

such a use of the university would fall, of course, to the silent majority which still exists in many faculties and in most student bodies.

Reviewed by C. P. IVES

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## *The French Catastrophe*

**The Collapse of the Third Republic:  
An Inquiry into the Fall of France  
in 1940**, by William L. Shirer, *New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969. 1082 pp. \$12.50.*

ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, when I completed a doctoral thesis on the subject of the French military collapse of 1940 and the subsequent Franco-German armistice, I was told by colleagues that I should have taken a far more obscure topic in order to remain properly alone and unchallenged in my field. I admitted the point. The armistice, being a big and controversial matter, has inevitably attracted the attention of a number of meticulous scholars. They have produced detailed studies in English, French, and even Spanish and Italian, all of them being academic in appeal and none of them being designed to reach or to arouse a large public. This is approximately the development I should have expected at the time I started on my own project, but what I should not have expected is that a best-selling author would ever try to find promising material to exploit in a series of events which nearly thirty years later may seem at least slightly peripheral to most people living outside of France. This is exactly what has happened. William L. Shirer, widely known over the years as a radio commentator and journalist and more recently as the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, has now

turned out *The Collapse of the Third Republic*, an opus that all will agree is enormous. Left-over or reusable materials from the earlier work have probably formed the foundation and much of the framework for this one. Maybe too much. For Shirer is writing French history with a French sympathy, but nonetheless with a German accent.

Since Shirer is primarily a journalist, his accomplishment here will all the more be scrutinized as to style and scholarship. Despite a few colloquialisms and eccentricities (Why does Shirer have to split so many infinitives that would obviously be happier left unsplit?), the story is passed along in straightforward sober fashion. There is little journalistic effort to provide a false atmosphere of excitement or glamor. Anyone anticipating a painful experience of fictionalized history is going to be pleasantly surprised. Shirer's setting is honest. The trouble is that Shirer, the journalist, is altogether too willing to trust contemporary observers, some of them very prejudiced and gossipy, as authoritative sources of information. Alexander Werth, Elie Bois, André Maurois and especially Albert Kammerer and Pertinax are cited with surprising frequency. It is almost as if twenty-five years from now a history of the Vietnamese war were greatly based on the writings of Drew Pierson, "Scotty" Reston, and J. William Fulbright. In the meanwhile, Shirer seems to be paying little real attention to some of the genuine scholars whose names appear in his bibliography, and he omits any mention at all of certain Italian, Spanish, and German works which are indubitably superior to the polemics of the contemporary opinion-makers that he relies on so uncritically.

In a general way, with the exception of text books, histories that cover a vast expanse of time are expected to be broadly interpretive or analytical in character, while authors dealing with a very brief time span usually go unreproached if they follow a largely descriptive method. For this reason Shirer's work should be at least

partly and deeply interpretive since it takes the story of the French collapse all the way back to the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. And yet it is not really interpretive or even explanatory at all. It is merely moralistic, in fact moralistic almost to the point of being censorious. Shirer does not analyze. He judges. In a sense he passes out grades to historical personalities and groups as if they were so many junior high school students waiting for their report cards. Shirer's sympathy is always on the surface of things. It is a sympathy with the liberal welfare society. At home, obviously, nations ought to be building that society. Abroad they ought to be encouraging such a trend among other peoples. Thus conservatives are largely stereotyped characters who act from vested interest or plain obscurantism. Liberals are to be criticized, if at all, for not being liberal enough.

Over a huge range of subjects Shirer passes down pronouncements that arise from these primordial axioms. Thus we are told that even today it turns his stomach to read about the humiliation of Dreyfus. The Paris press had a venality and an irresponsibility that helped poison French society under the Third Republic until it was beyond healing. French veterans' organizations were dominated by reactionaries and demagogic know-nothings. *Action Française* published drivel. By 1933 well-heeled reactionaries wanted an up-to-date fascist totalitarianism on the Italian and German model, and conservative circles concluded that Nazi Germany represented the wave of the future. The comfortable well-to-do were gripped by an increasingly hysterical fear of communism. France was far behind in introducing the income tax and social security, for which ugly situation the business community was to be blamed. The leaders of the Popular Front wanted to assure the possessors of capital that their money bags were safe at home. Meanwhile the United States was guilty of betrayal towards France in not remaining tightly allied with her after World War I. Americans came to France in some num-

bers in the 1920's in order to get away from the land of the Scopes trial. As for the Poles, after behaving like hyenas in taking land from Czechoslovakia in 1938, they became blinded—like their ancestors for centuries past—to their own best interests in dealing with both Germany and Russia. But perhaps French generals are the least esteemed breed of all. They spend most of their time being timid, ossified, frozen, stupified, or consternated. As a result Hitler gained sensational victories, and when he arrived for the armistice negotiations, "his face lit up successively with hate, scorn, revenge, triumph." Shirer, reviewing the whole situation here and more than ever acting as judge rather than historian, remarks: "Still it seemed incomprehensible to me that the French, despite the shattering *débauche*, could in one frantic step go back on their own history and so basely betray their nation's character and their democratic institutions." Even so, France despite all her defects is more civilized than Germany. If, then, it is the right and the wrong of the matter from the liberal viewpoint that the reader is after, Shirer will seldom let him down.

Shirer's version of the armistice will very probably reach a bigger audience than any other. Furthermore, with its more than one thousand pages of text, notes, and bibliography, it will doubtless remain the biggest version for a decade or a generation. And yet because Shirer looks at history so emotionally, all his investigation has availed him—and us—very little. He has simply used his vast pile of evidence, some of it fairly dubious, for the purpose of shoring up personal reactions that admittedly go back to the years of the war itself. His views are those that were in style in 1945 after Hitler's tide of blitzkrieg victory was almost miraculously reversed as a consequence of historical switches that could never have been forecast in 1940. As to the origins of the whole war catastrophe, he is convinced that France in the years 1934-1939 was largely responsible for failing to

revive the muscular alliance with Russia that had existed prior to the first war. Had Foreign Minister Barthou not been assassinated in 1934, had his successor Laval not been so opposed to a genuine military convention with the Soviets, and had Bonnet not been so inept in his failure to get the Poles to cooperate with their big eastern neighbor, the old alliance could have been reestablished for the protection of Europe. But Shirer is making things too much a matter of personalities. He does not recognize that the circumstances for an alliance in the 1930's were far more adverse than they were in the 1890's. At the earlier date, France was not particularly opposed to the kind of revisionism (Pan-Slavism) which Russia was encouraging in many areas of the Balkans, and within France itself, the Russian form of government and ideology was not a divisive issue. At the later date, the presence of communism, not so much in Russia as in France, was certainly a deterrent to good relations between the two countries, and latent Soviet revisionism, like Nazi German revisionism, was aimed at the dissolution of the very treaty settlement of 1919, which the French identified with their essential national interest. Thus in 1939 France and Britain were concerned to preserve Poland and other eastern European nations as such. The Soviets were not so concerned and would only act to preserve these nations if some better arrangement proved to be impossible. Eventually a better arrangement was worked out. It was the pact with Hitler. This is what Shirer is unwilling to see.

He is most of all unhappy about the way in which the French reacted to their initial defeat in 1940 in Belgium and Flanders. Playing the role of professional armchair general, he has decided that at this point they ought to have abandoned any notion of continuous front warfare, and with unprecedented zealotry they ought to have resorted to a kind of in-depth resistance throughout much of the remainder of their nation. Then discarding antiquated theories of military honor, the French could have

surrendered most of their army in the homeland and continued the conflict in North Africa. Constantly Shirer appears to be saying that the French ought to have been something other than what they were. They ought not to have been realists or pessimists but rather Gaullist visionaries. This impresses me about the way I would be impressed by a biography of Pope Leo X, the main point of which is that he ought to have been a Lutheran. Furthermore, Shirer himself has gone to considerable length to show that during the war and long beforehand a definite moral, political, and military lethargy had taken hold in France to such an extent that the grand finale desired by Shirer in retrospect would have been historically inconceivable.

Personally, I have never found a great deal of shame for the French in having negotiated the armistice. The circumstances of 1940, according to any kind of realism, were too dismal to permit any hopes except those based on hallucination. If Shirer had the kind of historical perspective that he needs for his job, he would know too that in the whole course of modern coalition warfare great powers, even when they have only come close to the kind of rout suffered by France in 1940, have invariably come to terms with the enemy for better or worse. If the field marshals of the past could have communicated with Pétain in his hour of decision, they would not have asked him why he negotiated, but rather why he did not do so earlier.

Reviewed by BRENTON H. SMITH