

Nov. 6, 1944

INFORMATION BULLETIN

A Letter From France

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Having been in France since the second week of the invasion, I have been able to talk to a great number of French people. What I held at first as a tentative opinion I am now able to confirm: the total consciousness of the most courageous and politically acute of the French people is devoted to one all-encompassing aim -- driving the Germans from the country.

We Americans are not looked upon by the French as captors in the way the French regarded the Germans. We are greeted by the townspeople as heroes. The larger the town, the more frenzied the welcome. People line the streets, yelling "Vive l'Americain! Vive les Americains!" and throwing flowers as we march by. They toss tomatoes, apples, grapes, and offer cider, wine, water with an infusion of mint, etc. Most indicative of all is the phrase which I have heard repeated time and again in the same quiet, grateful way: "We have waited a long time for you." This feeling is almost universal despite losses suffered from Allied aerial bombing and artillery fire. It survives even those indignities inflicted by some American soldiers: rudeness, drunkenness, contemptuous familiarity, minor pillage -- "We overlook these things in you because you are our friends."

The economic and political basis for this hatred of the Germans is an old story by now. They took everything they could lay their hands on. "Les Boches ont pris tous" is a phrase which recurs again and again in conversations. In the section we left recently, bread was rationed at one slice per person per day -- and black bread at that, which the French dislike. The wheat was shipped to Germany, of course.

People buried almost everything to prevent its being looted -- butter, soap, automobiles, etc. Leather, gasoline, chocolate and other commodities disappeared from the market or became prohibitive in price. The suffering was greater in the large cities since the country is more or less able to sustain itself.

A resistance movement was inevitable. The Maquis in the country; the FFI (Forces francaises de l'interieur) in the cities. They exist everywhere. I have spoken to many of them and they are universally intelligent, self-sacrificing, courageous. They have helped the Allies in information and fighting. They number many old and many very young, most of the men from eighteen to twenty-eight having been conscripted as forced laborers or taken prisoner by the Germans. Many Maquis are men who evaded the German

forced labor draft. Sheltering such refugees became a large scale business in France as did the production of identity cards and other papers. Parents and their children were separated for months on end. Arrests, shootings and tortures were common.

How great the desire for liberation is can be illustrated by the fact that the father of a family of eighteen whom I met was the leader of the resistance forces and was missing for some months. Other men have left their wives to work in the resistance forces; many have been away from home several years; some have joined our forces.

There was no place we stopped that we did not find one of the members of the resistance army waiting for us with information or prisoners. Their activities are limited by their materiel, but the movement is widespread.

Let me tell you of the advantages to be gained by the expulsion of the Germans.

First, there would be an immediate rise in the standard of living. The Germans have drained off so much that merely to obtain what they formerly took in food, clothing, and minor luxuries would be immediately noticeable. Business would start up again. Foreign trade could begin again on a limited scale.

There would be equally obvious social advantages. Children, who are now in danger of being deported to Germany as forced laborers, could come out of hiding, meetings could be held. Political rights would exist again. It is a little hard for an American to grasp what it means to be without a radio or "free" press for four years. To understand what the press means to a Frenchman, you should see as I did with what avidity a Frenchman I met held on to a copy of "Le Populaire," one of the few papers then appearing.

Further, the gestapo would be gone; curfews would be abolished; trains would run; books now on the German Index, would reappear; American movies would be available again; leather shoes, now unfamiliar, would reappear in the stores; unions would be reorganized; innumerable identity cards would be abolished; husbands, brothers and sweethearts could return from Germany. In the mind of the average Frenchman, all of this depends upon the defeat of the Germans by the Allies.

To think, as did some of our friends, that the French would be so envenomed by their privations that they would turn to socialism is fantasy. Their concepts do not correspond to the reality at all. I can state that categorically now.

I have not yet been able to discern a real tendency in French thinking on the type of government they want after the war. Over this problem they place a question mark. The anti-German feeling is uppermost now. But there are many statements to the effect that there must be a "strong" government. This represents a desire for order, for a return to "normalcy". It is partly a reflex from the Popular Front regime, with its "defeatism without revolution," a regime which could introduce desirable social reforms, but which could not prevent defeat by the Germans or an internal political collapse.

Toward the possibility of civil war and socialism, not excluded in French thought, is directed the attitude of "We shall wait and see." There

are many imponderables: What are the forced laborers in Germany thinking? What are the soldiers thinking? What will the workers demand? etc. The feeling runs high against the collaborators who sold food to Germany while the French went hungry. One expression of this hatred is the lynching-bees directed against the town whores whose heads are being shaved and whose faces are being branded.

Here is one of many experiences I have had with the anti-German hatred. In a little French Town, we were in the headquarters when we heard a mob screaming in the town. We jumped into a jeep and rushed to where a big mob was all ready to lynch about fifteen German prisoners that had been brought in. Only the colonel's rushing in with a pistol prevented it. The SS fellows were a mighty meek and scared bunch. The French consider us in general too soft with prisoners.

So much for that. So far as I am concerned, our prognoses on what was to occur in France have been borne out by reality to the last dot over the last i.

November 6, 1944

James Fenwick.

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