

CURRENT MAGAZINES

THE FALL OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

The French Collapse—Mr. Thomas Cadott, in the *National*.

France in June—Mr. W. H. Chamberlin, in the *Atlantic*.

Why France Fell—The Hon. George Peel, in the *Contemporary*.

The Flight from Paris—Mr. P. R. Pulham, in the *Fortnightly*.

HAS the French Republic fallen? Or has it merely stumbled? Can anyone—especially a foreign observer—presume yet to set forth the causes of its collapse, distinguishing the military causes, the economic, the political? Despite these objections, indicating that an article on such a subject is premature, it seems impossible to evade or to postpone review of this central issue in current magazines. The writers I have enumerated, in the *Fortnightly*, the *Contemporary*, the *Atlantic*, the *National*, did well, I think, to venture a general interpretation, though the evidence is still so far from complete. For we know quite enough to be clear about some vital things, and decision about them cannot be too quickly vocal.

This is anything but a purely speculative subject. Difference is made for every one of us, in the way we think about the perils just now threatening democracy, by the account we give to ourselves of what has happened to France and of why it happened. For none of us is it possible to look upon our British Commonwealth crusade as it now stands without taking account of what went wrong, apparently all of a sudden, with our French partner. That it was not thus sudden, but explicable in terms of antecedents long maturing, which only those either wilfully blind or interested to misinterpret could explain away, it is now imperative to realize.

I mean here to consider the fall of the French *Republic*, not of France in general, or of the French army, or of the French people: our concern is with the fall of that peculiar fabric of government which had there been maintained for rather less than three-quarters of a century. Why did it collapse? In consequence, someone will glibly exclaim, of German victory over the French armies. Collapse of the constitution did indeed follow a military defeat. But is it certain that the military defeat was what caused the constitutional collapse? Some excellent critics insist that the order was the reverse; that there would have been no military defeat, on anything like the scale

of the defeat we witnessed, if it had not been contrived by traitors in the French camp whose master purpose was to change the constitution. Perhaps it is still more arguable that what happened to the constitution and what happened to the army sprang from the *same* cause. I mention these rival suggestions merely to indicate how "the obvious", as newspaper correspondents call it, may oversimplify a discussion such as this. For the present, avoiding responsibility for problems which belong to either the military or the historical expert, I set myself this quite limited question: What is it, exactly, that has happened, whether temporarily or finally, to the Republic of France? And what were the motives of those who either led the change or acquiesced in it?

This article, then, will be in two parts. One will be narrative, telling what happened; the other will be interpretation, telling why it happened. First *facts*, which no one can dispute, but which are often dimly or only partially understood, and which need to be kept before one's mind with the utmost clearness and fullness. Next, *motives and purposes*, about which different observers may think very differently, but about which we cannot dispense with forming some opinion, retaining or modifying it in accordance with its capacity to bring facts into coherent order.

I.

First among the facts is this: that the French Republic, whether temporarily or finally, has been *extinguished*. Here and there one meets the suggestion that what has happened to it is rather a *reform*; as a sanguine story runs, that thanks to "the good Marshal Petain" a new and better French Republic is to arise. When one declares, on the contrary, that the extinction is complete, one means that the new system which Marshal Petain has set up is a system contradicting, and meant to contradict, all that was vital to the French Republic.

Two-thirds of France is occupied by German troops under a German Governor, with no more trace of its republican institutions than can be found, for instance, in the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. If anyone supposed this to be a mere temporary arrangement, to pass away when the definite peace should be made, like the withdrawal of the German armies in 1871, Field-Marshal Goering has surely undecieved him. "Germany", he says, "has gained the dominant rôle in Europe. A France may exist beside her, but not the France

of yesterday, which has been defeated, and which must be satisfied with the rôle assigned to her". What is being done and will be done with "Occupied France", the German administration of other subject peoples is enough to show. The part known as "Unoccupied", the part in which Marshal Petain and his colleagues are allowed the forms of government, has adopted a new system not less remote from republican ideas; differing indeed only in this, that there not Germans, but Frenchmen (under ultimate German direction) exercise despotic power.

What is gone, in Occupied France directly, in Unoccupied France by implication, but no less surely, is all that we judge essential not to a republic alone, but to any free country of whose safeguards the republic provides one example. I mean the responsibility of government to those who are governed; a legislature elected and meeting regularly for the enactment and revision of laws; courts of justice that are independent of executive control; freedom of speech and of writing on public policies. All these are abolished in the new scheme for even that section of France which the Fascist and Nazi conquerors have left with the poor pretence of sovereignty. Government by decree of three men, who will themselves be mere agents of Adolf Hitler! The change is all summed up in that. It is superfluous to spend time on the miserable phrases, intended to deceive, by which the character of the régime is stated otherwise. The Republic of France was established first, a hundred and fifty years ago, to set the French people free from despotic caprice: the despotic caprice under which the French people are now reimprisoned is one whose cruelties, whose insults to human dignity, make that old eighteenth century appear by comparison just and even generous. Who would think of comparing even the worst Minister of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette with a Hitler, a Goebbels, a Mussolini?

Already we have had some specimens of the new system at work. A legislative assembly has been set up, subject to the qualification that it cannot legislate, but can only advise the Head of the State, advising him too only when he chooses to ask for advice, while the place of laws is taken by presidential decrees with the opening words "We, Philippe Petain, Marshal of France" decree so-and-so. To the question who created this new office, of Head of the State, and conferred this new title upon Philippe Petain, the answer is that he created and acquired everything for himself, with the support of a German Air Force and German tanks, the people of France being given no choice

but, under grim penalties, to submit. The name of his successor, chosen by himself, as next "Head of the State", has likewise been intimated: France is to do homage to Pierre Laval, and no one may discuss the selection. Day by day his countrymen await fresh Petain decrees. One day it is ordered that no one of Jewish origin shall in future be held eligible for any public office in France. Another command is that the courts shall forgo their customary summer vacation, as there are many thousands of trials pending: report had it that 17,000 warrants had been issued for political offences: such is the caprice of "We, Philippe Petain". Next the police are commissioned, in true Gestapo style, to arrest Madame Geneviève Tabouis, M. André Geraud, and M. Henri de Kerillis—those candid French journalists whose insight and courage has won them an audience all over the world. Yet another pair of decrees soon afterwards called forth abroad a mingling of disgust with amusement. One was to the effect that a special court would try ex-Premier Daladier and those associated with him in the wickedness of declaring war on Germany a year ago: the other was a demand that Great Britain should pay reparations to France for injury to the French warships which her naval guns had lately inflicted off the coasts of Africa. Recovering damages for the affair of the *Dunkerque* is likely to be a tedious process, for Marshal Petain's decree against the British Admiralty will be hard to execute. But it was easy to work the dictatorial purpose upon M. Daladier. With other refugees, the ex-Premier had fled from the French as from the German Terror, but not soon enough, for he had been held a prisoner on a French ship off the coast of Morocco, and was brought back to face the "special tribunal", whose proceedings (like those against Alfred Dreyfus nearly half a century before, and no doubt with the same purpose) would be "in secret".

Not only does the new régime thus pursue with implacable vengeance the men whose offence was their loyal fulfilment of republican responsibilities. It likewise pledged itself to act as agent for the vengeance of Adolf Hitler upon wretched Germans who had sought asylum on French soil. Among the undertakings given by Marshal Petain was one which bound him to seek out and surrender any such refugees whom the Nazi authority might indicate by name as in concealment somewhere in France! It cannot be too clearly emphasized (for the propagandists of deceit are hard at work to confuse us on this point) that in the "Unoccupied" no less than in the "Occupied" area there

has been abolition of all the safeguards for human freedom which the French Republic established on the downfall of the monarchy of two centuries ago.

The second outstanding fact, apart from conjecture of motive, that we need to realize is this: the constitutional change was no requirement of the bargain for peace with Germany. There is an impression in some quarters that it was inevitable because France had been overwhelmed in the field. But look at the terms of the document so curiously misnamed "Armistice". Not one of its Articles has anything to do with alteration of the republican form of government for the area left "unoccupied". This was no part of the price which, as Marshal Petain's advocates tell us, had to be paid to Germany for ceasing to massacre French women and children. If, then, a Fascist régime has been set up, this was not because it was forced: it must have been either because it was desired for its own sake by the circle of Marshal Petain, or because they meant it as a gesture of conciliation, disagreeable for themselves, but worth while, to facilitate harmony with their formidable German neighbor. In either case, the republic was destroyed not by men who *had* to destroy it, but by men who definitely and freely chose to divert France from the democratic to the authoritarian bloc.

So much for the facts. Now for their interpretation. The air is thick with guesses as to why the Republic of France thus committed suicide. In next section I advance a theory, claiming for it not that it *must* be correct, but that it is likeliest to be so, because it brings the facts together in a sequence more reasonable than any other I have seen, and because—unlike many others—it is not disproved by any fact of which we are sure.

II.

That the French Republic was overthrown not reluctantly but exultantly, by Frenchmen who had been plotting this for years, and who took advantage of German help to achieve it, is a thesis which rests upon the following evidence:

- (i) For at least six years a fierce agitation had been openly carried on in Paris against the republican régime.
- (ii) This agitation had included on a great scale the forming and drilling of private armies, together with accumulation of arms.
- (iii) Among the agitators, not seldom among the leaders of such Fascist or semi-Fascist Leagues, had been the men most prominent last June at Vichy in destroying the Republic.

- (iv) The destruction of the Republic was the sequel to an "Armistice" in which those who destroyed it had pledged their utmost aid for the triumph of the Axis Powers over Great Britain.

These considerations in sequence constitute a formidable case. To the contention that a certain change was made under the constraint of new circumstances, I reply that those who made it had given proof of keen desire for it years before the alleged new circumstances arose, that they had then schemed for it even at great personal risk, and that just before they brought it to fruition they had struggled, even at the cost of treachery towards an ally, to disable the Power by which the change was likeliest to be resisted.

I take first the last-mentioned point. The Petain group, which negotiated the Armistice, promised to hand over the French naval forces to Adolf Hitler. Many times in the preceding weeks, the French Government had given Great Britain a pledge that under no circumstances, no matter what "separate peace" a defeat in the field might compel France to make, would she omit to ensure that her naval forces should first be placed where the enemy could not capture them. Not only did Marshal Petain neglect thus to send the French ships to a British port: he ordered them to fight their way—if need be, against British resistance—to a German or an Italian port, and the lives of at least two hundred French seamen were lost in a desperate attempt to carry out this treachery. Those who were about to frame the new French State had just given this most signal token of their wish to promote an Axis victory, at whatever cost in French shame.

An "authoritarian" zeal had indeed been made obvious at least six years earlier, when Paris was rocked by Fascist and semi-Fascist Leagues. The propagandist preliminaries there in 1934 had been such as no one with memories of Milan could mistake. Fourteen years earlier, Benito Mussolini had been shrieking from his editorial chair that parliamentary parties were all corrupt or incapable, that social order was about to collapse at the hands of "Communists", and that only the organization of a White Terror under dictatorship could meet the threat of Red Terror under workers' committees. Ten years ago Adolf Hitler, inflamed by Mussolini's success, was prosecuting an exactly similar campaign against the German Republic, and by February, 1933, he had extorted the Chancellorship of the Reich, with powers expressly defined as equal to those of Mus-

solini for Italy, from the aged President Hindenburg. The appeal was the same—it is always the same, when dictatorship is being plotted—"Either this or the triumph of the Reds". Hindenburg, like King Victor Emmanuel, under the same sort of pressure from large industrial and landed interests, surrendered. Not everyone, even in British countries, was then disposed to blame the choice by Italian King and German President: the perils of the dictatorial alternative were strangely underestimated by some of us who should have known better. It is small wonder then if, back in 1934, French conservatives who had long fretted under the democratic equalitarian ways of the Republic, hankering after the privilege and caste of the *ancien régime*, were thrilled at the success of reaction in Germany and Italy. From admiration to imitation was a short step, at length frantically ventured. There was nothing obscure, for example, in the motive of the Stavisky riots, on the pretext of a financial scandal, in the first week of February, 1934. When we got the list of Marshal Petain's officials, under his new régime, we found names which the incipient French Fascism of that memorable week had made familiar.

Tokens of what was afoot could be seen, too, in the Paris press, particularly during the crucial period after that Munich Conference which in 1938 deferred war for eleven months. To an array of newspapers in the French capital, the obligations and commitments of France as a democratic State, particularly as a member of the League of Nations, were the object of constant mockery. These journals were tireless in defence of whatever Fascist Italy did abroad—of her attack upon Abyssinia, her cynical bad faith, her outrage on the decencies of international custom in the Spanish civil war. To such a writer as M. Charles Maurras it seemed apparently altogether ridiculous that France should hesitate to break her covenant with Czechoslovakia: in the months before things came to crisis between Hitler and Benes, the German press used to reprint with the utmost glee these French editorials, at least as contemptuous of democracy as any that came from the Goebbels Bureau. It is no mere coincidence that just the same newspapers are now sounding the praise of Marshal Petain.

The charge most effective abroad which these organs urged against French republican leaders was that of sacrificing national safety to the appeasement of riotous Labor. It is very largely a baseless charge, and Marshal Petain ought to be the last to press it. Did Leon Blum, and the party called "Popular Front",

in the years 1936 and 1937, prepare the way for this great disaster—by starving the Forces, by diverting to the demands of a greedy proletariat the appropriations which ought to have gone to national defence? Were they the villains of the piece, by the ruin they brought on French industry when they drew up prohibitive regulations to aggrandize the worker, and took no adequate measures with strike after strike wrecking the timetable of munition factories which had neither time to lose nor energy to waste? To this theory, so attractive for the conservative mind, Marshal Petain lent the support of his sorrowful judgment when he admonished France from the microphone that her defeat had been due to loss of her moral fibre within the last five years.

One has met a like argument from British critics, that it was Ramsay MacDonald and his Socialist following who reduced Great Britain to lamentable military unpreparedness. But Ramsay MacDonald did not lead a Labor government at any date after the fall of 1931: there was certainly no menace of German military preparation so soon as that, and the disarmament programme which MacDonald promoted was not of his making. He was but trying to fulfil what British Conservative statesmen had adopted as the national policy when they signed the Treaty of Versailles and the Washington Treaty. So in regard to that arraignment of British Labor for the state of the Air Force in 1938, we may say with Browning "Thus fancy strikes fact, and explodes in full". A similar imposture has been, and is being, tried in the reproach against Leon Blum. He had no control over French legislation until 1936, and it was long before then that the damage was done. I am not urging any plea for those outbursts by French factory workers in 1936 and 1937 from which we got a new term, and a disastrous new method, in industrial strife—the so-called "stay-in" or "sit-down" strike. But to indict Leon Blum for a disturbance meant chiefly to embarrass his administration is odd indeed.

It is worth while to linger a moment on this, so as to get the record clear. The organization of the *Popular Front* in 1934, bringing together all the anti-Fascist groups to defend the structure of the Republic, was the answer to the Fascist riots of February 6. Temper rose high at the discovery that some such outrage as Mussolini had perpetrated on Italy and Hitler on Germany was intended for France by the group which Daladier then called "a few energetic men". There appeared something of the old spirit which had more than once brought

Parisians in a rush to man the barricades against tyranny! The reaction went far, as a reaction so beginning always will. Before long its leader was being reproached by his own followers for the contrast between the vehemence of his critical attack and his timid moderation when he was himself raised to power. Visitors to Paris in 1937 reported that they saw everywhere scrawled on the hoardings *A bas Blum*—most probably the work of a Communist inspired by a Fascist, in the same spirit which brought Hitler and Stalin together against the cause of freedom. How often we have seen the like in party strife, but without drawing the desperate conclusion that democracy has failed, and that the time has come for recourse to despotism!

What did Leon Blum in his short period of power actually do for France? His government established by law what France had never known before, except as a wild dream of "extremists on the Left"—the principle of collective bargaining, the unionized Labor of which British and American observers heard with amazement that to the French it was a novelty. It prescribed for industry the forty-hour week, and holidays with pay. It withdrew from private hands and entrusted to the State the manufacture and sale of armament. It stabilized the price of French wheat, abolishing such speculation as had been the terror of the French farmer. It nationalized the Bank of France, providing that not merely the 200 largest shareholders, under whose control the Bank had been ever since Napoleonic days, but also the 40,000 other shareholders, and France as a whole (whose concern with currency and credit might sometimes conflict with the advantage of the 200 largest shareholders) should be taken into account. These changes may not have been all good. The last mentioned recalls our own recent establishment of a Central Bank of Canada, which other Banks viewed with disapproval, for reasons not unlike those urged against Blum's nationalization of the Bank of France. Other changes under the *Popular Front* recall President Roosevelt's New Deal, which was applauded and denounced with the same suggestive variety of critic. Comparison between Roosevelt and Blum was indeed on countless lips during that period, when they seemed to be trying much the same sort of reform, amid much the same difficulties.

But what bearing had this domestic legislation upon the coming tragedy of France? Can the collapse of the French army be explained by the institution of workers' holidays with pay, by the sit-down strikes, by the vigorous measures of restraint upon the two hundred who controlled the Bank? What feeble

attempt is this, at a deceit no longer possible! The ruin, as everyone now knows, was due to lack of tanks, lack of airplanes, lack of equipment for a motorized professional army, and the men chiefly responsible for that lack are, as usual, struggling to shift the blame to other shoulders. If the French troops were sent out with such wretched armament as no valour could make good, if they seemed like warriors with bows and arrows against rifles, or with rifles against long range artillery, whose fault was that? Who was it that dominated the French Department of War throughout those terrible years of decay? None other than Marshal Philippe Petain. Was he not importuned, urged, alternately flattered and attacked by those who saw the fatal drift of things, but could make nothing of that inveterate obstinacy, that attachment of an old soldier to the ways of war he had known in his youth and in which he had won his fame? The men pleading in vain for tanks, for airplanes, for a motorized professional army, years ago, when there was still time to make the deficiency good, were such as Paul Reynaud and Charles de Gaulle. There had been no lack of funds, no blocking of army appropriations by representatives of a comfort-loving proletariat. Look at the astronomical figures of that gigantic folly we call the *Maginot Line*. Look at the figures of the expenditure on armament in the *Popular Front* budget. In all conscience the French taxpayer contributed enough to have established by land, on the air, in the sea, such strength of machines as would have made the story of last spring altogether different—if the Reynaud and de Gaulle intelligence had not been thwarted by the stubborn stupidity of the Petain circle. The Marshal himself, Minister of War in 1935, was too intent on defeating at the polls the hated Blum (against whom he issued a last minute pre-election blast in the very strain of the Fascist Leagues) to spare much thought for the problem of the fast increasing German Air Force.

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Nothing in all this dreadful story casts the least reflection upon the good faith of the French people, upon its fidelity to the principles of freedom, or upon the heroic endurance of its fighting men. What is here written is about the doings of politicians, such as France will yet know how to discipline as they deserve.

But why and how did such politicians acquire so dangerous an influence? If a few were able to organize the great betrayal,

this must have been because a multitude were ready to acquiesce. To discuss this would take us into deep mysteries about democracy's peril in choice of leadership. It is no doubt the finest system of government, but also (perhaps for that very reason) the hardest to work: Plato well said that the corruption of the best is the worst. Nor will anyone deny that the France of at least ten years after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles showed democratic institutions on a level far from their highest either in efficiency or in integrity. It was a period of readjustment after an intense fever for more countries than one, and the French aberration—deplorable as it often was—at least never touched the depths of disgrace which marked Italy and Germany. But there was enough to cause such disgust and alarm in the average Frenchman as made too many lend an ear, in the hour of military defeat, to the same sophistry which had prevailed in Berlin and in Rome.

That France will recover from this mania is assured by our knowledge of her great qualities shown so often and on so great a scale in bygone fights for freedom. Not long will she play with the appalling alternative to an inefficient and changeful democratic order. Her "Head of the State" and his associates have been hard at work, it seems, to exhibit and fix the revival of the old régime in the revival of old constitutional machinery: the very map of France has been re-drawn in terms of pre-Revolution provinces which take the place of post-Revolution departments, after the usage of the *Grand Monarque* and the *siècle Louis Quatorze*. Like the Prussian soldiers who have been stamping through the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, making the walls of the old French palace shake as often as they cross the floor upon which the hateful Treaty was signed! But how childish, even at the age of 84! Can anyone who appreciates the historic spirit of republican France admit a doubt of the issue? What Marshal Petain has set himself is an inherently impossible task.

The only question is how long the attempt will last. If it were not so tragic, any student of human affairs would rejoice in the opportunity of this unique spectacle. One cannot think of an effort in the past, on anything like the same scale, or with resources for a moment comparable, to reverse at a stroke a century and a half of history. Cooperating dictators, with enormous material strength and no deterrent scruple, have undertaken, working—as they boast—"to a time-table", to undo very fast the whole development of Europe whose source was

in the great French Revolution. How much that Revolution meant, transforming first France and then by the French pattern country after country of the continent, inspiring ideals and creating guarantees of freedom, it has taxed the powers of countless historians to describe. Upon this, Hitler and Mussolini have given orders that Europe shall go back: they require her to retrace her steps to the point at which she thus missed her way and began her lapse to decadence! *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* must be repudiated, in favor of Race dominance, personal mastery, recurrent war. The France of the "New Order" would be a France illiterate, and docile to direction (in consequence of illiteracy), like the France of Arthur Young's eighteenth century *Travels*, like Franco's Spain, or Salazar's Portugal. Does anyone believe that for any length of time Frenchmen will endure that? With tender considerateness for those who have been temporarily misled, Great Britain confidently looks for a quick restoration of the old resoluteness. But, for the time, Great Britain must defy the menace of this "New Order" alone. Her defiance, one is thankful to note, is being gloriously successful. America's defiance may well come next. Would it not always be wiser for those concerned in the same great cause to undertake the battle in partnership, rather than so to postpone the adjustment of their differences with each other that they must take up the common fight successively and each of them fight it alone?

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