16, Daladier audition, 31 Aug. 1938. On this question, see also Kiesling, *Arming against Hitler*, *passim*.

material from weapons to armoured cars.¹⁵⁰ The training and organization of the regular army had declined dramatically as a result of the cancellations of large-scale manoeuvres from 1935 to 1937. Significantly, the partial mobilization of the French field army at the height of the Munich crisis proved a complete disaster. Thousands of reservists were sent to the wrong assembly depots, there were desperate shortages of equipment of all kinds at every level and there had been a general breakdown in the system established for transporting assembled units to their assigned positions.¹⁵¹ Nor was the French army capable of striking a decisive blow at Germany. In 1938 the emphasis on ensuring the inviolability of France's frontiers was more immediate than ever. After the *Anschluss* the army operations bureau prepared a fifteen-page study of the possibility of a swift French offensive into western Germany. It concluded that to mount such an attack with the hope of even moderate success would require 'a complete reorganization of our army and the restructuring of our military policy'.¹⁵²

The ramifications of this conviction for the Czechoslovak alliance were made explicit to France's political leadership during a meeting of the CPDN on 15 March where Gamelin and Daladier advised that, in the event of German aggression, France could supply no direct aid to its ally but could only hope to pin down a portion of German military strength along the Franco-German frontier while Germany devoted its main effort to crushing Czechoslovakia.¹⁵³ The operations bureau concluded that '[w]e can have no illusions about providing [Czechoslovakia] with significant aid'.¹⁵⁴ France could eventually attack in the west but only after a lengthy phase of preparation. The conclusion was that '[b]y the time we intervene, if we intervene, the situation for the Czechoslovaks will already be very critical'.¹⁵⁵ The army staff had ceased to plan any major offensive operations against Germany since the collapse of the Franco-Italian military arrangement. In fact the only offensive operations envisaged in the short term were against Italy

¹⁵⁰ The best discussions of these problems are in Alexander, *Republic in danger*, 120–4 and Dutailly, *Les Problèmes*, 133–74.

¹⁵¹ AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, no. 17, 'Contrôle des fabrications d'armement: Rapport de M. Camille Fernand-Laurent', 25 Oct. 1938.

¹⁵² AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 35, dr. 5, sdr. a, 'Notes sur une action offensive pour soutenir la Tchéco-slovaquie', undated but clearly post-*Anschluss*. Also SHAT, 7N 3434–3.

¹⁵³ DDF, 2ème série, viii, no. 446, *Procès-verbal* of the meeting of the CPDN of 15 Mar. 1938.

¹⁵⁴ SHAT, 5N 579–1, 'Étude pour le Président', 13 Sept. 1938.

¹⁵⁵ SHAT, 7N 3715, 'Note pour le Ministre: Directive pour l'offensive entre Rhine et Luxembourg', 9 June 1938. See also Gamelin, *Servir*, ii, 346–7.

in North Africa. This had been confirmed by the CPDN the previous December when French strategic policy was officially reoriented and the Mediterranean was designated the principal theatre of operations during the initial stages of a conflict. This strategy would hardly benefit the Czechoslovaks in a war with Germany. Hence the bemused complaint of one Foreign Office official to French planning during the crisis: 'when one asks how the French are going to fight for Czechoslovakia the only answer one gets is that they will march—in Libya!'¹⁵⁶

Gamelin would not have resisted the order to go to war, but he did everything in his power to drive home the unfavourable military circumstances to Daladier and the rest of the government. This included emphasizing the strengths of the Wehrmacht and playing down its vulnerabilities. The issue of Germany's fortifications in the west is a case in point. The German westwall had been under construction since late 1936. Yet intensive work had begun only after Hitler decided on invading Czechoslovakia at the end of May 1938. The building of the Siegfried Line was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign aimed at intimidating the West into believing that the westwall was much further advanced than was actually the case.¹⁵⁷ The Deuxième Bureau, however, was well-informed on the progress of the westwall. In addition to the reports and the useful aerial photographs provided by Section Nemo, the Deuxième Bureau received reports from several SR agents who had infiltrated work on these fortifications as labourers. An engineer was assigned to the Section Allemande to aid in the assessment of the strength of the Siegfried Line.¹⁵⁸ By August the Deuxième Bureau estimated that over 200,000 civilian labourers were employed in the construction of fortifications in the west. It concluded that, despite the vast quantities of manpower and resources which were being poured into work on the westwall, there was no chance that this system would constitute an effective defensive barrier before the spring of 1939.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Cited in R. Young, 'French Policy and the Munich Crisis of 1938: A Reappraisal', *Historical Papers* (Canadian Historical Association) (1970), 194. For the minutes of the Dec. meeting of the CPDN, see *DDF*, 2ème série, vii, no. 325. See also Salerno, 'The French Navy', 77–81.

¹⁵⁷ Weinberg, *Starting World War Two*, 379.

¹⁵⁸ SHAT, 7N 2641–3, 'Note sur les travaux de fortifications entrepris par les allemands sur leur frontière occidentale', 12 Aug. 1938; 7N 2602, 'Affaire tchécoslovaque et fortifications de l'Ouest', 29 June 1938; Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau*, 135; and Navarre, *Service de renseignements*, 69, 82–3.

¹⁵⁹ SHAT, 7N 2602, 'Fortifications allemandes', 6 July 1938; 'Renseignements sur les

Utterly opposed to the idea of a headlong offensive into Germany, however, Gamelin and the general staff continually stressed the difficulties which these fortifications would pose to a projected French offensive.¹⁶⁰ In fact, the operations bureau of the general staff had explicitly ruled out an offensive into western Germany before construction on the westwall had been expanded.¹⁶¹ Yet Gamelin repeatedly alluded to the importance of the Siegfried Line. 'I will attack,' he promised Daladier, 'but before me I have fortifications . . . [thus] . . . expectations should be realistic.' An offensive into the German fortified region, he advised, would result in a 'modernized Battle of the Somme'.¹⁶² This emphasis on the strength of Germany's defensive system in the west was a smokescreen, a distortion of received intelligence that deceived only the wilfully blind. Privately, Gamelin judged that 'another year or even more would be necessary to make the Siegfried Line really formidable'.¹⁶³ And Daladier revealed to the Chamber army commission in late August that the German westwall was 'in no way comparable to our Maginot Line', and 'will not constitute a powerful defensive front until the summer of 1939'.¹⁶⁴

Germany had been conceded powerful western defences by default. Gamelin, as we have seen, had abandoned serious plans for an offensive months before the Rhineland had even been remilitarized. Gauché had done his part to justify this pre-emptive abandonment when he observed in March of 1937, months before any serious work was even begun on the Siegfried Line, that '[i]n the near future a French offensive into the Palatinate will encounter significant difficulties'.¹⁶⁵ Nor can it be argued that Daladier was deceived by the army staff in this regard. In the minds of French officials psychologically committed to a defensive posture during the initial stages of a conflict, Germany's western fortifications were unbreachable long before they even existed.

manifestations actuelles de l'activité militaire du Reich', 28 July 1938; 'Équipement de la frontière occidentale du Reich', 2 Aug. 1938. See also AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, Carton 16, Daladier audition, 31 Aug. 1938.

¹⁶⁰ SHAT, 1N 61-2, 'Exercices 1937-1938', studies on the possibilities of a French offensive into western Germany in the event of war in central Europe.

¹⁶¹ SHAT, 1N 48-1, 'Études préparatoires fixant le dispositif des armées sur le théâtre d'opérations du Nord-Est en cas d'agression allemande contre la Tchécoslovaquie', Apr.-May 1938.

¹⁶² Cited from Gamelin, *Servir*, ii. 334, 346-7.

¹⁶³ Quoted in Adamthwaite, 'French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War', 192.

¹⁶⁴ AAN, Commission de l'armée, 16ème législature, Carton 16, Daladier audition, 31 Aug. 1938.

¹⁶⁵ SHAT, 7N 2522-1, 'Réflexions sur un conflit éventuel en Europe', 9 Mar. 1937.

VI

Intelligence on the political and economic situation across the Rhine reinforced the pervasive gloom that prevailed in Paris. Through the summer of 1938 assessments continued to reinforce the perception that Germany had subordinated its entire economy to preparations for war. The French commercial attaché in Berlin abandoned completely the idea that Germany might revise its economic policy and concluded that '[t]he intensity of the German industrial effort can have only one explanation: preparations for war'.¹⁶⁶ To French observers all too aware of the divisions in their own society, Germany seemed to exude an aura of determination and militaristic vitality that was quite terrifying. A report prepared by financial attaché Jean Aris in the summer of 1938 conveys the sense of a coming war:

For the past five years, the new masters of Germany have single-mindedly pursued the goal of restoring the nation's military power and have prepared, with the method and efficiency which characterizes the German spirit, for an eventual war. Step by step the economic activity of the nation has been subordinated to the creation of an instrument of conquest capable of establishing German hegemony in Europe.¹⁶⁷

Reports such as this could only have strengthened the conviction that Hitler was not bluffing over Czechoslovakia.

Yet appreciations of the economic situation indicated that the structural weaknesses in the German economy continued to create difficulties for the Nazi leadership. In early summer 1938 the DAPC prepared a lengthy report on German war potential that received wide circulation within the defence community. While underlining German industrial and demographic strength, this study concluded by citing the judgement of the Berlin embassy that Nazi Germany's 'latent strengths' were 'certainly inferior to those of Imperial Germany' and that '[a]n examination of [Germany's] material and human resources . . . tends, it seems, to show that after several months of a general war Germany will be faced with grave difficulties in terms of both supply and effectiveness'.¹⁶⁸ In a subsequent report, Aris considered that the 'frenetic state spending' and the 'abuse of public investments'

¹⁶⁶ *DDF*, 2ème série, x, no. 149, 5 July 1938.

¹⁶⁷ France, *Ministère des Finances* (cited hereafter as MF) Série B, 31484, Questions économiques 1938, no. 394. Also in Deuxième Bureau records in SHAT, 7N 2424-1.

¹⁶⁸ SHAT, ARR, 505, dr. 182, DAPC to EMA-2ème Bureau, 11 July 1938, summarizing reports of 13 Apr. and 23 June.

had brought Germany to the verge of the worst financial crisis since 1923. The Nazi government, he judged, could avoid financial collapse only by reducing its rearmament effort or by embarking on a policy of conquest.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, a commercial attaché report which the Deuxième Bureau received depicted the German economy as stretched to the limit:

The National Socialist government has placed the national economy completely at the service of rearmament. All of the resources of the nation are now mobilized. These measures have restricted the population to a Spartan lifestyle. Germany is essentially a vast factory where the worker labours more than nine hours per day. In certain industries factories operate non-stop.¹⁷⁰

François-Poncet agreed. He considered that '[t]he economy of the Third Reich is more than a paradox, it is an idol with clay feet . . . becoming more precarious as it grows larger'. As long as Hitler retained his hold over the German people, the system could hold together. He concluded that this was why 'Hitler has no choice but to keep searching for success in the domain of foreign policy'.¹⁷¹ The familiar anxiety that an internal crisis might propel Germany towards war was as powerful as ever in 1938. Renondeau endorsed this point of view. He unequivocally rejected the possibility that Germany might scale back rearmament and reported instead that plans existed for the construction of two new Panzer divisions and to increase the size of the regular army by 25 per cent by 1939.¹⁷² All of this pointed to war and soon.

Significantly, the possibility of a popular revolt by the German people was discounted and did not play an important role in decision making in during the Czechoslovak crisis. Received intelligence indicated that the German population was becoming resigned to the prospect of war. Renondeau reported that the 'war psychosis' of the German people had deepened into a 'general malaise' in which the inevitability of war was accepted with resignation.¹⁷³ In another report Renondeau characterized the public mood as dominated by a sense of *fatalisme de guerre*.¹⁷⁴ A Deuxième Bureau synthesis judged popular opinion in

¹⁶⁹ MF, B 31484, N, no. 381, 23 Feb. 1938.

¹⁷⁰ DDF, 2ème série, x, no. 149, 5 July 1938.

¹⁷¹ DDF, 2ème série, viii, no. 114, 24 Feb. 1938. See also the army and naval intelligence reports of 6 and 8 July 1938 in SHAT, 7N 2602-1 and SHM, 1BB2, 94, respectively.

¹⁷² SHAT, 7N 2601, 'Renforcement de l'armée allemande', 22 Feb. 1938 and 'Ralentissement possible du réarmement allemande', 9 Mar. 1938.

¹⁷³ SHAT, 7N 2602-1, 'Situation générale', 27 July 1938.

¹⁷⁴ Cited from 7N 2602-1, Personal letter from Renondeau to Dentz, 6 Sept. 1938. See

Germany to be 'in truth very anxious and opposed to war.' It concluded, however, that the German people would follow their Führer: 'If faced with the prospect of war, there is no doubt the masses will obey with discipline but without enthusiasm.'¹⁷⁵ This analysis appeared to be confirmed as tension mounted in September and Renondeau described Germany as 'a vast armed camp'.¹⁷⁶

The central considerations in assessments of the German threat during the summer of 1938 were not the weaknesses in the German economy but instead the strengths of the Nazi system of *Wehrwirtschaft*. The tremendous advantages which this system provided Germany in terms of economic mobilization and general preparedness to make war were a central component of intelligence assessments of German military capability. During the annexation of Austria in March, for example, French observers were struck above all by the speed with which Hitler's decision to move into Austria was put into operation. According to one study, Vienna had been occupied only 72 hours after Hitler had decided to move. Such rapidity of action was deemed possible 'only in a political system where the entire machinery of the state is placed at the disposal of the leader and the armed forces'. The system of *Wehrwirtschaft*, the report warned, had been designed 'with the sole and specific purpose of allowing the nation to move to a war footing'.¹⁷⁷ Another assessment judged that the state of semi-mobilization at which the German economy was functioning constituted a crucial advantage in strategic terms:

Thanks to the present state of organization of the German economy, in the event of a conflict the process of shifting to wartime production levels, so critical to most states which will have to transform fundamentally their national industry, will be for the Third Reich only a matter of implementing the final stages of a system which is already in place.¹⁷⁸

The steps taken to prepare Germany both physically and morally for

also the Renondeau reports of 11 Jan., 23 Feb., 21 May, 27 July, 17 Aug. 1938 as well as another personal letter from Renondeau to Dentz of 17 Mar. in 7N 2602-1.

¹⁷⁵ SHAT, 7N 2523-1, 'Compte-rendu', 16 Sept. 1938. Initialled by Gamelin, Colson, and Georges.

¹⁷⁶ SHAT, 7N 2515, *RH*, 1-7 Aug. 1938 and 7N 2602-1, Personal letter from Renondeau to Dentz, 20 Sept. 1938.

¹⁷⁷ SHAT, 7N 2629-3, 'Études Allemagne: L'Occupation de l'Autriche par l'armée allemande', July 1938.

¹⁷⁸ SHAT, 7N 2676, 'Conférence sur le matériel dans l'armée allemande: L'Industrie allemande et le réarmement', Apr. 1937.

war had provided Hitler with a decisive material and psychological edge over France.

VII

The contrast between Germany's short-term preparedness and the situation in France was demoralizing. The French economy was profoundly unprepared to undertake war with any major power. By early 1938 national production was still less than 75 per cent of pre-1900 levels. National revenue had decreased by over a half and France remained unable to resolve its seeming endless financial difficulties.¹⁷⁹ The franc, which had functioned since 1927 as a symbol of French economic stability and had served as an effective agent of French interests abroad, had been devalued for the third time in eighteen months. As a result, another exodus of capital had drained the gold reserves of the Bank of France and caused panic at the ministry of finance. During the crisis days of September a run on the franc prompted finance minister Paul Marchandeau to warn Daladier that France was threatened with financial collapse. Significantly, the mobilization procedures of late September 'caused wholesale upheaval in the French banking system' and forced the government to impose strict restrictions on capital fleeing the country in order to prevent the bankruptcy of the treasury.¹⁸⁰ The collapse of investment reflected the poor state of national confidence at this juncture. It was both a cause and a symptom of France's stagnant industry. And these developments came to a head at a time when German national production had effected a spectacular recovery, marking a 17 per cent increase from its pre-Depression levels. To make matters worse, in the summer of 1938 the lag between the financial effort devoted to rearmament and the production of French defence industries was at its greatest.¹⁸¹ Hence, while the flight of capital and the costs of rearmament threatened France's finances with

¹⁷⁹ S. Berstein, 'La Perception de la puissance par les partis politiques français en 1938-1939', in Girault and Frank (eds.), *La puissance en Europe*, 291.

¹⁸⁰ M. Thomas, 'France and Czechoslovak Crisis', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 10 (1999), 122-59. See also R. Girault, 'La Trahison des possédants', in Michel Winock (ed.), *Les Années trente: De la crise à la guerre* (Paris, 1990), 160-3 and Frank, *Hantise du déclin*, 168-81.

¹⁸¹ Frank, *Hantise du déclin*, 42-6 and Jean Bouvier and Robert Frank, 'Sur la perception de la puissance économique en France pendant les années 1930', in Girault and Frank (eds.), *La Puissance en Europe*, 176.

bankruptcy, Germany's military superiority had increased.¹⁸² Daladier was painfully aware of the relationship between economic strength and military power. In his initial address to the Chamber after the formation of his government in April he stressed that '[t]he fundamental requirements of national defence are a healthy currency and a strong economy', and that 'a Great Power cannot long retain its status if it is not served by a vibrant economy'.¹⁸³ The economic situation in France constituted a powerful restraint on France's response to Nazi aggression.

A less tangible but equally important factor in French perceptions of the balance of power were the deep ideological fissures in French society. The effects of the divide between right and left had been sharpened by the social policies of the Popular Front. The right attributed France's economic problems to Popular Front policy. The left considered that the conservative elements in France had systematically sabotaged the efforts of the Popular Front to reform and revitalize the nation's economy. Each side accused the other of egotism detrimental to the cause of national defence. Dispute crystallized into a bitter conflict over the question of the 40-hour week. The right considered that this law had crippled national production while the left cherished the 40-hour week as the most important achievement in the history of the workers movement in France. Amid all of this acrimony, the Czechoslovak question did not serve as a rallying theme. Quite the opposite in fact. The principal conclusion reached in the massive study of French public opinion at this juncture by Yvon Lacaze is that France was deeply divided at every level over Czechoslovakia.¹⁸⁴ Daladier could not hope to lead a united France into war in 1938. Looking across the Rhine, the profound rifts in French society contrasted sharply with the resolve and strength of purpose conveyed by Nazi Germany. Intelligence reports tended to stress the iron grip with which the Party controlled German society. Germany appeared better prepared to face the rigours of war at every level.

The diplomatic situation was equally grim. By the summer of 1938 the French eastern system lay in ruins. Poland, the largest and most populous of France's eastern allies, desired to share in the spoils of an invasion of Czechoslovakia. French observers in Warsaw judged that Poland might very well enter an eventual conflict on the side of Germany. The Little Entente, moreover, had been broken. When tension

¹⁸² Berstein, 'La Perception de la puissance par les partis politiques français', 291.

¹⁸³ Cited from Du Réau, *Daladier*, 224. See also Frank, *Hantise du déclin*, 62–89 and 178–81.

¹⁸⁴ Y. Lacaze, *L'Opinion publique française et la crise de Munich* (Berne, 1991), 603–12.

increased over the Sudeten question during the summer both Romania and Yugoslavia declared their intention to remain neutral in the event of hostilities.¹⁸⁵ Nor did Soviet intervention appear a viable option. Russia's armed forces, with their ravaged command structure, were judged incapable of intervening to prevent Germany from over-running Czechoslovakia. According to the *Deuxième Bureau* the execution of Marshal Tukhachevski and the bulk of the Russian officer corps had left the Red Army 'no more than a decapitated corpse'.¹⁸⁶ Vuillemin and the air force general staff considered that the USSR could not provide significant air support to Czechoslovakia in time to prevent the destruction of the latter's major airfields.¹⁸⁷ These perceptions of Soviet power were as much a product of the ideological bias of the French military as they were calculated readings of the military situation. They were accepted, however, without serious question by civilian decision makers who were profoundly suspicious of Soviet motives and unwilling to count on the assistance of Communist Russia in a war with Germany. The war in Spain had only exacerbated these suspicions. The army staff and defence ministry, in particular, became convinced that the USSR desired to use the Spanish Civil War as a pretext to foment war between France and Germany. And this conviction only delayed the slow evolution of French strategic policy towards a military alliance with the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁸

Most importantly, neither the United States nor Great Britain would commit to supporting France in the event of war over Czechoslovakia. During the summer of 1938 Ambassador Bullitt warned French officials repeatedly that the Roosevelt government would apply its neutrality legislation from the moment war broke out in Europe. All sales of military hardware to France would cease and American aid would be limited to the moral support of its more enlightened citizenry.¹⁸⁹ The British government had made it clear the previous

¹⁸⁵ See the diplomatic overview presented by foreign minister Bonnet to the Senate foreign affairs commission on 8 June 1938 which is in MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Cabinet Bonnet, vol. 1.

¹⁸⁶ SHAT, 7N 2522-3, 'Aide soviétique éventuelle à la Tchécoslovaquie', no date but certainly the spring/summer of 1938. See also Vaisse, 'La Perception de la puissance soviétique', 22; Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau*, 76-7.

¹⁸⁷ SHAT, Fonds Gamelin Supplémentaires, Carton 7, Vuillemin to Gamelin, 29 Aug. and 16 Sept. 1938.

¹⁸⁸ P. Jackson, 'French Strategy and the Spanish Civil War', in C. Leitz and J. Dunthorne (eds.), *Spain in an International Context, 1932-1973* (Oxford, 1999), 55-80.

¹⁸⁹ Bullitt, *For the President*, 252-300; B. R. Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making* (Princeton, 1997); J. McVickar Haight, Jr, 'France, the US and the

November, in April of 1938 and again on 8 September that Great Britain would not enter a war 'caused by German aggression against Czechoslovakia'.¹⁹⁰ In private, London was unsure how it would react. As late as 30 August 1938 the British cabinet was still refusing to consider the question of aiding Czechoslovakia.¹⁹¹ The British government had been receiving overviews of the strategic situation which were every bit as dire as those produced by the Deuxième Bureau. British air intelligence warned of a 'knock-out blow' by the Luftwaffe while military intelligence, basing its estimations in large part on information obtained from Paris, exaggerated the size and effectiveness of the German army.¹⁹² These considerations do not appear to have shaped decision making in London however. At the heart of the policy of appeasement as it was practised by Britain was instead Neville Chamberlain's belief that it was possible to come to a workable understanding with Hitler in which the structure of Europe could be maintained.¹⁹³ It was this conviction that set Chamberlain apart from Daladier and which distinguishes British from French appeasement.

And French policy makers were well aware of this. Signals intelligence was able to provide confirmation that the British government was working fervently to forge an agreement with Hitler over Czechoslovakia, at almost any price. French cryptanalysts were reading the British 'R' code, a low-grade Foreign Office cipher used for transmissions that were not highly sensitive. This enabled French observers to follow the day-to-day correspondence between London and the Paris Embassy. It did not, however, provide insight on the perceptions of high-level British policy makers. But the material from the 'R' code was useful. It provided the French with both advance notice of what they would be hearing from Ambassador Phipps and a check on how

Munich Crisis', *JMH* 32: 4 (1960), 333-52; and A. A. Offner, *American Appeasement* (Cambridge, Mass, 1969), 229-69.

¹⁹⁰ See e.g. British foreign minister Anthony Eden's warning to this effect in late 1937 in *DDF*, 2ème série, vii, no. 41. The British held this line through 1938. See the discussions between the British and French heads of state in Apr. 1938 where the broad outlines of Anglo-French cooperation over Czechoslovakia were established. These are in *DBFP*, 3rd series, i, no. 164. The French record of these exchanges, which is less detailed, is in *DDF*, 2ème série, xi, no. 405. For the warning of 8 Sept., see *DBFP*, 3rd Series, ii, no. 814.

¹⁹¹ PRO, CAB 23/94, 30 Aug. 1938.

¹⁹² See Wark, *Ultimate Enemy*, 59-79 and Hinsley *et al.*, *British Intelligence*, 45-85.

¹⁹³ Recent and compelling versions of this argument include Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement, passim*, and an interesting and highly nuanced study by Erik Goldstein, 'Neville Chamberlain, the British Official Mind and the Munich Crisis', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 10 (1999), 276-92.

accurately the British embassy was relating messages back and forth between Paris and London.¹⁹⁴ All indications from Great Britain, both official and clandestine, indicated that if France decided to aid Czechoslovakia it would do so alone.

Such a decision simply would not be taken. The progress of German rearmament meant that Great Britain had never been more important to French planning. In the spring and summer of 1938 Daladier received memoranda concerning the vital importance of British support from all sides. 'More than ever,' Gamelin declared in a personal note in late March, 'it is essential that we have England with us.'¹⁹⁵ On the eve of his departure for the first summit meeting with Chamberlain in April the SGDN produced a long document on the importance of Franco-British military cooperation. The acute disparity between French and German air power and the familiar bogey of demographic inferiority were invoked along with the possibility of war with Italy. In such an event France would face a bloc of 75 million Germans and 40 million Italians. 'France cannot resist forces three times as numerous,' the SGDN warned. British support would be essential.¹⁹⁶ From Paul Marchandeu at the ministry of finance came repeated warnings that France was dependent on British support to maintain the solvency of the franc.¹⁹⁷ Daladier's cabinet summed up the strategic situation with the conclusion, 'France can only defeat Germany in a war if it is assured, in every possible respect, of total British assistance.'¹⁹⁸

This was preaching to the converted. Daladier had been a firm believer in close ties with Britain since the early 1930s. It had been Daladier who had declared to the CPDN that '[o]ur policy is presently, and will continue to be, aimed at complete collaboration with Great Britain'.¹⁹⁹ The overriding priorities of the Daladier government were to redress France's terrible military, economic, and diplomatic situation and to meet the Nazi challenge in close accord with Great Britain. Accordingly, economic reform, rearmament, and British

¹⁹⁴ Transcripts of intercepted messages encoded in the 'R' code (labelled 'chiffre alla' by French code-breakers) are in MAÉ, *Télégrammes Interceptés*, vols. 1–2. I am grateful to John Ferris for information on British ciphers during this period.

¹⁹⁵ *DDF*, 2ème série, viii, no. 432, 14 Mar. and no. 445, 15 Mar. 1938.

¹⁹⁶ MAÉ, *Papiers 1940: Fonds Daladier*, vol. i, 'Note sur la collaboration militaire franco-britannique', 24 Apr. 1938.

¹⁹⁷ R. Girault, 'The Impact of the Economic Situation on the Foreign Policy of France', in Mommsen and Kettenacker (eds.), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement*, 209–26.

¹⁹⁸ AN, Archives Daladier, 496 AP 31, dr. 5, 'Note sur la mobilisation industrielle', 5 Apr. 1938.

¹⁹⁹ SHAT, 2N 22, *Procès-verbal* of the CPDN, 15 Feb. 1937.

military support received priority over ties to Czechoslovakia. Several weeks before Daladier acceded to the premiership Gamelin officially requested a 387 million franc increase in defence spending and recommended an end to the 40-hour week. A memorandum produced by the SGDN warned that 'given the current international situation, measures to increase our armaments production must be taken with all urgency whatever the financial and industrial repercussions'.²⁰⁰ On 20 April, less than one week after forming his government, Daladier assured Gamelin that 'I am in complete accord with your note of 11 February. . . . The question of supplementary credits will be settled very soon by decree laws which I intend to demand from Parliament which will permit us to order a substantial portion of the material earmarked for 1939.' In the same note Daladier hinted at 'alterations' to the 40-hour week.²⁰¹ All of the major undertakings of the ensuing twenty-two-month period—the extensive financial reforms, the modification of the 40-hour week, the Law for the Organization of the Nation in Time of War, and the ever-expanding outlays for army and air force rearmament—were intended to attract capital back to France, restore the national economy, and bolster France's military preparedness.

The direction of French policy was established with Daladier's choice of Georges Bonnet as foreign minister the previous April. Historians have often argued that this decision was taken in response to British pressure.²⁰² This overstates the role of Great Britain and ignores the importance of military considerations in the making of French policy. After Reynaud, Blum, and Herriot were eliminated as candidates, the final decision was between Paul-Boncour, also foreign minister in Blum's short-lived government, and Bonnet. Bonnet was in favour of accommodating Germany at the expense of Czechoslovakia while Paul-Boncour advocated standing by the Czechoslovak alliance with or without Great Britain. The British government, significantly, had made it clear that it preferred anyone but Paul-Boncour as foreign minister. On 10 April Paul-Boncour met with Daladier to request the foreign minister's portfolio. Daladier's perspective on the European balance of power is distilled in his response to Paul-Boncour '[t]he

²⁰⁰ SHAT, 2N 224-1, 'Les Données actuelles du problème militaire français', SGDN note forwarded by Gamelin to Daladier, 2 Feb. 1938. See also Fonds Gamelin, 1K 224-8, 'Développement des armements', Gamelin to Daladier, 11 Feb. 1938.

²⁰¹ SHAT, Fonds Gamelin, 1K 224-9, dr. 1, Daladier to Gamelin, 20 Apr. 1938.

²⁰² Most recently in J. Herman, *Paris Embassy*, 84-7.

policy you propose is a good one, the honourable course for France to follow. Sadly, I do not believe that we have the capability to follow such a policy. I will take Bonnet.²⁰³ This interpretation is borne out by Colonel Rivet's account of his meeting with Daladier during the May crisis. According to Rivet, the Premier described France as 'impotent' and 'had decided not to intervene in the German–Czech conflict'.²⁰⁴

Under Daladier and Bonnet, French foreign policy aimed at presenting a solid Franco-British alliance to Berlin which would provide Czechoslovakia with leverage in its negotiations with Germany over the Sudetenland. This was the context in which the meetings between French and British heads of state in April and again in September must be interpreted.²⁰⁵ France would publicly affirm its fidelity to the alliance with Czechoslovakia. France would, in conjunction with Britain, warn Germany of the possible consequences of unprovoked aggression. There was no hope, however, that France could save Czechoslovakia by going to war. This was made clear to Czechoslovak government in mid-July when Bonnet informed the Czech ambassador in Paris that France would not make war with Germany without British support.²⁰⁶ When, as French intelligence had predicted, Hitler refused to negotiate on a reasonable basis, the betrayal of Czechoslovakia became all but inevitable.

This is not to say that France would not have gone to war under any circumstances. There were two possible scenarios that could have brought about a decision for war. The first was a guarantee of British support in war against Germany. The second was Czechoslovak defiance. Had the Benes government refused to submit, it is possible that public opinion in both France and Great Britain might have forced a change of policy. Any discussion of France's Munich policy should mention that the Daladier government had begun taking precautionary military measures in late August. Leave was cancelled and various

²⁰³ Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, iii. 101.

²⁰⁴ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 22 May 1938.

²⁰⁵ See political director René Massigli's assessment of the conversations of early Apr. in MAÉ, Papiers Massigli, vol. 16, 'Programme général des conversations franco-anglaises', 24 Apr. 1938. See also Bonnet's explanation of French policy towards Czechoslovakia to the Senate foreign affairs commission on 8 June 1938 in MAÉ, Papiers 1940: Cabinet Bonnet, vol. 1.

²⁰⁶ *DDF*, 2ème série, x, no. 218, 17 July 1938 and no. 222, 'Note du Ministre', 21 July 1938. Léon Noël and Igor Lukes, among others, have claimed that this warning was never given: Noël, *La Guerre de 39 a commencé quatre ans plutôt* (Paris, 1979) and Lukes, *Czechoslovakia*, 174–6. But the day after Bonnet met Osusky, President Benes summoned the French minister in Prague, Victor de Lacroix, for a 'very emotional' interview where he demanded clarification of France's position: *DDF*, 2ème série, x, no. 242, Lacroix to Paris, 21 July 1938.

classes of reservists were called up until, by 24 September, France had more than one million men under arms and the majority of the Marine had been placed on 24-hour alert.²⁰⁷ On 25 September Rivet recorded a 'sense that we are moving rapidly towards war'.²⁰⁸ But neither of the above scenarios emerged and Daladier flew to Munich to participate in the dismemberment of France's lone military ally.

This policy was not founded on the hope that Hitler could be trusted once he had been appeased over the Sudetenland. Appeasement, for Daladier, was a policy of expediency, the dangers of which he was painfully aware.²⁰⁹ It was based on the conviction that France was unready to face the prospect of war with Germany. The perceptions of German power conveyed to the high command and to Daladier were central to this conviction. The elements of German power stressed in intelligence reports—quantitative superiority on the ground and especially in the air, the superior productive capacity of its war industries, and the concept of *Wehrwirtschaft*—became all the more compelling as arguments for capitulation when compared with the disorganized state of the French army, the impotence of French air power, the inadequacies of France's armaments production, and the frailty of the French economy. The military balance was not the only factor involved in the decision to forsake the Czechs. It was kept to the forefront, however, by proponents of appeasement both inside and outside the government.

During the Czechoslovak crisis, intelligence played a central role in shaping perceptions of both the balance of military force and the day-to-day movement of events. Both Rivet and Gauché were in constant contact with the high command and the Premier's offices throughout the crisis. There is no doubt that decision makers were kept up-to-date regarding the political situation in Europe in general and German intentions in particular. But it is also clear that the intelligence services performed less well when it came to evaluating German military capability. The crucial failure was the assumption that Germany's manufacture of armaments was keeping pace with the expansion of the regular army and the training of reserves. This led to the erroneous conclusion that Germany could field an army of millions upon mobilization and constituted an important victory for Nazi propaganda.

²⁰⁷ SHM, 1BB2, 172, 'La Crise de septembre 1938', 31 Mar. 1939; Gamelin, *Servir*, ii, 344–8; and Lacaze, *France et Munich*, 226–40.

²⁰⁸ *Carnets Rivet*, ii, 25 Sept. 1938.

²⁰⁹ Cited in Young, *In Command of France*, 215.

The sense of impotence and inferiority which conditioned thinking within the general staff played an important role in this failure. Military intelligence was psychologically incapable of penetrating the veneer of propaganda to see the widespread organizational and material deficiencies which afflicted the German army.

Yet, once again, the failures in intelligence assessment were not decisive factors in the decision to retreat before Germany. Given the state of the French army, the impotence of the Armée de l'Air, Britain's refusal to commit to France, the impending financial catastrophe coupled with the general sickness of the economy, and, perhaps above all, the overwhelming reluctance at every level of French society to accept the risk of war, exaggerations of German military capability were not decisive in shaping policy. Indeed the exaggeration of German power was in many ways a product of the inferiority complex which reigned in both civilian and military circles.