Strange Defeat

A STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE
WRITTEN IN 1940

BY

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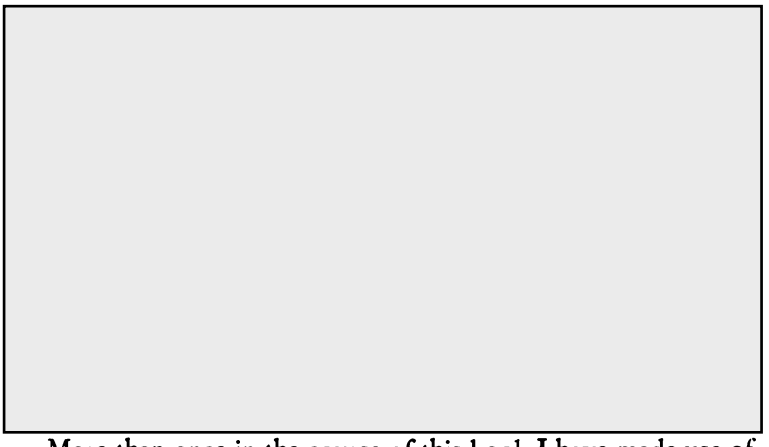

More than once in the course of this book I have made use of the word *bourgeoisie*—not without a qualm of conscience. The sciences which have human beings as their subject are, at best, but empirical, and their pursuit is made more than ever difficult when they are cluttered up with words which have become so debased by long use that their meaning has ceased to be clear. The realities which they express are too complex; the language which expresses them too fluid. That, however, is beyond our power to alter. Until some better means of communication than that of language has been evolved, we must resign ourselves to using the only vocabulary which the imperfections of our tongue have made available. But it can be used successfully only if we define our terms. Let me say, then, that, when speaking of Frenchmen I employ the term *bourgeois*, I mean someone who is not dependent for his livelihood on the work of his hands; whose income, irrespective of its source and of its size (for it may vary considerably from individual to individual), permits him to live in easy circumstances, and gives him a sense of security such as no mere wage-earner can ever know in his own hazardous existence; whose education, enjoyed from birth, if his family happens to be an old-established one, or gained in the course of an exceptional rise in the social scale, is richer in texture, better in quality, and more pretentious in kind than the minimum

cultural training enjoyed by the ordinary man in the street. Finally, the *bourgeois* is a man who believes that he belongs to a class which is marked out for leadership in the country's affairs, and, by a thousand little details of dress, language, and good manners, shows more or less instinctively that he is one of a very special group and enjoys a high degree of prestige in the eyes of less fortunate mortals.

Now, the *bourgeoisie*, thus defined, was not feeling any too happy in pre-war France. The economic changes which it was the fashion to lay at the door of the last world catastrophe, though some of them had other causes, were in process of sapping the foundations of those solid, unadventurous fortunes which had existed in earlier days when an income from investments had formed the sole resource of many families, and was the goal of many others whose members were just beginning to climb the ladder of success. In the world brought into existence by the first war, this kind of livelihood was beginning to melt away in the hands of its astonished possessors. The workers were setting their faces stubbornly against all attempts to reduce wages, with the result that after each recurrent crisis, profits and dividends alike grew smaller. The spread of industry in new countries which showed an increasing tendency to become self-sufficient was producing an ever-worsening condition of anaemia in the capitalistic system not only of France but of Europe generally. The aggressive mood of the new-comers to the social scene was already threatening the economic and political power of a group which had long been accustomed to command, and had conveniently come to terms with the institutions of a democracy to which many of its members had even sworn allegiance. As usually happens, custom had lagged behind fact. The franchise had been widened to include workers on the land and in the factories, but the exercise of the vote had not as yet seriously shaken the traditional position of superiority enjoyed, outside the capital, by the bigwigs of the middle class. Indeed,

to some extent it benefited them, because they were able, partially at least, to eliminate from the great offices of state their old adversaries of the great noble and near-noble families. Untouched by aristocratic arrogance, their outlook on life was genuinely humanistic, and it drew strength from a democratic system so long as that system did not strike at them through their pockets or undermine the solid structure of their very real, though modest, prestige. But a day soon came when the voters of the lowest category, encouraged in their demands by the economic tragedy of the times, began to make their voices heard. And what those voices now expressed was something that was a great deal more dangerous than it had formerly been. Old resentments drew fresh vigour from an exacerbated sense of inequality. The *bourgeois*, forced to realize that he had got to work a good deal harder than he had done in the past, got the idea that the 'masses', whose labour was, in the last analysis, the source of his own profits, were working less—which was true, and even less than he was—which was not, perhaps, equally true, and certainly did not take into account the difference in degree of human fatigue. He grew indignant at the thought that the manual worker had now enough free time to enable him to go to the cinema like his boss. The workers' attitude to money, born of a long past of insecurity which had firmly fixed in their minds the conviction that it was useless to look ahead, and that the morrow could be left to take care of itself, offended his inborn respect for the virtue of saving. Even the most charitable-minded sought in vain among the crowds parading with clenched fists raised, and demanding their rights with a violence which, in fact, was no more than a rather crude expression of honest frankness, the 'respectable poor' who had peopled with such deferential charm the novels of Madame de Ségur. The value of discipline, of docile good-nature, of a ready acceptance of social differences by the less fortunate, had formed the basis of their timid and unadventurous education. And now it looked as though all these

things were to be swept away for good and all. With them, they felt, would go something far more valuable, that sense of the common weal which, little though the comfortably off might think it, does demand a greater degree of sacrifice from the poor than from the rich.

Because, for all these reasons, the members of the *bourgeoisie* had grown anxious and discontented, they now began to show signs of bitterness. They might, had they looked a little closer, have reached a better understanding of the 'People' from whom they were themselves sprung, and with whom they had more than one deep affinity. But because they were unused to making the mental effort which social analysis demands, they preferred to condemn out of hand. It would be difficult to exaggerate the sense of shock felt by the comfortable classes, and even by men who had a reputation for liberal-mindedness, at the coming of the Popular Front in 1936. All those who had a few pennies to bless themselves with smelled the rising wind of disaster, and the good housewife was, if anything, more terrified than her husband. It is the fashion to-day to say that the Jews were behind the Left-Wing movement. Poor Synagogue—always fated to act as scape-goat! I know, from what I saw with my own eyes, that it trembled even more violently than the Church. The same held true of the non-Catholic congregations. 'The old Protestant employer's a thing of the past'—I heard a writer say who had been brought up in Nonconformist circles. 'At one time no one could have been more whole-heartedly concerned for the well-being of his people than he was, but now he is among the most rancorous of their critics.' A deep fissure was opening almost before our eyes in the fabric of French social life. The country was splitting into two opposed groups.

It is no part of my intention to enter the lists as a champion of the Popular Front governments. They are dead now, and those who for a moment put their faith in them may, perhaps, be allowed to cast a handful of dust in pious memory on their

graves. More than this they do not deserve. They fell without glory, and what makes it worse is that their adversaries had little to do with their overthrow. Events outstripped them, but even that is not the whole story. The movement failed mainly because of the follies of its supporters, or of those who claimed to be its supporters. Still, the attitude of the greater part of middle-class opinion was inexcusable. It grumbled with stupid mulishness at everything that was done, whether good or bad. One decent fellow of my acquaintance obstinately refused to set his foot inside the Exposition Universelle. He liked looking at beautiful things, and it offered for his enjoyment an incomparable display of the glories of French art. But that made not the slightest difference. It was enough for him that a detested minister had officiated at the opening ceremony! It was said that the demands of organized labour had, at one moment, raised doubts as to its being ready in time, and that was enough to put it outside the pale. And what an outcry there was when the authorities began to talk about the organization of leisure! The idea was greeted with mockery, and attempts were even made to bring it to nothing. Yet the very people who took that attitude then are now prepared to extol to the skies similar efforts, made more or less seriously, though under a different name, by régimes after their own hearts.

But whatever the faults of which the movement may have been guilty, there was in that striving of the masses to make a juster world a touching eagerness and sincerity which ought not to have been without effect on any man animated by ordinary human feelings. But how many employers of my acquaintance have I ever found capable of understanding, for instance, what nobility may lie behind a 'sympathetic' strike, no matter how unreasonable? 'It isn't', they say, 'as though the men were striking for their *own* wages.' There are two categories of Frenchmen who will never really grasp the significance of French history: those who refuse to thrill to the Consecration of our

Kings at Rheims, and those who can read unmoved the account of the Festival of Federation. I do not care what may be the colour of their politics to-day: such a lack of response to the noblest uprushes of national enthusiasm is enough to condemn them. In the Popular Front—the *real* Popular Front of the masses, not the one exploited by the politicians—something lived again of the spirit that had moved men's hearts on the Champ-de-Mars under the hot sun of 14 July 1790. Unfortunately, the men whose ancestors pledged their faith on the Altar of the Nation have lost contact with the profound realities of national greatness. It is no accident that our régime, in spite of all its democratic trappings, has never been able to create for the people of France festivals capable of sounding a note to the ears of all the world. We have left it to Hitler to revive the paeans of the Ancient World. When I was with the First Army I saw a good deal of certain officers who had been given the task of raising the morale of the troops. The High Command had chosen for this duty a banker who was a Parisian to his finger-tips, and an industrialist from the north. They thought that the best way of slipping a few 'home truths' into the trench newspapers was to give them a plentiful coating of rather crude humour. As to the field theatres, well, the more they concentrated on smutty farces, the better pleased the authorities were. The *bourgeoisie* lived completely separated from the people. Its members made no attempt to reach that understanding which might have led to sympathy. Turn and turn about, either they refused to take the masses seriously, or they trembled before their implied threat. What they did not realize was that, by so doing, they were separating themselves effectively from France.

As a result of attacking the régime, these same *bourgeois* proceeded, naturally, to condemn the nation which had produced it. Driven to despair of their own future, they ended by despairing of their country. If anyone be tempted to say that I exaggerate, let him re-read the newspapers on which, a few years ago, the

middle classes lived, and whose outlook they dictated. He will find the experience edifying. At the time when Belgium had just rejected the offer of an alliance in favour of a neutrality which unhappily turned out to be fallacious, a friend of mine in Brussels said: 'You've no idea of the amount of damage done to the French cause by your great Weeklies. They declare in every issue that France, as a nation, is in an advanced stage of putrescence. Well, I'm afraid we believe 'em. How can you expect us not to?' We ourselves believed them only too well. Many men of what might still claim to be our ruling classes, since from them were drawn our leaders of industry, our senior civil servants, the majority of our reserve officers, set off for the war haunted by these gloomy prognostications. They were taking their orders from a political set-up which they held to be hopelessly corrupt. They were defending a country which they did not seriously think could offer any genuine resistance. The soldiers under their command were the sons of that 'People' which they were only too glad to regard as degenerate. No matter how high their own courage, no matter how resolute their own patriotism, it can hardly be maintained that this was the best intellectual preparation for men who would be called upon to fight 'to the last quarter of an hour'.

Now, those who provided the personnel for the various military staffs were only too ready to share these jaundiced points of view. I do not mean that they were all to the same extent contaminated. It was by no means true that *all* regular officers, even those in the most senior positions, necessarily belonged to the world of hereditary wealth. More than one, on the contrary, hailed from a social level which was little, if at all, removed from that of the great mass of his countrymen. By the nature of their calling, and as a point of honour, they were for the most part strangers to the petty outlook of the tradesman. The future of capitalism—supposing that they ever had time to think about such things—would not have caused them any

particular concern, and most of them would have been left unmoved by the prospect of a redistribution of the national wealth. Almost all of them were men with a strong sense of duty, fervent patriots, and very conscious that they were soldiers of France. The idea that they might be regarded as the mercenaries of certain private interests, or of any one class, would have brought a blush of shame to their cheeks. But what did they know of social realities? Education, the spirit of caste, tradition, had all combined to build around them a wall of ignorance and error. Their thoughts were simple. The 'Left' meant for them 'anti-militarism', free thought, and a hatred of that authority which, as everyone knows, is the main source of an army's strength. About Socialists they had long known all there was to know. They equated the word with the 'bad' soldier, the man who always has a grouse, and, horror of horrors, sometimes communicates his grievances to the Press. Anyone who had dealings with 'Socialists' became automatically suspect. Even Roosevelt had something of the 'Bolshie' about him (I actually heard that said once by a highly placed staff officer). They were not, as a whole, intellectually curious, and they had been trained from boyhood to flee from heresy as from the plague. This brief and simple orthodoxy was admirably suited to their needs. They never made the slightest attempt to acquire information. Among the newspapers which lay on our anteroom table, *Le Temps* was, by comparison with its neighbours, a 'red rag'. And so it came about that a whole group of young leaders, recruited from among the most intelligent representatives of the nation, never opened a daily paper which reflected, even in the smallest degree, the opinions professed, rightly or wrongly, by the majority of Frenchmen.

There is no getting away from the fact that we, the teachers, were largely to blame for this state of affairs. I have long felt it to be deplorable that men whose proud boast it was in recent years that they stood for all that was most liberal, most

disinterested, and most humanly progressive, in our country, should have been guilty of the serious charge of having made no effort whatever to touch the understanding of a professional body which enshrined such high moral values. Their failure to do so dates, I think, from the Dreyfus affair, and the original responsibility does not rest on the shoulders of those who, at that time, were on our side of the barricades. But that is no excuse for what has happened since. Many a time I have said to myself, as I saw my companions drinking in like harmless milk the poisonous brew compacted of stupidity and hatred which certain squalid sheets continued to dispense even during the war: 'What a shame it is that such fine fellows should be so ill informed: what a crying scandal that no one has ever really tried to enlighten them.'

The fact remains that we are now in a position to measure up the results. Ill informed about the infinite resources of a people that has remained far healthier than they, as the result of poisonous teaching, have been inclined to believe; rendered incapable by inherited contempt and by the limited routine of their training to call in time upon its inexhaustible reserves of strength, our leaders not only let themselves be beaten, but too soon decided that it was perfectly natural that they should be beaten. By laying down their arms before there was any real necessity for them to do so, they have assured the triumph of a faction. Some of them, to be sure, strove hard, by backing the *coup d'état*, to disguise their fault. But others there were, in the High Command and in almost every rank of the Army, who were very far from pursuing any such selfish design. They accepted the disaster, but with rage in their hearts. However that may be, they did accept it, and long before they need have done. They were ready to find consolation in the thought that beneath the ruins of France a shameful régime might be crushed to death, and that if they yielded it was to a punishment meted out by Destiny to a guilty nation.

The generation to which I belong has a bad conscience. It is true that we emerged from the last war desperately tired, and that after four years not only of fighting, but of mental laziness, we were only too anxious to get back to our proper employments and take up the tools that we had left to rust upon the benches. So behindhand were we with our work that we set ourselves to bolt it down in indigestible mouthfuls. That is our excuse. But I have long ceased to believe that it can wash us clean of guilt.

Many of us realized at a very early stage the nature of the abyss into which the diplomacy of Versailles and the Ruhr was threatening to plunge us. We knew perfectly well that it would have the double result of embroiling us with our former Allies and of keeping open and bleeding our ancient quarrel with an enemy whom we had just, but only just, defeated. We were not ignorant of the potentialities of power latent in both Germany and Britain. The same, or roughly the same, men whom we have heard to-day preaching, before the last hour had struck, the gloomy wisdom of Louis XVIII, were then urging us on to ape the grandiloquent arrogance of Louis XIV. We were not such fools as to believe that in a France impoverished, relatively undermanned, and capable of realizing only a very small industrial potential, a policy of the kind they contemplated was advisable—if, indeed, it would have been so at any time. Not being prophets we did not foresee the advent of the Nazis. But we did foresee that, in some form or other, though its precise nature was hidden from us, a German revival *would* come, that it would be embittered by rancorous memories to which our foolish ineptitude was daily adding, and that its explosion would be terrible. Had anyone asked us how we thought a second war would end we should, I doubt not, have answered that we hoped it would end in victory. But we should have been perfectly clear in our own minds that if the terrible storm broke again there was grave danger that the whole of European civilization might well suffer

irremediable shipwreck. We did realize that in the Germany of that time there were signs, however timid, of a new spirit of goodwill, of an attitude that was frankly pacific and honestly liberal. The only thing wanting was a gesture of encouragement on the part of our political leaders. We knew all that, and yet, from laziness, from cowardice, we let things take their course. We feared the opposition of the mob, the sarcasm of our friends, the ignorant mistrust of our masters. We dared not stand up in public and be the voice crying in the wilderness. It might have been just that, but at least we should have had the consolation of knowing that, whatever the outcome of its message, it had at least spoken aloud the faith that was in us. We preferred to lock ourselves into the fear-haunted tranquillity of our studies. May the young men forgive us the blood that is red upon our hands!

All, or almost all, these things had long been whispered among intimate friends: the weakness that was slowly undermining the robust health of the nation; the intellectual lethargy of our ruling classes, and their bitter grievances; the illogical propaganda which was providing so adulterate but so heady a draught for our workers; the dominance of age, and the unrest in the Army. But how many had the courage to speak their thoughts aloud? I know well enough that we lacked the partisan spirit, and that is something of which we need not be ashamed. Those of us—and they were the exceptions—who let themselves be caught up in one or other of the political parties almost always ended by being its prisoners rather than its guides. It was not to work on electoral committees that our duty should have urged us. We had tongues and brains in our heads and pens in our hands. But we were all of us either specialists in the social sciences or workers in scientific laboratories, and maybe the very disciplines of those employments kept us, by a sort of fatalism, from embarking on individual action. We had grown used to seeing great impersonal forces at work in society as in nature. In the vast drag of these submarine swells, so cosmic as to seem

irresistible, of what avail were the petty struggles of a few shipwrecked sailors? To think otherwise would have been to falsify history. Among all the characteristics that mark the rise and fall of civilizations, I know of none that is more significant than the gradual movement of the collective mind towards self-consciousness. In that fact lies the key to many of the contrasts that show, however crudely, as between the societies of the past and those of to-day. Juridical changes, as soon as they grow large enough to be noted, look very different from what they would have done had the movement remained purely instinctive.

The movements of the Stock Exchange vary according as the fluctuation of current prices are or are not known to the aggregate of shareholders. But of what is the general mind composed if not of a multitude of individual minds which continually act and react upon one another? For a man to form a clear idea of the needs of society and to make an effort to spread his views widely is to introduce a grain of leaven into the general mentality. By so doing he gives himself a chance to modify it to some small extent, and, consequently, to bring some influence to bear upon the course of events which, in the last analysis, are dictated by human psychology. The real trouble with us professors was that we were absorbed in our day-to-day tasks. Most of us can say with some justice that we were good workmen. Is it equally true to say that we were good citizens?

In thus parading my remorse for things left undone, I am actuated by no sense of gloomy pleasure. I have never learned from experience that a sin is any the less heavy to bear because it has been confessed. No, I am thinking of those who will read these words, of my sons certainly, of others perhaps, and they may be of a younger generation. I ask them to reflect on the faults of their elders. It matters little whether they judge them with ruthless severity, or pay them the rather contemptuous and grudging tribute of that amused indulgence which adolescents are prepared to accord to age. The important thing is that they

should realize what those faults were, so that they may be in a position to avoid them when their turn comes.

We find ourselves to-day in this appalling situation—that the fate of France no longer depends upon the French. Since that moment when the weapons which we held with too indeterminate a grasp fell from our hands, the future of our country and of our civilization has become the stake in a struggle of which we, for the most part, are only the rather humiliated spectators. What will become of us if, by some hideous mischance, Great Britain is in turn defeated? Our recovery as a nation will, it is quite certain, be long retarded. But *only* retarded, of that I am sure. The deep-seated vitality of our people is intact, and, sooner or later, will show signs of recovery. That of nazified Germany, on the contrary, cannot endure indefinitely the increasing strain which its masters see fit to impose upon it. Foreign systems brought into France in the 'baggage wagons of the enemy' have, on more than one occasion, lasted for a limited time. But the detestation of a proud nation has always, in the long run, proved too strong, and, sooner or later, sentence has been pronounced. Already we feel the iron of occupation eating more cruelly into our flesh. The seeming good-nature of the early days no longer deceives anybody. We have but to see Hitlerism in its day-to-day manifestations to condemn it. But I would so much rather look forward to an eventual British victory! I cannot tell when the hour will sound when, thanks to our Allies, we can once more control our own destiny. But when it does sound, shall we see scraps and corners of our territory liberate themselves successively from the enemy? Shall we see wave after wave of volunteer armies spring into being all agog to answer to the renewed appeal of 'The Country in Danger'? Maybe some tiny autonomous government will suddenly appear in some remote district and spread like a patch of oil. It may be, on the other hand, that a great surge of national feeling will develop swiftly. An elderly historian likes to arrange patterns with these pictures of a pos-

sible future, though imperfect knowledge makes it impossible for him to choose between them. My only hope, and I make no bones about it, is that when the moment comes we shall have enough blood left to shed, even though it be the blood of those who are dear to us (I say nothing of my own, to which I attach no importance). For there can be no salvation where there is not some sacrifice, and no national liberty in the fullest sense unless we have ourselves worked to bring it about.

The duty of reconstructing our country will not fall on the shoulders of my generation. France in defeat will be seen to have had a Government of old men. That is but natural. France of the new springtime must be the creation of the young. As compared with their elders of the last war, they will have one sad privilege: they will not have to guard against the lethargy bred of victory. Whatever form the final triumph may take, it will be many years before the stain of 1940 can be effaced. It may be a good thing that these young people will have to work in a white heat of rage. It would be impertinent on my part to outline a programme for them. They will search for the laws of the future in the intimacy of their heads and of their hearts. The map of the future will be drawn as a result of the lessons they have learned. All I beg of them is that they shall avoid the dry inhumanity of systems which, from rancour or from pride, set themselves to rule the mass of their countrymen without providing them with adequate instruction, without being in true communion with them. Our people deserve to be trusted, to be taken into the confidence of their leaders. I hope, too, that though they may do new things, many new things, they will not break the links that bind us to our authentic heritage, which is not at all, or, at least, not wholly, what some self-styled apostles of tradition have imagined it to be. On one occasion Hitler said to Rauschning: 'It is very much better to bank on the vices of men than on their virtues. The French Revolution appealed to virtue. We shall be better advised to do the contrary.' A

Frenchman, that is to say, a civilized man—for the two are identical—will be forgiven if he substitute for this teaching that of the Revolution and of Montesquieu: 'A State founded on the People needs a mainspring: and that mainspring is virtue.' What matter if the task is thereby made more difficult—as it will be? A free people in pursuit of noble ends runs a double risk. But are soldiers on the field of battle to be warned against the spirit of adventure?

GUÉRET-FOUGÈRES (CREUSE)
July–September 1940