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## The Making of the Anglo-French Alliance, 1938–39

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In the spring of 1939 the threat of war weighed heavily over Europe. In March, just six months after the Munich Conference, Germany destroyed what remained of Czechoslovakia, violently repudiating Hitler's assurances that the Sudetenland represented the limit of Germany's territorial ambitions in Europe. Soon afterwards the Germans began to threaten their eastern neighbours, particularly Poland. In April Italian troops invaded and annexed Albania, an apparent step towards Mussolini's oft-declared goal of a Mediterranean Empire. In this tense international situation, a Quai d'Orsay evaluation in June found comfort in the state of Anglo-French relations. The two countries, its author enthused, were 'perfectly in agreement' on the need to prevent or resist 'coups de force' in Europe.<sup>1</sup> If the conclusion is somewhat exaggerated, the satisfactory tone is understandable. For most of the period after 1918, Paris and London tangled over European politics, particularly the treatment of Germany.<sup>2</sup> A remarkable turnaround, however, occurred in the months following Munich as French and British policies converged on a shared resolve to resist future aggression in Europe, culminating in early 1939 in the creation of an alliance. Britain and France vowed to resist any attempt by Nazi Germany to expand its territory by force. Hitler would not achieve *Lebensraum* without a war.<sup>3</sup>

As a significant episode in the origins of the second world war, the making of the Anglo-French alliance has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, which can be broadly divided into two tendencies. The first is to examine the policy of one country largely in isolation – sometimes France, more often Britain.<sup>4</sup> The second tends to place British policy or more generally Anglo-German relations at the centre of the story. It assumes that decisions made in London (and Berlin) dictated the course of events and what happened in Paris (or elsewhere) was of

secondary importance.<sup>5</sup> With few exceptions, studies of British and French policies in relation to one another are missing.<sup>6</sup> This is unfortunate since juxtaposing the two offers important insights into the making of the Anglo-French alliance and the origins of the war.

A closer examination of the months preceding the alliance – and an examination of both British and French policies – highlights the critical role of France. Following Munich, French leaders considered and then rejected a retreat into isolation, in effect choosing to resist future German expansion in Europe. It is worth stressing that this decision preceded that of the British and was taken largely independently of them. If the British exerted little influence on French decisions, the opposite was not the case, which points to the role of misperception. Beginning in late 1938, fears of a French retreat, when combined with a ‘war scare’ triggered by reports of an impending German attack in western Europe, compelled the British to revise their foreign and defence policies. Significantly, British leaders appear to have been largely ignorant of the French decision to resist Germany. Why this might be so points to the role of manipulation. Evidence suggests that French staff officers deliberately encouraged Whitehall’s fears of a French retreat and of Germany’s aggressive intentions in the west despite the questionable soundness of both claims. More surprising perhaps, there is also evidence that the British General Staff knowingly collaborated with their French counterparts in this effort.

The evolution of French policy begins with Munich, which inflicted a tremendous strategic blow. By dismembering Czechoslovakia, the agreement eliminated a powerful ally in Germany’s rear.<sup>7</sup> Recognition of this fact prompted the French to reassess their strategic policy. Informing this process was the pressing question of what to do when, as expected, the Germans next challenged the status quo. This in turn raised the issue of eastern Europe and of France’s remaining alliances with Poland and the Soviet Union, since it was assumed that Germany’s immediate expansionist ambitions lay eastwards. Thus, at stake were questions of French resistance to German hegemony and France’s role in Europe. Despite significant political and military support for a retreat from eastern Europe, the French rejected this option. In so doing, they committed themselves to a policy of resisting German expansion, if necessary by war.

Among French leaders a policy of retreat enjoyed the determined support of foreign minister Georges Bonnet. During the Czech crisis Bonnet had laboured tirelessly and sometimes deviously to keep France