

IS TOMORROW HITLER'S?

The Fall of France

by H.R. Knickerbocker



Q. *Why did France fall?*

A. Because the French people were hypnotized by their low birth rate; because their Maginot line had imprisoned their army; because, ignorant of the character and intentions of their enemy, they did not know why they had to fight the Germans and so preferred to fight among themselves; because they had no Churchill; because they were betrayed by a powerful group of their leaders including senior officers of the Army; and because the French were stultified by their debased and venal press.

Q. *But I thought they lost chiefly because they lacked the proper weapons: airplanes and tanks.*

A. They did not possess anything like the number of tanks and airplanes used by the Germans; but I would rank this deficiency at the bottom of any list of causes of the French defeat. If they had ignored their birth rate, been willing to spend lives, had retained the old offensive spirit traditional in the French Army, had known that they had to win or perish, had possessed a Churchill to inspire and lead them, and had had no traitors in their ranks, their comparative lack of weapons would not have mattered; they would still be fighting the Germans in France. The inferiority of their equipment consisted, as you indicate, in the lack of a sufficient number of planes and tanks, but if they had had the spirit to win they could have held the Germans until the deficiency could be made up.

Tanks cannot cross properly defended rivers, and there were several sets of rivers which the French could have held if they chose: the Meuse, the Somme and the Oise, the Aisne, the Marne, the Seine, and finally the Loire, but they held not at all at any of these natural barriers. At most of these rivers I was present during the retreat, and it astonished all of us, including United States officers, to visit a French position along a river one day and observe how strong it was, and how difficult it would be to take, and

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then the next day learn the Germans had taken it within a few hours of our departure.

Q. *How would you sum up Pétain? Is he a patriot or a traitor, or misguided, or what?*

A. He is first of all a very old, too-old man. Only a man who had lost his judgment could surrender his country to Hitler as Hindenburg did and as Pétain did, both under a profound misconception of Hitler. Pétain is intensely religious and identifies Communism with anti-Christ, the only enemy, failing to perceive that the most powerful foe of Christianity to appear on earth since Christ lived is Hitler. It is a mistake to call Pétain a Fascist; he is a medievalist. He believes the principal goal of life is to prepare for the other world, and the man who can do that best is the man whose activity is closest to nature, the peasant, and the man whose mind is not confused by learning, the illiterate peasant. Therefore he wants a France of uneducated, devout peasants; he does not mind at all the plan of Hitler to abolish French industry.

He is a defeatist at heart; the affairs of this earth are not worth fighting for. It is on record that at Verdun he several times wished to surrender. As a defeatist he believes in superior force and can be as ruthless when he is in possession of it as he can be submissive when he has lost it. His suppression of the mutinies in the French Army was notoriously harsh; the statistics of the killed have yet to be published. He accepts the French birth rate as a fact of superior force to which France must bow and his experience of the bloodletting at Verdun reinforced his conviction that France ought not to try to maintain a predominant place in Europe.

As an old man his vivid memories are of the past, and Germany, though marching under the pirate swastika, remained for him in 1940 the Germany which let France off lightly in 1871. He once told a friend how impressed he was with the behavior of the German commander at Verdun who allowed French officers to retain their swords after one of the surrenders of Douaumont. In this venerable confidence that he was dealing with gentlemen, he gave up. The most pathetic words uttered in this war were those of Pétain when he addressed his petition for an armistice to Hitler with the words, "I speak as soldier to soldier."

Q. *Why was that pathetic; isn't Hitler a soldier?*

A. Yes, indeed, but the meaning of the old marshal's words was, "I speak to you as gentleman to gentleman," and that is the most pathetic sentence of the war, because it contains the utter failure of the French to understand that not only is Hitler not a gentleman, but Hitler would be the first indignantly to repudiate a title he despises. The code of a gentleman is derived from the Christian code, which Hitler and his Nazi-Nietzschean followers despise. They curse Christ as a Jewish weakling whose religion is for slaves.

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They spit upon the elementary idea of fair play. A group of devoted young Nazis, a dozen strong, who have just beaten to death a crippled Jew, will be clear of conscience, joyful as though they had done a good deed, and utterly unable to understand the American or British notion that it is not even enjoyable sport to attack with odds of twelve to one. It is sport to them. Pétain had not the faintest notion that the sons of the Germans he had known had come to this. So with his eyes closed, and dreaming of the past, he accepted the promise of a position for France of junior partner to Germany.

Q. *Why, if the Germans have such a hold over Pétain, have they not forced him to surrender the French fleet and to give them the use of the North African naval and air bases? If Pétain is in fear of being revealed by the Germans as one who helped bring about the French defeat, why can't the Germans get anything they want from him?*

A. First, because Pétain is more useful to the Germans than the French fleet and the North African bases. Who else could lead so many of the French people to submit and collaborate as they are doing today under Pétain? Pétain does Hitler's work for him. Pétain coaxes the plunder from the French people in the form of taxes and hands it to Hitler in the form of payment for maintenance of the army of occupation. If the Germans ever exposed him, he would lose his position and they would lose their most useful servant.

Second, the more time that elapses since the armistice, the less effective is the German blackmail threat on Pétain, because as time passes people become less interested in what happened, and as experience with the Germans deepens, fewer people can be found to believe any German explanation.

Third, Pétain, with all his senility, must have realized that it is not nearly as certain now that Germany will win, as it was when he surrendered. The Russian resistance, much as Pétain hates and despises Bolshevism, must have made him think; and the growing belligerence of America must have had some effect upon him. As he becomes less and less convinced that Germany is certain to win he should logically become less submissive to the Germans. On the other hand, he is not likely to revolt openly until he is convinced Germany will lose.

Q. *What would Hitler do if he finally tired of fooling with Vichy?*

A. He would simply march in and occupy all of France. He could do it with a handful of divisions, since the French have been totally disarmed or at least as fully disarmed as it was possible for the Germans to do. But from then on he would have the trouble of administering the whole country and collecting the taxes which Pétain collects for him now.

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I do not think he is anxious to increase his responsibilities that way now.

Q. *What about Darlan?*

A. Darlan undoubtedly sees more clearly than Pétain, but he is less honorable; indeed I have heard highly placed Englishmen who knew him intimately curse him with concentrated bitterness as the vilest traitor of the lot. Few people would describe Pétain as consciously dishonorable. Few of the men around Pétain are spared the charge by Frenchmen who know them best.

Darlan has no respect from anybody. His politics were consistently opportunistic. Today he helps head a government that has suppressed Freemasonry; yet he was a Freemason when to be a Freemason was an asset. He helps keep Leon Blum in confinement; yet he supported Blum when Blum was in power. He is now the fiercest advocate of fighting England; yet until Reynaud fell he supported the policy of moving the government to North Africa and carrying on.

Nothing in Darlan's record indicates that he has ever acted except for the purpose of furthering his career; he is characterized by the French as the perfect careerist, and the word has even less flattering connotations in French than in English. The one instinct in him which seems to have persisted without variance is his hatred of the British, based upon the centuries-old rivalry of the French and British navies.

Q. *And Laval?*

A. Whatever else one may think of him, Laval has guts and is no hypocrite. He hates democracy and says so. He is out to promote the fortunes of M. Laval and admits it. He calls himself a realist; and realistically he long ago estimated the strength of France as inadequate to stand up against Germany. He learned to hate Britain during those long years when every French move to bolster their position against the doubly powerful Reich was checked by an imbecile British Foreign Office which continued to think that the balance of power required a stronger Germany and a weaker France. So Laval's belief in the desirability of a Franco-German "understanding" was not born of defeat alone.

Q. *Has Laval a chance to come back?*

A. Yes, if the Germans win he has the best of chances. Laval today is the only master politician left in France; Pétain is senile; Darlan is ward-heel size; none of the others in the Vichy camp is even that large, and the politicians of the Republic are dead and buried. Laval is the best-hated Frenchman alive; the shots fired into him by Colette were cheered from one end of France to the other, but he is still the only Frenchman capable of ruling France as a dictator.

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Q. *In what ways do we Americans compare with the French?*

A. It is astonishing to see how many points of similarity we can discover, beginning with the well-known Maginot line complex which we parallel with our Atlantic Ocean complex. I remember back in 1930 at a cocktail party in Berlin a German Lieutenant Colonel remarked to me about the Maginot line, which the French were just completing: "That line of fortifications will be the death of France. If soldiers have such an impregnable fortress to live in, they will never willingly leave it to take the offensive, and without taking the offensive you can't win a war. The Maginot line will give the French Army a permanent defense complex and out of its sense of security we will eventually defeat it." Our complacency behind the Atlantic Ocean, which we fondly fancy could always protect us from attack, is precisely the same as the French had.

Another curious and not unimportant item of coincidence is that there was a strong current of anti-British feeling in France at the beginning of the war, just as there is here. In France it was grounded largely in the argument, which had much truth in it, that Great Britain had been largely responsible for the war by her shortsighted support of Germany against France for so many years, and that the British would "fight to the last Frenchman." The British Fleet, the French knew theoretically, was just as important for beating Hitler as the French Army, but the British Fleet was far away and its actions were unobserved. Just so today in America we all know theoretically that the presence of the British Fleet in the Atlantic is imperative for our safety, but the British Fleet is far away, and so even when we are sending supplies to the British Fleet and other arms standing between us and our enemy, many Americans think of it as "aiding Britain," and feel quite unselfish about it.

Finally we have our anti-British Americans of Irish origin who consider Oliver Cromwell more blameworthy than Hitler, although all Irish-Americans are not so purblind by any means.

Q. *Aren't there any encouraging differences between ourselves and the unfortunate French?*

A. The most encouraging difference between the French and American democracies is the quality and character of our newspapers. American newspapers bring to their readers today a greater volume of news, of greater accuracy, than has ever been delivered to an audience of newspaper readers in the history of the world. It has been my job for nearly two decades to study the newspapers of a score of countries, not superficially but with the businesslike object of gleaning news. I had to read thirty-two German newspapers a day when I was correspondent in Berlin; and a dozen or so daily in Paris. It is no exaggeration to say that the reader of the *New York Times*, or the *New York*

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Herald Tribune, or the *Chicago Daily News*, or any one of half a dozen of our great metropolitan dailies, has more detailed and true information about what is going on in the world than if he were able by magic to accumulate all the newspapers published everywhere else on earth, and were able equally by magic to read them all in the original.

Often I am asked, "How can we know the truth? Everything is so confusing. Aren't we fed with propaganda?" The answer is you can know the truth by reading your newspapers thoroughly and exercising common sense in balancing the reports from the belligerent countries against each other.

No war has ever been fought in such a blazing light of information. Never has such a quantity of news been put before a people as we Americans have before us at breakfast every day and from then on until midnight. American newspapers are doing today the most superb job ever done by daily journals. But that is not their chief merit. Their chief merit is their honesty and incorruptibility and their sincere endeavor to be fair and objective. These qualities have enabled the American press, since the foundation of the United States, to be the equal in importance to the executive or the legislative or the judicial branch of government. It is the vigilant watchman over the functioning of the other three branches of government.

In no other country has the newspaperman the rights and privileges that he has here. He is as important for the preservation of our liberties and our security as any legislator, judge, or executive. One can almost formulate a law that one can judge the quality of a democracy and its expectancy of life by its press. By that standard France was doomed to fall. France under the Republic had the most venal newspapers on earth. As the American press is honest, so was the French press dishonest. The French government was a faithful reflection of its press, one might say almost a creation of its press. Some good Frenchmen even go so far as to lay the major responsibility for the fall of France on their newspapers whose editorial opinions for the most part were as plainly for sale as the vegetables in the market.

The reasons for their venality go back to the period at the end of the nineteenth century when all the states of Europe were floating government loans in Paris, the banking center of the continent. The French peasant, who kept his gold in his *bas de laine*, his woolen stocking, was the chief investor, and the French newspapers were the chief salesmen. Profits from the flotation were so enormous that the governments concerned could afford to pay very large bribes to the French newspapers to recommend their bonds. The French peasants at that time believed their newspapers, bought the bonds, and the corrupt newspapers grew rich and content. This easy money made it unnecessary for them to go out and get advertising, and from that day to this French newspapers have lacked the economic foundation that American newspapers have. After the war, the bribes

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from financial quarters largely disappeared and the French newspapers, without advertising, and with the habit of venality, became more unscrupulous, because hungrier than ever. French newspapermen, worse paid than ever, were reduced to selling their services cheaper than ever before, and the corruption became almost universal.

One famous French correspondent was fired by his famous newspaper because he had taken a bribe from a foreign government—and had failed to split it with the managing editor. Hardly a newspaper in Paris would refuse a subsidy from a foreign government, but all this giving and taking of bribes became trivial when Hitler came to power in 1933. From then on the French press was inundated with German money, and from then on could be dated the certainty that France would fall.

I want above all things to emphasize that there were a few honest, capable, patriotic, and incorruptible French journalists. It is sufficient commentary on the Vichy government that most of them had to flee when the Germans came.

Q. *Is there any hope for the French? Do you think they can come back?*

A. Yes, because they have learned to hate; the Germans have taught them. I know it sounds most un-Christian to insist upon the necessity of hatred, but the thoughtful will remember that Christ hated evil, and when he scourged the money-changers from the Temple he did it with fury. Who will dispute that Hitler is more evil than money-changers in a Temple, and that all the forces of Christianity ought to be ranged together to destroy his hateful power. You cannot win a battle, you cannot win a war, you cannot win any kind of fight that involves killing unless you have the spirit to kill. You cannot have that spirit unless you are convinced of the justice of your cause, and you know that God is on your side, and that God approves your killing your enemies.

The French never had any such spirit during the war, except perhaps at the very end, but they have it now. During the war they were all the time debating in their hearts whether it would not be better to quit and make friends with the Germans. They thought in terms of the last war. They thought of the Germans as the same sort of human beings as the Germans of 1870 or of 1914-1918. They simply failed to grasp the most important fact in the world of international affairs today, namely that the Nazi Germans under Hitler are a new species of creature never seen before in modern times, a deliberately amoral species of men who reject every tenet of Christianity or of any other religion which enjoins kindness, truth, and justice, and who are possessed of such unique talents for war that they could conceivably achieve their ambition to conquer the world if they were not stopped by a coalition of all the decent peoples on earth. The French above all failed to take seriously

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Hitler's cool, considered statement that he intended to exterminate France as a nation.

Q. *How about the treatment Hitler has given France so far; he hasn't tried to exterminate them, has he?*

A. No, but Hitler is not through with the French; he has not even begun to treat them the way he intends to ultimately. There are several reasons why he has been comparatively lenient to France so far. First, he wished to end French resistance immediately in order that the whole force of the German Army might be thrown at England. Second, he wished to lull the French into a belief that by collaborating with the Germans they might obtain the "honorable peace" Pétain talks about. Third, he wished to make it appear to the British and eventually to the Americans that surrender to Hitler is not so bad. Finally, he wished to get from the Vichy government several important things he either did not dare demand or was refused at the Compiègne armistice, chiefly that the French should go to war against Britain or at any rate turn over the French fleet and naval bases to the Germans for use against the British.

Q. *Do you imply that later on Hitler's treatment of France will be different?*

A. I do indeed. He will eventually fulfill the one principle which has guided his foreign policy more than any other; to destroy the power of France *ever* to threaten Germany again.

If left alone her fate will surely be that defined by Churchill in his address to the French people while Vichy still hesitated: "I tell you truly and what you must believe when I say this evil man, this monstrous abortion of hatred and deceit, has resolved on nothing less than the complete wiping out of the French nation and the disintegration of its whole life and future. By all kinds of sly and savage means he is plotting and working to crush forever the fountain of characteristic French culture and French inspiration to the world. It is not defeat that France will now be made to suffer at German hands, but the doom of complete obliteration. Army, navy, air force, religions, laws, language, culture, institutions, literature, history, tradition, all are to be effaced by the brute strength of a triumphant army and the scientific low cunning of a ruthless Police Force."

Q. *What did Hitler promise Pétain?*

A. He promised that if Pétain would sign the armistice, very soon afterward he would give France a permanent and just peace, that German troops would evacuate France, and in the New Order of Europe Germany would help France become a free and independent partner. All this was, however, tacitly contingent on the defeat of Britain. The German excuse for not freeing France now is that the battle against Russia and Britain is still going on. France

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meanwhile is compelled to suffer in a slavery worse than she ever suffered in her entire national history.

Q. *What do you mean by the term "slavery"? The French people are not being driven about in slave gangs, are they, with an overseer carrying a black-snake whip and all that as in Uncle Tom's Cabin? I understood the Germans were behaving very "correctly."*

A. It is true that only the prisoners of war, who still number about a million and a half, are in this literal, physical sense enslaved. The rest of the French people, though, are just as much the slaves of the Germans as if they were housed in slave pens and driven to work in chains. Why? Because they must give up to their German masters all the fruits of their labors except a bare subsistence. The French people have been paying the Germans an indemnity of roughly ten million dollars a day, or \$3,650,000,000 a year, and with this money the Germans have been buying from the French, who are forced to sell, all the property of any value in the country, from objects of art to great industrial plants. Consider the size of this indemnity. The maximum yearly reparations payment Germany had to make after the last war was \$600,000,000. That is one sixth of what the French have had to pay in the first twelve months of German rule in this war.

Q. *How was this indemnity fixed?*

A. In the armistice agreement which Pétain so trustfully signed, it was stipulated that the French would pay for the cost of maintaining the German Army in France. No sum was named. You can imagine the astonishment of the French when, after they had laid down their arms and there was no possibility of refusing, they learned they had to pay the Germans 400,000,000 francs, or roughly \$10,000,000 a day. It will give you some notion of the difference between the old-fashioned German conqueror and the new-fashioned Nazi to recollect that after the Franco-German War of 1870 Bismarck exacted a *total* indemnity of \$1,250,000,000, or one-third of what the French of today are forced to pay *yearly*.

Q. *How does this French payment compare with the total amounts Germany paid for reparation after the last war?*

A. The maximum estimate of German reparations payments in cash and kind is about \$5,000,000,000, which is almost precisely the amount of money Americans lent Germany and never got back. It is the literal truth that Germany paid no reparations. The United States paid them. I was a correspondent in Germany during all those crucial years from the French occupation of the Ruhr onward, and most of us who were on the spot agree that despite the dislocation of wealth in Germany the country as a whole had not lost wealth through payment of reparations, since

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for every dollar that went to France or England, an American dollar came in.

At the rate they are now paying, the French will have paid the Germans in about seventeen months an amount equivalent to all the reparations payments (\$5,000,000,000) made by the Germans with American money in the twelve years during which the Germans pretended to pay.

Q. *Why did the Germans select the figure 400,000,000 francs daily?*

A. Because this was the amount the French were spending on the war. In their 1940 war budget they allocated 106 billion francs to the air force, 36 billion to the army, and 15 billion to the navy, making a total of 157 billion, which is roughly 400,000,000 francs a day. Hitler reckoned if the French could afford to spend this sum on fighting the Germans, they could spend the same amount to feed, clothe, transport, lodge, amuse, and otherwise support the Germans as they are doing now.

Q. *But if the French were spending this much money on the war anyway, how are they economically worse off by continuing the same expenditure?*

A. They are incomparably worse off because formerly the proceeds of this sum were consumed by Frenchmen; today they are consumed by Germans. The money formerly circulated throughout the French economic body as healthy blood; today it is sucked and swallowed by the vast German leech. Furthermore the French expenditure on the war did not cease with their defeat; they still have large expenses besides their tribute to Germany.

Q. *Why do the Germans bother to go through the form of buying, if they can confiscate whatever they want?*

A. Because they can get what they want with much less trouble and in better shape and be able to make better use of it if they go through the form of purchase. They had their whole system of plundering France worked out before the war. During the prewar period thousands of Germans crisscrossed France, as tourists or traveling salesmen. They located the most desirable industrial or other properties, nearly all, incidentally, in the rich Northern half now Occupied France. When the Germans came in they rushed a specially trained corps of experts to all the banks and business houses, embargoed banking transactions and ordered every security holder in France to give a list of his property. Soon they knew the precise financial position of every important corporation or individual in France. With this knowledge they were able to buy into the control of all the businesses they wanted. Sometimes if the French owner refused to sell, the Germans could make the owner's bank foreclose on his loan and thus force the owner to raise money by selling a share of his business. The Germans were modest; usually they wanted only 51 per cent. Some-

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times the Germans would withhold raw materials from a stubborn industrialist. Sometimes the German authorities forcibly confiscated the property; just often enough to remind Frenchmen that, if they liked, the Germans could take every machine, sack of flour, and stick of furniture in the country without recompense.

Another most effective weapon used by the Germans to force the French to sell their businesses is the German edict that all concerns, from shops to factories, must remain open and keep their full roll of employees. Since almost no business is being done, and most concerns would normally have closed, this rule drives most businessmen into bankruptcy, as it was intended to do. By these and other similar means, the Germans, using the francs paid them by the French, have gone far toward buying "legal" control of the most valuable property in France. With appalling swiftness the French people are being pauperized and reduced to slaves in what used to be their own homes.

Q. If these are the interim armistice terms imposed on France, what will the final terms of peace be like?

A. You can be sure that the German demands will be limited only by the total wealth of France. We know Hitler intends the total productive wealth of the country to pass into German hands. Without waiting for peace, the Germans are, as we noted, already systematically stripping France of her movable valuables and taking them to Germany, and buying control of the immovable property they want. But if the time ever comes, when Hitler makes a so-called peace with France, we may expect that he will take pleasure in basing his demands partly on the Versailles treaty.

He will first demand that the reparations Germany paid after the last war be paid back; then he will demand full compensation for the German merchant and fishing fleets, and the railroad equipment, cattle, etc., turned over to the Allies after the last war to make up for similar items seized by the Germans; he will demand replacement of all the shipping Germany was compelled to build for the Allies to take the place of the ships sunk by the Imperial Navy; he will bill the Allies for the coal Germany delivered the Allies to replace the coal taken from the mines of Northern France during the war. After the broad category of claims from the last war has been put down, Hitler will then ask for reparations for this war, and of course he can set any sum he likes.

Q. But why should Hitler take so much trouble to claim formal reparations? Since he obviously intends permanently to cripple his victim, why should he bother to go through the legalistic form of itemizing his claims?

A. Because that is the way Hitler and his Nazis always do things. The German, even the Nazi, is an orderly fellow. The first principle of all Germans is "*Ordnung muss sein.*"

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Aside from that, or above it, is the fact that Hitler, deeply conscious of the illegality of all his actions, beginning with the seizure of power, has always insisted on clothing everything he does with the appearance of lawfulness. When he seized power he did it by banning the Communist and then the Socialist parties from the Reichstag, and thus obtaining a majority vote in the Reichstag. Whenever he attacks a nation he announces a long list of reasons, backed sometimes by an extraordinary array of documents, many of them forged, to prove he not only had a right to attack but was compelled to do so.

This necessity for self-justification explains also one of the queerest Nazi practices in their torture chambers. When they have finished torturing a victim, they invariably make him sign a statement testifying that he had been well treated.

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