



CHURCHILL & FRANCE

Churchill y Francia

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There is no doubting the ambivalence of Churchill's attitude to France as a British Francophile but also as a British patriot. Much depended on whether he perceived the interests of Britain and those of France as coinciding, as was fortunately the case for most of the period, and the article examines the ups and downs of his relations with the French through his long career, beginning with his first stay in Paris in 1883 and ending with his obvious enjoyment of the French Riviera after his withdrawal from world affairs in 1955. In between, the way he managed to surmount the major crises in Anglo-French relations, notably after June 1940, is discussed in the light of what must definitely be seen as an indefectible life-long attachment in spite of all the difficulties.



Abstract

Winston Churchill; Anglo-French relations; Anglo-German relations; First World War; appeasement in the 1930s; Second World War; European integration.



Key words

Winston Churchill; relaciones anglofrancesas; relaciones angloalemanas; Primera Guerra Mundial; política de apaciguamiento en los años 30; Segunda Guerra Mundial; integración europea.

La actitud de Churchill hacia Francia fue sin duda ambivalente. Francófila por una parte, pero sin dejar de lado un gran patriotismo británico. La inclinación de Churchill dependía en si percibía que los intereses de Francia y Reino Unido coincidían; afortunadamente, así fue a lo largo de la mayoría de sus mandatos. Este artículo examina los ires y venires de sus relaciones con Francia durante su larga carrera, comenzando con su primera estancia en París en 1883 y finalizando en su claro disfrute de la Riviera Francesa tras su retirada de los asuntos políticos mundiales en 1955. Entre tanto, Churchill consiguió superar las principales crisis de las relaciones anglofrancesas, notablemente a partir de junio de 1940. Sus acciones se enmarcan en un indiscutible apego de por vida a Francia, a pesar de las dificultades a las que ambos países se enfrentaron.



Resumen

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Fechas

It seems appropriate to begin with what is arguably the best short summary of Churchill's attitude to France, from someone who accompanied him in many of his later travels to the country and heard what he had to say at first hand:

When it came to France, ambivalence was again evident. WSC's love of France was sentimental and long-standing, based on personal experience in peace and war. His greatest heroine, or indeed hero for that matter, was Joan of Arc. But this did not deter him from taking a firm line with the French if he felt it was required, and he told me that after 1940, and their breaking of a solemn agreement not to sue for a separate peace, he never felt the same about them. (Montague Brown, 1995, p. 160)

One might add that this ambivalence is also in evidence according as it is Churchill the statesman and impeccable British patriot or Churchill the private man and Francophile speaking. When the interests of France coincided with those of Britain, all was well – there was no conflict of loyalties deep in his heart. But when he felt that they did not and that British interests were threatened, he naturally gave them priority – somehow suffering from a sense of guilt towards France which made him irritable, often unpleasant with his pro-French British entourage (one may think here primarily of Anthony Eden) and his French interlocutors (there, de Gaulle springs to mind), and always ill at ease, impatient, dismissive of contrary arguments, all the more so as he knew that he was in obvious bad faith. But these inner conflicts only came at a late stage in his relations with France and the French – arguably at the time of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. It seems useful, therefore, to distinguish between several stages in this long relationship, his physical presence in France running from 1883 to 1963 – over some eighty years, with more than a hundred visits: by far the largest number of his sojourns abroad.

It seems that it is with the Agadir Crisis in 1911 that Churchill became fully aware of the converging interests of Britain and France in thwarting German ambitions

1: 1874-1918

The first obvious connection with France is of course his parents's wedding in the Anglican Chapel of the Paris Embassy, on 15 April 1874 – and the circumstances of his birth, officially “premature” on 30 November, allow us to conjecture that he was in fact conceived in Paris, his mother not being a paragon of virtue. His first stay in France took place in the summer of 1883, with his father, in Paris. Then, when he was 17, in 1891, he was sent to perfect his French at Versailles. It was a success in spite of his initial reticence. This avid reader of history books knew all about Napoleon's campaigns – he often cited them in his writings and it is well known that he always had the idea of publishing a life of the Emperor at the back of his mind¹. When he married Clementine in 1908, he in fact married another Francophile, who had spent some of her youth in Dieppe and spoke excellent French.

It seems that it is with the Agadir Crisis in 1911 that the young politician became fully aware of the converging interests of Britain and France in thwarting German ambitions. When at the Admiralty (1911-1915), he was an active supporter of Anglo-French cooperation, and it is often forgotten that the decision to launch the joint Dardanelles expedition was taken with the enthusiastic agreement of the French naval staff. Admittedly, Churchill was to apportion part of the blame for the failure to the priority given by the French Army Generals to the Western Front – but he also deplored that the British Generals had been more than lukewarm in their

¹ See Packwood, Allen. “A Tale of Two Statesmen: Churchill and Napoleon”. *Finest Hour – The Journal of Winston Churchill* 157 (Winter 2012-2013), pp. 14-19.

support. When he himself left for that Front in November 1915, serving with the British Expeditionary Force, he soon found himself on the best terms with the French Generals whom he met in the area: all his life he kept the *Poilu* helmet that General Fayolle gave him². He was very impressed by what he saw of the French Army then – an opinion which was reinforced when he became Minister of Munitions in 1917, the reason being that this involved close collaboration with his French opposite number, Loucheur, and frequent visits to France, including the front. The climax was reached in March 1918, when Clemenceau took him on a tour of inspection of the battlefields which included a stop at Foch's Beauvais HQ on the way. The way Foch explained his plans – which turned out to be a complete success – made a profound impression on Churchill, who repeatedly and admirably related the event in his later writings. The fullest account appeared in a magazine article of 1926, "A Day with Clemenceau", which he reprinted in *Thoughts and Adventures*³. For him, the Beauvais scene encapsulated the best of the two Frances: that of the old Roman Catholic, conservative tradition – the Ancien Régime – (Foch) and that of the Radical atheists of the Republic (Clemenceau). He was awed by the understanding between these two apparently irreconcilable camps before the German peril: both put Country before Party, and for him nothing could be nobler. Unfortunately, he drew the wrong conclusions from this memorable day, believing that this reconciliation was definitive in the face of Germany, which misled him in the inter-war years.

2: 1919-1932

Churchill's ambivalence was clearly visible at the time of Versailles and in the fifteen years or so which followed the Armistice. Churchill approved of Keynes's reservations as expounded in *The Consequences of the Peace* (1919). First, because he believed that Germany must be allowed to enjoy the prosperity to which it was entitled by the undeniable abilities of its people. Secondly, because pre-war Germany had been an excellent customer of Britain: the sooner its solvency was restored, the better for the British export industries, in dire need of orders after 1920. Thirdly, because France was no more to be permitted to dominate the Continent than any other country – this was of course a canon of British foreign policy. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, during a conference of Finance Ministers on the settlement of war debts and reparations in Paris in January 1925, he was received by the French President, who pressed for an Anglo-French agreement against Germany. His reply excellently sums up his position since 1919:

I said that of course I was only expressing a personal opinion, but one which I had expressed in public on many occasions, and which it was well known I had held for several years, namely that one real security against a renewal of war would be a complete agreement between England, France and Germany. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 339)⁴

At the same time, Churchill continued to cultivate his French contacts in high places. As he wrote to Clementine from Paris on the same occasion:

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2 Now visible at Chartwell, together with the canvas by Lavery showing Churchill sporting it, "Winston Churchill, Wearing a French Poilu's Steel Helmet".

3 *Thoughts and Adventures*. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1932 (London: Odhams Press, 1947, pp. 120-132).

4 "Note of a conversation with the President of the French Republic. 11 January 1925". Churchill Papers 18/21.

Even meal times have been devoted to meeting people of consequence. I had an interview with Herriot [then Prime Minister]... We got on well. Tomorrow I am to see President Doumergue in the morning... & visit Clemenceau in the evening & dine with Loucheur. (Soames, 1998, p. 288)⁵

He was also to have long conversations with Poincaré, Finance Minister from 1926 to 1928, and in January 1927, he writes again to his wife about the conversations which he has just had in Paris: "Loucheur's luncheon in Paris was a considerable affair. [Aristide] Briand, [Raoul] Peret, Vincent Auriol, about 15 MPs representing leading elements in all parties - & vy advanced politicians" (Soames, 1998, p. 306)⁶. All this to say that no British politicians were better informed about opinion in French Government circles than he then was.

His report to the Cabinet two days after the Paris conference in January 1925 is interesting because it does not show France as having a domineering attitude – but rather showing the lack of fibre which was to prove so tragic fifteen years later:

Speaking generally, I find the French Ministers and politicians depressed. Having seen them so often during the last ten years, often in tragic hours, I have never found them so tame and sad. For the moment there is no resentment towards us. All that has passed to the United States. [...] In my opinion the new attitude of France, amid all her difficulties, deserves recognition at the hands of His Majesty's Government.

The position of France ground between the upper and nether millstones of American avarice and German revenge affords full justification for her present sombre mood. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 341)⁷

When exactly he got convinced that the Weimar Germans were using double talk – agreeing to pacts in favour of peace in public and making plans for rebuilding their war potential in secret – will probably never be established. Likewise, it is also extremely difficult to say when he finally chose the lesser of two evils – backing France at the risk of encouraging it to make fewer concessions to Germany. That danger seemed to be deliberately forgotten and ignored later in the 1920s, when Churchill wrote his articles in praise of the two great French leaders of the recent war – the obvious intention being to emphasise the military and other virtues of France. In 1929, he praised Foch:

His undaunted and ever-flowing combative energy, as a man in contact with other personalities and harrying remorseless detail, as a Commander with a front crumbling under the German flail, was proved inexhaustible even by the Great War. His power of endurance was the equal of his energy. [...]

The magnitude of the events which Marshal Foch directed is of course beyond compare in the annals of war. [...] In 1914 he had saved the day by refusing to recognise defeat. [...] But 1918 was created for him. [...] Then it was that the characteristic genius of Foch attained its full and decisive expression. (Muller, 2012, p. 184)

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5 "Letter to Clementine, 10 January 1925".

6 "Letter to Clementine, 28 January 1927".

7 Churchill Papers 18/21.

For good measure, he also used his glowing portrait of Clemenceau the better to stress the indomitable will of the French never to submit to the Germans:

The truth is that Clemenceau embodied and expressed France. As much as any single human being, miraculously magnified, can ever be a nation, he was France. [...] He represented the French people risen against tyrants – tyrants of the mind, tyrants of the soul, tyrants of the body; foreign tyrants, domestic tyrants, swindlers, humbugs, grafters, traitors, invaders, defeatists – all lay within the bound of the Tiger and against them the Tiger waged inexorable war. Anti-clerical, anti-monarchist, anti-Communist, anti-German – in all this he represented the dominant spirit of France. (Churchill, 29 November 1930, p. 290)

Churchill's description of the double face of France and how it was symbolised by the contradictory, yet complementary personality of the two joint saviours of the country in 1918, as he saw them, has never been bettered. After his portrait of Clemenceau and how he represented the dominant spirit of France, Churchill continued:

There was another mood and another France. It was the France of Foch – ancient, aristocratic; the France whose grace and culture, whose etiquette and ceremonial has bestowed gifts around the world. There was the France of chivalry, the France of Versailles, and, above all, the France of Joan of Arc. It was this secondary and submerged national personality that Foch recalled.

The link is cleverly made with the events which eventually led to victory, pointing to the decisive factors of convergence:

But when they gazed upon the inscription on the golden statue of Joan of Arc: “La pitié qu’elle avait pour le royaume de France” and saw gleaming the Maid’s uplifted sword, their two hearts beat as one. The French have a dual nature in a degree not possessed by any other great people. [...] It is an unending struggle which goes on continually, not only in every successive Parliament, but in every street and village of France, and in the bosom of almost every Frenchman. Only when France is in mortal peril does the struggle have a truce. The comradeship of Foch and Clemenceau illustrates as in a cameo the history of France.

Anyone not familiar with Churchill's two articles might easily be excused for thinking that they are the translation of some writings by General de Gaulle, such is the similarity in the style and reasoning. Here, Churchill was clearly “more French than the French”. Indeed, his Francophilia made him seize every occasion to go to Paris, to the French Riviera and to the châteaux of his wealthy British and American friends in France, with many private visits supplementing his official talks in the 1920s.

3: 1933-1939

Clemenceau and Foch both died in 1929, but during “the gathering storm” of the 1930s Churchill never forgot how “in the combination of these two men during the last year of war, the French people found in their service all the glories and the vital essences of Gaul”. (Churchill, 29 November 1930, p. 291) Hence his famous *cri de coeur* in the Commons, “Thank God for the French Army”, on 23 March 1933, less than two months after Hitler had become Chancellor

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of Germany. For the young generation, it would be easy to misunderstand the tenor of what he says of the episode in his Memoirs: “I remember particularly the look of pain and aversion which I saw on the faces of Members in all parts of the House when I said “Thank God for the French Army” ” (Churchill, 1948b, p. 77). Of course the Members mentioned did not foresee the routing of that army in 1940 – their “pain and aversion” was directed at Churchill’s plea for a renewal of the military alliance of the Great War.

Churchill’s isolation in British political circles during his “Wilderness Years” was paradoxically paralleled by his renewed presence among leading French statesmen. Once again, he availed himself of every opportunity to go to France, staying in luxury villas on the Riviera for pleasure or at the Paris Embassy for business. His visit to France in September 1936 is remarkable for the number of important people whom he met. Besides Flandin, who had been his opposite number when he was Minister of War and Air from 1919 to 1921 and was briefly Foreign Minister in early 1936, Churchill also saw his old friend General Georges, who invited him to the military manoeuvres near Aix-en-Provence on 9 September, followed by a visit of the Maginot Line. He duly followed the manoeuvres as a guest of General Gamelin, now commander-in-chief of the French Army. In the evening he wrote to Léon Blum, then Prime Minister: “I have had a most interesting day with General Gamelin at the manoeuvres. I was very pleased with all I saw”. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 340)⁸ In case one should think this is base flattery, totally insincere, he wrote to Clementine a few days later using almost the same terms:

The manoeuvres were very interesting. I drove about all day with General Gamelin the Generalissimo, who was communicative on serious topics.... To anyone with military knowledge it was most instructive. The officers of the French army are impressive by their gravity & competence. One feels the strength of the nation resides in its army. (Soames, 1998, p. 417)⁹

On the 12th, he had lunch with General Gamelin and on the 13th with Flandin. From there, he went back to the Embassy in Paris before leaving on the 15th for the Maginot Line with the British Military Attaché. After a ten days’ interlude in London, he was back in Paris with Clementine on the 24th, and they had lunch with President Herriot, Flandin and Paul Reynaud – then a backbench Deputy of Paris. In the evening he delivered a major speech in English at the *Théâtre des Ambassadeurs* on the importance of Anglo-French cooperation in defence of Parliamentary Democracy and Western Civilisation, in contrast with “the doctrines of Comrade Trotsky and Dr Goebbels” (Gilbert, 1976, p. 788).

One of the paradoxes is that Churchill’s good French friends were often from the Radical and Socialist Left: Léon Blum, Daladier or Paul Reynaud. Indeed he gradually fell out with Flandin in 1938. On 10 January, after dining with him on the Riviera, Churchill wrote to Clementine:

The dinner with Flandin was very depressing, the food lamentable. But the account he gave of France was most pessimistic.... It looks as if these French Right-Wing politicians thought that Germany would become undisputed ruler of Europe in the near future. (Soames, 1998, p. 433)¹⁰

Churchill’s isolation in British political circles during his “Wilderness Years” was paradoxically paralleled by his renewed presence among leading French statesmen

8 “Letter to Léon Blum, 8 September 1936”. Spencer-Churchill Papers.

9 “Letter to Clementine, 13 September 1936”.

10 “Letter to Clementine, 10 January 1938”.

The final estrangement occurred on 27 March 1938, when during another lunch in Paris, at the British Embassy, with Sir Eric and Lady Phipps, Flandin argued that the only possibility of recovery of strength for France was to bring down the Popular Front and introduce Government by decree, with Churchill objecting that this “would alienate all Left sympathies in Great Britain for France”. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 961)¹¹

That trip of March 1938, only a few days after the *Anschluss*, though much shorter than in September 1936, was also of major importance. We have all the details of Churchill’s meetings with prominent French leaders thanks to the daily reports which Sir Eric Phipps, the Ambassador, sent to the Foreign Office during Churchill’s stay. The schedule is most impressive. Friday 25th: meeting with Léger at the Quai d’Orsay in the morning, lunch with Paul Reynaud, dinner with Herriot. Saturday 26th: dinner with Léon Blum and Paul-Boncour at the Embassy. Sunday 27th: lunch with Flandin (not a success, as we saw) and dinner with Daladier, both again at the Embassy. Sir Eric Phipps also noted that outside these formal functions, Churchill saw “André Chaumeix of the *Journal des Débats*, Wladimir d’Ormesson of the *Figaro*, Louis Marin, General Gamelin, Mandel, Chautemps, Chastenet of the *Temps*, Sauerwein of the *Paris-Soir* and others”, adding “He wanted to see a Communist, but I strongly advised against this and he abstained”. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 963-964)¹² Thus it is clear that in what Sir Eric Phipps called “this hectic and electric week-end”, which took place “in an increasingly kaleidoscopic manner”, Churchill met all the men who were to count so much in *L’heure tragique*, to take up the French title of his discussion on June 1940 in *The Second World War* – with the exception of Laval, Pétain and Weygand. What did he tell them? We know, thanks again to the Phipps Papers: “Churchill’s share in the conversation was chiefly devoted to the urgent necessity of forming a solid Anglo-French block against Germany [...with] close and immediate Anglo-French staff talks”. We also learn that “these suggestions fell in the main on willing ears”. But then the British Ambassador intervened in conformity with Foreign Office policy: “Churchill’s French interlocutors naturally realise that he only speaks for himself and a very small section of British public opinion, and I lay great stress on this, and urge liberal sprinklings of salt on what he says”. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 960)¹³ As he wrote to Sir Alexander Cadogan, “I fervently hope that all these meetings will not unduly excite the French. In any case I shall do my best to calm them down and to convince them that Winston is not the arbiter of our destinies” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 959)¹⁴.

In *The Gathering Storm*, Churchill mentions the friendly atmosphere with Blum and Paul Reynaud. He also confirms his difficulties with Flandin: “We argued for two hours”. And he suggests that the first cracks in his absolute confidence in the French army appeared when hearing Gamelin, in contrast with his views after the manoeuvres in September 1936:

Gamelin, who also visited me, was rightly confident in the strength of the French Army at the moment, but none too comfortable when I questioned him upon the artillery, about which he had precise knowledge. (Churchill, 1948b, p. 282)

This was new, because until then he had only really been queasy about the French Air Force. Churchill also left Paris uneasy about the political developments there :

11 “Sir Eric Phipps to Lord Halifax, 27 March 1938”. Phipps Papers.

12 “Sir Eric Phipps to Lord Halifax, 28 March 1938”. Foreign Office Papers 800/311.

13 “Sir Eric Phipps to Lord Halifax, 27 March 1938”. Foreign Office Papers 800/311.

14 “Sir Eric Phipps to Sir Alexander Cadogan, 24 March 1938”. Phipps Papers.

The attention of the French Government to the dangers of the European scene was distracted by the ceaseless whirlpool of internal politics at the moment and by the imminent fall of the Blum Government. (Churchill, 1948b, p. 282)

Thus it seems clear that by the spring of 1938 behind the façade of absolute faith in French military invincibility in case of attack – he knew of course that what was later called the Maginot mentality precluded any French invasion of Germany – his faith in France’s political will to fight and ability to renew the *Union sacrée* of the Great War was no longer unshakeable.

Churchill and Clementine went to Paris again in July 1938, as official guests of the French Government during the Royal Visit, and Churchill continued to follow political developments in France extremely closely, keeping his correspondence with Blum and his successor Daladier. One instance of this is his exchange of correspondence with Paul Reynaud in October 1938. On the 10th, after Munich, Churchill wrote:

I cannot see what foreign policy is now open to the French Republic.... You have been infected by our weakness, without being fortified by our strength. The politicians have broken the spirit of both countries successively.... Not since the loss of the American Colonies has England suffered so deep an injury. France is back to the morrow of 1870. What are we to do?

To which Paul Reynaud replied on the 20th: “France is, alas, in a worse situation than in 1871” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 1208-9)¹⁵.

On his way to the French Riviera in January 1939, he spent a day in Paris, having lunch with Paul Reynaud and an afternoon conversation with Sir Eric Phipps at the Embassy before meeting Léon Blum “who was the most informing of all”, he wrote to Clementine in a long letter marked Secret in which he gave her a full account of his conversations, the gist of which being an evaluation of the odds which the French would have faced if they had invaded Germany at the time of the Czech crisis (Soames, 1998, p. 447)¹⁶. As he said to the House on 27 April, all this told on Anglo-French relations, but nothing should be allowed “to drive a wedge between us and France”. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 1477)

Churchill was again a guest of honour, on the official stand, for the 14th of July military parade on the Champs-Élysées. General Gamelin invited him to come again to visit another part of the Maginot Line and he wrote on the 21st to discuss the dates and details, ending his letter with flattering words on both the French Army and its supreme commander:

It was a great pleasure for me to see the splendid parade of the French Army and the French Empire on July 14, and if I may say so, to feel your hand upon this situation, which clearly approaches another climax. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 1572)¹⁷

Churchill’s last visit to France before the outbreak of war, in August, seems to deserve close attention since it tells us a lot about Churchill’s final attitude to France in those days of anxiety. His visit of the Maginot Line from the 14th to the 17th with Generals Gamelin and Georges greatly satisfied him, and on his return he wrote to the Secretary of State for War:

15 «Letter to Paul Reynaud, 10 October 1938”.

16 “Letter to Clementine, 8 January 1939 – Secret”.

17 “Letter to General Gamelin, 21 July 1939”.

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The French Front cannot be surprised. It cannot be broken at any point except by an effort which would be enormously costly in life, and would take so much time that the general situation would be transformed while it was in progress. (Churchill, 1948b, p. 384)

Retrospectively, however, Churchill reflected on the warning signs which he should have interpreted more percipiently:

What was remarkable about all I learned on my visit was the complete acceptance of the defensive which dominated my most responsible French hosts, and imposed itself irresistibly upon me. In talking to all these highly competent French officers, one had the sense that the Germans were the stronger, and that France no longer had the life-thrust to mount a great offensive. She would fight for her existence – *voilà tout!* (Churchill, 1948b, p. 384)

Back from the Maginot Line, he went for another painting holiday at a château where Clementine and their daughter Mary joined him. Shortening his family holiday in view of the deteriorating situation – the newspapers were full of rumours about a spectacular German-Soviet pact – Churchill stopped in Paris on his way back to England, having lunch once more with General Georges on the 23rd, who gave him a regained confidence in the French Army. This is confirmed by General Ironside, who wrote in his diary on the 27th, after having lunch at Chartwell with Churchill: “Winston was full of Georges, whom he had seen over in France. I found that he had become very French in outlook and had a wonderful opinion of the whole thing he saw” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 1597)¹⁸.

What is of course of considerable importance is that Churchill did not only say that he was impressed by the preparedness of the French Army in public speeches – this could be interpreted as perfunctory, insincere declarations – but in private, to close friends and associates. Now, that does not mean that he was naïve: he knew that the alliance with the French implied constant efforts, especially in view of the instability of their political leadership. Yet, one can notice how he was able to back the right horses in the long run – that is, the French leaders who emerged intact from the misdeeds and betrayals of defeatism, occupation and collaboration. By September 1939, Churchill had broken with Flandin – and he never got along well with Laval or Pétain. On the other hand, by then his two best political friends in France were Léon Blum and Paul Reynaud. The latter may have been unequal to the situation in May-June 1940, but he was not a traitor – and the same could be said of Gamelin, and also of Georges.

On the eve of the war, therefore, Churchill’s love and support for France was undoubtedly comforted by the substantial number of “sound” Frenchmen in high places with whom he was friends – and he would have no difficulty ignoring or fighting the rest during the war.

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4: 1939-1945

During the “Phoney War” period, which Churchill spent at the Admiralty, he naturally pleaded for the closest possible cooperation with France, as in 1914-1918. When he became Prime Minister on 10 May – the day of the German offensive – he never envisaged that the French could

18 “General Sir Edmund Ironside: diary, 27 August 1939”.

sue for a separate armistice, especially in view of the solemn agreement concluded between the two countries during Paul Reynaud's visit to London on 28 March. Admittedly, certain choices made by the French from September 1939 did not please him, like the confirmation of Gamelin when he would have preferred Georges as Commander-in-Chief, or their refusal to fill the gap in the Ardennes between the Maginot Line and the Allied Armies. But he was soon to despair of the French and their lack of nerve before the German breakthrough at Sedan.

Hardly ten days after the real start of hostilities, on 19 May, his secretary "Jock" Colville noted in his diary: "Winston also dictated a telegram to Reynaud, expressing his distress at the plight of the French army and insinuating that we had been rather let down" (Colville, 1985, p. 158). On the 25th, Churchill asked the three Chiefs of Staff to examine the options left to Britain if France withdrew from the war. The Dunkirk evacuation was of course linked to their conclusions, like the thorny question – never finally elucidated – of the sending of additional fighter squadrons to France. Churchill uneasily navigated between his military advisers who wanted to keep them and the French who clamoured for more: in so doing, however, he gave excuses to the defeatists. One thing is for sure: Paul Reynaud and de Gaulle were to approve of Churchill's decision to save most for the defence of Britain, the former in his Memoirs, the latter as early as 1940.

It seems that it is on 11 June, at Briare, that Churchill realised that all his efforts to keep France in the war had been in vain, particularly when his old friend General Georges intimated that suing for an armistice was inevitable. The confirmation came for Churchill on 13 June, at the Tours prefecture, where he had come to attend what was to be the last Inter-Allied Council of this phase of the war, when Reynaud officially announced to the British delegation that General Weygand had formally recommended that the Government should ask the German terms for an armistice. In his Memoirs, Churchill has very harsh words towards Weygand – in some way the exact opposite of Foch in his mind. On the extraordinary affair of the Franco-British Union proposed on 15-16 June, "my first reaction was unfavourable" he later wrote (Churchill, 1949, p. 205). But after the war, he did not doubt that if Reynaud had held his own on the 16th at Bordeaux, on the 17th the two Prime Ministers would "have uplifted and converted the defeatists round the table, or left them in a minority or even under arrest". In his Memoirs, Churchill proposes a scenario of speculation:

France would never have ceased to be one of the principal belligerent allies and would have been spared the fearful schism which rent and still rends her people. Her homeland no doubt would have lain prostrate under the German rule, but that was only what actually happened after the Anglo-American descent in November, 1942.

Now that the whole story is before us, no one can doubt that the armistice did not spare France a pang. (Churchill, 1949, p. 222)

France was to stay among the belligerents, but alas not the "principal" ones. In his own Memoirs, Colville suggests that Churchill would have liked Georges Mandel – a prominent anti-defeatist and moderate right-wing minister since 1938 – to take the lead of a movement which would "carry on the struggle from North Africa". But Mandel wanted to stay with his fellow Jews and his origins made him "unacceptable to many of his compatriots". Since "there was no other available politician of comparable experience... the lot therefore fell on Charles de Gaulle" (Colville, 1981, p. 196). Churchill of course does not say that de Gaulle was his second-best choice – on the contrary, he gives us to understand that he unhesitatingly spotted him as "the

In his own Memoirs, Colville suggests that Churchill would have liked Georges Mandel to take the lead of a movement which would "carry on the struggle from North Africa"

Constable of France” (Churchill, 1949, p. 215), thus immediately likening him to Du Guesclin, the implacable enemy of the English during the Hundred Years War.

Still, it would be an exaggeration to say that Churchill staked everything on de Gaulle, since he was careful to keep the possibility of arrangements with Vichy whenever they best served British interests. This infuriated de Gaulle, who is now seen as having been over-sensitive in his denunciation of Churchill’s supposed scheming in the Levant, both at the time and in his War Memoirs. Few historians today accept the Gaullist thesis that a Machiavellian Churchill tried to take advantage of France’s misfortune to further the interests of the British Empire. One only has to consider Churchill’s constant, undeniable efforts to impose the legitimacy of the Free French, first to a British public which was initially unconvinced, if not outright hostile, then to Soviets who were indifferent and finally to Americans who had long been negatively influenced by the Anti-Gaullists who had taken refuge in their country. The most obdurate of Churchill’s critics cannot deny his efforts finally to obtain the recognition of the Free French Government, a seat for France in the Security Council of the United Nations and a Zone of Occupation in Germany.

Churchill’s inner conflict between his personal tenderness towards France and the harsh facts of Britain’s survival probably reached a climax at the time of the “Greek tragedy”, as he calls it, of Mers el-Kébir (Oran) – when he gave orders to open fire in July 1940 in the face of Admiral Darlan’s refusal to yield, duly obeyed by his subordinates. Three elements were inextricably linked following this “hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned” (Churchill, 1949, p. 232): the enormous relief of warding off the threat of a German seizure of the French fleet, the self-satisfaction of hearing the Parliamentary Conservative Party applauding him unanimously for the first time, but also the realisation of the harm done by the death of so many French sailors to this Anglo-French alliance which he had so assiduously cultivated since at least 1933. Admittedly, de Gaulle rose to the occasion and put the blame on Vichy’s blind obstinacy – but how many Frenchmen followed him in July 1940?

Churchill patiently strove to heal the wounds, beginning with his fine broadcast in French on 21 October – which few people were in fact able to hear. Its importance lies in the symbolic dimension of the speech, which reaffirms his faith in the French and his love of France:

Frenchmen! For more than thirty years in peace and war I have marched with you, and I am marching still on the same road. To-night I speak to you at your firesides wherever you may be, or whatever your fortunes are. I repeat the prayer around the lousis d’or, “Dieu protège la France”.[...] Never will I believe that the soul of France is dead. Never will I believe that her place among the greatest nations of the world has been lost forever! [...] Vive la France! (Churchill, 1941, p. 295-97)¹⁹

In his Memoirs, Churchill credits this broadcast with an impact which it was unable to have, if only because the German jamming made inaudible the passages which his English accent did not render incomprehensible. Linking it with the Oran tragedy as a sub-text, he suggests that it led to a general forgiveness:

There is no doubt that this appeal went home to the hearts of millions of Frenchmen, and to this day [1949] I am reminded of it by men and women of all classes in France, who al-

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19 The French text follows, pp. 298-300.

ways treat me with the utmost kindness in spite of the hard things I had to do – sometimes to them – for our common salvation. (Churchill, 1949, p. 512)

The great ceremony of reconciliation had to wait until the celebrations of 11 November 1944, when Churchill was the Guest of Honour, sitting on de Gaulle's right on the official grandstand before being received by the Resistant authorities of the City of Paris who – knowing his taste for military memorabilia – presented him with a Nazi flag taken from the enemy during the Liberation street fights. He resided at the Quai d'Orsay – which gave him occasion to remark on the contrast between 1940 and 1944: "Everything was mounted and serviced magnificently, and inside the palace it was difficult to believe that my last meeting there [...], with Reynaud's Government and General Gamelin in May 1940 was anything but a bad dream" (Churchill, 1966, p. 211)

The harsh constraints of *Realpolitik* re-emerged as the Nazi peril receded, but Churchill could rejoice once more that his personal feelings coincided with his country's interests. As he explained at Yalta to President Roosevelt:

To give France a zone of occupation was by no means the end of the matter. Germany would surely rise again, and while the Americans could always go home the French had to live next door to her. A strong France was vital not only to Europe but to Great Britain. She alone could deny the rocket sites on her Channel coast and build up an army to contain the Germans. (Churchill, 1966, p. 292)

This sounded very much like the "Thank you for the French Army of 1933". At the same time, Churchill entrusted the great Francophile, Duff Cooper, with the Paris Embassy. Thanks also to his beautiful wife, a perfect hostess, at a time when austerity was the order of the day in post-Liberation Paris, the glittering receptions given at the Residence made it the undisputed seat of intelligent conversation, gourmet food, fine wines, vintage champagne and old brandy: everything that Churchill enjoyed in France. He was a frequent visitor – and this was probably enough to convince him that his beloved *France éternelle* was back on the world stage after this detestable, but after all relatively short period of absence.

5: 1945-1965

In his first major post-war speech in France, at Metz on 14 July 1946, Churchill enthusiastically reaffirmed his faith in the Anglo-French alliance in spite of the events of 1940:

Never have I allowed the slightest recrimination between Britain and France and never must you allow the slightest recrimination between France and Britain. History will tell its tale, for us both, of tragedy, of triumph, of honour.

It has woven our two peoples together in a manner indissoluble and inviolable. We fought each other for many centuries. And now we must help each other all we can. Shame to any who deny this vital fact. (Churchill, 1948a, p. 173)

As Leader of the Opposition from 1945 to 1951, he never ceased to call the Anglo-American allies, in the Commons, in North America and during his European tours, to support the rapid recovery of France. Even more remarkable, in the course of his Zürich speech on "The United States of Europe" on 19 September 1946, he proposed for France no less than "the moral leadership of Europe" (Churchill, 1948a, p. 201). Those who subscribe to Freudian

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theories would argue that there was a dimension of self-interest, since a prosperous France would enable him to resume his travels – in style – to the châteaux and villas which he loved on the French Riviera. He in fact lost no time in taking up his old habits, for he spent a week at Hendaye before going back to Potsdam in July 1945. This was the first of a long series of extended holidays in the South of France, including Monaco, which only ended in June 1963, when he became too weak to leave Britain.

In Paris, he was always received as a major statesman. In May 1947, he was awarded the *Médaille militaire* at the Invalides by the Prime Minister, Paul Ramadier – dining in the evening with the President of the Republic, Vincent Auriol, a pre-war political friend. His presence at Metz for the 14th of July celebrations in 1946 is explained by an extraordinary *rendez-vous* given in November 1942 to General Giraud when his native city was liberated. At Strasbourg on 15 August 1949, where he received the Freedom of the City, he also gave an applauded speech to the crowds massed on the largest square. The following month, at the Hôtel de Paris in Monte-Carlo, they demolished a wall in the cellar which had hidden the oldest brandies from the occupiers to celebrate the return of their most famous guest.

What remains most surprising today is that he scarcely slowed the pace of his visits to France when he was back in power in 1951. His constant presence was excellent publicity for the local tourist industry and in September 1952 the Town Council of Cap-d'Ail made him Honorary Mayor. He came back in September 1953, to recover from his major stroke, and continued to often stay there with his old crony Lord Beaverbrook after his retirement in 1955. From a political point of view, one can perceive a wide difference between his insistence in Opposition on the restoration of France as a major power and his impatience with the French in 1951-1955: by then, they had become an embarrassment for his obsessive pursuit of a Summit of the Big Three, as he made it painfully obvious to the French Prime Minister and Foreign Minister during the Bermuda Conference of December 1953. We do not know what he answered to his wife, who wrote from London after reading reports of the discussions in the press: “The general impression is that the French have been as tiresome, obstructive & odious as usual” (Soames, 1998, p. 377)²⁰. But this is perhaps the place to quote “Jock” Colville’s magnificently percipient remark: “de Gaulle’s loyalty was [...] to France *alone*. Churchill’s [...] was merely to Britain *first*” (Colville, 1981, p. 209).

With the burden of the Premiership over, France became again only a source of pleasure and honours. Two partly overlapping attractions drew him to it from 1955: his literary agent’s splendid villa at Roquebrune, and Onassis’ yacht and Hôtel de Paris at Monte-Carlo. Both hosts organised sparkling dinner parties for him as he loved them, with important people reshaping the world in their informed conversations. At Roquebrune, he met old acquaintances like Paul Reynaud, former President René Coty and former Chancellor Adenauer. On his way to the Riviera, he often stopped in Paris. On 6 November 1958 he was made *Compagnon de la Libération* by de Gaulle, who decided to reopen the Order for him. Churchill was obviously flattered – and on that occasion all the old quarrels were forgotten. Further meetings between the Churchills and the de Gaulles took place at the Nice prefecture and in London. A final source of satisfaction for the aging Churchill was that he also saw de Gaulle introduce – not the Westminster Model which was Churchill’s lifelong ideal – but at last some form of stability in

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20 “Letter from Clementine, 8 December 1953”.

French political life, as he had always suffered from the lack of continuity in government action under the 3rd and 4th Republics.

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