

## A FRENCHMAN SPEAKS

YVES SIMON, pupil of Jacques Maritain and Professor of Philosophy, is not the first Frenchman to raise his voice against the betrayal of his country, nor the first French Catholic to declare his adherence to the Free French Movement. His passionate cry for freedom comes from the United States, where he is employed at a famous Catholic University, and only grave physical infirmities prevent him from standing with his Free French comrades in the battle. *La Grande Crise de la République Française* has already been published in Montreal,<sup>1</sup> and I hope that it will soon be translated and published here. It deserves to rank with Maritain's *A Travers le Désastre* as an explanation, and with Bernanos' *Les Grandes Cimitières sous la Lune* as a polemic. In more than one place it is like the voice of Péguy speaking in judgment from the grave.

M. Simon's theme is the corruption of French nationalism. It was the classes who regarded themselves as the hereditary guardians of the city who delivered the keys to the besiegers. It was they who welcomed the advent and prepared the acceptance of the Trojan horse. Those who in 1914-18 had sustained the Republic by their valour and their service betrayed it in 1940 and the critical preceding years. Those who had clamoured for the dismemberment of Germany when she was weak clamoured for collaboration with her when she was strong. Those who were most insistent in their demands for territorial guarantees were the most ready to abandon them at the waving of the Wagnerian wand. The myth of the French Revolution was dead. All that the cynics of the 'Action Française' and the scoundrels of 'Je Suis Partout' could find to supplant it was the skeleton of Frederician Macht-Politik dressed up in the coronation robes of the French Kings and the Roman Caesars. What must St. Louis have felt, or even the feeblest of his successors, when he saw this miserable disguise impose itself upon a cretinous bourgeoisie? May he not have cried out of the depth of his charity 'Better Danton—better Robespierre than this'? It was not enough for Herr Hitler, who likes to consummate his triumphs, that the French Republic should have been betrayed by the French Republicans. It was necessary that it should be betrayed, albeit in good faith, by a Marshal of France.

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<sup>1</sup> Editions de l'Arbre, 340 Kensington Avenue, Montreal; \$1.25.

M. Simon does not spare the treachery of the Communists, or the insufficiency of the politicians, but he shows, in one cogent passage after another, that treachery may perform its hideous work in forms less advertised, and less dangerous for those who perform them, than the normal operations of espionage. We had only to look at certain organs of our own Press to see in what guileless fashion the fortress of resolution may be broken down and by what plausible paths we may be led into impossible positions. M. Simon wastes no pity on those Christians who believed that all Chinese were Communists, or that the Abyssinian tribes were an imminent menace to the civilisation of the West, or that the vulgar rhetoric of Mussolini was a salutary recall to classicism. If any of us ever believed these lunacies, we stand rebuked. Over the difficult question of Spain M. Simon is more cautious, although it is not difficult to see that he is on the side of M. Maritain. The rights and wrongs of the Spanish War may legitimately be debated by men of good will, but one thing is not open to doubt. Over a period of two and a half years a large number of Catholics were on the side of General Franco, and therefore of General Franco's friends. Was it reasonable to expect, asks M. Simon, that these people should have ranged themselves, within a few months of the war's conclusion, with an equal resolution against those military forces by whom General Franco had won his victory? History has given the answer to that question. Herr Hitler should indeed be grateful to the criminal elements in the Valencia Government: they were his most potent allies.

M. Simon assigns its due importance to the Dreyfus *affaire*, and he includes in an equal and scornful condemnation those Catholics who continued to believe in the guilt of Dreyfus and those who believed that the sacred city of the Basques was fired by the Basque people, while the Messerschmidts flew overhead for fun. In a passage of profound judgment he places his finger on the touchstone of the French tragedy:

*On ne comprendra rien a ce qui s'est passé en France au cours des dernières années de l'avant-guerre, lorsqu'on n'a pas compris qu'il y avait toute une classe de personnes pour qui la chose souverainement importante n'était ni l'argent, ni l'honneur, ni le plaisir, ni Dieu, mais la haine.*

Nor was it only in France that the spirit of love was extinguished among those whom Love had redeemed.

The mood of patriotic indignation in which this book has been conceived and written has nothing in common with that stupid and suicidal obsession. M. Simon displays an essential generosity which, as he observes, was once the chief virtue of France. He is perfectly

aware of the defects of the Third Republic, and the weakness of the Popular Front, although he does not waste his breath over the bedrooms of the Quai d'Orsay. But he points out once and for all that France was betrayed with varying degrees of consciousness, by those who had claimed a monopoly of patriotism. I am much more of a conservative than M. Simon; I have little sympathy with the Republican idea; I believe that unlimited democracy in modern industrial states leads quickly to unlimited dictatorship; I am thankful that my own country has conserved so much of her monarchical and aristocratic traditions; I have no faith in the prophets of the Brave New World. But I do not think the present moment is the time to exult over the downfall of the French Republic. I do not think it is a little thing that in any place, in France or in Spain or elsewhere, men should have died for the most infantile illusion of liberty. I think that even political funerals should be attended with a little decency. I think, also, that it would be more prudent to wait and see.

Are they so sure, the smug denigrators of Republican France, of the regime which will succeed the paternalism of Marshal Pétain? Do they think that French civilisation will be so secure when Admiral Darlan has consummated the surrender, and M. Déat has banked the thirty pieces of silver, and M. Doriot has applied the whip? Do they suppose that this singular triumvirate will be so careful of Christian liberties? If so, let them look, with M. Simon, on the achievement of France under the Republic. Let them consider the foundation of the empire, the apostolate of the Missions, the laurels of Lyautey and Foch. Let them remember the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine, Valéry and Claudel, the novels of Mauriac and Bernanos, Proust and Gide; the still golden age of French painting—Rouault and Matisse, Dérain and Cézanne; the renaissance of French music—Milhaud and Debussy; the flowering of philosophy with Bergson and Maritain; the resurgence of French Catholicism. No one with any knowledge will dispute M. Simon's claim that the last few years were among the most glorious in the whole long religious history of France. Let us admit, if you like, that these summits were reached in spite of the Republic. Would they have been reached in spite of the Gestapo?

ROBERT SPEAIGHT.