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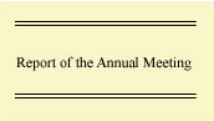

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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THE FALL OF FRANCE, 1940: THOUGHTS ON A NATIONAL DEFEAT

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How strange it seems that it should have been Marc Bloch who first suggested the seriousness, the essential complexity of the question. If you go into his old classroom in the Sorbonne today you can see a plaque on the wall commemorating him, but somehow that room suggests little of the things he wrote down in his "Statement of Evidence".[1] It is difficult to connect that rather drab lecture-room which must have heard such different words from his lips, with the lost war he wrote of and the clandestine life which was finally to lead him out to his death in a field at Trévoux, near Lyons, ten days after the Allied landings in Normandy. It has seemed curious that six years were to go by before this memoir, written between July and September 1940, saw light of day, two years after they killed him. There had been many writings about the fall of France, and one might not have expected the personal recollections of a medievalist, examining his conscience (as he put it), to shed so much light on the immediate past. For whatever he was to the scholarly world, Marc Bloch had scarcely loomed large in the broader general world of the Third Republic. And yet it is possible that he illuminated it more than some who had made a career of taking and publishing its daily pulse. Certainly his was a small, a flickering light: *Strange Defeat* suggested more than it concluded. At best it was the merest beginning; in the long run it might be no more than personal evidence along the way. But however far down it sank with time, a first generation of students would remember it kindly for the keys it offered to doors that might not have been looked for without it.

In the immediate aftermath perhaps there had been little inclination to search very far. Evidence for simpler and, in those far-off days seventeen summers ago, more satisfying explanations seemed ready to hand. In the hard-pressed English speaking world the themes of "consciously guilty" and "unconsciously guilty" Frenchmen had been weighed on "balance sheets"[2] like produce in a market. Newspaper readers everywhere, from whom no secrets are hid, were having their worst suspicions confirmed by André Maurois or Jules Romains, or Mme Tabouis who had made a career out of gossip and a chance remark of Adolf Hitler's. One asked for very little, and it was forthcoming. Explanations and conclusions tended to be emotional and therefore best suited to the needs of the hour. For it was quite the most stunning defeat of contemporary times, and every schoolboy knew (whatever his elders might tell him) that the world would never be the same again. Even then, in the last days of that disastrous summer, Marc Bloch sat covering his pages with thoughts on the

[1]Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: a statement of evidence written in* 1940 (London 1949). The original French text appeared in 1946.

[2]Cecil F. Melville, *Guilty Frenchmen* (London, 1940); cf. Frederick L. Schuman, *Night Over Europe: the diplomacy of nemesis* (New York, 1941), pp. 429-522.

great battle that had ended. But the pages were then unknown in the free world, and unwanted in Hitler's Europe. Men in crisis needed certainties, deities and devils. So they were variously found in order to explain and banish the nightmare past and to give strength for the troubled future. Thus Lord Robert Cecil (remembering, perhaps, so many hard-fought struggles with the French Republic in the Geneva days when international dreams had succumbed before national realities) now scored "the conspiracy by which a sordid adventurer induced a Marshal of France to sell the honour of his country for the satisfaction of his servile ambition".[3] Then as always, mere imagination and fear were poor friends to understanding, yet they fed on more than rumour.

It was of course years later, when the Thousand Year Reich had crashed to the ground, that Loustaunau-Lacau in the hot crowded court-room of the Palais de Justice swore to Pétain's innocence of all conspiratorial negotiation with the Cagoulards.[4] And indeed nothing was to come to light to demonstrate the contrary, least of all the notorious statement, dated March 30, 1940, which Anatole de Monzie attributed in his diary to the Marshal: "They'll need me in the second half of May".[5] But there had been other, less sensational, more public indications. There were the doubts about Georges Bonnet, dropped, it is true, from the Daladier Government soon after the war began, but standing for an important body of political opinion which had fought against war to the end, delayed action through two agonizing days until it was clear that Neville Chamberlain could neither hope nor accept to be saved by an Italian mediation. A Foreign Minister of course, had necessarily been discreet, where a mere Deputy or Senator felt no such restriction. Anyone who cared to might have remarked that Gaston Bergery and Pierre Laval had sought, in vain, to speak on September against taking up arms, each being cut short by the chamber presidents, but not without shouts of "Speak!" "Speak!" rising around them.[6] And while winter turned to spring, Parliament had shown itself nothing if not timid. Surely it had grown less and less inclined to prosecute the war with vigor, worn down by the decree-law system which it accepted and which permitted the executive to govern, by the silences and anodynes of the President of the Council, by the discouragements and defeats in Finland, Norway, the Low Countries and finally France itself. What but conspiracy, it might have seemed, could explain that the silencing of the anti-war group around Bergery in September should have been followed by the silencing of the protesters against the extinction of Parliament the following July? — for the chambers had not changed. If Edouard Herriot had spoken for France in September ("France", he said, "affronts the danger with her head high and her conscience clear."[7]), was it not the Deputy Jean-

[3]Foreward to the Anonymous *Pétain-Laval: the conspiracy* (London, 1942), iii.

[4]Georges Loustaunau-Lacau, July 30, 1945, *Le Procès du Maréchal Pétain devant la Haute Cour de Justice* (Paris, 1945), 120-1; —, "Lettre ouverte au général de Gaulle," *Le Monde*, October 30, 1954, p.5.

[5]Anatole de Monzie, *Ci-devant* (Paris, 1941), p. 207.

[6]Laval, September 2, 1939, *Journal Officiel. Débats Parlementaires. Sénat*, September 3, 1939, p. 640, (hereafter cited as *J.O.S.*)

[7]Herriot, September 2, 1939, *Journal Officiel. Débats Parliamentaires. Chambre des Députés*, September 3, 1939, p. 1950 (hereafter cited as *J.O.C.*).

Louis Tixier-Vignancour who in the final sitting of the Chamber on July 9 expressed the mood of defeated France, lashing "those who have trampled their country underfoot, those who have wished to prolong a useless war"?[8]

Censorship had forbidden certain degrees of controversial discussion during the war. The brilliant slanders of the Right-wing press — *Action Française, Gringoire, Candide* or *Je Suis Partout* — ignoble as they were, had necessarily stopped short of open defeatism and too flagrant attacks on an ally thought generally to be doing altogether too little in the cause. But military disaster and the lamentable naval action at Mers el Kébir unleashed even the most respectable journalists. "For twenty years", wrote the great *bien-pensant* newspaper *Le Temps*, "Great Britain, while helping a German recovery in order to hamper development of France, which was in any event so small a threat, has always prevented every rapprochement between Paris and Berlin, and every intimacy between our country and Italy."[9] The unhappy war had come to be seen largely as the deadly work of a now unfaithful ally. This was openly stated by public officials. It was something less than odd, then, that across the Channel such charges should seem to spring from evil purposes, to be the external marks of an internal conspiracy which had destroyed the Third Republic.

Many years would pass before one came to see clearly that if the old Marshal had flayed Britain during the six-weeks war and General Weygand had denounced the declaration of September 3 as "sheer madness"[10], still there was not the slightest evidence that either one had collaborated with Laval or with any other politician in order to bring down the Republic — however little they might have regretted its passing. Through an ocean of tendentious journalism and the post-war political trials, which were so often the negation of justice, the conspiracy thesis had journeyed vainly in search of support. As a clue it led nowhere. The parliamentary Republic had abdicated; the nation had been militarily defeated. One could not start higher up than that. There was no convenient single explanation for this Strange Defeat.

A student might nevertheless feel that the military side of things offered the most important evidence. What more direct, more convincing than the second "Mémoire" General Gamelin submitted to the High Court at Riom, charged with the prosecution of those responsible for the catastrophe? "We soldiers, and I first among them", wrote the former commander-in-chief, "we were mistaken about certain matters, or at all events deluded".[11] With this the civilians were evidently in agreement, "for in the last analysis", Edouard Daladier told the Parliamentary Commission seven years after the débacle, "this

[8]Tixier-Vignancour, *J.O.C.*, July 10, 1940, p. 815.

[9]*Le Temps*, July 6, 1940, p. 1.

[10]Paul Baudouin, *The Private Diaries* (March 1940 to January 1941) *of Paul Baudouin. . . .* (London, 1948), 89; Major-General Sir Edward Spears, *Assignment to Catastrophe*, I, *Prelude to Dunkirk* (London, 1954), p. 190.

[11]"Mémoire 2", p.17, in Maurice Ribet, *Le Procès de Riom* (Paris, 1945), p. 508.

French defeat was a military defeat. Its causes were profoundly military".[12] It was certainly true that at almost any level a mass of proofs existed to condemn this most celebrated of the European armies after 1918, languishing in victory, living on its past, undisturbed through twenty years of 14th of July parades and almost universal acclaim. What could one say of a Marshal of France so little aware of responsabilities as to alter a staff report on the state of the Maginot Line in 1937 because it was critical of the prevailing dispositions and likely to disturb accepted views? What professional certainties led a general officer to comment on a study submitted to him, "Young officers would do better to study the last war's operations for their lessons than to abandon themselves to prophecies about the future"?[13] The regimental and staff library tables might carry the current literature; the pages went uncut. Observations on the use of air and land machines were made, but Army Regulations were little altered after 1921. "The Army chiefs," declared Gamelin in 1937, "are ready to seize every new idea which appears fruitful to them,"[14] but this was not immediately evident, and Colonel De Gaulle was only one who found this profession not to be true in the years before 1940.[15] The year 1918 was to cost so much more than anyone had ever thought possible.

Where doctrine was so rigid it was not altogether surprising that discipline should have been so relaxed. The most famous army in the world may also have been the most disparate, and Fortune or incapacity was to visit the heaviest shock upon its worst-trained units. War of course would always be the province of the unforseen. History would note that the so-called Manstein Plan, which finally brought the weight of enemy armour down through the Ardennes to dislocate divisions of the Second and Ninth Armies within days of the assault on May 10, came to execution almost as the chance product of the Führer's intuitive military mind. It might all have been so different. But it was not. Lieut.-General Brooke of the Second Corps, B.E.F., reviewing a November parade beside the Ninth Army commander, General Corap — destined to be the great military name publicly and unfairly branded in the coming battle — stood appalled by the sight. "Seldom have I seen anything more slovenly and badly turned out", he recalled. "Men unshaven, horses ungroomed, clothes and saddlery that did not fit, vehicles dirty, and complete lack of pride in themselves or their units". "I could not help wondering," ran his Diary entry that night, "whether the French are still a firm enough nation to again take their part in seeing this war through".[16] The event showed that these reserve divisions could not hold before the German fury. Officers and men turned and fled. Corap bore the public odium for a military

[12]*Commission d'Enquête Parlementaire sur les Evénements survenus en France de* 1933 *à* 1945 (Paris, 1951-54), I, 8 (testimony of May 21, 1947).

[13][General] Tony Albord, *Pourquoi cela est arrivé, ou les responsabilités d'une génération militaire* (1919-1939) (Nantes, 1946), pp. 16, 74-75.

[14]Gamelin, "Hier et Demain," *Revue Militaire Générale,* I (January 1937), 28.

[15]Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs,* I, *The Call to Honour* (New York, 1955), 3-31.

[16]Arthur Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide* 1939-1943: *a study based on the Diaries and Autobiographical Notes of Field Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke K.G., O.M.* (London, 1957), pp. 71, 72.

concept that was as old as the great Revolution and as outworn. "What happened to Corap could have happened to us all," General Huntziger remarked during the battle,[17] for disaster had brushed his Second Army also. A whole system had been condemned. All the complications at the top, the command divisions existing between Gamelin and Georges, the ill-considered entry into Belgium, the advent of Weygand, the conduct of Lord Gort, the vast disputed question of British co-operation by land and air — all these things merely served to underline the basic failure of the French military machine, so huge, so cumbrous, so utterly unfit to fight. Though fight part of it did, bravely, hopelessly, cut to pieces by an enemy who wheeled through the bright summer countryside and startled villages past hundreds of thousands fleeing westward and south towards heaven knew what, unseeing, unbelieving, alternately panicked and dulled by the terrible spectacle of the great déroute.[18]

Yet it was not so simple a thing as military leadership or discipline. "The word 'responsibility' is a very general term", General Georges reminded the Parliamentary commissioners long afterward. Weygand, as always, was explosive and more direct: "I must tell you that in the Army we are unanimous in thinking that the politicians want to place the whole responsibility for the defeat — I speak very plainly to you — on the military men. And that we will not accept."[19] Certainly no observer could entirely disagree here and must stand perplexed before the spectacle of a civilian control which was scarcely exercised and a "responsible" Government which went largely unchecked, baffled by the welter of conflicting facts and figures on appropriations, equipment, matters of ordering and supply. This dreadful inquest on past responsibilities, begun even before the six-weeks war had come to its end, dragged itself out in the Riom Courthouse in a sad profusion of bitter recriminations to clear a people's uneasy conscience. Not the least unpleasant event of the Vichy regime, this debate (for it became a debate and not a trial) reflected little credit on soldiers or civilians. In a slightly less political manner it has continued to the present day, to the point where one felt an overwhelming compulsion to retire from the maddening task of achieving even an acceptable list of war materiel. Colonel Goutard's success in demonstrating that 1940 was another "war of lost opportunities"[20] ought not to beguile History into easy assumptions about non-military roles. Senator Maroselli's account of his struggle to obtain an airing of the aircraft production problem before and during the war communicates something of the frustration he felt, faced by the "scandalously eloquent" facts he presented to the President of the Council. "It would be criminal to continue with this aviation policy which has brought us where we are", ran a letter of January 9, 1940: "we must end, quickly and decisively, this fatal policy pregnant with disaster".[21]

[17]Henri Massis, "Huntziger, Weygand, de Gaulle," *Hommes et Mondes,* December 1954, p. 4.

[18]B. H. Liddell Hart (ed.), *The Rommel Papers* (New York, 1953), pp. 19-22.

[19]Georges, February 19, 1948, *Commission d'Enquête,* III, 718; Weygand, June 16, 1949, *Commission d'Enquête,* VI, 1818.

[20]A. Goutard, 1940: *La guerre des occasions perdues* (Paris, 1956).

[21]André Maroselli, *Le sabotage de notre aviation: cause principale de notre défaite* (Paris, 1941), p. 102.

Previous representations had achieved nothing; this time there was not even a reply. A secret session in the Chamber one month later revealed an evasiveness and an ignorance in Parliament and the Ministry which merely foreshadowed coming events. The figures coming from the Tribune were misleading, not least because the Government appeared to have been misled by the Airforce or ministerial staff. The Minister for Air was publicly silenced by the President of the Council. The Deputies heard Daladier promise that they could contemplate an air war, whatever the inevitable losses, "with a certain assurance".[22] And the sitting ended on a familiar note of harmony which showed that Robert de Jouvenel's *République des Camarades*[23] was changeless as the Palais Bourbon.

The Airforce might have been the most sensational weakness; it was only one. How many matters of supply, of labour, of equipment, of organization could bear the light of investigation? Doubtless every nation at war had its problems of industrial bureaucracy, its multiplications and cancellings-out of offices. Doubtless the production troubles of France were reduced upon the creation of the Ministry of Armaments under Raoul Dautry shortly after the war began.[24] Perhaps it was no more than bad luck that France suffered a catastrophe where other nations escaped because of time or geography. Yet one emerged from the labyrinth of disputed figures with the conviction that something fundamental had been wrong. It was not a mere matter of Hotchkiss tanks being manufactured with steering-mechanisms which failed after less than 300 kilometres, or of Bloch bombers which could not take off with full fuel and bomb load.[25] Responsibilities at that level pointed inevitably upward, reaching always into the political arena where Parliamentary commissions had been too readily satisfied because of ignorance or indifference or politics; where Ministers had been misinformed or disinclined to answer questions and had taken refuge in appeals to patriotism, to confidence in the *grands chefs*, and to memories of other days and other trials which still in 1939-40 cast their evening-glow of victory over a nation which now sought only the contemplation of this last. One could add the figures a dozen different ways: what they told was more or less the same; it was civil and military failure.

Still, the more one looked the more one became convinced that this Strange Defeat would never be comprehensible considered solely as a French phenomenon. The Armistice of June 25 was French, but the military collapse was European. Perhaps outside of France this had been too much lost sight of. It had come to seem inevitable that students should learn how Gamelin made no reply to his representative General Faury, August 22, 1939, when asked what the expectant Poles

[22]February 9, 1940, (Comité secret), *J.O.C.* February 9 (sic), 1940, pp. 1-46. [Published 7 April 1948.]

[23]*La République des Camarades* (Paris, 1914).

[24]Jean Ottenheimer; "Les commandes d'armement et la mobilisation industrielle en 1939," *Fédération*, October 1952, pp. 614-26.

[25]Colonel de Beaufort, "L'armée blindée: le personnel," *Revue de Défense Nationale*, VI (January 1948), 31; Colonel Paquier, "Combien d'avions allemands contre combien d'avions français le 10 mai 1940," *Revue de Défense Nationale*, VI (June 1948), 745.

should be told; how Georges then spoke up to say that there was no knowing when the French Army would be able to attack; and how eventually Gamelin said simply: "Poland must hold out".[26] But would they also learn how unprepared were France's allies? The valuable but somewhat sterilized pages of Major Ellis and Professor Butler[27] might not really communicate the fantastic lack of preparation prevailing that year when the United Kingdom undertook to offer guarantees in Europe against aggression. Evidently official histories have their limitations as well as their uses. One looked elsewhere. The Diary entries of General Brooke reflected more faithfully that underestimation of the enemy which characterized Lord Gort,[28] the British Government, and possibly the people as a whole. For later condemnations of "the colossal military disaster which occurred when the French High Command failed to withdraw the Northern Armies from Belgium at the moment when they knew that the French front was decisively broken at Sedan and on the Meuse"[29] were too easy and too late. The unfortunate Dyle manoeuvre with all its potential risks had been freely accepted the previous autumn, as Mr. Churchill himself admitted.[30] Doubtless the tiny British land force of little more than ten divisions had discouraged serious questioning of the French plan, but one might doubt the intention itself. Whatever her sea and air effort, Great Britain was content to follow the French on foot. In the face of intransigent German bellicosity British policy before September had precipitated war; after September French policy precipitated defeat: ironic conclusion to more than thirty years of wavering entente. Were not the terrible events of the six-weeks war only footnotes to the original errors? For it was not only the front that was broken in the crossing of the Meuse. An elaborate myth collapsed and disappeared not later than the summer day when a British General lost his temper and shook the commander of the French First Army Group by the button of his tunic to shock him back into action. The painful scenes and encounters between French and British along the refugee-packed roads and on the beaches and piers were an end to 1904 and all that. What Weygand called "twenty years of mutual suspicion and hesitation" closed as Brooke and his staff sailed around the Breton peninsula on June 18, "mostly lying on the deck in the sunshine and thanking God that we were safely out of France for the second time".[31]

[26]General Faury, "La Pologne terrassée. Souvenirs (août — septembre 1939)", *Revue Historique de l'Armée,* March 1953, p. 134.

[27]Major L. F. Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders,* 1939-1940 (London, 1953); J. R. M. Butler; *Grand Strategy,* II, *September* 1939 — *June* 1941 (London, 1957) — both in the *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series.*

[28]Bryant, *Turn of the Tide,* p. 64.

[29]Winston Churchill, broadcast speech, June 18, 1940, *The War Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill O.M., C.H., P.C., M.P.,* (London 1951-52), I, 198.

[30]'Ajax', "Enigma Number One," *The National Review,* CXXXI (July 1948), 35-40; Butler, *Grand Strategy,* p. 161-55; Ellis, *France and Flanders,* pp. 22-24; Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War,* II, *Their Finest Hour,* (New York, 1949), 37.

[31]Jacques Weygand, *The Role of General Weygand: conversations with his son. . . .* (London, 1948), p. 25; Bryant, *Turn of the Tide,* p. 183.

All this and more compelled examination if the events of 1940 were to make any sense. Unless the British role were evaluated fairly there could be no history above the level of national prejudice which—to take only the example of French jugments — had sometimes reduced this war to a case of British desertion and Belgian treason. In retrospect, there would seem to be something desperately sick and weak in the alacrity with which the surrender of May 28 was condemned and Leopold made the scapegoat for so many misfortunes. For the French, of course, allowances would be made. They had waited so long, been alerted so often, made so many representations to Brussels in vain, been given scarcely the slightest co-operation, and finally had staked all on reaching the river Dyle or even the Albert Canal to save not only themselves and the Belgian Army but what they could also of the land.[32] All that only to see a King accept defeat and choose surrender rather than exile. The unleashing of French fury against him was a shocking action born of fear and frustration, but it was understandable then as the German armor moved up to Dunkerque to destroy the finest divisions of the French army. Perhaps it was some sort of psychological identification which led them to condemn in others what they would so soon accept for themselves. Perhaps the French would afterwards comprehend the feelings of Leopold as he explained himself to his Ministers shortly after five in the morning, May 25, in the Chateau de Wynendaele, telling them why he could not leave, why his Armies were at their last gasp, predicting the proximate fall of France and the continuation of Great Britain's war, which could not then, however, help Belgium.[33] At the time they did not understand. Yet a student would have to take account of it all, just as he would have to take account of the French reaction to it, if ever he were to make anything of the Strange Defeat.

And then, too, weighing the external factors, he could hardly neglect the enemy, his plans, strengths and weaknesses. For war in the West was something more than the rather gay and dashing Panzer thrusts of Generals Schmidt, Reinhardt and Guderian so breathtakingly recorded in the letters and diaries of Erwin Rommel. A long chain of events stretched from September to June; they were not all brilliant. Every account must make room for Hitler sitting silent after Paul Schmidt had translated the British ultimatum, deep in thought, immobile, then suddenly asking, "What now?"[34] What of the many alarms, alerts and doubts of the long cold winter? Or that awful January day two German officers crashed in Belgium carrying orders for an imminent invasion of the Low Countries, precipitating the Führer into what Field-Marshal Keitel later called "the nicest storm" he had ever witnessed and leading to an overhauling of German plans?[35]

[32]See, inter alia, Colonel Fernand Vandaele, "La Belgique face à l'Allemagne de septembre 1939 à mai 1940," *L'Armée — La Nation,* June, July, August and September 1949, pp. 7-14, 7-18, 7-18, 7-16.

[33]Belgium, *Rapport de la Commission d'Information instituée par S. M. le roi Léopold III le* 14 *juillet* 1946 (Brussels, 1947), pp. 53-55.

[34]Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter* (London, 1951), p. 158.

[35]Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "10. Januar 1940 — Die Affäre Mechelen," *Wehrwissentschaftliche Rundschau,* IV (November 1954), 497-513; Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, "L'alerte du 10 janvier 1940: les documents de Mechelen-sur-Meuse," *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale,* III (October 1953), 33-54; — "L'origine du Plan von Manstein," *L'Armée — La Nation,* X (May 1955), 2-10.

Those who allowed themselves to be blinded by sentiment, ideology or the verve of the German success, the "sixty days that shook the West", to use Jacques Benoist-Méchin's title,[36] would have to do their homework again. History would probably reject the view of a pre-ordained outcome; everything would have to be weighed as often as fresh evidence came into view. "We never imagined war in the West would be like this", Rommel wrote to his wife.[37] And four months before he was hanged at Nürnberg Keitel reminisced at length about the Dyle and Manstein manoeuvres and the opportunities France and Britain had lost.[38]

For us, of course, it is a matter less of pursuing didactic purposes than of seeking understanding. Since we are not pupils of Colonel Goutard, we do not feel the professional military urgency to explain away the enemy's victory: our lessons may be touched with a doubt and even a pessimism which is probably not acceptable in military schools. The indispensable thing must always be to try to see the possibilities and only then, if necessary, accept the apparent fatality of events. No account which did not place the hesitations and fears of the German Army beside the mistakes of the French and British would satisfy History. If it was true that the French entered the war with no plan of campaign, it was not less true that the Germans had none for the West. And though Clio must always be on the side of the successful, she will remember that General von Brauchitsch once tendered his resignation rather than agree to the invasion of France.[39] She will also remember, of course, that the resignation was refused and that within little more than six months Adolf Hitler stood looking down on Napoleon's tomb.

* * *

As the weeks went by and he continued his reflections, it seemed to Marc Bloch that the roots of the disaster were not military and "must be sought elsewhere and at a much deeper level". He thought the soldiers had come to despair of their country and the people whose sons they commanded.[40] Certainly there had been much to distrust: the preoccupations of France were as largely internal as external in character. The social and political struggle weighed on all classes. One day it might be possible convincingly to say whether or not the advent of the Léon Blum Government was not a more shattering experience for the Republic than the violation of Locarno and Versailles. So many paths ran back to 1936, or even to the night of February 6, 1934. And now when all that pre-war era is reduced to paper and imagination, one follows along the trail of the vicious social battle right down to July 1940 with a measure of Probably no act of recent times had more profound consequences than the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and in France it sparked an explosion of frenetic

[36]Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Soixante jours qui ébranlèrent l'Occident,* 3 v. (Paris 1956).

[37]Rommel to his wife, June 10, 1940, *Rommel Papers,* p. 58.

[38]See the interviews of Lucien Corosi, "La mésentente entre les généraux Gamelin et Georges," *Le Journal de Genève,* November 12, 1947, pp. 1-2.

[39]B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London [Panther], 1956), pp. 104-06.

[40]Bloch, *Strange Defeat,* p. 125.

activity on the Right which recalled counter-revolutionary howls of incredulity. The war did not bring it to an end. 1939 was many things and not least a cardinal date for the internal history of France. the Revolutionary age and was indeed little more than delayed revenge for the tentative Popular Front policies which had threatened "the new Ancien Regime". After three months of war Daladier might speak to Senators of "a few bad shepherds" with whom the Government would quickly deal (in the event thousands of arrests were made) but the response which the spectre of Communism elicited from Parliament and much of the press passed beyond all rational bounds. Hitler himself would not have received a warmer reception and a swifter ejection into the street than did the Communist Deputy Florimond Bonte on November 30, when he was so rash and arrogant as to attempt to take his seat.[41] The blows that rained down, the torn clothes, the uproar might have passed as no more than one of those minor Parliamentary diversions with which the Republic of Pals occasionally entertained itself when debates grew lengthy and tempers short — had it not been that M. Bonte was a symbol not merely of the treason of Maurice Thorez and the other Communist deserters from the Army, nor only of the hopes for peace which had died in Moscow the previous August, but also of the lost assurances that the comfortable old nineteenth century world of the respectable bourgeois would know no end.

Anyone could see that of the public wartime debates the most animated and protracted concerned the issue of extirpating the Communist influence from the country. Time and time again the Daladier Government, and more especially the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, were accused of softness toward the Left. An observer might well have wondered whether the war was in fact being conducted against the real enemy. "Everything is illogical", cried Senator Fiancette. "They tell us: we have declared war on Germany — which is true enough — because she attacked Poland. Well, Russia attacked Poland in the circumstances you know, and we haven't declared war on her!"[42] Stripping Marcel Cachin of his parliamentary immunity seemed less than justice to some. "The Convention", shouted Senator Lauvray, "would have guillotined him!"[43] Sarraut might show that he had arrested 400 militant Communists and claim even to have destroyed "the essential structure of Communism". It was not enough. The attacks on him continued, and he was reduced to warning the Luxembourg that "the most serious, the most tragic mistake would be imperceptibly to permit the work of Public Safety to be debased because it had been infused, however little, with the spirit of revenge or of party".[44] It was obvious that where Deputies stood to applaud Finland when they had done neither for their ally Poland, something

[41]Daladier, December 1, 1939, *J.O.S.*, December 2, 1939, pp. 687-88; *J.O.C.*, December 1, 1939, p. 2010; Florimond Bonte, *Le chemin de l'honneur: de la Chambre des Députés aux prisons de France et au Bagne d'Afrique* (Paris, 1949), pp. 44-57.

[42]*J.O.S.*, January 20, 1940, p. 30.

[43]*J.O.S.*, March 1, 1940, p. 172.

[44]*J.O.S.*, March 20, 1940, p. 267.

was not right in a nation committed to war with Germany and peace with the Soviet Union. Demands for a break with the Russians contrasted sharply with attitudes toward Germany before September. If it was suggested that traitors be summarily despatched, the Deputy Louis Biétrix called out, "We must start by cutting down the schoolteachers!"[45] Plainly the issue was not merely that of exposing pro-German or anti-national subversion. The fact was, as Daladier so delicately hinted in a secret session in February, that, "The war surprised us in a certain disarray, as regards our state of mind, in a certain struggle between political parties. . . ."[46] Of course it was true that "Bolshevist gangrene" existed. But what they fought against, on the Right, was more than that. To them the Finnish cause appeared like a harbor light after a long voyage without a compass. Here at last was the opportunity to strike at the real enemy within, and if need be, without. And when this was not done, they could not forgive Daladier. After all, it was his great chance: in 1940 he might finally have expiated the sin of 1936, even of 1934. But the occasion passed. The Treaty of Moscow intervened; the Northern War ended. And in March his Government fell. By then it was in any event too late: other troubles followed fast upon the new cabinet of Paul Reynaud. The ideological war inside France, however, did not abate. Despite censorship it smouldered on while the defenses of the nation collapsed before the German attack. "That such a manifestation of party spirit, of class spirit should be tolerated in this tragic hour of the Battle of France", wrote the liberal editor Emile Buré one week before Paris fell, "is inconceivable; and I say it to you plainly, Paul Reynaud".[47]

An onlooker, then, might be forgiven for suspecting that in the minds of many, of the Centre and the Right — not to mention the uncertain Left, or the recently-converted from the Left, the Paul Faures, the Marcel Déats — France was caught up in the wrong war. For them the Mannerheim Line had been "an extension of our front".[48] It was understood that this front was neither wholly military nor wholly national: it was indeed international and it ran through France itself. When the opportunity to fight there had been lost, the existing state of war seemed less sensible than ever. And at length it was left for Pierre Laval to sum it up, saying what was in the minds of so many on that last day when Parliament voted away its powers: ". . . we have overlooked not one possible mistake, without a single exception we committed them all. . .: Oh yes! they rashly hurled their challenge! they flung out their challenge, and we have been beaten!"[49] Always their minds went back to 1936, to the fall of the Laval Government and the coming of Blum, to sanctions against

[45] *J.O.C.*, January 17, 1940, pp. 22-23.

[46] It was actually February 10, despite the date on the Compte Rendu, *J.O.C.*, February 9, 1940, p. 42 (Comité secret).

[47] *L'Ordre*, June 9, 1940, p. 1.

[48] Camille Fernand-Laurent, March 12, 1940, *J.O.C.*, March 13, 1940, p. 509.

[49] Laval's words were delivered at the unofficial session of the National Assembly held on July 10, 1940. Minutes were kept and deposited in the National Archives. Part of this Compte Rendu was published for the first time in *Le Figaro*, February 29, 1952, p. 7.

Italy and the end of Stresa, to the ratification of the hateful Franco-Soviet Treaty; they thought always of the beginning that morning of March 7 of the series of external misfortunes which tied France irrevocably to Britain and led down through the Nazi-Soviet Pact to the second Armistice at Compiègne — of the beginning that June 4 of the coalition of Socialists and Radicals with Communist support which, short-lived though it was, had tampered with the securities of their world. "Defeatism", Raoul Dautry told General Spears (May 29), "has its roots in political and middle-class circles, amongst those who were most frightened by the *Front-Populaire*, and therefore hated it most".[50] Bordeaux and Vichy were evidently the end also of a profound social struggle.

Still, one might feel uncomfortable leaving the problem there. Suspicious of a socio-economic determinist explanation, one might search for the play once more of the contingent, the personal, even though the dangers here were not less. Titles such as André Géraud's *The Gravediggers of France*[51] were fair warning. Yet it would be impossible *not* to consider individuals, soldiers and civilians. So many questions stood like lions in the path. Had it really been impossible for Gamelin to break the iron-ring of Daladier's refusal to make General Georges commander-in-chief of the Armies? Was the irrational partitioning of responsibilities between the two Generals all that could be achieved? Many officers, including the old Marshal, thought not. Yet their complaints had been fruitless[52] and both Gamelin and Georges had acquiesced in this decision, born of the political prejudices of the President of the Council and perhaps of Parliament, which dictated that each General would accuse the other of failure to command, if only because their relationship to one another and to the battle had never been defined.

"The higher one is placed", Gamelin wrote (December 10, 1939), pressing acceptance of the title Commander of the North-East Theatre of Operations on Georges, "the greater is one's duty to sacrifice one's personal conceptions. My intention is to increase your station, not to diminish it; and if one day you are to succeed me, as I have always wished, it is certain that I shall have served you in what I now do".[53] Considerations of personal place, appeals to ambition are the stuff of all human intercourse, but set against the military débacle this extraordinary letter sheds not a little light on the men who led the nation and on the spirit of the hour. It was only one straw in the wind. Was it any more significant than the remark made by General Billotte when asked why he did not speak out against the plan for entry into Belgium to which he was opposed: "The task must be done. It's me or someone else!" One had no reaction save to echo Gamelin's query, "Was I really so severe a master that they did not dare tell me the truth?"[54]

[50]Spears, *Assignment*, I, 269.
[51]New York, 1944.
[52]Georges, February 12, 1948, *Commission d'Enquête*, III, 675-78.
[53]General Maurice Gamelin, *Servir*, 3 v. (Paris, 1946-47), III, 257-58.
[54]Colonel D'Astier de la Vigerie, *Le ciel n'était pas vide*, 1940 (Paris, 1952), p. 58; Gamelin, *Servir*, III, 387.

Beyond doubt this Strange Defeat would resist all inquiries which did not examine the nature and conflict of personality as far as the evidence allowed. It was a problem that grew more difficult as the war reached its climax. If Gamelin's was a case of the sudden evaporation of apparent tranquility and confidence, what was one to make of his successor Weygand? Confidence and despair rolled from him like waves on a shore. "The awakening will be tragic", he had written somewhat darkly before the great battle opened. "What have we come to," he asked on receiving Paul Reynaud's telegram, May 17, summoning him to Paris, "that they are calling on an old gentleman of 73?"[55] Yet to Admiral Cunningham only a week earlier he had seemed "quite cheerful", and even after assuming command he was reported by Sir John Dill to be "a breath of fresh air coming amid all the tired men". Weygand himself always insisted he had had no notion of the terrible state of the Army when he became commander-in-chief; he still believed recovery possible. He said that as late as June 9 he hoped the enemy might be held. But his private remarks indicated the gravest doubts much earlier. There was reason to believe he had told the War Committee on May 25 that "the war must be stopped at once".[56] Perhaps it would never be possible to arrange the apparent contradictions in a meaningful pattern, to do more than suggest that essentially the confidence of Weygand was neither more surely founded nor longer-lived than that of his predecessor. "He feels," Madame Weygand wrote to Pierre Lazareff on 27 May, requesting him not to publish a special issue of *Match* about her husband, "that it is preferable not to undertake anything in the tragic days we are now living through, in view of the fact that nothing in the present situation can permit us to hope that France will be able to extricate herself from her present predicament for which she alone is responsible."[57]

Whatever puzzle the Generals offered was scarcely more baffling than the problem of sorting out the minds of the politicians. Was there anyone else in this crisis so mercurial, so subject to moods, so independent and yet so disastrously in political and personal bondage as Paul Reynaud? If he was not the defeatist some suspected him of being, neither was he the Clemenceau whose mantle he cared to imagine he had assumed. If it could be said of any one man, it might be said of him that he embodied that "psychological problem" which, as Camille Chautemps remarked, dominated "the whole question of the Armistice".[58] It would always be a matter of some interest to

[55]General Maxime Weygand, *Recalled to Service: the memoirs of General Maxime Weygand* (London, 1952), pp. 50-51; Gabriel Puaux, *Deux années au Levant. Souvenirs de Syrie et du Liban* (1939-194_) (Paris, 1952), p. 191.

[56]Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor's Odyssey. The autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope* (London, 1951), p. 225; Butler, *Grand Strategy*, p. 189; Weygand, *Recalled*, pp. 136, 138; P. Dhers, "Le comité de guerre du 25 mai 1940;" *Revue d'Histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, III (June 1953), 166-69, 172 n.4; Daladier, July 24, 1945, *Procès Pétain*, p. 36.

[57]Pierre Lazareff, *Deadline: the behind-the-scenes story of the last decade in France* (New York, 1942), p. 295.

[58]Chautemps, "Mémoire" quoted in Albert Kammerer, *La vérité sur l'armistice*, rev. ed. (Paris, 1945), p. 108 n. 2; Chautemps, "Lettre d'un condamné," *Ecrits de Paris*, June 1947, pp. 118-19.

reflect on what strange fate had brought the fortunes of France to the point of decision in Bordeaux on June 15, placing them in the hands of these two men, Weygand and Reynaud. Their celebrated encounters must always be one of the great scenes of the Republic, the President of the Council demanding that the Army capitulate in order that the war might go on from the Empire, the commander-in-chief angrily defying him. "No force on earth," Weygand cried, "can make me sign the capitulation of an army which has just fought as the French Army has fought". Even if Reynaud were to sign it, no officer could be found to carry out such an order. The President of the Council had made a mistake if he had brought him back from Syria to do this sort of job. "You are here to obey," retorted Reynaud. "I am here," shouted the General, "to defend the Army's honour. You and the President of the Republic are seeking to shift the responsibility. The Government was responsible for the war; it is for the Government to take responsibility for the Armistice."[59]

Even in the enormous complexity of the defeat this shattering public clash was critical. It focussed so much: all the unsolved problems of the organisation of the nation for war, of command, the vast untouched matter of the very conception of the war, the timeless struggle between the civilians and the military. One almost senses that the protagonists felt the nation watching them, judging them, siding with or against them. And, rightly or wrongly, one feels instinctively that at that moment, whatever else it might later come to believe, the nation ranged itself behind the General who demanded an immediate and honourable end to the slaughter, who had certainly laid himself open to dismissal or even arrest in order to maintain his view, beside whom stood the silent old man of Verdun and all the great Generals in metropolitan France, determined to have done with a war which now at least was seen to have been madness from the beginning.

What a curious twist of fate it was that now directed this loyalty to a defeated Army and to Generals who denounced the very people clinging to them and to the hopes they reflected from bygone days of another defeat and the recovery that had followed then? For the Generals were not sparing of the nation in defeat. Even the most correct of them, the most amenable, pliable, even Republican of them, struck out at the Parliamentary regime which had ruled France since 1871. In his long statement on the battle, delivered to Daladier on May 18, just before he was replaced, Gamelin condemned the civil as well as the military failures. While the Battle of Flanders rolled on across the northern plain he had sat quietly in his office deep in the fortress at Vincennes, drawing up this extraordinary document. The French citizen-soldier, he said, had understood nothing of the

[59]Weygand, *Role*, pp. 137-38; —, *Recalled*, pp. 169-71, 211-12; Paul Reynaud, *La France a sauvé l'Europe* (Paris, 1947), II, 337-38, 344-45; —, *Au coeur de la melée* (Paris, 1951), pp. 814-18, 830-21; Yves Bouthillier, *Le drame de Vichy*, I, *Face à l'ennemi, face à l'allié* (Paris, 1950), 25; François Charles-Roux, *Cinq mois tragiques aux affaires étrangères* (Paris, 1949), pp. 40; Baudouin, *Private diaries*, p. 114; Albert Lebrun, *Témoignage* (Paris, 1945), pp. 81-82; Weygand, June 21, 1949, *Commission d'Enquête*, VI, 1845-46.

war, could see nothing beyond his personal horizon. "Disposed to criticize ceaselessly all those having the least authority", wrote this lethargic disciple of Henri Bergson, "encouraged in the name of civilization to enjoy a soft daily life, today's serviceman did not receive in the years between the wars the moral and patriotic education which would have prepared him for the drama in which the country's destiny is going to be played out. The old national instincts may have been awakened in many, but that is not enough."[60] What Gamelin was writing as his military career reached its end, others were saying. Pétain, Georges, and more — all had found fault with the Republic, though they insisted on their loyalty to it. Characteristically, it was Weygand who was most outspoken about sweeping away the past and creating a new nation. Steadily, as the situation deteriorated and his mood darkened, his attacks increased. "What we are paying for," he said early in June, "is twenty years of blunders and of neglect. It is out of the question to punish the generals, and not the teachers who have refused to develop in the children the sentiment of patriotism and sacrifice." "We are paying for twenty years of lying and of demogogy."[61] And sometime later that same month he drew up a memorandum calling for a new social regime, the restoration of God, Patriotism, Honour and the Family to the nation's hearth. "The old order of things," he wrote, "a political regime made up of masonic, capitalist and international deals, has brought us where we stand. France has had enough of that."[62]

Thus the Generals proclaimed this lost war to be a national defeat. But it was not only the soldiers who spoke out; nor even the authoritarians like Colonel de la Rocque whose ideas, it almost seemed, flowed from Weygand's accusing pen.[63] They gave the lead here, no doubt, but the prevailing climate of opinion was receptive. Anyone who troubles himself in the future about this moment in the history of France will always savour the spectacle of that fiery old rebel Gustave Hervé, whose pathetic career had carried him from Dérouledism to preaching treason and planting the tricolor on a dung-heap to glorifying a Marshal of France, now waving the flag as the enemy swept into the fallen city. The great responsibility, his newspaper, *La Victoire*, said on June 19, was the people's! "All the people, not this or that class, but everyone, rich and poor; for in this misfortune there are no classes, only people who suffer and weep." The 18th and 19th centuries, Bernard Fäy commented, had dried up the well-springs of the national life. "Our generation has come to the point where it must undertake methodically the resurrection of all our instincts: above all, the religious instinct, that need and capacity for faith, without which human existence has neither direction nor purpose."[64] The chorus of self-condemnation arose. Not merely the military chiefs sought to clear the honour of the Army: it was the people, the nation itself. It was not merely the old professional

[60]Gamelin, *Servir*, I, 357, III, 425.
[61]Baudouin, *Private diaries*, pp. 79, 92.
[62]Weygand, *Recalled*, pp. 229-30.
[63]General Maxime Weygand, *La Rocque* (St. Etienne, 1952).
[64]*La Victoire*, June 19, 20, 1940.

enemies of the Republic of Pals who blackened the past and spun myths of a virtuous future. It was the people, history's celebrated common people, who rushed to embrace this defeat and accept it as their own. "We came to imagine that the proper duty of man was to arrange an easy way of life," a simple wine-grower remarked to an American reporter. ". . . We saw no further than the parish pump and we were well satisfied when our representatives in Parliament brought home some of the gravy. . . . We shall have to bow our heads, but no force on earth will be able to break our hearts."[65]

Perhaps all this, as a mass phenomenon, could be explained. Indeed, it was explained at the time. In his prison at Bourassol Léon Blum sat reflecting on that age-old compulsion of the vanquished, Greeks, Jews, Frenchmen, no matter who they might be, to punish themselves. It was all the same; it was timeless. "The peoples' instinct is for justice", he wrote. "When they have been beaten they need to believe that they have not been beaten for nothing. They seek in themselves the source of their inner guilt. And thus from the beginning of time national calamity has been linked with the idea of sin or error, and with its natural extension: contrition, expiation and redemption."[66] Was it likely that History could disagree? However the evidence might be put together, and no matter what weight would one day be given to the hundreds of interlocking issues which made up the thing called The Fall of France, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that by June 16 (no matter what Frenchmen thought later) the catastrophe had become and was accepted as being national. With the British gone, with the Germans spread out triumphant from Dunkerque to Saint Jean de Luz, France turned in upon herself to consider this Strange Defeat and examine her conscience. Whether they agreed with him or not, Frenchmen understood the impatient words that rang out from the irascible Tixier-Vignancour in the Petit Casino at Vichy where the Deputies convened in the afternoon of July 9 to be informed of final arrangements for the transfer of powers to Marshal Pétain: "I say that these proceedings are the expression of an epoch which is finished. . . ." [67]

It must have seemed that France was at last on her own. The war was over; the battle was lost. There would be no more bloodshed, no more manoeuvering, no more alliances. There would be no more *"Cours pratique d'Anglais"* on the radio. All that had gone. Now in the classified column of a Paris daily appeared a small announcement: "Cook, speaking German, very capable, 40 years old, seeks employment, even for a few days. . . ."[68] As an epitaph it seemed adequate. It said everything essential. There was nothing more to say.

[65]Bordeaux, June 22, *New York Times,* June 23, 1940, p. 25.

[66]Léon Blum, *A l'échelle humaine,* in *L'Oeuvre de Léon Blum,* V, *Mémoires, La Prison et le Procès, A l'échelle humaine,* 1940-1945 (Paris, 1955), 411-12. A noisy, witty and ill-mannered delayed echo of this sort of thing is Jean Dutourd, *The Taxis of the Marne* (New York, 1957).

[67]Tixier-Vignancour, July 9, 1940, *J.O.C.,* July 10, 1940, p. 815.

[68]*Le Matin,* June 19, 1940, p. 2.