

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN INTELLIGENCE

**A RARELY USED SOURCE FOR THE “PHONEY WAR”.
THE SECRET FRENCH DOCUMENTS FOUND BY GERMAN SOLDIERS
AT LA CHARITÉ-SUR-LOIRE ON JUNE 19TH, 1940**

Lars BAERENTZEN*

Abstract:

Germany justified the April 9, 1940, attack on Norway and Denmark by claiming that Great Britain and France were planning an intervention in Scandinavia. After the defeat of France, German soldiers found on June 19, 1940, by chance, in abandoned railroad cars in La Charité-sur-Loire, many French secret documents which Berlin saw as a confirmation of this claim. The German Foreign Ministry in 1941 published 70 of these documents in Denmark and in other occupied countries including France. These texts were used in press articles and in some official speeches. This paper describes the circumstances of the capture and argues that the documents are genuine and may, with caution, be used as historical evidence, although the 1941 publication was indeed propaganda. A small number of the documents are presented in some detail. The German publication has apparently not been used by Danish historians, but a few post-war historians in Great Britain, the USA, France and Germany have made use of the “captured French documents” and have discussed their historical value. This paper argues that they are important for understanding the course of the war in early 1940, the period known as “The Phoney War”.

Keywords: *1941 German propaganda, captured French documents, La Charité-sur-Loire, British and French 1940 plans, Scandinavia in World War II, The Phoney war.*

Introduction

When German troops occupied Denmark and attacked Norway on April 9, 1940, the German Government justified this action in a “Memorandum to the Danish and Norwegian Governments”. This document stated that England and France *are using all possible means in order to transfer the field of battle to the neutral continent inside and*

* Historian and a former intelligence practitioner for Danish Defence, independent consultant and lecturer. Email address: email: lars.eb@gmail.com.

*outside Europe. (...) Quite openly, English and French statesmen have, in the course of recent months, proclaimed an extension of the war to these areas as the main strategic idea in their conduct of the war. The first opportunity to do so was the Russo-Finnish conflict*¹.

Less than three months later, after the German victories in the Netherlands, Belgium and France and while the situation in France was still chaotic – and before the armistice was signed in Compiègne, German soldiers found, on June 19, 1940, by pure chance a large number of French diplomatic and military documents which had been left in a French railroad car abandoned in the station at La Charité-sur-Loire. *These documents were part of the archives dealing with “inter-allied affairs” at the headquarters of the French Commander-in-Chief, General Gamelin.* Gamelin had been replaced as C-in-C by General Weygand a short time before. His headquarters’ archives were being evacuated, but this particular train, bound for Vichy, found the track blocked at La Charité.

A few days’ study of these captured documents convinced the German Government that they had struck gold: It was a discovery, they believed, of great value – not as “intelligence”, for the German victory over France had made the information value of the documents largely irrelevant – but it seemed to be priceless for propaganda purposes. This was because, in the view of the German leaders, these captured French documents provided precise confirmation that British and French strategy was exactly what the German Government had said it was in their justification for the attacks on Denmark and Norway and elsewhere.

Hitler mentioned the captured documents in his speech to the Reichstag on July 19, 1940, and he gave a detailed (and correct) description of the circumstances of how German soldiers had found them: “A German soldier found at the train station of La Charité on 19th of June 1940 a singular document as he was going through the railroad cars there. He delivered this document – which was marked in a special way – at once to his superior command post. From here this paper was sent on to higher authorities who now realized that they were about to

¹ The Germans made the same claim in leaflets scattered over Copenhagen on April 9, 1940.

discover some important intelligence. The railway station was now subjected to a careful investigation. And so, did the High Command of the Wehrmacht acquire a collection of documents of unique historical importance".²

The following day, the Danish newspaper Politiken, in its report on Hitler's speech, quoted his remark that "all the captured documents include hand-written comments by Gamelin, Daladier, Weygand etc., so these men may at any time confirm or deny them."

German war-time propaganda continued for years to publish articles dealing with these French documents. In 1941 the German Foreign Ministry, the Auswärtiges Amt, published a selection of 70 of the French documents. This book of 400 pages was published in several of the occupied countries, including Denmark.³ The book contained photographic reproductions (facsimiles) of high quality. These "original documents" were accompanied by complete and careful translations into the language of the occupied country (except of course in France where translations were not needed.) The propaganda publication was introduced by a short text in which the Foreign Ministry explained what the captured documents, in their view, "proved about English and French policy in the first year of the war".

This paper is written on the basis of the edition with translations into Danish. This book is relatively rare, but by no means impossible to find. My own copy is one I found by chance in an antiquarian bookseller in a small town in Denmark. Gradually I discovered that no Danish historian of the Second World War has used or even mentioned this book.

² In the original German: "Ein deutscher Soldat fand auf dem Bahnhof in La Charité am 19. Juni 1940 ein eigenartiges Dokument beim Durchstöbern der dortigen Waggons. Er lieferte dieses Dokument – da es eine besondere Bemerkung trug – seiner vorgesetzten Dienststelle sofort ab. Von dort ging dieses Papier an weitere Stellen, die sich nun klar wurden, hier auf der Spur einer wichtigen Aufklärung zu sein. Der Bahnhof wurde nun noch einmal einer gründlichen Untersuchung unterzogen. So kam in die Hand des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht eine Dokumentensammlung von einmaliger historischer Bedeutung. Adolf Hitler: Reichtagsrede 19. Juli 1940. (As found e.g. on <https://justice4germans.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/adolf-hitler-rede>).

³ Auswärtiges Amt 1939/41 Nr. 6. Hemmelige Dokumenter fra den franske Generalstab. Berlin (Foreign Ministry 1939/41 No.6. Secret Documents from the French General Staff. Berlin, 1941).

However, these French documents and the German publication have been discussed by a few important historians of the Second World War, but they don't appear to be widely known. The fact that the Auswärtiges Amt publication is obviously a work of propaganda naturally makes its use as an historical source a matter of particular difficulty. Nevertheless, these French documents do provide information – and contain some valuable perspectives – that deserve to be considered for the history of the first year of the war – **the so-called “Phoney War”**.

How the French documents were found by German soldiers and how they were returned to Paris in May 1945

It was by pure accident that these classified French documents fell into German hands.⁴ The sequence of events is quite well known, but all details need not be told here. In short form, here is what happened:

On about June 10, 1940, it became necessary in great hurry to evacuate the forward French military headquarters used by the Commander-in-Chief, General Gamelin, from its position in North-eastern France because the advancing German forces had come quite close. All equipment and all archival material were loaded on several Lorries or on railroad cars which were to be sent south to Vichy. One part of the archives which dealt with “inter-allied relations” was put on a train which, however, came no further than the town La Charité-sur-Loire where it was forced to halt because the bridge over the Loire had been blocked by bombing. While the train was standing there on a siding, it was attacked by a German patrol who forced the guards to surrender. The wagons were now left alone.

A German soldier from another patrol went into some of the wagons looking for petrol – and perhaps he was also looking for some red wine.⁵ He found three documents stamped “secret” or “très secret”.

⁴ Commandant Pierre Lyet: “Des documents secrets voyagent” (“Some secret documents travel”) *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, no.3, Septembre 1948. This short paper can be found as a PDF. It is an important source for the fate of the captured documents and is quoted hereafter as ‘Lyet’.

⁵ The description of these details is based on a paper by a journalist from Luxembourg, Henri Koch-Kent, who interviewed the German officer, Major Erwin Kaffke, who was responsible for the discovery. This article is introduced with these words: “Le

His chief realized that these documents must be sent to the HQ for the II German Army which was in the town of Clamecy about 60 km away.

A dispatch-rider on a motorcycle brought the documents to the HQ at about two-thirty in the morning and delivered the documents to the duty officer without any explanation. The duty officer alerted the officer in charge of intelligence, who realized that the documents came from the station area in La Charité. As this town was now German-occupied, a telephone call from the HQ ordered guards to be posted by the railroad cars.

At about three-thirty in the morning of June 19, a small group headed by Major Erwin Kaffke (who belonged to the Abwehr) set off with some colleagues from Clamecy for La Charité where they arrived at dawn.

The German soldiers patrolling the area knew nothing about secret documents in the railroad wagons. Major Kaffke and his group then began a systematic search. About one hour later a Captain by name

journaliste luxembourgeois Henri Koch-Kent, ami du Colonel Doudot, nous a fait parvenir un très intéressant article qu'il a pu rédiger récemment, sur la base d'informations recueillies auprès d'un ancien officier de l'Abwehr, à propos des Archives secrètes françaises tombées aux mains des Allemands en gare de La Charite-Sur-Loire en Juin 1940. Cette affaire, amplement exploitée à l'époque par la propagande allemande et les journaux collaborationnistes Français, a parfois été utilisée pour discréditer le 2ème Bureau et les Services Spéciaux. On a prétendu également que grâce aux documents récupérés, les Allemands ont pu identifier certains agents de nos Services, ce qui est inexact. Nous publions ci-dessous l'article de M. Koch-Kent en le remerciant de son obligeance. <http://aassdn.org/xldc10751.htm> ("Le Luxembourg journalist Henri Koch-Kent, a friend of Colonel Doudot, has transmitted to us a very interesting article which he has been able to put together recently, on the basis of information acquired from a former officer of the Abwehr. It concerns some secret French archives which fell into the hands of the Germans at the railway station Charite-Sur-Loire in June 1940. This affair which was widely exploited at the time by German propaganda and by the collaborationist French newspapers, has occasionally been used to discredit the 2ème Bureau and the Special Services. It has also been claimed that due to these captured documents, the Germans have been able to identify certain agents belonging to our Services, which is not correct. We publish below the article by Mr. Koch-Kent, while we thank him for his kindness.")

of Neinhaus (in civilian life he was the Mayor of Heidelberg)⁶ was the first to identify the spot where the first few secret documents had been found.

The secret files from the French General Staff were lying about together with a variety of other things, including bottles of wine, foodstuff, typewriters, teleprinters, telephones, cineprojectors, some secret films and various items of military uniforms.

Major Kaffke and his group brought all the documents back with them to their HQ. Here a group of translators made a preliminary survey. The next day all the documents were transported in two airplanes to the military headquarters in the West of Germany. Major Kaffke spent a week writing his report. News of the discovery was published by the Deutsche Presse Agentur on July 3, 1940. This text emphasized the great importance of the documents.

From now on the documents were stored in Berlin together with other captured documentary information until Allied bombing made the Germans move all this material to safety in Glogau; however, the Russian advance soon made them move it to the castle called Ebersdorf in Thüringen. Here it stayed until the end of the war.

Some French prisoners-of-war had noticed the documents from La Charité at Ebersdorf and seen that these papers were kept apart. On April 14, 1945, American troops reached Ebersdorf. The Americans were told about the special collection of French documents by the French prisoners. Five of the French prisoners were then charged by the Americans with the task of returning the documents to the archives of the French Foreign Office, the Quai d'Orsay in Paris. Here the documents arrived on May 8, 1945. (All five men were awarded with the Ministry's medal of honour). In Paris, officials at the Quai d'Orsay were able to verify that the documents returned from Ebersdorf were in fact the same as the documents which disappeared at La Charité, and that they were the originals of the documents which the Germans had published in facsimile in 1941.⁷

⁶ Carl Neinhaus was Mayor of Heidelberg in the years 1929-1945 and again 1952-1958. A portrait (which is not uncritical) may be found in the Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung 9.9.2020.

⁷ This information about the "journey" of the documents after they were found at La Charité is based on Pierre Lyet's article where it is also stated that the documents and their five escorts reached Paris on May 8, 1945 with American help, and that the documents in the French Foreign Ministry (Quai d'Orsay) were compared with those which the Germans had published in facsimile in 1941. The Quai d'Orsay established

The selection of French documents published by the Auswärtiges Amt: the structure and the purpose of the book

The 70 French documents selected are ordered chronologically and not by subject, sender or receiver. The documents are of many different kinds: they span from long reports on various topics, reports (by the French side) of top-level Anglo-French meetings to short telegraphic messages. Many carry hand-written notes. One document is a long autograph letter from General Weygand to General Gamelin. Going through the book rapidly, it produces a somewhat confusing impression because the subject-matter varies from strategic planning at the highest level to documents about detailed matters that for some reason have interested the German editors.

Of the book's 399 pages, the longest part (161-399) are photographic reproductions of the original documents. Pages 19-157 are translations into (in this case) Danish of all the texts in the collection. Pages 5-10 give a list of contents with title and short summary of every document. Finally, the book contains an "overview" (pages 15-18) explaining the purpose of the publication. These 3½ pages make the propaganda purpose of the book quite clear.

The name of the "Auswärtiges Amt" on the title page indicates the "Publisher", but the book does not say who the editor or editors were or how the selection has been made or what have been the editorial principles; nor is the reader informed how big a proportion of the documents captured at La Charité (and elsewhere) have been included in this collection. Have the documents been edited or is each document complete? If not, what has been left out and why?⁸

that they were genuine. I assume that the discovery of the documents in Ebersdorf on April 14, 1945 by American soldiers must be documented somewhere, and that both French and American sources may exist about the transport of the documents back to Paris. Finally, documentary evidence for the award of La Médaille d'Honneur des Affaires Etrangères to the five French former POWs must also exist.

⁸ It is evident here and elsewhere in this paper that I pose questions which I am not able to answer – although it seems likely that sources do exist that might give at least some answers. Possibly some readers of the RISR can help? In that case I would be grateful to be told, for instance via this email: lars.eb@gmail.com.

These questions are not answered directly, but the reader can get a good idea of some answers from the text of the “Overview” which begins with these words: (in my translation from the text in Danish):

“In a manner which is quite sensational, the secret documents from the French General Staff which, by pure coincidence, were found in some railroad cars at the station in the small French town La Charité and in a couple of other places, have confirmed, point by point, the conclusions which could be drawn from the earlier Whitebooks published by the German Auswärtiges Amt, and they have brought the inner secrets of English and French policy and warfare into the light of day. In what follows we now present 70 documents out of this large material to the Public in order to show, in an effectful way, the plans of the Allied war-making. All these plans have one thing in common: The hunt for new areas to wage war and the attempt to exploit the small peoples in Europe in the service of these war-plans.

Note: Some of these have already been published in the daily press.”

The next couple of pages are a sort of “guide” presenting the claims and the interpretations which the editors want to convey to the reader. For each claim one or more of the published documents are quoted to serve as proof.

The documents, then, are intended to show that the German claims about Allied policies have in fact already been expressed – in so many words – by the Allied powers themselves. The reproduction of the documents in good photographic quality is intended to convince the reader that the documents are genuine.

The excellent reproduction has the intended effect: I do not doubt that each individual text is correctly reproduced. I also do not doubt that the collection only includes documents which are in full accordance with the picture that the German Government wanted to paint. In this regard there is perhaps not a very great difference between this publication and other “white books” from this (and other) wars. But it would be very interesting to know what documents the editors have left out.

The French historian, Commandant Lyet, in his 1948 article about the “Documents which travel”, quoted the same passage (from the French-language edition of the book) which I have just quoted, but he added an important comment: “It is unnecessary to say that the published documents, which have since been recognized as genuine, had been carefully selected by the enemy from among a lot of others. Taken out of their context, or quite simply abridged, the plans of the Allied Governments and General Staffs were presented in a tendentious and false way.”⁹

It is important to note the words “*which have since been recognized as genuine*” in Commandant Lyet’s text. But just as important is his remark that the documents present the Allied plans *in a tendentious and false way*.

Unfortunately, Commandant Lyet did not explain how or why the German publication gave a “tendentious and false” picture. To find out whether this is in fact correct will require an analysis of the general history of the war from September 1939 until June 1940, an analysis in which these documents are compared and judged against many other sources. Obviously, this is not possible to do in this paper.

My aim in this paper is to present the German publication in such a way that others may judge whether it deserves their attention.

Put as briefly as possible, the German claims, made in the short “Overview”, about the Allied plans may be summarized as follows:

- First of all, the aim was to find new “auxiliary forces” for the Allies.¹⁰ (Here plans are mentioned concerning Sweden and Norway, a landing in Thessaloniki, a pact of mutual assistance with Turkey.)
- Plans to conduct an English-French offensive against Germany through Dutch and Belgian territory.

⁹ “Inutile de dire que les documents publiés, reconnus postérieurement exacts, avaient été soigneusement triés par l’ennemi parmi la masse des autres. Séparés de l’ensemble ou simplement tronqués, ils présentaient les plans des gouvernements ou des États-Majors allies d’une manière tendancieuse et fausse.”

¹⁰ The expression “auxiliary troops” is not explained, but the context makes it clear that the Allies (as the Germans saw it) were hoping to get military support from Swedish forces as well as from forces several other countries, including Balkan countries.

- In Scandinavia, military assistance to Finland should present the Allies with an opportunity to involve Sweden and Norway in a front hostile to Germany.
- An operation against the iron-ore mines in northern Sweden.
- To cut off Germany from her supplies of iron ore.
- An attack against Batum and Baku in order to destroy Germany's oil-supply.
- Sabotage against shipping in the Black Sea.
- Preparations to block the Danube River.
- Destruction of Romania's oilfields.
- The creation of a new front in the Balkans.
- A unified front from the Arctic Sea in the North to the Caucasus intended to strengthen the blockade against Germany and completely paralyse its economic life.

After presenting this list of claims about Allied policy the book concludes that the "power of the Allies could not match their grand plans" and that the Germans "time and again prevented the plans of their adversaries by lightning actions". Among these "lightning actions", the book no doubt especially refers to the occupation of Denmark and Norway.

The last item in the "Overview" is a claim that the British have "betrayed" Norway by their "insufficient assistance", but "most brutally has France suffered from the faithlessness of the British". This is explained in this way: France has "time after time begged for greater English support in the air" during the battle in France in May and June 1940. The book here refers to a long list of documents: 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 63, 64, 68, and 69.

The last document (no. 70) is "a cry for help" by the chief of the French Air Force, General Vuillemin, who concludes his appeal for more British fighter aircraft to be sent to France by writing that "the fulfilment of this demand for both Great Britain and France is a question of life and death".

A few examples among the documents

Denmark is very rarely mentioned in the "secret French documents". Once in the summary from at a meeting on April 9, 1940 in

the “Comité de guerre” of the French Government, in which a number of decisions are listed, made “after a rapid assessment of the general situation which now exists as a consequence of the German attack on Denmark and Norway”. Among these decisions is “the very great interest in carrying out as soon as possible the occupation of the harbour in Narvik and taking control of the mines in Gällivare”.¹¹

Further on (p. 313) in the account of the 9th meeting on April 27 between the French and the British leaders (“Neuvième Reunion du Conseil Suprême”), a description is given of the difficult military situation in Norway which includes this remark: “the only thing the Royal Air Force could do was to bombard every night, with considerable forces, the airports in Stavanger, Oslo or Aalborg, the last-named being, as is well-known, the base from which the transports of the German forces depart.”¹²

In whole or in part, many of the French documents in this (German-made!) selection deal with plans concerning Norway, Sweden and Finland and with the failed Allied operations in Norway. These texts are too many and too complex to be even summarized in this paper. In order to assess their historical importance, one would of course need to compare them with many other sources.

However, in order to give some impression of the range and diversity of the “secret French documents”, a few examples will be presented here:

- (a) Document no. 23: A note (“Acte”) dated March 10, 1940 and signed by the French Commander-in-Chief General Gamelin

¹¹ “Après un rapide examen de la situation générale résultant du déclenchement de l’attaque allemande sur le Danemark et la Norvege ... Il y a le plus grand intérêt à réaliser le plus tôt possible l’occupation du port de Narvick et à mettre la main sur les mines de Gällivare” (After a rapid examination of the general situation which has come about as a result of the German attack on Denmark and Norway ... we have a very great interest in carrying out as soon as possible the occupation of the port of Narvick and in taking control of the mines at Gällivare.)

¹² “Tout ce que pouvait faire la Royal Air Force c’était d’aller chaque nuit bombarder, avec des forces considérables, les aérodromes de Stavanger, d’Oslo ou d’Aalborg, celui-ci étant, comme on le sait, la base de depart des avions-transports de troupes allemandes.” (“The only thing that the Royal Air Force could do was to bombard, each night, with considerable forces, the airfields of Stavanger, Oslo or Aalborg, the last-named being, of course, the base from which the German transport aircraft departed.”)

under the headline: "Note concerning the participation of Franco-British forces in operations in Finland."

It is stated that France and Great Britain from the beginning of the Soviet attack on 30 November 1939 have "shown their willingness to offer Finland efficient and quick assistance", and that the French Headquarters in this connection on December 20 sent an officer to Marshall Mannerheim to inquire as to his views "about the operational support which French forces could give him".

Specific plans began to be made on January 16, 1940, in the French Supreme Command. The long text (of nine pages) ends with a paragraph allegedly by General Gamelin himself ("De la main du Général"): "In conclusion, we must resolutely continue our projects in Scandinavia, in order to save Finland, at least to lay our hands on the Swedish iron and the Norwegian ports. We must say that, viewed as military operations, the Balkans and the Caucasus through which we can also deprive Germany of oil, promise greater returns. But Italy holds the key to the Balkans."¹³

That French military planning was quite detailed is suggested by a remark about the cold Finnish climate: "Our own beasts of burden, except the mules, cannot function in the climate. Finally, the supply of food to our troops, and especially of wine, will pose a problem which will be hard to solve."¹⁴

(b) No. 48 of the documents is a letter dated May 1, 1940, from the French Minister of War, Daladier, to General Gamelin.

The subject of the letter was "Operations in the Mediterranean". The fact that French plans included a landing at Thessaloniki as well as an occupation of other bases in Greece is not surprising. During World War I, Greece was a country of military importance for both sides in the war; by 1918 the Allied front in northern Greece against the Bulgarians

¹³ In the original French: "Il y a donc lieu de poursuivre résolument nos projets en Scandinavie, pour sauver la Finlande, au minimum pour mettre les mains sur le fer suédois et les ports de Norvège. Mais, disons-nous qu'au point de vue des opérations de guerre, les Balkans et le Caucase, par où l'on peut aussi priver l'Allemagne du pétrole, sont à plus grand rendement. Mais l'Italie tient la clef des Balkans."

¹⁴ In the original French: "Les animaux de nos pays, sauf nos mulets, ne peuvent s'acclimater. Enfin, le ravitaillement de nos unités en vivres, et surtout en vin, posera un problème difficile à résoudre."

and Austria-Hungary was even decisive: everyone in 1940 remembered that this front was the spot where the final victory of the Entente Powers began.

In his letter to General Gamelin, Daladier wrote: “In continuation of letter no. 948 FMF* dated April 17, of which you have received a copy, I have the honour to inform you that I completely share the views of Admiral Darlan with regard to the overwhelming interest in those occupations which he intends to make on Greek territory”.¹⁵

Daladier in this letter ordered Gamelin to issue the orders necessary to “prepare the forces needed for the planned occupations”.

(c) No. 51. A technical document issued May 13 by the “3rd bureau” of the French General Staff.

This document, by providing codenames for certain parts of Greece, gives some idea of the areas of interest: “Codenames. In order to avoid indiscretions with regard to the planned actions <in case of operations in the Aegean Sea> it has been decided from now on to make use of the following codenames in communication about this subject.”

The words <in case of operations in the Aegean Sea> are a handwritten correction to the document, but it is still possible to read the original typescript which has been crossed over: “for the purpose of a possible occupation of Thessaloniki and Greek naval bases”¹⁶

(d) Document no. 44: The French report of the meeting on April 27, 1940 between the French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud and the British Prime Minister Chamberlain.

¹⁵ In the original French: “Comme suite à la lettre de l’Amirauté No 948 FMF du 17 Avril dont vous avez reçu copie, j’ai l’honneur de vous faire connaître que je partage entièrement les vues de l’Amiral Darlan sur l’intérêt primordial des occupations qu’il envisage en territoire Grec.” (FMF: forces maritime francaises)

¹⁶ In the original French: “Pour éviter des indiscretions au sujet des mesures envisages en <cas d’operations en Mer Égee> CORRECTED BY HAND FROM: <vue d’une occupation éventuelle de Salonique et des bases navales grecques>, il a été convenu d’utiliser désormais dans les correspondances relatives à cet objet les mots conventionnels suivants: Pour Salonique=Honduras, Pour la Crete=Guatemala, Pour Milo=Argentine, Pour Salamine=Chili, Pour Navarin=Colombie, Pour Argostoli=Bolivie, Pour Grecs=Equateur, Pour Turcs=Bresil”. (The code words themselves are: For Thessaloniki=Honduras, For Crete=Guatemala, For Milos=Argentine, For Salamis=Chile, For Navarino=Columbia, For Argostoli=Bolivia, For Greeks= Equator, For Turks=Brasil”.)

From this long document I would like to quote a detail: Reynaud and Chamberlain discussed how to make Sweden accept that the Allies took steps to destroy the Swedish iron ore mines. Here Chamberlain, in my view, showed sharp realism, when Reynaud proposed that the Allies might give the Swedish Government an offer comparable to the offer <of monetary compensation> given to the Romanian Government during the previous war as a result of which the Romanian oilfields had been destroyed. To this Chamberlain replied: "... regarding an offer to Sweden in order to make this country destroy her iron ore mines, the Prime Minister believes that it is not a question of money. In effect, the result of a German occupation of Norway will be that Sweden will become completely cut off from the outer world. The country will not be able to communicate with foreign countries except by German intermediation. Germany will supply the goods which the country needs and it is almost a certainty that Germany will want to be paid in iron ore. Can one expect that the Swedes will accept to destroy the one kind of currency which the Germans will accept from them? The Romanian example was quite different."¹⁷

The French documents from La Charité as seen by post-war historians in the USA, France, Great Britain and Germany

After 1945, these "secret French documents" have been used and commented on in a few historical works on The Second World War.

The first (known to me) is a book about the policy of the Roosevelt Administration towards the French Vichy-regime: William L. Langer: *Our Vichy Gamble*, published in 1947. Langer was a highly respected American historian who during World War II was head of the "Research

¹⁷ For the original French: "... en ce qui concerne une offre à la Suède pour amener ce pays à détruire les mines de fer, le Premier Ministre considère qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une question d'argent. En effet, le résultat de l'occupation de la Norvège par les Allemands sera que la Suède va être complètement coupée du monde extérieur. Elle ne pourra plus communiquer avec le dehors que par l'intermédiaire de l'Allemagne. C'est l'Allemagne qui lui fournira les produits dont elle a besoin et il est à peu près certain qu'elle exigera, en paiement, du minerai de fer. Peut-on s'attendre à ce que les Suédois acceptent de détruire le seul instrument d'échange qui leur sera reconnu par les Allemands? Le précédent de Roumanie était tout différent".

and Analysis Branch” of the U.S. Intelligence Service OSS. His book was based in part on reports from – and conversations with – the American Ambassador in Paris, William Bullitt. Langer mentioned the French documents from La Charité at the beginning of his book where he discussed the “Phoney War”: “... the French and British staffs elaborated schemes for opening fronts in Norway, in the Balkans, and against the Russians in the Caucasian oilfields. The details of these plans need not concern us here, for none of them materialized in time.” In a footnote Langer explained: “The Germans published a large number of documents on these plans which were captured at La Charité in 1940. See Auswärtiges Amt 1939-41, No. 6: Die Geheimakten des französischen Generalstabes (Berlin, 1941).”

As Langer’s note shows, he saw the documents as genuine. But his comment on them was, in my view, a wrong assessment. The fact that these plans were not carried out does not reduce their value as an historical source for the first year of the war. The opposite, rather, seems to me to be the case.

The next year, 1948, a short article was published in the French periodical *Revue d’Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale* which has already been quoted here. Commandant Pierre Lyet gave his article an intriguing title: “Some secret documents travel”: “Des documents secrets voyagent”. This work is an important source used in this paper.

A very detailed French book about France’s military defeat in May-June 1940 was published in Paris in 1956: “Soixante jours qui ébranlèrent l’Occident” (Sixty Days which shook the West). Its author, Jacques Benoist-Méchin, was known during the German occupation of France as openly pro-German and as a supporter of the Vichy-regime. After the war he was condemned to death, commuted to prison, and he was released from prison already in 1954. In his large (1029 pages) book it is easy to sense the author’s contempt for the French leadership who lost to the Germans in 1940. Benoist-Méchin wrote (on page 37), that “the thinking heads” in the French General Staff tried to solve this problem: “How would it be possible to provoke a collapse of Germany (“effondrement”) without at the same time risk an offensive attack against France by the German army?”

Benoist-Méchin quoted a string of documents from the German publication, (viz. nos. 9, 11, 19, 22, 25, 26, 31, 42) and listed the following plans:

- A blockade of the sea off Norway combined, if necessary, by an occupation of the country.
- A landing at Thessaloniki and an occupation of Greece.
- Destruction of the Romanian oil-industry.
- Blockade of the Danube.
- Blockade of the Black Sea.
- Entry into the Caucasus, with the connivance of Turkey.
- A bombardment of Batum and Baku, combined if necessary with operations into Iran and Afghanistan.

The author's comment on this list deserves to be quoted: "One thinks that one is dreaming when faced with this array of impossible plans. Why did our General Staff not see that these operations could lead to nothing else than a deadly dissipation of our forces which were already insufficient? Why did they not realise that an attack against Russia would at once transform the German-Russian agreement into a military alliance and make us face all the divisions of the Red Army in addition to the German divisions?"¹⁸ Benoist-Méchin lists the French-language edition of the German publication in his bibliography under "Publications diverses": Documents secrets de l'État-Major général Français (Les). Publications de l'Auswärtiges Amt 1939/41 No 6 (Imprimé au Deutscher Verlag, Berlin, 1941).

The British historian Basil Liddell Hart made roughly the same assessment of the British and French plans in his chapter on "The Phoney War" in the last book he wrote, a short "History of the Second World War", published in 1970:

"During that autumn and winter the Allied Governments and High Command spent much time in discussing offensive plans against

¹⁸ In the original French: "On croit rêver devant cette amoncellement de plans irréalisables. Comment notre État-Major ne voit-il pas que ces opérations ne peuvent aboutir qu'à une dispersion mortelle de nos forces, déjà insuffisantes? Comment ne pense-t-il pas qu'une agression contre la Russie transformera instantanément l'accord germano-soviétique en alliance militaire, et nous mettra sur les bras toutes les divisions de l'Armée rouge, en plus des divisions allemandes?"

Germany or Germany's flanks – which they had no possibility of achieving with their resources – instead of concentrating on the preparation of an effective defence against Hitler's coming attack.

After the fall of France, the Germans captured the files of the French High Command – and published a collection of sensational documents from them. These showed how the Allied chiefs had spent the winter in contemplating offensive plans all-round the circle – for striking at Germany's rear flank through Norway, Sweden, and Finland; for striking at the Ruhr through Belgium; for striking at her remote eastern flank through Greece and the Balkans; for cutting off her lone source of petrol supply by striking at Russia's great oilfields in the Caucasus. It was a wonderful collection of fantasies – the vain imaginings of Allied leaders, living in a dream-world until the cold douche of Hitler's own offensive awoke them”. (Liddell Hart, 1973, p. 37)

About the German attack on Norway, Liddell Hart (1973, p. 63) wrote in the same book, that “Allied spokesmen promptly denied, and continued to deny” German announcements “to the local authorities that they had come to take Norway under German protection against an Allied invasion that was imminent”.¹⁹ Liddell Hart clearly believed that Great Britain and Germany were “keeping more or less level in their plans and preparations”, < - > “but Germany’s final spurt was faster and more forceful. She won the race by a very short head – it was almost a ‘photo-finish’.”

In direct continuation Liddell Hart made a remarkably blunt remark: “One of the most questionable points of the Nuremberg Trials was that the planning and execution of aggression against Norway was put among the major charges against the Germans. It is hard to understand how the British and French Governments had the face to approve the inclusion of this charge, or how the official prosecutors could press for a conviction on this score. Such a course was one of the most palpable cases of hypocrisy in history.” (Liddell Hart, 1973, p. 37)²⁰

¹⁹ Liddell Hart is referring to the German statement quoted at the beginning of this paper.

²⁰ If this was in fact “one of the most palpable cases of hypocrisy in history” may perhaps be doubted. The list of cases of hypocrisy in History is long.

A thorough study of the Nuremberg trials by Eugene Davidson from 1966 stated that the defence lawyer for Grossadmiral Raeder wanted to quote long passages from the French “documents from La Charité” as proof that while Raeder certainly did plan aggression against neutral Norway, Germany’s enemies had done exactly the same. But the Court did not allow these documents to be quoted during the trial. (Davidson, 1966, p. 377-379)²¹

Much more recently, a German historian, Stefan Scheil, published a study in which the “documents from La Charité” are used extensively: This book is: *Weserübung gegen Operation Stratford, Wie Deutschlands Gegner 1940 den Krieg nach Skandinavien trugen* (2015) (*Weserübung against Operation Stratford. How Germany’s enemies in 1940 brought the war to Scandinavia*). Scheil also made use of these documents in an earlier work. (Scheil 2004)

One might almost say that Stefan Scheil sees and interprets the events in Scandinavia in 1940 in a way that is, in its essence, not very different from the views and interpretations that were put forward by the German Foreign Ministry in their 1941 book. Scheil himself wrote in the preface to his study published in 2015 that he has been attacked for being “too little critical of the reasons put forward by the Nazi Government” and that the German war making during the Second World War in his books is presented as “a series of preventative wars”. (Scheil, 2004)

Some concluding remarks

How much does this German book with captured French documents add to the historical understanding of the Second World War? Perhaps there is a lack of interest among historians for this *Auswärtiges Amt* publication from 1941 because it does not, in fact, add much? (In Denmark, for example, its existence seems to be ignored completely).

²¹ For an early critique of how the Nuremberg Court in general did not accept the principle of “tu quoque”, see the memoirs by Otto Meissner from 1950: “Staatssekretär unter Ebert – Hindenburg – Hitler”, p. 631.

William Langer wrote that historians need not spend time on these plans, since none of them were carried out. Basil Liddell Hart clearly thought otherwise, and I believe he was right: In order to describe and understand what happened during the war until May 10, 1940, the historian needs to take these many futile plans and deliberations into account.

But studies of the “Phoney War” are overwhelmed by the tremendous shift in perceptions and in focus which was caused by the Fall of France in 1940. This event changed everything.

A new colossal “tectonic shift” in the historical perspective happened in 1945. France was now among the victorious powers who occupied Germany. And neither the French nor the British seemed eager to make historical use of the information to be found in the “Documents from La Charité” – as the example from the Nuremberg Court suggests: in 1945 and for many more years the victorious powers had little inclination to look for responsibility beyond the Nazis.

But an historian needs to understand the process: arguments and deliberations are important even when they led to nothing. These secret French documents present the top level of decision-makers, especially the French, but also the British, from a French perspective; the choice of words, the tone used by the writer may tell the historian a lot.

The documents are *contemporary*. Most were written “in the heat of battle” – bureaucratic battle, rather than physical. That makes them different from, for instance, a valuable eye-witness account like Major General Edward Spears’ book “Assignment to Catastrophe”, published ten years after the war, and from Winston Churchill’s “The Second World War”. (See more complex creation of Churchill’s six volumes on the WWII on Reynolds, 2005)

Still, the *Auswärtiges Amt* publication obviously cannot be seen as anything else than a selection of documents produced by the German government in 1941 in order to show that Germany was right and her enemies wrong. In 1941, German leaders still had confidence in victory and hoped to convince others that their enemies were responsible for the continuation of the war and especially for what happened to Scandinavia on April 9, 1940.

I would suggest that these “Documents from La Charité” show that between September 1939 and May 1940, French and British leaders, on the one hand, were determined to carry on with the war and bring an end to Hitler’s regime – but that, on the other hand, they had unclear and unrealistic ideas as to how this could be done.

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