

A Prime Minister's Prison Diary

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Edouard Daladier was the French Prime Minister at the time of Chamberlain, Hitler and Mussolini. A son of a Baker, a brilliant student, a High School teacher, he joined the Radical Socialist Party, became Mayor of a small town in 1911, was a sergeant in WWI, elected Deputy in 1919 and President of his party in 1927. He was several times a minister in the 1920s, specialising in foreign affairs and defence matters. Prime Minister in 1933 in a coalition with the Left, he resigned after nine months; PM again in January 1934, he was forced to resign in February. Elected in 1936 on a Popular Front (a coalition of Communists, Socialists and Radical Socialists) ticket, he was the Defence Minister. A split in his own party saw him replaced but, on the fall of the government, the President of the Republic called on him to form the new government in 1938, a government which lasted two years. He signed the 'Munich Agreement', declared war on Nazi Germany one year later and his government fell in March, 1940. He then became the Defence Minister and, a short while later, the Foreign Minister as well in the Paul Reynaud Cabinet -- a cabinet which presided over the collapse of France in May-June 1940 and resigned. A WWI French hero, General Petain, formed the new government and signed the armistice. Daladier was arrested and imprisoned together with Leon Blum and the Supreme Commander, General Gamelin. Tried inconclusively by a special court, he was later handed over to the Germans and imprisoned in Tirol till liberated by the Americans. This journal was written in prison but only published in France in 1991; this English edition has been published in 1995.

How did France, a then world power, a large colonial power, a WWI victor and a comparatively large, developed European country, collapse so disastrously and capitulate so quickly? Why was the war not continued from the colonies in North Africa? Daladier does not answer these questions and does not blame himself: He states that he recognised the threats and the dangers and, whenever in a position of power, had initiated policies and issued directions but these were undone by a successor government or rendered valueless by the military. This view is probably right as Daladier defends himself very ably at his trial. So, in spite of wise higher direction, France was unprepared. Why? What comes through was that France had no real leader-

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ship; Politicians, military leaders and media persons, jockeying for power and influence, formed cabals, horse-traded and were corrupt. Daladier's comment on Laval, a previous Prime Minister, a minister in the Vichy Government and a Nazi collaborator: "A poor socialist in 1914 and a rich fascist in the 1930s". France had politicians and no leaders : "those in power had forfeited the trust of the people, there was class competition and class distrust" It is probable that a well-off French-man felt more comfortable with a fascist German than a communist Frenchman. Petain still had the greatest influence on military thinking still mired in WWI; Daladier says he recognised the fallacies, had been impressed by some younger officers but did nothing about it. How quickly a nation can deteriorate under short-sighted leaders and corruption can so easily sap the morale of the people. France needed a Hitler and a defeat to cleanse itself : grave maladies require a strong medicine.

Daladier is an intelligent and a well meaning man, possibly, in any other circumstances, a good role-model for youth but there are times when a country needs strong leaders and not "nice guys". He could see far into the future but was uncertain in the present: "The present war marks the end of a period in history that began in 1792— the era of independent nations. Nations will now have to be integrated into federations and, above all, vast economic systems — the partitioning of Germany, which certain Britons and Americans have been talking about, is an absurd proposition." An interesting journal to peruse, especially Appendix B—The Riom Trial. Daladier may have failed France but he doesn't fail as a human being.

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