

Paris

In the early summer of 1940 all the talk was of France, and particularly of Paris. Radio reports had been broadcast by different war correspondents, alarming accounts of Paris's impending fall and of the confusion that was sweeping through the city. The French people themselves were unaware of many of the events which were shaping their immediate future as government censorship hid much from them. Rumours concerning quarrels amongst politicians, and incompetence and betrayal in the army high command were rife, so when the leadership of Paris finally disbanded, chaos and panic took over. The French had put their trust in the supposedly impregnable 'Maginot Line', kilometre after kilometre of intense defences which shadowed its border with Germany between Luxemburg and Switzerland. The women of France planted roses along the line so it looked pretty for their men as they guarded France; but the three-billion -franc wall of protection failed them: on 10th May the Germans marched into France.

On Friday morning, June 14th, we were all gathered around the radio in our hut to hear the news on the 'Home Service': "PARIS HAS FALLEN; NAZI TROOPS MARCH INTO THE CITY, FRANCE IS LOST". Martin's comment wasn't crafted with his usual poetic prowess, he just uttered,

"Bugger!"

Over the ensuing days our mood was somber in spite of efforts by the NCOs and officers to shake us into shape. In their wisdom we were given passes to go into the nearby town one night, but I recall little of what we did other than stare into pints, and mull over Hitler's next move.

Just over a week after we heard the first news of Paris, our corporal posted on the hut's notice board the copy of a dispatch our wireless boys had picked up; it was a 'Communique from an American War Correspondent' who had witnessed the fall of Paris: it made grim reading.¹³ France had been ripped apart, partitioned as seen fit by the Germans. Marshall Pétain assumed absolute powers as 'Head of State', but there was little enthusiasm for either him or his government. Philippe Pétain's heroics of the last war were largely forgotten now, many seeing him as a defeatist. The Germans occupied the north of France and the Atlantic coastline, allowing Pétain to govern southern France from Vichy, to be known as the so called 'Free Zone', some two fifths of the country. Widespread devastation existed north of Paris: towns and villages destroyed, large areas of countryside deserted, crops rotting alongside corpses of men and animals. Any food which was available went first to the occupying forces, then those who worked for the Germans and collaborated, and lastly to the French people.

I heard a broadcast over the BBC by General Charles de Gaulle: a large obscure, prickly Frenchman, who fled to London to form the 'Free French Army'. He defiantly rallied the people of France to establish the resistance movement.¹⁴ It was stirring stuff and he went on to assure the people of

France they were not alone: behind them was a vast empire, the British Empire, and the immense resources of the United States. He stated that the destiny of the world was at stake. He concluded by promising to them and the world,¹⁵

“Whatever happens, the flame of French resistance must not, and shall not die.”

Yet Paris was still Paris.

The white-domed Basilica of the Sacré Coeur overshadowed the nightclub district known as Montmartre; this was outside the city limits, free of Paris and had become a popular area of pleasure. Here theatres, cinemas, cabarets were always full, regardless of air-raids. The Germans, normally unarmed, loved the extravagant shows and would flock to Le Moulin Rouge and Les Folies Bergère in vast numbers, often escorting young French women; for the Germans had begun to love Paris.¹⁶ Amid the plush décor and dim lighting they would sip French champagne, surrounded both by the amorous low life and the decadent bourgeoisie. Here was where the exotic and erotic, the bawdy and breathtaking would play alongside one another. With the dramatic colliding of orchestral sound and the dancers cries as they high kicked their can-can across the stage, it must have been easy to put the pain of war out of their minds, albeit only for a moment. Some women might well learn to forget their missing men and find fresh pleasures; old men would just sit and fish in the Seine. There was widespread resignation amongst the French people that took on the mantle of indifference; for the Nazis, Paris had become their Babylon, every Nazi's favourite playground. The Metro was running again, albeit on German time, and if you were careful or knew a German you could avoid the 8.00pm curfew.

Letters identifying Jewish families and their possessions poured into the authorities; nearly five million informant's letters in 1940 alone. France had been home to the largest Jewish community in western Europe – two hundred and seventy thousand - of whom three-quarters lived in Paris. Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Main Security Office, would preside over a meeting to determine the final solution to the Jewish problem, and how Vichy could help avoid French retaliation against the Germans as they implemented such plans.

The Germans had pushed back the Allied armies to Dunkirk, but Hitler's Panzer divisions had momentarily stood-down allowing many to escape; the French army was disbanded and the forty day long 'Battle of France' was over: the 'Battle for Britain' was now to begin.

There was never a victory parade in Paris: Hitler concluded they were not at the end yet.