

Neutrality at Vichy

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NEUTRALITY AT VICHY.

WALTER STUCKI: *Von Pétain zur viernten Republik*
Herbert Lang & Cie., Berne.

Walter Stucki was Swiss Minister in Vichy during the four years of the regime. As representative of a country neutral *par excellence*, and therefore entrusted by both sides with the guardianship of their interests when required, he envisaged his task in a wide humanitarian spirit, and gave neutrality, however scrupulously preserved, an active character: disregarding personal danger, he laboured to save human lives and to avert unnecessary suffering, without distinction of nationality or party. In his account of the work done, there is quiet pride in his country's role and satisfaction with his own performance, artlessly displayed. He disclaims literary merit for his book, and speaks of its "sober, almost office-like narrative," and of his pursuit of truth; which includes testimony on behalf of "a man who once was Head of the French State." The book is both honest and naive.

Its story centres in the arrest and deportation of Marshal Pétain by the Germans and M. Stucki's subsequent quest for an orderly transfer of power at Vichy to the French resistance forces; these transactions are related largely in extracts from his diary, which cover August 12-20 and 22-27, 1944, and form almost half the book. Accredited to the Vichyites, he witnessed their daily sufferings and humiliations at the hands of the Germans, and the endeavours of the more decent among them to lighten the burdens of their countrymen. The moral loss which their policy inflicted on France, though perhaps perceived, was not brought home to him with the same force. But he is not uncritical; he writes, for instance:

It was the tragedy of French leadership since 1940 that, devoid of all psychological understanding of German mentality, they too often thought themselves bound to give in, and did not dare sufficiently to play out their one but powerful trump, the great interest which the Germans had in the preservation of peace and order in France.

Still, M. Stucki fails to ask himself how a Government of Vichy's complexion could have played that trump.

For Laval M. Stucki had a hearty dislike, but for Pétain he expresses pity, as "his age and character deprived him of the necessary strength and determination"; and there was also, he admits, vanity and the desire to retain power. And yet M. Stucki shows a sentimental devotion to the Marshal, frankly expressed also on occasions when it exposed him to difficulties and criticism. He said at the headquarters of the F.F.I. (Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur): "I come from Vichy, whose name grates on your ears. I have spent there four years with Marshal Pétain, whom you have been taught to hate, but whom I respect as a good Frenchman, and whom I now pity in his bitter fate..." And when receiving the freedom of liberated Vichy, M. Stucki considered it "a matter of decency and loyalty," after having spoken of "the brave F.F.I.," to commemorate "also the old Marshal of whose brutal arrest I had been a witness." For this "undiplomatic and misplaced remark" he incurred severe, and perhaps not unjustified, criticism in the Swiss Press.

When, by the summer of 1944, Germany's defeat was merely a question of time, Pétain's, and even Laval's attitude stiffened. For instance, Pétain re-

fused to congratulate Hitler on his escape from the attempt on July 20th (two years earlier, Pétain had congratulated him in fulsome terms on the British failure at Dieppe). By the middle of August Laval, having gone to Paris, was beating about for a way to rehabilitate himself and save his neck; while Pétain's entourage thought of rigging up the old Marshal as "Résistant No. 1" (some even wished him to get into touch with the *Armée secrète* and place himself in their hands). Naturally neither Pétain nor Laval felt like following the defeated Germans as a "Government in exile," and each, separately, took M. Stucki for witness that he would never do so voluntarily. They hung on to that last peculiar scrap of respectability: not to collaborate with the Germans any longer when of those the doom was sealed.

Then followed Pétain's arrest, which M. Stucki relates with sincere emotion, and apparently without perceiving certain farcical aspects. Perhaps the final touch of unconscious comedy was put on it by M. Stucki's own sensible and well-meaning concern for human life: the gates of Pétain's residence were closed, the doors were barred, the guards were posted, and there was to be no surrender; but not any fighting either, for M. Stucki had persuaded both sides not to load, nor use any lethal weapons. So it all finished in an attack with butts, crow-bars, or boots, against iron and wood; a beautifully prearranged assault against Vichy's inert redoubt. When at last the German commander, a regular soldier who in the (invisible and immaterial) depth of his heart was anti-Nazi, reached Pétain's bed-chamber, he found the Marshal only in shirt and trousers, tying up his shoes. Pétain raised his head and said: "Ah, c'est vous." General von Neubronn bowed deep and announced: "You know, Herr Marschall, what painful duty brings me here." Pétain nodded: "En effet, je sais que je suis votre prisonnier"; and with faint irony: "Vous me permettez quand-même de m'habiller?" Whereupon Neubronn withdrew and waited with the others in profound silence.

"Times" (17.1.48).

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