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Unpatriotic Wage Earners and the Failure of the High Command

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In *Strange Defeat*, Bloch puts the blame for France's defeat by the Germans on the High Command and the general disposition of the French people. Their material self-centeredness and slow recovery from World War I set France up for an easy defeat. In comparison, Paxton and de Gaulle's opinions coordinate well. They were outnumbered and outmaneuvered by the changing tactics and tools at hand, and were unable to keep up with the evolution of technology.

Bloch attributes much of the cause for France's quick failure to the general self-focused attitude of the French people. Bloch seems to feel that it is inaccurate to say that the French people were self-centered, which is evidenced by how he never seems to come out and say 'self-centered' directly. Instead he says, "Their vision was limited to immediate issues of petty profit."¹ After World War I, the French people, and the wage earners in general as he speaks about here, became focused on providing for themselves as the lowest labor possible and the highest pay possible. Combining that with a snobbish *bourgeois*, the changing economy did not prepare the French for a coming war. There was also a general disbelief that war would reach them. "Our people are temperamentally disinclined to *want* any war," Bloch says.² They had already suffered greatly at the hands of chaos during the French Revolution and World War I. They couldn't image it would return so soon, and were prepared to avoid it at all costs.

Bloch also claims that the French wage earners did not see the value in the work they were doing, and that they did not have a strong sense of nationalism or patriotism. They were self-absorbed, presumably still trying to recover from the first world war. The combined turmoil of an upset *bourgeois* at the new wage earning population and its demand for high wages created a cycle of self-interest that began to destroy the economy. Instead of focusing on the good of the

¹ Bloch, Marc Léopold Benjamin, and Translated by Gerard Hopkins. *Strange Defeat; a Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*. New York: Octagon, 1968. 139.

² Bloch, 136.

country, they focused on personal comforts. Bloch points out, “They seemed blissfully unaware of such problems as the role which our corporation might play in the life of the country, nor were they ever prepared to discuss the bigger question of France’s material future. Their vision was limited to immediate issues of petty profit...”³ This petty profit caused less tanks and airplanes and other machines to be less produced. When the Germans arrived in France, there simply was not enough machinery to even fund a war. He explains, “The evidence of which I have amasses is so unanimous, and comes from so many different sources, ranging in variety from chief engineers to machine-minders, that I am forced to accept its conclusions as valid. The output of our war factories was insufficient.”⁴

As for the High Command, Bloch expresses a great disappointment in its ability to save France. He says blatantly, “I have often heard my friends on the staff say, discipline at the front did break down. If that is so, then I think that the High Command was largely to blame.”⁵ He argues that the High Command’s incompetence and desire for self-preservation led to the misuse of his own intelligence and the quick cease-fire and collaboration with the Germans. It seemed that the French has already lost from the start. But he also believes that the French people were separate from the High Command. Bloch says, “The errors of the High Command were, fundamentally, the errors of a specific group of humans.”⁶ The High Command attempted to hide its collaboration with the Germans, believing it was best to preserve France at any cost. Their ‘specific errors’ were the way they decided to go about the collaboration. In *Vichy*, Paxton points out, “‘Too few allies, too few weapons, too few babies.’ Petain’s lapidary formula for defeat in his June 20 speech carried the debate deftly from the realms of foreign policy and military

³ Bloch, 138-139.

⁴ Bloch, 135.

⁵ Bloch, 105.

⁶ Bloch, 27.

doctrine to the realm of social decadence. A wide range of other Frenchman followed his train of thought.”⁷ According to Paxton, France was largely unprepared for the invasion. His claims and validation of Petain’s quote coincides with Bloch’s evidence. There weren’t enough soldiers or weapons due to the general lack of patriotism within the common people.

Though de Gaulle’s appeal sounds very propagandist, he does have a valid point in how advance the Germans were in comparison to the French. In his *Memoires* he says, “It was the tanks, the planes, and the tactics of the Germans, far more than the fact that we were outnumbered, that forced our armies to retreat. It was the German tanks, planes, and tactics that provided the element of surprise which brought our leaders to their present plight.”⁸ When building the anti-tank trenches to combat the Germans armored tanks, Bloch points out,

... because the doctrine then current among our military theorists laid it down that we had reached one of those moments in the history of strategy when the power of defensive armour to resist is greater than the power of gun-fire to pierce— though, unfortunately, the High Command lacked the courage, when the decisive moment came, to remain loyal to a theory which would... have condemned the Belgian adventure even before it started;⁹

Instead of being proactive and understanding the gravity of the new age of war, the French fell back on old concepts of what a tank was. They saw it as armored defense, not a strong offense capable of attack. Bloch also points out how they did not understand the value of bomber airplanes. “....our technical experts... were of the opinion that bombardment by artillery was far superior to bombing from the air, oblivious of the fact that ammunition for guns has to be brought up over great distances, while the rate at which airplanes can be replenished is limited only by the speed of their flight.”¹⁰ His examples show the slowness of the French reaction and

⁷ Paxton, Robert O. *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. New York: Knopf; Distributed by Random House, 1972. 21.

⁸ De Gaulle, Charles. *Memoires*. Blackboard Document.

⁹ Bloch, 53.

¹⁰ Bloch, 53.

failure to evolve according to changing war strategy. He also says, “But I do know, only too well, that the High Command was lamentably slow in learning its lessons.”¹¹ Here, Bloch points directly to the High Command as part of the reason for French failure. Not only did they not have the new strategy required to combat the new German technology, but they also could not innovate on the spot. They could not counter the Germans quickly enough.

It’s clear by the use of his evidence that he does feel some kind of sentimentality and urge to present his people more favorably, despite his rage about the High Command. He softens his criticisms of the French people in general, but fully stings and attacks the High Command. He describes the people’s preoccupations and contributions to the downfall of France as them simply being “short-sighted.”¹² In comparison, he spares the High Command no such sympathies. In relation to the High Command, he says “Whatever the reasons, there can be no doubt that our governors, both individually and as a class, did lack something of that ruthless heroism which becomes so necessary when the country is in danger.”¹³ In conclusion, despite the emotion that is vivid throughout the memoir, Bloch provides convincing evidence for his claims.

¹¹ Bloch, 41.

¹² Bloch 139.

¹³ Bloch, 135.

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