

France under de Gaulle

(ii) De Gaulle's Successes

(From Our ex-Paris-Correspondent)

AS the leader of the Americanist camp, de Gaulle had on coming to power three political tasks: firstly, to neutralise opposition from the Left, which included, besides the Communists, some Socialists and some Centrist Democrats (e.g., Mendes-France, Mitterand etc); secondly, to eliminate his Petty Bourgeois supporters of mainland France; and thirdly, to disband the Fascist junta of Alger and find a solution to the Algerian problem. He has succeeded exceedingly well in the first two; the third is proving very much more difficult, though he is 'gaining ground.

Reform of the Constitution

The Constitution of the Fourth Republic, prepared mainly by the Communists and Socialists during their brief coalition after the War, was one of the most democratic of republican constitutions. It provided for very reduced powers for the executive as compared with the legislature; long durations of parliamentary sessions; proportional representation, etc. But its very democratic character provided numerous loopholes through which the functioning of the Government could be obstructed by any determined minority either in the legislature or in the executive. These shortcomings were fully utilised by the enemies of the Constitution to discredit its working in the eyes of the Government.

A Constitution that permitted a quarter of the Assembly seats to be occupied by Communists and another tenth or so by Poujadists and such other extreme elements was highly inconvenient for the Big Bourgeoisie. The Assembly, instead of being its instrument, was substantially outside its control. Thanks to the negative block votes of the Communists and the Poujadists, any and every body could have a bargaining position. The tactics followed by the enemies of the regime were to systematically obstruct the working of the Assembly, engineer systematic disobedience by the executive (principally that of Alger) of the legislature, and simultaneously carry on powerful propaganda denouncing the inefficiency of the regime.

The alternative Constitution that de Gaulle proposed and which he got accepted by the nation through his highly successful 'Operation Referendum' is exactly what suits the needs of the Big Bourgeoisie. It retains an Assembly, so that the illusion of a republic is maintained. The Assembly has practically no power. Both executive and legislative powers are concentrated in a President who nominates the Ministry and the Ministers are obliged to be 'non-members' of the Assembly! The Government thus is almost entirely free of the controlling influence of the Assembly: it is a Government of technocrats and bureaucrats at the service of their employer. This technocratic and bureaucratic character of the de Gaulle and Debre Governments is no less conspicuous in the composition of their cabinets than is their domination by representatives of high finance. In both the Governments, a significant number of portfolios is held by men whose previous fields of experience are administration, diplomacy, banking and finance, etc.

Mendes-France's Criticism

Here is what Mendes-France has got to say about the Gaullist Constitution:

"The President of the Republic is a virtual monarch, though (the office is) non hereditary. What is his origin? The electoral college, which is going to elect him, is composed of between 75,000 and 80,000 electors from mainland France, Algeria, and the overseas territories of France. Now in this college the delegations of the small communes of less than 2,000 inhabitants from the French mainland alone, representing 16 million inhabitants, dispose of the majority. The remaining part of the French population, that is 60 per cent of it, plus the inhabitants of Algeria and the overseas French territories are put in a minority. Is this democracy? ...this President has almost sovereign powers! He can go—as has largely been discussed—upto the legal proclamation of dictatorship in terms of Article 16 of the proposal."

Referring to the assumption of even legislative powers over the most important sectors of the nation's life by the President, he adds:

"Finally, even in the domains left to the Assembly's competence, the President can violate the Assembly Suppose that he proposes an electoral law which the Assembly does not adopt. Government can declare that 'It acts on its responsibility'- funny way of speaking—for all that results from it is that the bill is adopted without even a vote if within three days the Assembly does not pass a no confidence motion with the absolute majority of all its members, which act naturally risks the House to being immediately dissolved."

Operation Referendum

As to the atmosphere in which the Operation Referendum was carried out Mendes-France has this to say:

"Never perhaps since the Second Empire has official pressure been developed to such a point. Never has a Government so ostensibly mobilised the district administrators to make them put pressure on electors. Never did the action of military chiefs influence thus their troops".

Soustelle had taken charge of radio and television, and they were used to full capacity in favour of de Gaulle. The entire Bourgeois press and the advertisers in cinemas, newspapers, etc. joined the campaign for 'yes'.

De Gaulle's genius consists chiefly in his capacity for ambiguity (thanks to which both Mauriac and Massu can consider themselves Gaullists); he made use of his gift to the full extent in winning his Operation Referendum. Of all the contradictory things which were bunched together in the same packet on which one had to pronounce Yes or No the most cynical combination was the duel interpretations of Yes and No for the people of the colonies: for them to say Yes meant not only that they approved of the Constitution but also that they wanted to stay in the French Union. To say No not only meant their rejection of the Consti-

Men and Oil . . . 7

The Welfare Officer

Most of the world's great oilfields lie under deserts, swamps and jungles, far away from established centres of civilisation. Near the wells and refineries live the geologists, drillers and technicians, and as operations expand so the oil camps grow into permanent settlements. In time, new towns are established, whose citizens are the thousands of people employed in the industry.

Oil companies are very much aware of their responsibility for the welfare of these new communities, and most oil towns are, for that reason, models of thoughtful planning and administration.

So it is in Digboi. Once just a clearing in the dense jungle, Digboi is now one of India's most modern industrial towns. The Assam Oil Company devotes great attention to the provision of health services, good housing and sanitation, schools and other amenities for its employees.

And this is where the Welfare Officer comes in. He is the link between the company and the community; the man who administers projects that make a fuller, happier life for everybody.

Just as the Assam Oil company recognises that it has a duty to serve the people of India, so, through its Welfare Officers, does it promote the happiness and benefit the lives of the men who make their living by oil.



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tution, but was also to signify their desire to be independent.

Operation Elections

The spectacular victory of de Gaulle, and the heavy loss of the Communists as well as of all democratic opponents of de Gaulle cannot of course be explained only by tricks and unfair means: they are expressions of deeper social malaise. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the loss of Communist support, however important it was, was after all to the extent of about 20 per cent. The fact that Communist representation in the Assembly has fallen to 10 in a house of 465 from 150 in a house of 544 has tended to create the impression that de Gaulle has managed to win away from the Communists all their supporters. But even today the Communists have greater electoral support than any other single party. If the rules of democracy were to be observed, it is the Communists and not the U N R who would have been called upon to form the Government. The accompanying table gives the voting figures and the composition of the Assembly between the elections of January 1956 and 1958. These are the true indices of the political success of de Gaulle.

Communists with 19 per cent of the votes have only 10 seats; the U N R with 17.6 per cent votes nineteen times as much. How did de Gaulle achieve this results? First by changing the electoral laws and secondly by changing the electoral map. If there were two contiguous districts in one of which Communists were strong and in the other weak, a suitable rearrangement of the boundaries was effected so as to reduce the Communist vote to a minority in each of them. Then the new system not only abolished the proportionality principle, it provided for a second round. Parties could prepare alliances in the light of the figures of the first round. Wherever there was a Communist candidate with the largest amount of electoral support, the other parties (Socialists included!) Irrespective of their ideologies, combined to put up a common candidate against him.

Economic Policy

Having assured its supremacy on the political plane, the new 'system' did not wait long to reveal its economic intentions. More than anything else, the series of steps taken

by de Gaulle's Government for the modernisation and rationalisation of the French economy reveal clearly the class character of the forces behind him. There has been first of all the budget for the year 1959; then there has been a devaluation of the franc, removal to a very large extent of restrictions on the convertibility of the franc, removal of part of the restrictions on imports; and finally, the entry into the first stage of the Common Market. There has been no attempt in France, either in official quarters or in the Press, to explain or examine what these measures mean for the common man. The French have been living beyond their means, the Press is saying; from now on they would have to live within their means. That means of course less of import, less of production (as French industries depend largely on imported raw materials), less of consumption and more unemployment. Devaluation raises the prices of imported raw materials and this alone is sufficient to shut down many a factory. Removal of tariff barriers is starting to flood the French market with German goods and that is a second blow to the relatively backward French industries.

But these two steps are not considered sufficient. Consumption has to be further curtailed by raising the indirect taxes and withdrawing subsidies. Commodities for which indirect taxes have been increased or from which subsidies have withdrawn include bread, milk, coal, gas, electricity, railway fares, stamps, telephones, cigarettes and wine. Also reduced are the allocations to the health services and other social security schemes. Investment in the public sector is increased, but so also is military expenditure. Education, the most scandalously neglected

head in the budgets of the Fourth Republic, the root cause of the decadence of scientific research in France, receives a worse treatment than ever.

Operation Rueff

Economic observers in France are straining their eyes to see how well the Operation Rueff is finally conquering the inflationary tendencies long persistent in the French economy. (Rueff is the economic expert behind Pinay's NEP—new economic policy; he has served many a master before; he advised Laval in 1935 in operating his deflationary policy and was a protege of Petain during the War.) In the mean time unemployment is spreading. Production has started to fall in certain sectors. The recession that is now slowly but surely spreading from one industry to the other is of course primarily a consequence of the American recession, but Pinay's policy has been not only not to take any anti-recession measures but to take anti-inflationary measures (the French recession being accompanied by an inflationary pressure). A moderate dose of unemployment, a clearing away of the undergrowth of uneconomic enterprises, are medicines the French Big Bourgeoisie has long been waiting to administer to the ailing French economy. Whatever doubts one may have about de Gaulle's class character from his policies in the field of politics proper, there cannot be any two interpretations of his role when an analysis is made of the economic policies announced and implemented immediately after his confirmation to power.

It is indeed true that from the point of view of the French economy as a whole, the results of the measures taken are going to be good.

	1956		1958	
	Votes (%)	Assembly seats (nos)	Votes (%)	Assembly seats (nos)
Communists	25.7	145	18.9	10
Socialists	14.8	88	15.5	40
Radicals and other Centrists	13.3	74	11.5	25
Gaullists				
(U N R in 1958, Social Republicans in 1956)	4.4	16	17.6	189
Catholics (M R P)	11.0	71	11.6	57
Independents	14.3	95	13.7	120
Extreme Right (including Poujadists)	13.1	52	3.3	1
Total		544		465

But what is good for the whole economy may not be good for all sections of the population—and there may be different ways of arriving at the same results. It is quite clear that the new economic policies are designed to modernize the economy, but exclusively for the benefit not even of the entire Big Bourgeoisie, but only that section of the Big Bourgeoisie which we have described before as the internationally competitive one.

Adenauer-de Gaulle Axis

There are two further evidences lending support to this interpretation. First the ominous sight of a developing axis between Adenauer and de Gaulle. While there are purely political factors behind this sinister alliance, there can be no doubt that there are also economic ones, and these are obviously the same as those that lie at the origin of the European Common Market. While the growing understanding between Germany and France indicates a developing interdependence between German capitalists and that sector of the French Big Bourgeoisie that is internationally competitive, it is not clear to what extent this is also a symptom of a European movement directed against Anglo-Saxon world domination.

There is of course no mystery about the intentions of the Common Market and the Franco-German axis with regard to the Sterling area. But in so far as the relations between the Continental Big Bourgeoisie and America are concerned, the picture is more complicated. If there is any economic domination in Europe, that is one of Dollar and not of Sterling; hence one would expect to see signs of anti-Americanism in the European movement. In fact however there are very few visible signs of it.

Sahara Oil Agreement

In this connection the agreement signed last January between Standard Oil and two French oil companies for the joint exploitation of the oil wealth of the Sahara is significant. As an analysis of the 'Express' shows, the French Government, in order to attract American capital, has offered terms which are more liberal than those offered by any Government anywhere else. The 'Code of Sahara Oil' lays down that only 36 per cent of the total net profit is to be paid to the Government as royalty, whereas everywhere else the royalty comes to

more than 50 per cent of net profit and is soon going to reach 60 per cent. As the 'Express' observes "only the Arabs of the Persian Gulf, twenty years back, at a time when they were still ignorant of accounting principles, consented to such advantageous conditions." The Standard Oil is the most powerful petroleum concern in the world. There is very little doubt that American attitude towards the problem of Algeria and French colonial policy in general is going to undergo a change. Whether apart from this obvious political motive, there is not also the factor of a certain fusion of interest of French and American Big Capital is a matter to be examined.

One cannot but be struck by the fact that the Government to make such drastic concessions to America as well as to implement the Common Market should be one with

Debre as Prime Minister and Soustelle as Deputy Prime Minister, two men who have been marked during the last few years for their venomous hatred of America and determined opposition to the Common Market. But is there not also the example of Pinay presiding over the contractionist economic policy of de Gaulle, the same good old Pinay who has always been known as the defender of the interests of the Petty Bourgeoisie? Soustelle, Debre and Pinay, it would seem are acting contrary to the standpoints long associated with them. We shall resist the temptation of drawing from this any moral about the Role of the Individual in History; but as will be shown in the concluding part of this article, even de Gaulle is not having his way everywhere. His role is also being determined by the balance of certain forces much beyond his control.