Allen on Clayton, 'General Maxime Weygand, 1867-1965: Fortune and Misfortune'

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The highs and lows of French history in the twentieth century are charted in the career of General Maxime Weygand, the subject of this monograph by Anthony Clayton. A naturalized Frenchman born to unknown parents in Belgium in 1867, Weygand rose through the ranks of the military to become Marshal Foch’s right-hand man in the First World War, a successful colonial administrator, and chief of the General Staff in 1930. Yet this succinct book dwells mostly on the moments that defined Weygand’s legacy: his service as commander in chief in May-June 1940 and afterwards as a member of the Vichy state. Clayton offers a reappraisal of Weygand’s role in the Second World War, and cautions historians against attaching too much blame to any individual for France’s defeat, which he portrays instead as the result of decades of civil-military distrust under the Third Republic.

The first three chapters of the book follow Weygand’s remarkable rise from orphan to military leader. Beginning with his mysterious origins (he was likely the illegitimate son of Emperor Maximilian), Clayton describes how Weygand came to prominence as a staff officer in the First World War and its aftermath. These chapters highlight Weygand’s skill as a diplomat, his devout Catholicism, and his adherence to military discipline, values which Clayton credits for much of Weygand’s career success. However, in a nation still reeling from the Dreyfus Affair, these same beliefs made his loyalty to the republic suspect in the eyes of the political Left.

Chapter 4 explains how this distrust hampered Weygand’s effectiveness as a senior military figure in the years before the Second World War. In 1930 Weygand was made chief of the General Staff but found himself quickly swept into partisan politics, which culminated in the far-right demonstrations of February 1934. Clayton pushes against contemporary critics, as well as modern-day biographers, who have portrayed Weygand as an admirer of interwar fascism. Weygand “remained a staunch conservative but was never a neofascist,” and had no personal involvement with reactionary movements (p. 73). Yet he also failed to fix the military sclerosis of the period. His limited attempts to reform the army were stymied by an ever-changing set of governments, budget problems, and an anti-militaristic political climate. But Clayton contends that no individual could have saved France given its internal divisions, least of all a traditionalist Catholic general.

A greater misfortune was to be recalled out of retirement at the beginning of the Second World War. In chapter 5, Clayton rightly points out that the government gave Weygand an impossible task in May
1940 when it appointed him commander in chief and ordered him to halt the German invasion of France. Clayton defends Weygand’s request for an armistice as the only realistic way of sparing France’s colonies and navy, and explains why plans to continue the war from Africa could not have worked. Less justifiable was Weygand’s unfounded fear of fifth columnists on the left. Still, there can be no doubt that Weygand fought the Battle of France to the best of his ability, and attempted to salvage as much honor as possible in the ensuing armistice. Postwar accusations that he engineered a French defeat were unfounded.

Weygand is most often condemned for his time as a Pétainist functionary through 1941, first as minister of national defense, then as commander of Vichy forces in North Africa. In chapters 6 and 7, Clayton argues that Weygand deserves more credit than he has been given for using his positions to rebuild French strength. Weygand obstructed attempts by the Axis to use French resources, and cannily avoided any pro-Allied moves that would give Hitler an excuse to occupy French territory outright. It proved impossible to walk this political tightrope for long, however, and Weygand was dismissed in November 1941. But he left behind 170,000 trained men in North Africa who were later able to fight alongside the Allies after Operation Torch. Ironically, Weygand would play no part in this victory. Arrested by the SS in 1943, he spent the rest of the war in prison camps, and was briefly imprisoned again in France after liberation on a charge of “anti-Republican attitudes” (p. 134). In chapter 8 Clayton describes Weygand’s last two decades, which were spent fighting accusations of collaboration. When he died in 1965, he was denied military honors.

As with any work, there is room for criticism. It is unfortunate that Clayton does not make more use of Weygand’s own writing, especially given that the general left behind two volumes of memoirs. This would have helped readers better understand Weygand’s character and the choices he made. Robert Paxton writes in *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* that the defining attributes of Vichy politics were distrust of “parliamentarism and laissez-faire economics ... because those means no longer seemed capable of dealing with the twin crises of decadence and disorder from the 1930’s. Hard measures by a frightened middle class—that, indeed, is one good general definition of fascism. In that broader sense, Vichy was fascist.”[1] Viewed from that perspective, it is not easy to agree with Clayton’s claim that Weygand never sympathized with fascism, especially during his Vichy tenure, when he wrote memorandums on the evils of Freemasonry, capitalism, and (hypocritically) naturalized immigrants, and enforced racial laws against Algerian Jews.

That said, Clayton brings an insightful outsider’s perspective on a controversial figure of French history. Each chapter situates Weygand’s career within a political context, showing how the steady growth of distrust between the military and the government of the Third Republic led to collapse in 1940, and the service of many genuine French patriots in Pétain’s puppet state. Ultimately, Weygand’s life offers a reminder that the line between resistance and collaboration in occupied France was never a clear one, especially for the people in power.

Note


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