

BLACKFRIARS

VOL. XXIII

JANUARY 1942

No. 262

FRANCE AND THE FUTURE

IN 1941 BLACKFRIARS, with a view to setting our own house in order, dealt chiefly with the internal structure of society. This must remain our principal preoccupation in the future; for the general reader will have the international situation constantly before his eyes, whereas the radical, internal diseases of our society may more easily pass unnoticed. To understand these evils and to attempt to cure them will require all our spiritual resources before the end of the war if there is to be any hope of peace in our day. There are, however, in the international sphere two points of special concern which must also be understood and be made part of the foundations of peace—indeed without such an understanding any re-Christianisation at home would be abortive. Firstly, there is the sound Christian tradition that survives the diabolic attack of the Gestapo in the German nation; and secondly, there is also a Christian tradition in France with which, above all other alliances, we must remain closely associated in any peace-making. It is to the second of these considerations that we devote the present issue, to the first we hope to return at a later date.

With the present alignment of forces a defeat for Hitler would mean that Britain, America and the Soviet Union would impose their terms on Europe. Two of these powers are essentially non-European, while at the same time one to a greater and the other to a far lesser extent derives its culture and civilisation from Europe. England alone of the three can lay claim to being an integral part of Europe, and that claim is being jeopardised by the alienation of the French from the British peoples. The main artery of cultural life has passed into Britain from Palestine, Greece and Rome through France. *But in recent centuries our limb of Europe has sought a false independence, and finally to cut that artery would mean not merely that this country would be finally condemned to a derivative and secondary culture, but its life blood would be spilt. In other words, the three powers—already very largely materialistic in outlook—would be severed finally from European life and given over*

to an organised and official materialism. And what if that were the attitude of the victors to a Europe lying prostrate at their feet?

In the past we have been bound to the tradition of the Christianised Greek and Roman way of life by links with France and Italy. But Italy is now unhappily an enemy and she will be treated as such at the end of the war, so that our remaining within the stream of the true tradition depends on our link with France. Yet at the present time, in the tenseness of a most difficult and protracted crisis we are in danger of losing sympathy and patience with what is left of a noble ally and of treating her at the level we would treat Germany or Italy. This antagonism, which was to be found in many a British soldier after Dunkirk, can be easily understood, especially in view of the provocative behaviour of the Vichy Government. If we are to return to any form of stability, however, France must play her part in the revitalising of Europe. She must not be allowed to become a partner with the grasping paganism of Germany and Japan.

We mean of course that the spirit of the true France will contribute to the reconstruction of the future. This 'essential France,' to use the phrase of the anonymous author of *A French Soldier Speaks*,¹ has been overlaid by many evils directly antipathetic to peace and order in Europe—Masonry, Secularism, Communism and hopelessly corrupt politics. No good European could wish to revive that France, nor yet the self-centred, nationalist France that can think of nothing but *La Patrie*. Yet our policy must surely be to try to heal the divisions that corruptions and defeat have produced. If, under the misguided aim of breaking off a section of French society to support our cause, we strike these wedges deeper into the living trunk of the nation, we are merely weakening our position for the future. There are many factions and hostile groups, inevitable in a defeated nation. It is tempting to blow on these smouldering embers to stir up a revolt in our favour, which would in fact leave the country in a weaker state than now. We ought to seek to heal those wounds, to close the fissures and reunite the French people. Professor Saurat has shown the extreme gravity of these divisions in his country by speaking of the *seven* Frances of to-day. First comes the France of the German prisons where thousands of her most virile sons have been confined for eighteen months. Then the bait to Vichy of a French Flanders now being actively established by the Germans in the north of France—a grave threat to us. Occupied and unoccupied France are two more quite different sections of the country. Vichy France and the collaborationists are again a sec-

¹ *A French Soldier Speaks*. Translated by Helen Waddell. (Constable, 4s. 6d.)

tion to themselves; and finally the French of the Empire and the Free French complete the seven Frances, all of which are quite distinct from and antagonistic to one another. And it must be realised that France alone can re-establish unity. We can only help as friendly neighbours.

An approach of this nature demands a sensitive sympathy and a tender patience. It is easy to condemn the country for betraying her ally. But if we could put ourselves, when we judge, in her position, we should not be so willing to condemn. France is down and out, defeated by her traditional foe because of her own internal weakness. We cannot therefore judge the actions of the nation as of one in full vigour and in complete control of his powers. 'For the moment the French are like a man who has just been knocked out. He sits up, feels himself all over, examines his bruises, tries to take stock of the situation. France has been so taken in by her former leaders that she is suspicious of every one . . .' (*A French Soldier Speaks*, p. 77). That is why so many Frenchmen have so far 'taken it lying down.' There was no treachery intended by the French soldier who said at the news of the collapse of France, 'After all it means that the war's over as far as we're concerned' (*ib.*, p. 8). To those soldiers who then returned to France from this country the future looked desperate—and their relatives and friends were over there. Why prolong the agony? They may have lacked vision and that heroic spirit of sacrifice which gave up all personal ties in the conviction that righteousness must prevail. But one can hardly expect a whole nation to be motivated by those rare and noble virtues. And ever since then Germany has been at France's throat. Her actions are those of a man in utterly desperate straits. But we must seek out the good elements in our neighbour, elements that will provide a firm foundation for the future. We should not indulge in invective and destructive criticism. They have had enough of destruction: they need constructive help. All Frenchmen admit the corruption of their politics, so that we should as far as possible ignore it, over-riding politics by encouraging the true tradition of Christian culture that has never collapsed despite revolution, secularism and the Masonic Lodges.

A sign of this continuity of the true tradition in the eldest daughter of the Church can be found in the little book already referred to in which a Free French soldier expresses his faith naturally, without embarrassment. He has no political axe to grind; he can honestly praise Salazar without supporting Fascism, he can criticise Laval while retaining a sympathy for the aged Marshal Pétain. 'The democracy of the future will be Christian, or will not be at all.

The future of a democracy "without God" is only too evident, as much in the international field as in the social. From the latter point of view, has it not fully deserved from its adversaries the odious name of "Plutocracy"? . . . A people does not fight to defend a few safes. Say what you please, a people only fights to defend an ideal. Now, what has become of our ancient ideal of justice? . . . France died of losing an ideal. But now? The heroic age begins anew' (pp. 67-68). 'Buttressed by his Christian philosophy, and behind it, the thought of Greece, the Frenchman believes in ideas of permanent value, independent of place and time' (p. 77). And the author concludes: 'By an odd reversal of history, after being so long her rival, then her ally, England by her final victory will bring back France from the dead; and they two, side by side, will unshackle Europe' (p. 80). There is our goal.

It may be objected that this 'essential France' is by now so overlaid with rotten excrescence that with difficulty can we see in what it consists let alone begin to found European reconstruction upon it. Perhaps the suffering now purging the country will remove some of the evil growths if her people accept it in the Christian spirit of active asceticism; but no society can begin anew as by a creation. Past selfishness, the tradition of the *petite bourgeoisie*, the secularism and materialism of the Lodges, these things cannot fall away and leave no trace. Very many have been bred into that outlook, and it will take much personal suffering accepted in the virile spirit of Christian sacrifice to work it out of the system. And what mediator is to overcome the temperamental differences between the French and the English? How can the two countries cooperate in the power and freedom of mutual trust in the light of recent history?

No one should minimise these difficulties; yet the genius of France burns brightly even now beneath the yoke of a brutal oppressor, and that very oppression helps it to burn more purely. It is a flame that has burnt since France was born; that burnt keenly in her saints, King Louis and Joan of Arc, and continues in such spirits as MM. Bernanos and Maritain, the collaborators of *Sept* and *Temps Present*, to mention only a small section of the country. 'In all the centuries of her history, France has derived her radiance from the intellect of her philosophers and her scholars, from the work of her writers and her saints, from her instinctive passion for beauty. This is what men call "the genius of France"' (p. 74). This radiance has shone most brilliantly perhaps in recent years among the young Catholics of the J.O.C. and the French Scouts. Few who have come in contact with them have failed to detect the spirit of

Christ working in them giving them their shining qualities. Many of those young people remain in their stricken land as the leaven which will work towards the resurrection and rejuvenation of their beloved *Patrie*. We should especially lend support to the French youth with its Christian spirit.

Again, in France the peasant remains the final stronghold that no invader can storm. In England lacking that firm foundation ourselves we may easily overlook it among the people across the channel. The peasant preserves the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of the Christian family, the stability of a limited but real property. If possible we should look also to them and offer them our support and encouragement.

Finally, we have no need to point to the Free French as the surest hope of a renewed France and Europe. They are our partners still in the struggle, and courage joined with heroic sacrifice marks them out as saviours of Christian society. We may look to them for the burning brilliance of St. Louis and St. Joan of Arc.

After a year of German occupation the Archbishop of Toulouse, Mgr. Saliege, reaffirms the Christian aims of Christian France in a prayer to the Sacred Heart:

'Sacred Heart of Jesus, I implore You never to allow the chivalrous soul of France to become the victim of error, of evil and of brutality. Never allow the dignity of human personality and the rights that it derives from its Creator to disappear from the earth from which Your Kingdom has been banished, nor the dignity of work which is not a thing to be bought and sold, nor the dignity of the family which is not merely the means of begetting children; nor the dignity of the nation which comes from God but which must never be an idol.'