

## **Suffering what they must?**

### **Harri Holma's diplomatic carrier in France (1927-1943) as a case study in small states' relations with Great Powers**

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## Abstract

When considering the international position of the Baltic region's smallest states, the most striking feature is their dependency on Great powers' politics. From Estonia to Norway, the 20<sup>th</sup> century brings enough examples of small Northern and Baltic nations being trampled upon. If might dictates right, and the international position of small states depends solely on Great Powers' politics and geostrategic situations, why to study the foreign policies of small states at all?

Building on that, the starting point of this presentation will be that, while limited and depending on the broader international context, there exists a real capacity of small states to influence the policies of Great Powers through diplomatic action.

We aim here at illustrating this point through the study of Harri Holma's diplomatic carrier. The Finnish ambassador to France from 1927 to 1943, Holma will be used in order to exemplify the possibilities open to a small state from the Baltic Sea Region to influence the policies of a Great Power. Holma's action will be studied in the context of French foreign policy, and of contacts between France and Finland.

The presentation will deal at first with Harri Holma, his diplomatic carrier and position in France. It will then present the main lines of French foreign policy in the Baltic Sea region. Holma's action in France will be studied through three chronological periods: 1927-1933; 1933-1938; and 1939-1940. The presentation will study his relations with the French foreign policy decision makers, his attempts at influencing France's perceptions on Finland, and his actions to promote Finland's image in France.

From Holma's action in France, the presentation will conclude on his capacity to influence French foreign policy related to Finland. Keeping in mind the peculiarities of France's foreign policy, the specificities of France's relation with the Baltic, and trying to avoid the dangers of generalization, general conclusions will be drawn on the capacity of small international entities to use diplomatic action in order to influence their fate. The presentation will especially emphasize the need for researchers to take into account both the context of great powers' politics surrounding small states, and the possible margin of maneuver allowed by routine diplomatic contact, the actions of their diplomatic representatives, lobbying or the use of propaganda.

*...since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and **the weak suffer what they must.***

**Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian war***, Book V, CHAPTER XVII  
trans. Richard Crawley, e-book edition: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/plpwr10.txt>

## Introduction

In his book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger concluded as follows on the French and British leaderships' reactions to the Finno-Soviet war of 1939-1940:

*The threat of allied intervention may have helped Finland to obtain a better settlement than the original Soviet demands would have suggested but, in the end, nothing could stop Stalin from pushing the Soviet defensive line away from the approaches to Leningrad. For historians, the puzzle remains as to what possessed Great Britain and France to come within a hairsbreadth of fighting both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany simultaneously three months before the collapse of France proved the whole scheme was nothing but a pipedream...<sup>1</sup>*

Kissinger is certainly right when wondering about the reactions of London and Paris to the 1939-1940 Finno-Soviet war. In the circumstances of the time, why did they chose to propose their help to Finland, support the exclusion of Soviet Russia from the League of Nations, and eventually contemplate the sending of troops on a new, Northern European front?

From studying the relations between the French wartime leadership and the Finnish representatives in Paris, we would like to contend that the action of the Finns in Paris played a genuine and important role in the French leadership's decision-taking process at the time.

- By their action before the 1939-1940 crisis, the Finnish representatives in Paris had paved the way for the pro-Finnish reaction of both the French elite and public opinion
- The Finnish representatives in Paris, most notably the ambassador Harri Holma and Marshall Mannerheim's special military envoy, colonel Aaladar Paasonen, were given access to portions of the French leadership, and participated, at critical junctures, in the shaping of French policy
- Finally, the Finns used public opinion to exert pressure on the French government, and had contributed to the shaping of specific images of Finland. Images that served as a basis for the French public opinion's overwhelmingly pro-Finnish stand during the war.

Of course, the reactions of the French leadership (Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, military leaders, diplomats, legislators from the *Chambre des Représentants*...) were essentially a function of the deep crisis experienced at the time by France and French foreign policy.

- The Finns, for example, had very little to do with the reactions of legislators exhorting pressure on Daladier to obtain a more active policy. These reactions can be explained by the anticommunism of most French politicians, a desire to endanger Daladier's government, a will to "activate" the Phony war, disagreements on war policy, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1995, p. 352.

Yet, the Finnish representatives in Paris were undoubtedly, in this context, allowed to influence French policy in a number of ways. More generally, this episode raises the question of small states' diplomats to influence the foreign policy of great powers.

English-speaking studies in small states' foreign policies and international relations have often departed from Thucydides' wisdom exposed at the beginning of this paper. Robert L. Rothstein (*Alliances and Small States*, New York, London, 1968), or Michael Handel (*Weak States in the International System*, Routledge, London, 1981) have exposed the various means small actors of the international system can use in order to influence their position and the policy of great powers.

- As suggested for example by Joshua Busby, Kelly Greenhill<sup>2</sup>, and Christine Ingebritsen<sup>3</sup>, small actors in international relations have the possibility to influence by investing in an international system congenial to their interests: norms and standards, international institutions, a normative architecture able to give them the tools to defend their rights. Small actors can also act on public opinions, use the media, soft diplomacy and representations, etc.
- Others, and this is the point I will try to illustrate in my presentation, have emphasized the role of crafty diplomatic work and lobbying in order for small states to influence greater powers and alleviate the pressure of the international system.

I will take two examples of interesting contributions in the Baltic/Nordic area:

- Michael Berry<sup>4</sup>
  - Studying the 1939-1944 relations between Finland and the United States, Berry describes the Finnish attempts at influencing, in the context of American society and foreign policy, US strategy towards Finland. Finland appears inscribed in what Berry calls the "paradigms" of American war policy, dependent on the wider context of US society and politics, and of the lobbying of the Finns themselves.
- Patrick Salmon<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Busby, Joshua. and Greenhill, Kelly. "**Have You No Shame? The Normative Sources of Weak Actor Influence**", *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Hyatt Regency Chicago and the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers, Chicago, IL, Aug 30, 2007.* 2008-05-20 <[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p212109\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p212109_index.html)>

<sup>3</sup> Ingebritsen, Christine. "**Norm entrepreneurs: Scandinavia's Role in World Politics**", *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37/2002. 11-23.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Berry, *American Foreign Policy and the Finnish Exception: Ideological Preferences and Wartime Realities*, SHS, Studia Historica 24, Helsinki, 1987.

- Salmon applies a different method, but he insists as well on both the possibility to influence, and the limitations put on this possibility. He insists especially on the capacity of small states' representatives to achieve a monopoly as information sources on their state's situation: lobbying, spreading images, and monopolizing information.

Both Berry and Salmon conclude to the existence of a margin of manoeuvre for the diplomacy of small states, with certain limitations. The goal of this short presentation is to illustrate this capacity through a case study: the carrier and activity of Harri Holma, Finnish diplomat, ambassador in France from 1927 to 1943.

### Harri Holma and his carrier<sup>6</sup>

Harri Holma was born Harri Gustaf Hellman, in 1886 in Hämeenlinna, Finland. He changed his Swedish-sounding second name to Holma in 1906, a sign of support for the Finnish-speaking national project.

Until 1918, Holma was a scholar: a specialist of Semitic languages and Ancient history, he defended his Ph.D. in 1914 at the University of Helsinki, on the names of bodyparts in Semitic languages. Beyond his academic activities, Holma was a man of his time: fennomane, nationalist, but also cosmopolit, with a taste and a skill for language, and an attraction for the main centres of European culture (Paris, Berlin, Stockholm...).

When Finland became independent (December 1917), and the ensuing Civil War ended, the first Finnish independent diplomatic service needed peoples such as Holma.<sup>7</sup> He decided to leave the University, and became the director of the ministry's archives in July 1918. After the first year however, he was already sent abroad, in Copenhagen as the press attaché of the embassy. In 1920, he was already in Berlin as Finland's ambassador there, and left for Wien in 1921. In less than three years, Holma had moved from lecturer in the University of Helsinki to Finland's diplomatic representative in Austria.

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> *Valtionarkisto* (National Archives, Helsinki), Harri Holma Fund, Files 6 to 23; *Helsingin Yliopiston Kirjasto, käsikirjoituskokoelmat* (Helsinki University Library, Manuscripts and Documents, Helsinki), Harri Holma Fund, Coll.324.1; Arto Mansala & Juhani Suomi (ed.), *Suomalainen diplomaatti...*, SKS, Helsinki, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Juhani Paasivirta, *Suomen diplomaattiedustus ja ulkopolitiikan hoito, Itsenäistymisestä talvisotaan*, WSOY, Helsinki, 1968.

However, Holma's career's main post was to be Paris, where he was stationed from 1927 to 1943. When Holma arrived in the French capital, the Versailles order was about to crumble and Finland would end up squeezed between a resurgent Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. In these conditions, Holma worked to emphasize Finnish neutrality (in 1929, he wrote: "*Our every effort must be dedicated to conveying the impression that we do not belong to one camp or the other...*"<sup>8</sup>), and improve French-Finnish relations.

As war came, and Finland was attacked by Russia in November 1939, Holma pleaded the Finnish cause in France with a measure of success. He then interpreted the Continuation War and the invasion of Russia by Nazi Germany in 1941 as the beginning of the "real" war between "Europe" and the USSR. His bitterness was obvious when Germany's war fortunes changed, and Finland withdrew from the war before being forced to sign a treaty with a victorious Soviet Union. Holma and his anti-Soviet tirades were at this point made irrelevant by the new world situation. He had already been sent to the Holy See in 1943, and was made ambassador in Rome in 1946 as a prelude to retirement. His only son Klaus committed suicide in 1945 at age 23, adding to Holma's bitterness in these post-war years. He retired in 1953, and died less than a year after, in Capri, where he still rests.

Holma was a man of two worlds. While retaining a clear vision of Finland's interests, he adapted almost too well to his country of residence. He remained a man of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slightly old-fashioned, his reports often turning into chronicles of diplomatic exchanges, embassies' receptions, and the like. His links with Helsinki were also quite distant, depending on who was in charge of the ministry. He had an excellent reputation as an ambassador (the Finnish president Lauri Kristian Relander called him "*the best of our diplomats*" in 1927<sup>9</sup>), yet he isolated himself from Finnish politics (a situation he acknowledged himself: approached in 1931 by president Pehr Evind Svinhufvud, he was proposed the Foreign Ministry, but refused, writing to Svinhufvud that he had lost touch with Finnish domestic politics<sup>10</sup>).

### **The French context**

Holma arrived in Paris in 1927, as the successor to Carl Enckell, who had represented Finland in France since 1919. France and Europe were coming out of the 1920s, and the peace that had settled in 1925 as a result of the treaty of Locarno was soon to end. Both European tensions and the tensions of French

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<sup>8</sup> Mansala & Suomi, *op.cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> Eino Jutikkala (ed.), *Presidentin Päiväkirja, Lauri Kristian Relander*, Weilin + Göös, Helsinki, 1968, tome I, p. 447.

<sup>10</sup> Mansala & Suomi, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

society made Holma's job increasingly difficult, leaving him very little room to defend Finnish neutrality, and persuade the French of Finland's worthiness.

- One of Holma's first problems was the image deficit of Finland in France.

Seen from France, Finland started the post-WWI period with an image deficit it shared with other new countries. The three Baltic States, for example, were considered by most French leaders in 1919 as an accidental outburst of the Bolshevik revolution, doomed to reintegration in the Russian sphere.

Finland as well was described by many as a small, politically fragile and economically unsustainable state, which contributed in no small part to the destruction of the Russian empire. Nostalgia for the old, stable international order based on the 1893 French alliance with Tsarist Russia against Germany inspired bitter comments to many French commentators. Schematically, the defiance was particularly strong amongst French conservatives, who regretted the pre-world war order and saw new states in the Baltic as prone to German influence. Finland had thus to convince it could represent a lasting national reality.

- The structures of Finland's diplomatic and strategic position also complicated relations with France.

The Baltic Sea Region was seen by most in France as an abstract, distant theater. France had few concrete strategic interests in the region, and the French interpreted local developments mostly through four questions:

- Bolster Poland as an ally against German influence, the regional champion of French policy
- Reduce German regional influence
- Concerning Soviet Russia, French policy went schematically through three stages. Until 1920, the main idea was to repel communism. Most of the Interwar period, though, saw the French engaged in ambiguous relations with the Soviet power, between containment and half-hearted attempts at obtaining a treaty with Moscow against Hitler's ambitions.
- Finally, the French wish to keep the Danish straits open in order to avoid a German domination on the Baltic Sea.

In all these domains, relations with Finland were shadowed by the structures of French policy in the Baltic. Holma, for example, was hard-pressed to convince the French that German influence in Finland was not a decisive factor in Finnish politics. As well, Finland's critical stand towards Soviet Russia collided at times with Paris' attempts to deal with Moscow.

- Finally, economic and trade difficulties plagued the relations between France and Finland although the Interwar period.

From 1918 on, and even more after the two countries signed a trade agreement in 1922, France had a trade deficit with Finland. The French leadership considered it as a problem, and worked actively to reduce this deficit. The main tools were, however, confrontational in essence: protectionist policies, quotas, yearly lists of goods admitted for import, etc. This remained until 1939 an endless source of tensions between the two countries.

These problems remained secondary in the 1920s, when European tensions tended to run low, and both France and Finland were heavily involved in the League of Nations. Most problems were then solved in Geneva. But the slow demonetization of the League and the rise of European tensions in the 1930s forced Finland and France to slowly move apart. Once appeased relations became increasingly tensed as the decade progressed, and Holma worked hard trying to preserve the political credit Finland had gained in Paris during the 1920s.

### **Propaganda, networking, information: the long term**

In these conditions, Holma was able to act at two levels: on the long term, and through his contacts with the French leadership around critical, punctual problems.

During these years, Holma was especially able to build on the work of his predecessors concerning the image of Finland among French leadership.

- Propaganda, information, networking:
  - Holma was particularly apt at networking, and carrying through to the French leaders and public opinion a specific image of Finland. Speaking perfect French, cultivated and a bit old-fashioned, he was the iconic, ever-smiling 19<sup>th</sup> century diplomat, always ready to explain the realities of his small, distant country to ignorant French interlocutors. He continued and amplified the work of networking started by Finnish representatives before 1914, and the networks of the embassy after 1918. These same networks were seen at work in 1919-1922 during the dispute over the Åland islands' status. Holma gathered around the embassy sizeable networks made of Finns and Frenchmen alike, ready to spread a certain image of Finland, a certain discourse on this country, its history, and its international position.
  - One of the most important things to observe here is how these networks slowly gained a monopoly on information about Finland. This trend was even more important as

foreign policy decision-making was increasingly concentrated in Paris during the Interwar period, with French diplomats unable to influence decisions as much as before World War I<sup>11</sup>. For the French leadership, and in a context where the French ambassadors in Helsinki were less and less influential (Helsinki became in the 1930s a dumping ground for old and/or incompetent ambassadors), information on Finland was gained mostly in Paris, through the Finnish networks.

- This is particularly important, as Patrick Salmon underlines it: “*Without adding up to anything so precise as a ‘policy’ towards Scandinavia, such views [images about Nordic countries] inevitably colored routine diplomatic exchanges in times of low international tension. In times of high tension, when politicians suddenly discovered an interest in Scandinavia and demanded advice from their professional advisers, they acquired much greater significance*”<sup>12</sup>. The same phenomenon is observable in the case of Finland and Harri Holma.

This part of the Finns’ action in Paris brought obvious results, as Finland was rapidly considered by the French in a much more positive light than, for example, the Baltic States. Holma’s skill lied in his capacity to adapt this discourse on Finland to his audience. He knew France, and knew how to adapt to the patterns of French debate: increasing anticommunism, support to the European system of the League of Nations, defense of democracy, suspicion towards Soviet Russia, attraction for a democratic welfare-state, etc.

Until the end of the Interwar period, the main representations on Finland in France were thus:

- Mostly brought about by the Finns and Finnish networks.
- Mostly positive. Finland appeared in the French public debate and amongst leaders as a neutral, friendly, democratic, prosperous little state. It was associated to “Scandinavian countries” and the knowledge the French had about a Nordic cooperation they saw until the Winter War as much more solid and important than it actually was.

For the French, Moscow’s insistence, in the spring of 1939, on trading assurance against Germany with more influence in the Baltic States and in Finland, came as a surprise. Finland seemed slightly outside of European tensions, a stable, reliable, peace-loving state.

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<sup>11</sup> Gordon A. Craig & Felix Gilbert (ed.), *The Diplomats, 1919-1939*, Atheneum, NY, 1968; Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932-1939*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Salmon, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

## **Tackling diplomatic problems**

Holma could influence the French image of Finland, but could he have any effect on the management of concrete diplomatic problems?

In the atmosphere of growing tensions that characterized the 1930s, Holma's game in France became increasingly difficult. French and Finnish interests collided on several occasions, especially around their assessments of the German danger and of Soviet Russia's position in Europe.

One can take three cases:

- The 1935 treaty between France and Soviet Union
- The 1938 disengagement of the Oslo group (comprising the Scandinavian countries and Finland) from the League of Nations' sanction system
- The 1939 negotiations between France, Great Britain, and the USSR on an eventual deterrence treaty against Germany

In these three cases, French and Finnish policies were at variance. In 1935, Finland voiced its concerns over contacts with the USSR, bringing forward its defiance of the USSR's policy. In 1938, the French leadership was critical of the Oslo countries' decision, out of a will to preserve the League of Nations as a forum against Nazi Germany. In 1939, finally, while France and Great-Britain were within a hairsbreadth to accept a Soviet zone of influence in the Baltic in exchange for a treaty against Hitler, Finland refused to be associated to any such schemes.

In all three cases, the issue for Holma was to keep a low profile and stay in good terms with the French leadership. Things were dealt with through meetings in the Quai d'Orsay, where Holma went on to explain Finland's policy and position. Specific problems were solved this way, also because Holma knew how to reassure the French leadership on Finland's intentions. Diplomatic exchanges were sometimes difficult, but Holma managed to keep good contacts with the French leadership.

Everything, however, was subordinated to the French general policy and vision of European tensions and France's interests. Holma's capacity to influence found its limits in the spring of 1939, when Moscow insisted on getting guarantees in the Baltic Sea area. While reluctant, the French leadership would have been ready to yield in the first half of 1939 in order to get guarantees against Hitler. After the Soviet-German treaty and the beginning of the war in October, Finland and the Balts had a difficult time: the French press was especially harsh on

countries that were described as annoying troublemakers unable to accept Russian influence in order to deter the real European danger: Germany. Finland was less criticized than the Balts, though, and when Russia started its pressures on the Finns in October, the French press turned out to mostly support Finland.

### **The Winter War**

Starting at the end of November 1939, the “Winter War” between Finland and the USSR was a dramatic showing of the Finns’ capacity to influence France’s policy at certain specific moments, when this policy was uncertain.

The war is Holma’s hour of truth. The Finnish networks found a French society ready to react and support Finland in its struggle. While the French leadership struggled to adapt its policy to the war, Holma and the Finns had a window of opportunity to act.

Orders from Helsinki came to Holma at the beginning of December, and he was asked to try securing French support in the war. Setting to work, he aimed to use a congenial French context, his networks and his position as a privileged interlocutor to a French leadership struggling to find the proper reaction.

- The French public opinion was at the time impressive, and the Finns had only little to do in order to transform it into an overwhelming show of support for Finland. Anticommunism and the rejection of dictatorships’ aggressive warmongering against little democratic states were two themes to which the French could be extremely sensitive. Consequently, and in the heated atmosphere of the Phony war, the breadth of French society expressed support to Finland: the press, the Parliament, various associations, interest groups, religious associations and the like... Finland became the headline story, a byword for democracy stomped upon by autocracy, a tragic symbol of France’s predicament in front of Nazi Germany.
- The French leadership felt the pressure of this public opinion, but was also more divided. Two poles dominated this leadership.
  - The Foreign Ministry, populated with the partisans of an alliance with the USSR aimed toward Germany, was cautious, eager to keep contacts with Moscow. Power, however, was in the hands of the indecisive Edouard Daladier, who was at the time Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Minister of Defense. He pushed for a more active policy, convincing himself of the interest to open a new front to the war in the North, using the Winter War as a pretext.
  - Holma and Aaladar Paasonen were important in shaping Daladier’s policy toward Finland in the war. He brought for example plans to the desk of Daladier, plans for a military operation in Northern Finland that were proposed as such by Daladier to his military leaders, and

presented to London for discussion. As such, Holma was influential in defining the French official reaction: discursive and material help to Finland, support for a rejection of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations, cautious involvement in the North of Europe, etc.

- France's friendship quickly became a burden for the embattled Finns: at the end of February 1940, the French and British pressured the Finns, asking them to stay in the war even with their depleted forces. These allied pressures made the Finnish decision concerning Stalin's peace conditions even harder to take, and probably delayed the end of the war by a few weeks.
- Yet this activity yielded results of a sort from the Finnish point of view: Stalin was actually impressed by the possibility of French-British implication, and came back to the negotiating table in February thanks to this, out of fear that the conflict would escalate.

In a large part thus, the activity of the Finns themselves before 1939 and during the tense months of December 1939-February 1940 paved the way for the French leadership's reactions to the Winter War. In the context of a French crisis, the Finns were allowed to participate in the shaping of France's policy regarding Finland. Without Holma's action, the reactions of the French leadership might have been dominated by the "Spanish strategy" of the Quai d'Orsay: unwillingness to antagonize Soviet Russia, indirect intervention, etc. Edouard Daladier favored a more active policy, in part due to his own convictions, in part due to the pressures of public opinion, and in part due to the action of the Finnish representatives.

## Conclusion

While researching the role of diplomats in the relations between small states and great powers, it seems difficult to avoid three clichés:

- Realist or structuralist thought would doubt the possibility of small/weak states' representatives to have a meaningful influence on great powers' policy. Small states seem to be stuck in structures that they cannot significantly influence, no matter how much crafty diplomacy they put into it.
- Small/weak states have also often presented themselves as victims of great powers' policies, helpless lambs sacrificed to reckless international pressures. Only their capacity to defend themselves militarily would, in this pattern of thought, make a meaningful difference: in the Finnish case, this is the undertone of much literature on the Winter War, emphasizing a lonely Finland fighting against the odds.

- Finally, there can be a temptation to emphasize the role of super-diplomats, super-leaders able to save their country through personal diplomacy. Most literature on Urho Kaleva Kekkonen suffers from this problem.

Researchers should try to see beyond these clichés, taking into account the limitations weighting on small states, but also the possibilities open to them. One should keep in mind the importance of the great power's context: society, foreign policy machinery, conflicting visions of the great powers' interest, etc... This is the setting to any attempt by small states' representatives to influence great powers and their policy. As well, the strategic and economic structures should be taken into account, as well as the role of circumstances.

Yet one should also, as shown above, take into account the capacity of representatives to influence on the long term, or at times of crises. There exists a complex equation between the capacities of small states' diplomats to influence, the context of great powers, and international structures. The work of the researcher is to evaluate the importance of these forces when studying the relations between great powers and small actors.

This is what Patrick Salmon invites us to do, emphasizing the study of “...*the relationship between the various influences – geography, resources, the international environment and diplomatic skill*”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Salmon, *op.cit.*, p. 11.