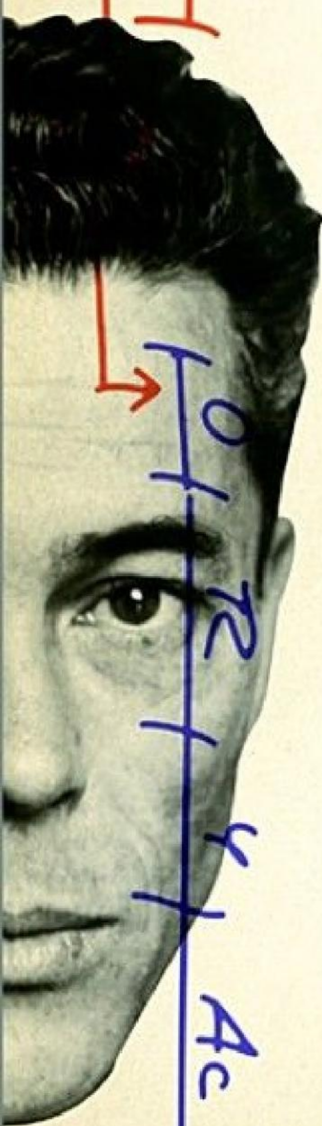

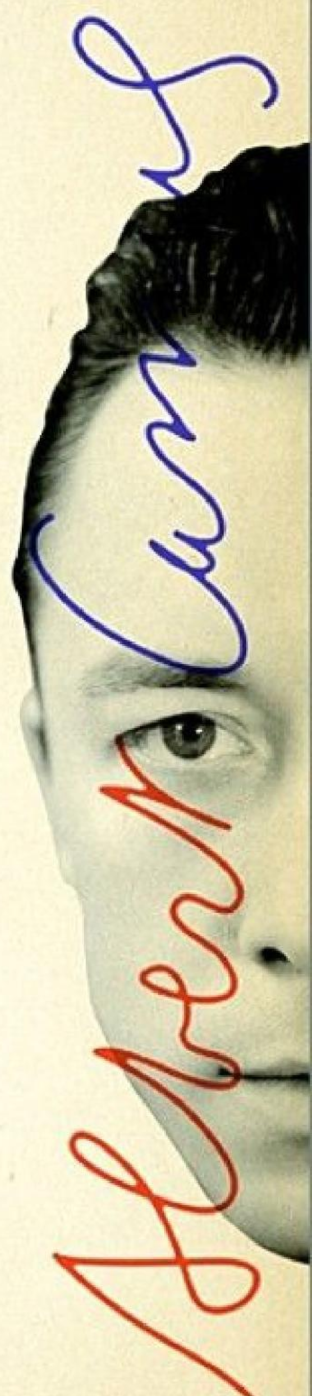

Brave Genius

A Scientist, a Philosopher, and Their Daring Adventures from the French Resistance to the Nobel Prize

Sean B. Carroll

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SEAN B. CARROLL

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PROLOGUE

CHANCE, NECESSITY, AND GENIUS

Genius is present in every age, but the men carrying it within them remain benumbed unless extraordinary events occur to heat up and melt the mass so that it flows forth.

—DENIS DIDEROT (1713–1784), "On Dramatic Poetry"

ON OCTOBER 16, 1957, ALBERT CAMUS WAS HAVING LUNCH AT Chez Marius in Paris's Latin Quarter when a young man approached the table and informed him that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The new laureate-to-be could not hide his anguish.

Sure, the Algerian-born French writer had been an international figure for more than a decade. He had earned great public admiration for his moral stands as well as for his novels, plays, and essays. But not yet forty-four years old, Camus was only the second youngest writer ever to receive the Nobel. He thought that the prize should honor a complete body of work, and he hoped that his was still unfinished. He dreaded that all of the fanfare surrounding the prize would distract him from his work. The demand for interviews and photographs, and the many party invitations that followed the announcement soon confirmed his fears.

Camus also worried that the prize would inspire even greater contempt on the part of his critics. Despite his public popularity, Camus had many foes on both the political right, to whom he was a dangerous radical, and the left, among them many former close comrades who had ostracized him

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for his clear-eyed, damning critiques of Soviet-style Communism. Both camps took the Nobel as proof that Camus's talent and influence had already peaked.

"One wonders whether Camus is not on the decline and if…the Swedish Academy was not consecrating a precocious sclerosis," wrote one scornful commentator.

After the demand for interviews subsided, he paused to reply to a few well wishers. One handwritten letter was to an old friend in Paris:

> *My dear Monod.*
>
> *I have put aside for a while the noise of these recent times in order to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your warm letter. The unexpected prize has left me with more doubt than certainty. At least I have friendship to help me face it. I, who feel solidarity with many men, feel friendship with only a few. You are one of these, my dear Monod, with a constancy and sincerity that I must tell you at least once. Our work, our busy lives separate us, but we are reunited again, in one same adventure. That does not prevent us to reunite, from time to time, at least for a drink of friendship! See you soon and fraternally yours.*
>
> *Albert Camus*

Camus knew well many of the literary and artistic luminaries of his time, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, George Orwell, André Malraux, and Pablo Picasso. But the recipient of Camus's heartfelt letter was not an artist. This one of his few constant and sincere friends was Jacques Monod, a biologist. And unlike so many other of Camus's associates, he was not famous, at least not yet. However, despite his pantheon of numerous, more illustrious colleagues, Camus claimed, "I have known only one true genius: Jacques Monod."

Eight years after Camus, that genius would make his own trip to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, along with his close colleagues François Jacob and

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André Lwoff.

Each of the four men's respective prizes recognized exceptional creativity, but they also marked triumphs over great odds. The adventure to which Camus referred in his letter began many years earlier, in a very dark and dangerous time. So dangerous, in fact, that the chances each of these men would have even lived to see those latter days, let alone to ascend to such heights, were remote.

This is the story of that adventure. It is a story of the transformation of ordinary lives into exceptional lives by extraordinary events—of courage in the face of overwhelming adversity, the flowering of creative genius, deep friendship, and of profound concern for and insight into the human condition.

Chance and Necessity

Several years after he won the Nobel Prize, Jacques Monod wrote a popular, philosophical perspective on the significance of modern biology for understanding humankind's place in the universe. The title he chose, *Chance and Necessity*, was taken from Democritus's dictum "Everything in the universe is the fruit of chance and of necessity." It would have been an equally apt title for Monod's autobiography, or that of any of the other three laureates. The paths their lives took, and the twists that brought them together as comrades, friends, and collaborators, were very much a product of the circumstances imposed upon them and the responses those compelled—of chance and necessity.

Many years before the honors they received in Stockholm, in the spring of 1940, the four men were living in Paris, quietly pursuing separate, ordinary lives. Camus was an aspiring but unknown twenty-six-year-old writer, working as a layout designer for the newspaper *Paris-Soir* to make ends meet while toiling on a novel in his spare time. Jacques Monod was an underachieving and, at age thirty, relatively

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old doctoral student in zoology at the Sorbonne. François Jacob was a nineteen-year-old second-year medical student intent on becoming a surgeon. Thirty-eight-year-old André Lwoff was the only established professional among the four; he directed the department of microbial physiology at the Pasteur Institute.

Then, in May 1940, catastrophe struck.

The German Army invaded and quickly overwhelmed France, plunging the country into chaos. This stunning event was the perverse catalyst that, as Diderot prescribed, allowed their genius to flow forth, that set the men on new paths to future greatness and into one another's lives.

Knowing of the merciless destruction wreaked upon Poland by the same army the previous fall, millions of French citizens fled the approaching Germans. Jacob was horrified at the sudden disintegration of the country but determined to carry on the fight against Hitler wherever he could. He made the agonizing decision to leave his family and France, and boarded one of the last available boats to England. There, he joined the Free French forces. He would not see his family or step foot on French soil for four years. The next time he saw Paris, it was from the stretcher of an ambulance, encased in a body cast, recovering from near-fatal wounds. The Stuka's bomb that ended his career as a surgeon was the beginning of his eventual path into science.

Monod, Camus, and Lwoff remained in France, bearing witness to the progressively harsher life under Nazi occupation. Over the next four years, occupation evolved into oppression and enslavement, accompanied by torture, deportations, and mass murder. Each man was inspired to join the Resistance against the Germans and to contribute whatever talents were useful.

For Camus, tubercular and not fit for physical action, that meant working for the underground Resistance newspaper *Combat*. During the Occupation, Camus had managed to publish his novel *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*, 1942), along with a book-length essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942), and had even completed two plays. He was

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becoming known in literary circles around Paris. But the need for secrecy and anonymity in the Resistance was such that he could not reveal his identity to his comrades. Introduced under an assumed name, he simply offered his previous newspaper experience to the group. Camus began by helping select and edit articles and prepare the layout of the paper. Later, he took over as editor. Camus's voice, which in peacetime might have been limited only to the salon or the theater, found a much grander stage at the pivotal turn of the war. In his inspiring, albeit anonymous, essays and editorials, Camus exhorted *Combat* readers to take action against the German occupiers and their French collaborators: "Frenchmen, the French Resistance is issuing the only appeal you need to hear…Anyone who isn't with us is against us. From this moment on there are only two parties in France: the France that has always been and those who shall soon be annihilated for having attempted to annihilate it."

After being involved in the dissemination of some underground newspapers, Jacques Monod sought more direct action against the Germans. After getting his Jewish wife settled under a false identity outside of Paris, he joined the best-armed and most militant resistants, the Communist Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP). He emerged as a highly capable officer and rose to become a high-ranking member of the general staff of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), the organization that coordinated Resistance activities in the latter stage of the Occupation. Monod organized the gathering of weapons and ammunition, planned sabotage that disrupted troop movements and supplies, and helped coordinate the civilian uprisings in Paris as the Allied forces approached.

It was nerve-wracking work with deadly stakes. The threat of discovery and arrest by the Gestapo was ever-present. Capture meant either deportation to a concentration camp or execution. Several of Monod's comrades and superiors in the Resistance were arrested, deported, or shot. Monod had to go completely underground, wear a disguise, and hide out—in Lwoff's laboratory in the attic of the Pasteur Institute. Lwoff

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also participated in the Resistance: in his Paris apartment, he sheltered Allied airmen who had been shot down so that underground networks could smuggle them out of the country.

Many of Camus's associates were exposed. *Combat*'s printer shot himself in order not to be taken alive and to risk divulging the names of other resistants. One of the few members who knew Camus's real identity was arrested on a day she was to meet with him, and was deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Camus himself was questioned by the police while carrying the layout for an issue of *Combat*. They did not find the layout, and Camus was released.

Such risks of participating in the Resistance were necessary, as Camus argued so compellingly in *Combat*. For individuals, to join was to acknowledge that the ongoing fight concerned every citizen. In taking action one person could inspire others and, Camus suggested, "at least share in the peace at heart that the best of us take with them into the prisons." Courage and sacrifice in the face of extreme danger were the only available remedies for the humiliation of military defeat and, perhaps more important, for expunging the shame felt over those French who collaborated with the Germans and heaped suffering and death upon their fellow citizens.

Resistance was also a matter of strategic importance to the Allied military effort. Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower credited the FFI with greatly accelerating the advance of the Allied forces after their landings in Normandy and on the Riviera, speeding the liberation of the country, and reducing Allied losses. Eisenhower estimated the effect of the Resistance to that of fifteen divisions (approximately 150,000 regular army troops). Their losses were certainly significant: some 24,000 resistants were killed in the battles for France.

Regardless of its exact quantitative effect, the effect of the Resistance on repairing the French psyche was enormous. On the eve of Paris's liberation, Camus declared: "Four years

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ago, a few men rose up amid the ruins and despair and quietly proclaimed that nothing was yet lost. They said that the war must go on and that the forces of good could always triumph over the forces of evil provided the price was paid. They paid that price."

Only after the liberation of Paris did his readers learn who had actually composed such moving passages in the middle of the battle, and they loved him for it.

For his part, Camus had learned just how much words matter. He later admitted, "To risk one's life, however little, to have an article printed is a way of learning the real weight of words."

Secrets of Life

After the war, each man returned to his livelihood or, in Jacob's case, forged a new one. Like many others for whom normal life had paused during the war, and whose experiences had imparted a profound appreciation of the fragility of life and freedom, they were each imbued with a much greater sense of urgency and purpose.

Camus focused much of his writing on the moral and political renewal of the French nation. From the moment of the liberation of Paris, *Combat* enjoyed a unique prestige. The newspaper would sell out as soon as it was published. In what Claude Bourdet, a leader of *Combat*, described as one of "those accidents which condition the life of individuals, if not societies," Camus had a perfect national pulpit from which to voice his concerns and ideas. In scores of articles, Camus urged that France be rebuilt upon basic principles of equality, individual freedom, and social justice. His editorials were often the talk of Paris.

Readers also had the opportunity to discover the literary and philosophical works that Camus had written and managed to publish during the war. The terror and cruelty of the Occupation, the slaughter of tens of millions in the war (the second such war in a generation), and the horrors of the

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Holocaust that were coming to light had made many despair and abandon any hope for the future of humanity. Denial of any meaning or purpose in life—nihilism—was a widespread response.

But Camus vehemently rejected nihilism and took an entirely different path. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus addressed what he contended was the fundamental issue of philosophy—"judging whether life is or is not worth living." To Camus, the crux of the matter of life was the certainty of death. The practical question that certainty prompted was: How could one live a meaningful life in full knowledge of the inevitability of death?

Camus asserted that by recognizing the reality of the physical limits of one's life, one attained the clarity and freedom to make the most of life as it is. He reasoned that the logical response to the certainty of death was a revolt against death—a revolt that took the form of living life passionately and to the fullest: "Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum."

Camus's recipe for living life to the fullest was to do nothing in hope of an afterlife, and to rely on courage and reasoning: "The first teaches him to live without appeal [to religion] and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom…and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime."

For Camus, even Sisyphus—condemned as he was to rolling his rock uphill each day, only to have it roll back down and to begin again—was master of his own fate. Sisyphus created meaning in his own life by deciding that "the struggle towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." Camus concluded the essay, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

His reasoned optimism, born as it was in the middle of the Occupation and war, struck a chord with readers recovering from the tragedies of World War II. Camus once wrote, "In the depths of winter, I discovered that there lay within me an

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invincible summer." Readers in France, and then as his works were translated, millions more readers around the world, responded to that invincible summer. Camus offered a practical philosophy for living without succumbing to nihilism or appealing to religion. In the aftermath of the great calamity, Camus offered the masses a picture of a brighter future for France and the world, an alternative to the cycle of war that had darkened a half century, and that threatened to continue. He offered a choice, as he put it, "between hell and reason."

His influence was widespread and profound. One *Combat* comrade stated, "Camus taught me reasons for living." François Jacob later described his pursuit of scientific research in the most Camusian terms, as "the most elevating form of revolt against the incoherence of the universe." The author and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who was a close friend for many years, described Camus as "an admirable conjunction of a person, an action, and a work."

As Camus expounded the philosophical reasons for living, Monod and Lwoff were exploring the biological secrets of life. They were joined by Jacob in 1950.

In the early 1940s, the mysteries of life were vast. Little was known, for instance, of how cells operated. At the time, physics and chemistry were the dominant sciences. While it was certain that organisms were composed of molecules, the identity of the molecules that endowed cells with the properties of life were completely unknown.

In 1944, the famous physicist and Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger wrote a very influential, short book entitled *What Is Life?* that examined life from a physicist's perspective. At the time of his writing, the concept of the gene was well established, but no one knew what genes were made of. Schrödinger's account of the mysteries of the matter underlying living organisms inspired many young scientists to enter biology, not the least of whom were James D. Watson and Francis Crick, who solved the structure of DNA a

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decade later.

It was a time for simple but fundamental questions. Monod pursued the mystery of how cells grow. He rediscovered a phenomenon in which bacteria, when given two sugars as sources of energy, used one first and then the second. Monod was asking a simple question: How did the bacteria "know" which sugar to use?

Lwoff was interested in viruses that lay dormant within bacteria. He discovered that under certain conditions these latent viruses could, in effect, come back to life. When Jacob joined the research group, they asked another question: How did the virus "know" when to become active?

The pursuit of these two apparently unrelated simple questions began in cramped and spartan laboratories in the attic of the Pasteur Institute, and led to one of the most creative, original, and influential bodies of work in modern biology. Monod and Jacob, in particular, discovered several of the major secrets of life (after DNA). Foremost among them were the first understanding of how genes are switched on and off as cells grow, and the discovery of messenger RNA, the molecule that serves as the intermediate (hence "messenger") between genes in DNA and the proteins they encode. Monod and Jacob's insights were far ahead of their time. Biologists barely had a foggy picture of what a gene was when Monod and Jacob delivered an exquisite synthesis of the general *logic* governing how genes were used. Walter Gilbert, who shared the 1980 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, described the two Frenchmen as having "made things that were utterly dark, very simple."

Their discoveries were certainly deserving of the Nobel Prize, but Monod and Jacob also displayed an extraordinary creative style that was often described in such literary terms as "taste" and "elegance." Their exceptional eloquence was coupled with bold extrapolation. The two scientists anticipated and explained the broader implications of their work for understanding one of the greatest mysteries of biology—the development of a complex creature from a single fertilized egg. It would take several decades for

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biologists to penetrate that mystery in depth, but Monod and Jacob provided the conceptual foundations of that effort. And their scientific impact reverberated beyond academia, for their discoveries about the inner workings of bacteria and viruses provided key tools for the birth and growth of recombinant DNA technology and genetic engineering.

Rebels

Such achievements would be admirable legacies for any scientist, but these men's concerns and talents reached far beyond the laboratory. For the former resistant Monod, the battle against totalitarian regimes was not over when the war against Nazism was won. Monod's next major clash brought him into the orbit of and friendship with Albert Camus.

Soon after the end of World War II, a new war emerged—of ideologies. It was a war between capitalism and socialism, between democracy and Communism, and the beginning of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In France, those along the entire spectrum of political ideologies from the far left to the far right vied for power and influence. The Communist Party enjoyed strong support, particularly among the intelligentsia and workers, many of whom looked to the Soviet Union as a model of where socialism in France should be heading.

During the war, Monod had joined the Communist Party as a matter of expediency, so that he could join the FTP. But he developed reservations about the Communists' intolerance of other political views and quietly quit the Party after the war, at a time when many fellow citizens were joining. That might have been the end of Monod's involvement with Communism, were it not for bizarre developments in the sphere of Soviet science.

In the summer of 1948, Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, Joseph Stalin's anointed czar of Soviet agriculture, launched a broad attack on the science of genetics. Lysenko believed that virtually any modification could be made rapidly and

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permanently to any plant or animal and passed on to its offspring. His belief, while consistent with Soviet doctrine that nature and man could be shaped in any way and were unconstrained by history or heredity, flew in the face of the principles of genetics that had been established over the previous fifty years. Nevertheless, Lysenko demanded that classical genetics, and its supporters, be purged from Soviet biology.

Lysenko's outrageous statements were heralded in Communist-run newspapers in France. Monod responded with a devastating critique that ran on the front page of *Combat*. Monod exposed Lysenko's stance on genetics as antiscientific dogma and decried Lysenko's power as a demonstration of "ideological terrorism" in the Soviet Union.

The public scrutiny damaged the credibility of Soviet socialism in France. The episode thrust Monod into the public eye and made him resolve to "make his life's goal a crusade against antiscientific, religious metaphysics, whether it be from Church or State."

AT THE TIME of Monod's editorial in *Combat*, Albert Camus was having similar thoughts about the evils of the Soviet regime with its show trials and labor camps, thoughts that would eventually be articulated in his book-length essay *The Rebel* (1951).

Monod and Camus were introduced at the meeting of a human-rights group and hit it off immediately. Their attraction to each other was deep. Although the two men had nothing in common in terms of their upbringing or professions, they were kindred spirits. Francis Crick described Monod in terms that applied equally well to his new friend Camus: "Never lacking in courage, he combined a debonair manner and an impish sense of humour with a deep moral commitment to any issue he regarded as fundamental." In addition to the special bond of former resistants, Monod and Camus discovered they shared many similar concerns. Over the course of their friendship, those concerns would

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encompass a broad spectrum of humanitarian issues, including the state of affairs in the USSR, human rights in Eastern bloc countries, and capital punishment in France.

Monod gave Camus further ammunition for his indictment of the Soviet Union, an indictment that terminated many of Camus's friendships with left-wing peers. Camus gave Monod access to his world of literature and philosophy.

Monod, too, was a conjunction of work and action. While Camus wrote "The Blood of the Hungarians" (1957) to arouse the world's conscience about the Soviets' crushing of the Hungarian revolution, Monod used his clandestine experience from the days of the Resistance to organize the escape of Hungarian scientists. As Monod's fame grew from his scientific achievements, he used his standing to advance many causes, including reproductive and human rights, and he was a prominent figure in the May 1968 unrest that nearly toppled the French government.

Camus had a profound influence on Monod and the philosophical ideas the biologist pursued in later years. After receiving his Nobel Prize, Monod turned to consider the implications of the discoveries of modern biology—how the answers to Schrödinger's question "What is life?" bore on the question of the meaning of life. He explained his impulse in Camusian terms: "The urge, the anguish to understand the meaning of his own existence, the demand to rationalize and justify it within some consistent framework has been, and still is, one of the most powerful motivations of the human mind." The opening epigraph of Monod's resulting, widely acclaimed, bestselling book, *Chance and Necessity*, was the closing passage from his friend's *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

THIS BOOK TELLS the story of how each man endured the most terrible episode of the twentieth century and then blossomed into an extraordinarily creative and engaged individual. It is divided accordingly—the first half is the story of how the world shaped these men, and the second half is about how

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they shaped the world. The dividing line is the liberation of Paris, for the preceding war and occupation were the crucible in which their characters were tested, and from which they subsequently rose to such brilliance.

Their close associates also possessed great courage and risked their lives for freedom. Two such heroines, Geneviève Noufflard and Agnes Ullmann, have allowed their extraordinary stories to be told here largely for the first time. Indeed, this book was made possible by the discovery of and access to a great deal of previously unknown and unpublished material: letters and other exchanges between Monod and Camus, as well as eyewitness accounts of their decade-long friendship; Paris police files on Monod's initial activity in the Resistance; an unpublished wartime memoir by Noufflard, Monod's secretary in the Resistance, and original documents concerning their participation in historic events; a trove of private letters by Monod and his wife, Odette, and other family members; and a large cache of documents detailing Monod's efforts in arranging Ullmann's daring escape from Hungary.

What emerged from the many threads of Monod's and Camus's respective journeys was one story in common, the elements of which define four major episodes in their lives and form the four main sections of this book. These elements are the sudden and shocking fall of France (Part I—"The Fall"); the actions they took to fight back against the Nazis (Part II—"The Long Road to Freedom"); their initial explorations of the questions that would dominate their creative work (Part III—"Secrets of Life"); and the peak of their creative achievements and widening involvement in human affairs (Part IV—"Nobel Thoughts and Noble Deeds").

The Epilogue ("French Lessons") examines how, after Camus's death, Monod assumed part of his friend's mantle through his public commitments and writing. Both men were deeply engaged with timeless questions about finding meaningful experiences in life. They were forced to ask, by virtue of the experiences into which they were plunged, the most fundamental questions of all: What is worth dying for?

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And what is worth living for? Once free, they were compelled to ask: What is worth spending one’s life pursuing? World War II, the Occupation, the Cold War, and the Hungarian Revolution belong to the past, but nothing has changed about the fundamental human yearning for meaning, and nothing has changed that alters the validity of their approaches. Monod argued that science had shattered traditional concepts of our purpose and place in the world. That being so, the choice remains of how to find meaning in a scientifically enlightened world.

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Part One

The Fall

All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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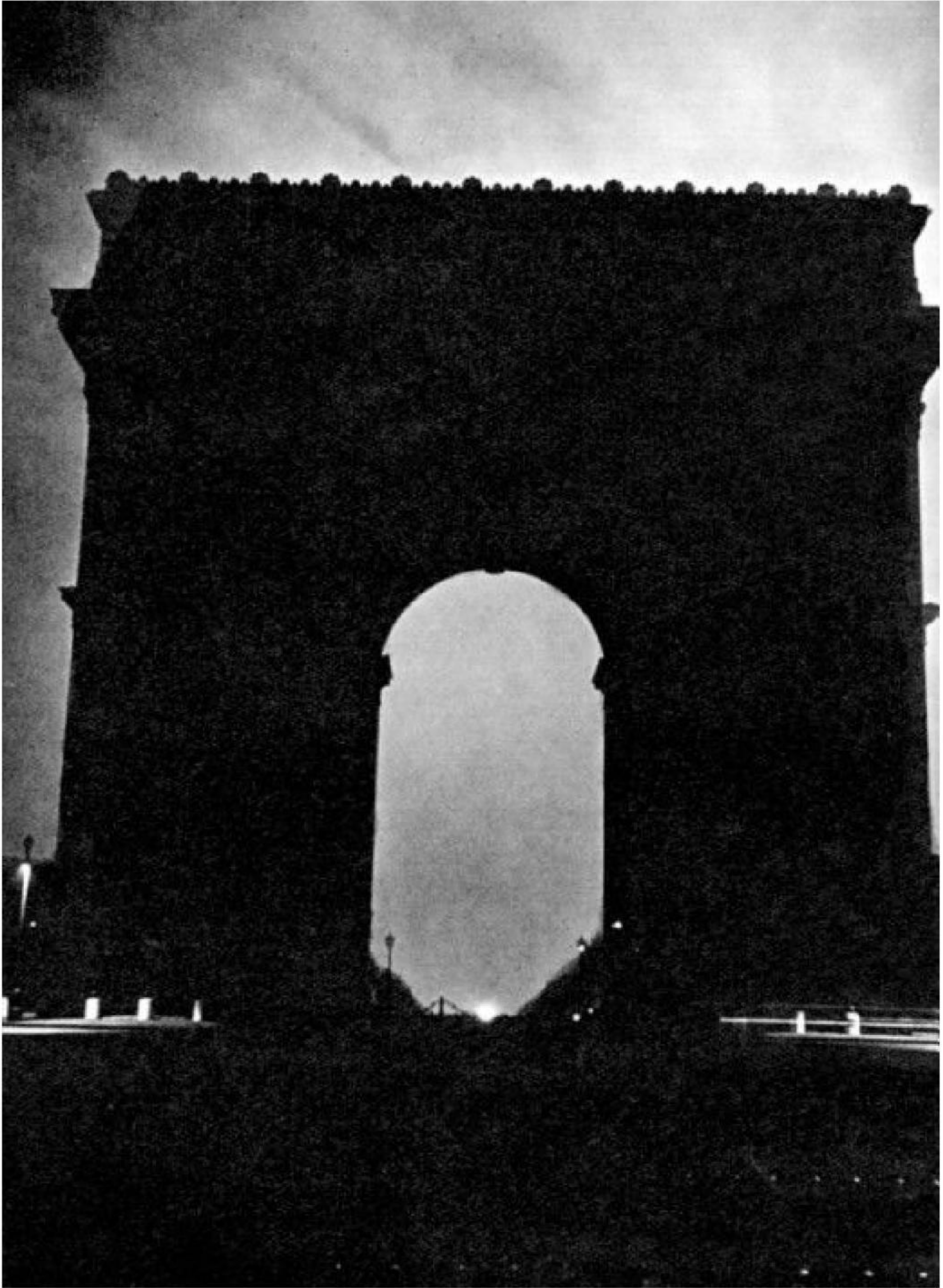

The Arc de Triomphe in the blackout, Paris 1940. (Photo by Brassai, *Lilliput* magazine, June 1940)

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CHAPTER 1

CITY OF LIGHT

An artist…has no home in Europe except in Paris.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Ecce Homo*

PARIS SLIPPED VERY QUIETLY INTO THE NEW YEAR OF 1940.

It was not the fresh blanket of snow, though one of the heaviest in fifty years, that muted the typically boisterous celebration of Le Réveillon de la Saint-Sylvestre. Nor was it the unusually cold spell that plunged Paris and much of France to well below freezing temperatures that night.

La Ville-Lumière (the City of Light) was dark and anxious. It had been so for four months.

On September 3, 1939, two days after Germany's invasion of Poland, France and her ally Great Britain had declared war. Blackouts were imposed across Paris to obscure potential targets from aerial bombing. The lights of the monuments and museums—the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and the Arc de Triomphe—were extinguished, the street lights along the grand boulevards and squares were veiled with a blue paint, as were automobile headlights, bicycle lights, and even handheld flashlights. Their blue beams cast an eerie, dim hue over the snow-covered city.

The cafés, clubs, cabarets, and restaurants were open on New Year's Eve, but their outside lights were off. Their windows and doors were covered to block the light from inside. The authorities extended closing time on this special occasion by three hours past the new wartime curfew, to two

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o'clock in the morning.

For more than two centuries, since the time of Les Lumières (the Enlightenment), when Voltaire and Diderot rethought civilization over coffee at Le Procope in the Latin Quarter, those cafés had drawn philosophers and revolutionaries from all over the world, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. For the previous two decades, since the last war with Germany, the cafés and clubs of Paris had beckoned a remarkable generation of writers, artists, and musicians who made the city the artistic and intellectual center of Europe, if not the world.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Paris literary scene drew the likes of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, and Samuel Beckett. Ernest Hemingway often installed himself at his favorite café, La Closerie des Lilas, in its garden of lilac trees, with notebooks, pencils, and pencil sharpener at hand. He composed some of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, sitting at its marble-topped tables.

Every form of art flourished in the Montparnasse area. Salvador Dalí came to Paris from Spain and was the principal figure of the surrealists, while Russian-born Marc Chagall was a pioneer of modernism. Spanish cubist Pablo Picasso lived and worked at various times in Montmartre and Montparnasse and then settled on the rue de la Boétie, not far from the Champs-Élysées. The prolific painter was represented by Paul Rosenberg, whose well-known gallery was next door to Picasso's studio. Rosenberg would help make Picasso famous, selling his works alongside those by Monet, Degas, Matisse, van Gogh, Renoir, and Cézanne.

The music scene also thrived. Josephine Baker, Cole Porter, Coleman Hawkins, and Benny Carter came from the United States. In 1934, Belgian-born Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, Parisian violinist Stéphane Grappelli, and three others formed the sensational Quintette du Hot Club de France, the most original and influential European jazz group of the era. Native legends Edith Piaf and Maurice Chevalier were immensely popular.

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Paris's creative life was not exclusively the domain of artists. Science prospered as well. In 1939, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, a leading researcher on the splitting of the uranium atom, had his laboratory at the Collège de France in the Latin Quarter. Joliot-Curie, who shared the 1935 Nobel Prize in Chemistry with his wife, Irène (daughter of Nobel laureates Pierre and Marie Curie), recognized the possibility of producing a chain reaction that would liberate massive amounts of energy. Joliot-Curie was one of the key scientists Albert Einstein cited in an August 1939 letter to President Roosevelt alerting him to the discoveries in physics that could possibly lead to the making of "extremely powerful bombs of a new type."

Fewer than two miles from the Collège de France was the crown jewel of French biology and one of the premier research institutions in the world—the Pasteur Institute. The institute was extending the many frontiers opened or advanced by Louis Pasteur (1822–1895). The primary catalyst to its formation was Pasteur's pioneering efforts in developing vaccines. It was founded specifically to treat rabies. On July 6, 1885, a nine-year-old boy named Joseph Meister was brought to Pasteur's laboratory by his desperate mother. A rabid dog had bitten Joseph fourteen times. The severe bites would surely be fatal, so Pasteur decided to try to treat Joseph with an experimental rabies vaccine that, up to that point, had only been tested on dogs. After thirteen injections over the course of eleven days, miraculously the boy survived.

After news of Meister's case spread, several children from Newark, New Jersey, were sent to Pasteur and also treated successfully with the new vaccine. The resulting acclaim led to an international fund-raising effort to establish an institute, initially under Pasteur's direction, that enabled thousands to be treated. Pasteur recruited other scientists with a similar, almost monastic, devotion to science. They would come to refer to themselves as "Pastorians." This tribe of Pasteur's associates and protégés led the world in understanding, preventing, and treating infectious diseases

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such as diphtheria, malaria, yellow fever, bubonic plague, typhus, and tuberculosis, and garnered four Nobel Prizes in Medicine or Physiology in just the first few decades after the initiation of the Prize. Those whose lives were touched, or saved, by Pasteur felt deep gratitude. Almost fifty-five years after being the first person treated, sixty-three-year-old Joseph Meister was working as a caretaker of the Institute.

When war was declared, the populace was placed immediately on high alert. Gas masks were issued and air-raid sirens sounded frequently. Thousands of children were moved out of the capital and into the countryside, as were most of Paris's most treasured works of art. Over the next four months, the Louvre was almost completely emptied. More than two hundred truckloads of paintings and sculptures, including the *Mona Lisa* and the *Venus de Milo*, were crated and shipped from the museum and stored in chateaux for safekeeping.

The threat of war prompted some artists and performers to leave the city or France altogether, but not Maurice Chevalier. In late 1939, he recorded *"Paris sera toujours Paris"* (Paris will always be Paris), a love song to his hometown that captured her new look under the blackouts and was a boost to her defiant, resilient spirit:

Par précaution on a beau mettre
Des croisillons à nos fenêtres
Passer au bleu nos devantures
Et jusqu'aux pneus de nos voitures
Désentoiler tous nos musées
Chambouler les Champs-Élysées
Emmailloter de terre battue
Toutes les beautés de nos statues
Voiler le soir les réverbères
Plonger dans le noir la ville lumière

Even if one puts for precaution

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Latticework on our windows
Blue on our storefronts
And up to the tires of our cars
Removes the paintings from our Museums
Turns the Champs-Élysées upside down
Swaths the beauty of our statues in clay
Veils the streetlamps in the evening
Plunges the city of light into darkness

Paris sera toujours Paris,
La plus belle ville du monde,
Malgré l'obscurité profonde,
Son éclat ne pert être assombri

Paris will always be Paris,
The most beautiful city in the world,
Despite the profound darkness,
Her luster cannot be dimmed

WITH THE EXPERIENCE of World War I, during which France lost 1.4 million lives, still fresh in their memories, political and military leaders and civilians alike had been hoping there would not be another war. But Hitler's actions over the previous two years had convinced many of the likelihood, and some even the necessity, of battle with Germany. Nonetheless, even after the war declarations, there was still some glimmer of hope that an all-out conflict could be averted. Indeed, France and Britain had retreated from the very brink of clashing with Germany just one year earlier, in September 1938.

The path toward war began with Hitler flouting the terms of the 1918 armistice by rebuilding Germany's armed forces, and then expanding the Reich's territory through a series of military threats and political maneuvers. The Führer's moves

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were guided by his perception of the will, or lack thereof, of France and Britain to oppose him. He assumed that both nations wanted to avoid another bloody conflict at almost any price, even if that meant ceding the control of much of central and eastern Europe to Germany. Hitler tested the Allies' resolve at every turn.

In March 1938, Austria was intimidated by the specter of an armed invasion and manipulated politically into accepting annexation by Germany. France and Britain made no significant objections or gestures. Encouraged by his swift, bloodless takeover, and the Allies' reticence, Hitler then set his sights on Czechoslovakia, which would push all of Europe to the brink.

Hitler's aims were to absorb the Sudetenland and to conquer what remained of Czechoslovakia. How to do so without arousing France, which was bound by treaty to come to Czechoslovakia's aid if it were attacked, and Britain, which was committed to aid France if she were attacked, was a tricky proposition. But Hitler assumed that neither France nor Britain would risk a European war over Czechoslovakia, so he plotted a takeover.

After months of military, political, and diplomatic maneuvering, the situation reached a crisis in September 1938. With Hitler threatening an invasion of Czechoslovakia that would trigger their obligations, Britain and France sought some resolution that would appease Hitler and relieve them of their respective commitments. The balance of considerations was delicate. On the one hand, Britain and France could not appear too reluctant for war, or the Führer would take that as a sign of weakness to be exploited. On the other hand, they could not take too aggressive a stance, as that might provoke the belligerent dictator into a war that might escalate quickly, with unknowable consequences. There was also the matter of honor, a commitment to an ally that, if broken, would undermine the reliability of all commitments and the security of the Continent. And finally, there was public opinion, which shifted unpredictably as events unfolded. Governments that ignored this last variable

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did so at great risk to their longevity.

Britain's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, initiated face-to-face negotiations with Hitler on September 15, 1938. It soon became clear to Chamberlain that the price of peace would be Czechoslovakia, or at least the Sudetenland. France's premier, Édouard Daladier, supported Chamberlain's efforts to avoid war. Chamberlain and Daladier pressured the Czech leadership to concede to Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland in order to keep the peace. The Czechs rejected the demands. France then upped the pressure by asserting that in rejecting their proposal, Czechoslovakia assumed responsibility for military action by Germany, and informed the Czech government that France would now not act if Germany invaded. The Czech government was cornered and had no choice but to bow to the demands; it could not resist Germany on its own.

Chamberlain brought the Czech concession back to Hitler on September 22. Although only a week had passed, Hitler now rejected the Czechs' capitulation as insufficient and increased his demands, which included the immediate military occupation of the Sudetenland. Chamberlain was surprised and exasperated at the Führer's change in posture and returned to London crestfallen. His cabinet rejected Hitler's new demands, as did the French and the Czechs.

In the meantime, the Czechs mobilized their armed forces and the French followed suit. The white posters plastered all over France on the morning of September 24 announced the immediate call-up of nearly a million men. French armed divisions were moved to the border with Germany.

To the general populations of all countries involved, war now appeared inevitable and imminent.

Daladier conferred with Chamberlain in London, who decided to attempt one last diplomatic effort to dissuade Hitler. Britain and France made an about-face from their previous abandonment of the Czechs a week earlier and informed Hitler on September 27 that they would stand by Czechoslovakia if Germany attacked.

Hitler was apoplectic. He replied by vowing to destroy

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Czechoslovakia and to be at war with France and Britain within a week.

But, aware that the Czechs and French were mobilizing, that their combined armies were double that of the German forces, and that Britain was also readying for battle, Hitler shortly reconsidered. He wrote to Chamberlain that he was now prepared to "give a formal guarantee for the remainder of Czechoslovakia."

Chamberlain seized on the reopening of dialogue. While the citizens of each country braced for war, with many fleeing the cities via traffic-choked roads, a last-ditch campaign unfolded. Chamberlain proposed a conference to Hitler, and asked Italian prime minister Benito Mussolini to do the same. Mussolini complied; Hitler agreed and proceeded to invite Chamberlain, Daladier, and Mussolini to a summit of the four powers in Munich (the Czechs were not invited).

At the news of the invitation, Britain's war-anxious House of Commons erupted with cheers. Paris was equally relieved and hopeful. The heads of state went to Munich determined to secure the peace—the price of which was Czechoslovakia, which was to be partitioned along lines that would satisfy the Führer. The four powers promptly signed the accords on September 30. The Czechs were left with no option; as their official communiqué stated, they had been "abandoned."

Chamberlain and Daladier were greeted at home by cheering throngs. Daladier addressed the nation: "I return with the profound conviction that this accord is indispensable to the peace of Europe. We achieved it thanks to a spirit of mutual concessions and a close collaboration."

The Paris newspapers gushed with praise and relief. Former premier Léon Blum said in *Le Populaire:* "There is not a woman or man in France who would refuse MM. Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier their just tribute of gratitude. War is spared us. The calamity recedes. Life can become natural again. One can resume one's work and sleep again. One can enjoy the beauty of an autumn sun."

Privately, however, Daladier had learned the lessons of

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dealing with Herr Hitler. "We can never deal with Germany except with force," he told two of his generals just days after the Munich pact.

When Daladier became premier, he maintained his position as minister of war and national defense. Shortly after the Munich pact, he committed 40 billion francs, nearly 85 percent of France's tax revenue for 1939, to rearmament, as well as an additional 2.5 billion francs in a secret deal to acquire one thousand aircraft from the United States.

Daladier's mistrust of Hitler was validated in March 1939 when the Führer, mocking the assurances given in Munich just six months earlier, engineered a full Nazi takeover of what remained of Czechoslovakia. Britain and France could merely protest what was an overnight fait accompli. Poland was then surrounded on three sides by the Reich, and surely would be its next quarry.

Daladier told his cabinet: "There is nothing more to do than prepare for war." In order to increase the standing army, he increased the length of service for military reservists. With respect to future spending, he insisted to a cabinet committee, "We should not devote a single dollar of our reserves to nonmilitary purposes. It is indeed necessary to go further: the dollars and gold of which we dispose should be devoted entirely to the purchase of airplanes in the United States…With that sum, we will be able to create a powerful air fleet, thanks to which we will crush the Ruhr [an industrial center in Germany] under a deluge of fire, which will lead Germany to capitulate…it is the only means of finishing the war. I do not see another."

The time for appeasement had passed. The military leadership prepared war plans. By July 1939, Gen. Maxime Weygand claimed that, due to the rearmament initiatives, France had the best-equipped army in the world and that there was no doubt of victory. The general's confidence was bolstered by the facts that the French Army, which had reached more than 2.4 million men by late August 1939, was comparable in size to the German Army, and that the French held an advantage in the number and quality of tanks. With

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the additional security of the heavy fortifications of the Maginot Line, which ran the length of the French-German border, the French leadership firmly believed that it would be folly for Germany to attack, but if they did so, together with the help of France's Allies (mainly Britain), Germany would be defeated, as in the previous war.

Public opinion had also shifted as Hitler's territorial thirst appeared ever more insatiable. France and Britain had commitments to aid Poland if it was attacked, and by late August Poland was clearly in Hitler's gun sights. This time, however, last-minute diplomatic heroics similar to those during the Czech crisis of the previous year failed. Hitler gave the order to attack, and on the morning of September 1, the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe began to pummel Poland.

Daladier ordered a general mobilization on September 2.

While split along many political and ideological lines before September, the diverse press quickly adopted the same themes. *L'Intransigeant* said, "War has been imposed on France and she has no other choice but to fight; France and her Allies are fighting a Nazi-created religion of hatred, brutality, and lies."

In *Le Populaire*, former prime minister Léon Blum wrote, "The Nazis have compelled the most peaceful of nations to go to war for the defense of her liberty, existence, and honor."

Across the political spectrum, from Socialists to conservatives, the war was unwanted but had become a necessity. It was to be a "just war," according to the Catholic daily *La Croix*, to decapitate "the modern Attila," a "struggle between civilization and barbarity."

If the last war was to be any guide, this spirit and unity were going to be essential for the struggle ahead.

The French military leaders, however, did nothing to save Poland in the first crucial moments of the war. After a week's delay, they finally launched an invasion of the German Saarland. The offensive was given enthusiastic coverage in the press, one newspaper calling it a "brilliant attack." But in reality, the Army moved just five miles into Germany, into territory where villages had already been evacuated.

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Despite overwhelming superiority on the western front—with some eighty-five well-armed French divisions facing thirty-four largely reserve German divisions—the French did not attack and thus did not draw away any of the pressure from Poland, and neither did they threaten any vital German areas. Poland crumbled in eight days. With Poland annihilated, the French command secretly ordered a retreat from the Saarland at the end of the month.

But Germany took no significant action against France, either. Days, then weeks, passed. Troops worked and even played in full sight and range of each other across the front. The military communiqués published on the front pages of the Paris newspapers became progressively shorter and repetitive: “Night calm on the entire front” or “Nothing to report” or “Routine patrols” were standard entries.

The war acquired new names. At first it was *la guerre d’attente* (the war of waiting). In England, it was dubbed the “Bore War,” then the “Phoney War.” Soon, a new moniker was offered by Henri Lémery in *Paris-Soir*—*“la drôle de guerre”*—the funny war.

By the New Year, four months had passed, and still nothing had happened. The long pause nourished hope that perhaps with further patience, resolve, and diplomacy, calamity might again be avoided, as it had been so narrowly in 1938.

There were many soldiers on leave in Paris restaurants, cabarets, and theaters that cold night of La Saint-Sylvestre. Neither they, nor the citizens who toasted the New Year with them, could know that the Phoney War was then half over, that there would be four more months of waiting. Nor could they imagine that this would be the last such celebration in a free Paris for a very long time.

The last verse of Chevalier’s song played on radios and phonographs that night:

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Même quand au loin le canon gronde
Sa tenue est encore plus jolie…
Paris sera toujours Paris!
On peut limiter ses dépenses,
Sa distinction son élégance
N'en ont alors que plus de prix
Paris sera toujours Paris!

Even when the cannon is roaring in the distance
Her dress is even prettier
Paris will always be Paris
One can limit what she spends
Her distinction, her elegance
Are only all the more priceless
Paris will always be Paris

As Parisians pondered what the New Year would bring, *Le Figaro* assured that: "Throughout this night, on each floor, deep in everyone's heart, the same burning hope arose: 'that 1940 will be the year of victory.' "

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CHAPTER 2

PLANS

Since France, the deadly enemy of our people, is pitilessly choking us and depriving us of power, we must not shrink from any sacrifice on our part that will contribute to the destruction of France as the master of Europe.

—ADOLF HITLER, *Mein Kampf* (1926)
(banned in France)

ACROSS THE BORDER IN BERLIN, THE NEW YEAR'S MOOD WAS DECIDEDLY different. In a thirty-minute radio address, Joseph Goebbels, the Reich minister for public enlightenment and propaganda, reviewed the past year and looked ahead to 1940:

> The year 1939 was so dramatic and filled with historical splendors that one could fill a library writing about them. One hardly knows where to begin…our people began to restore its national life in 1939, beginning a great effort to throw off the chains of constraint and slavery and to once again take our place as a great power after our deep fall.

He justified the takeover of what remained of Czechoslovakia after annexation of the Sudetenland in late 1938. Then he rationalized the invasion of Poland, blaming the "London warmongering clique," a series of purported incidents against Germans, and provocations by Poland (such as mobilizing its reserves) as warranting action by Germany.

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"The Führer had no alternative but to answer force with force," he claimed. Goebbels exonerated Germany of any blame for the current climate in Europe and railed against the French and British governments:

> On September 2, London and Paris gave Germany an ultimatum, and declared war against the Reich soon after…The war of the Western powers against the Reich had begun…No one can doubt that the warmongering cliques in London and Paris want to stifle Germany, to destroy the German people…We 90 million in the Reich stand in the way of their brutal plans for world domination…They have forced us into a struggle for life and death.

Finally, Goebbels looked into the future:

> It would be a mistake to predict what will happen in the New Year. That is all in the future. One thing is clear: It will be a hard year, and we must be ready for it…As we raise our hearts in grateful thanks to the Almighty, we ask his gracious protection in the coming year.

THE SPEECH WAS reported and quoted prominently in the Paris papers. *Le Matin* described it as a "harangue."

Goebbels's speech did not tip the Führer's hand. Nowhere in the bombast was any specific hint about the plans for 1940. Would the Germans attack and, if so, when and where? Allied intelligence and the High Command had to weigh scenarios and plan accordingly.

The one possibility that was thought to be least likely was a direct invasion from across the border with Germany, along which France had constructed the Maginot Line. The cornerstone of France's strategy for the defense of the homeland, the Line was an extensive system of fortifications built along the entire frontier with Germany. The Line was born out of the costly experiences of the French military in

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World War I, when the French leadership was caught by surprise by the German invasion in August 1914.

French forces suffered very heavy losses in the opening months of the war. In just a few weeks, the German Army had reached the Marne River, only forty-three miles from Paris. There was great fear that the capital would be captured. However, the deep thrust of the German armies had left gaps and weaknesses in their lines that French commanders identified and exploited. French and British forces counterattacked, pushing the Germans away from Paris and into defensive positions that began four years of stalemate on the western front. More than 2 million soldiers fought in the battle of the Marne, with the two sides suffering more than 500,000 casualties. The French alone lost more than 80,000 men. One key aim of the Maginot Line was to hold up any surprise invasion long enough for sufficient forces to be mobilized that could thwart the assault before it advanced deep into France.

A second inspiration for the construction of the Maginot Line was the epic battle of Verdun in the late winter and early spring of 1916. The city was surrounded by eighteen large underground forts that had been constructed around the turn of the century; these would save its French defenders. Flanked on three sides by German forces determined to take the stronghold, the French forces led by Gen. Philippe Pétain endured massive artillery bombardments, including poison gas shells, while resisting the German offensive. Although they took several forts, the Germans were not able to sustain the attack and take the city. For his leadership, Pétain was hailed as a hero—the "Savior of Verdun"—and was named marshal of France after the war.

Pétain's experience in defending the Verdun forts and his great stature made him a key proponent for the building of the Maginot fortifications. Pétain believed very strongly that the Line would provide multiple strategic advantages. One of the foremost concerns of the French leadership was the conservation of manpower. During World War I, France lost

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27 percent of all able-bodied men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven. This greatly reduced the birthrate in France, which was already considerably smaller in population (39 million) than Germany (59 million) at the end the war. Fortifications could be manned with fewer troops than open field formations. Furthermore, the Line would not only deter enemy forces from directly attacking France but force them to take routes through Belgium or Switzerland and therefore perhaps divert major battles from French soil.

The Line stretched across the length of the German frontier, from Switzerland to Luxembourg, at a depth of ten to fifteen miles from the border to the French interior. It was comprised of a series of large fortresses and smaller forts that were spaced about ten miles apart in order to allow for mutual artillery support during battle. Each fort contained underground structures for housing, feeding, and arming the crews, as well as extensive networks of connecting tunnels, telephone lines, and supplies intended to last at least three months. The forts were connected by rows of antitank obstacles and dense barbed wire all along the front. The formidable challenges presented to attackers instilled great confidence in both the leadership and the public that the country was well protected.

As early as 1935, however, some dissenting voices were making themselves heard. Col. Charles de Gaulle, who served under Pétain in World War I and was taken prisoner in the battle for Verdun, was concerned that the focus on defense compromised the opportunity to take the offensive. De Gaulle thought France needed armored forces capable of rapid offensive movement. That notion was rebuffed by the then minister of war, who stated, "How can anyone believe that we are still thinking of the offensive when we have spent so many billions to establish a fortified frontier!"

De Gaulle continued to press the case for armored motorized divisions, to the point where his relentless advocacy earned him the nickname "Le Colonel Motor."

The protection of France's northern frontier with Belgium, however, posed a different set of considerations. For

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centuries, the favored invasion route into France was through the Belgian plain, as it had been in 1914. Pétain, French minister of war in 1934, insisted that to meet the threat of an invasion, French forces “must go into Belgium!”

Entering Belgium raised some sensitive issues. Because Belgium was a sovereign country, France was reluctant to enter preemptively without a request or permission from the king. The difficulty that waiting for permission posed was that Belgium might either decline to ask for assistance or refuse entry to Allied troops, as it did in the first days of World War I. Any delay on Belgium’s part could handicap the Allies’ war plans and increase France’s vulnerability.

Some parts of Belgium were well protected. The Maginot Line connected to the Belgian fortification system, the strong point of which was Fort Eben-Emael, a fortress between Liège and Maastricht (the Netherlands) that protected key bridgeheads into Belgium from Germany. There were also some natural obstacles protecting Belgium’s frontier with Germany, including the Meuse River and the hilly Ardennes Forest. At the same Senate commission hearing in 1934, Pétain was asked about the possibility of an invasion through the Ardennes, which lay immediately northeast of Sedan, France. Pétain replied, “It is impenetrable, if one makes some special dispositions there. We consider it a zone of destruction…the enemy could not commit himself there. If he does, we will pinch him off as he comes out of the forest. This sector is not dangerous.”

In accord with Pétain’s analysis, only very sparse, light fortifications were constructed on the Franco-Belgian frontier. French war planning focused on countering an attempted invasion that was expected to cut through the Belgian plain. The centerpiece of the plan was for Belgian forces to delay the German advance while French and British troops rushed into Belgium to form a defensive line as far east as possible.

In January 1940, Allied intelligence and war planners were

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analyzing and debating invasion scenarios when the German plans fell into their laps.

On the foggy morning of January 10, German major Erich Hoenmanns was flying another major, Helmuth Reinberger, in his Messerschmitt to Cologne when he lost power. Thinking he was over Germany, he attempted an emergency landing. He crash-landed in Mechelen-sur-Meuse, Belgium, a few miles from the border. Reinberger happened to be carrying detailed plans for an attack on Belgium and the Netherlands. Once the two majors realized where they were, Reinberger tried to burn the documents. But Belgian border guards arrived on the scene and salvaged some of the papers from the fire.

Belgian intelligence officers were first concerned that the papers were a plant intended to throw them off the actual German plans. But after interrogating the prisoners and examining the documents, they concluded that the papers were probably authentic. The bits they could read indicated the Germans were planning to invade the Netherlands and Belgium, and to do so very soon (though not written on the documents, the planned date was January 17). The plan also included a diversionary attack on the Maginot Line.

The German command learned of the plane crash and was deeply worried that its plans had been compromised. Hitler was furious. Rather than delay, he ordered that the attack go ahead as planned, before the Belgians, the Dutch, and their Allies could respond.

The Belgians passed on to the French, British, and Dutch the information gleaned from the charred documents, as well as additional intelligence warnings pointing to an imminent invasion. Dutch and Belgian troops were put on alert, and France began to mass formations on the Belgian border in preparation for entering.

The Germans, however, got wind of the alerts and realized that they had lost the element of surprise. Then the weather deteriorated. Chief of Staff Gen. Alfred Jodl explained to Hitler that for the attack to succeed, they would need at least eight days of good weather; he suggested that the attack be

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postponed until spring. Hitler agreed, telling Jodl that "the whole operation would have to be built on a new basis in order to secure secrecy and surprise."

The planned route of the German invasion was, in fact, exactly the one expected by the French command. They were satisfied that they understood the German command's reasoning and methods.

Colonel de Gaulle, however, was deeply concerned that the Allied plan to form a defensive line did not take into account the new capabilities of mechanized warfare.

On January 26, just days after the crisis of the Belgian invasion had passed, he made one more attempt to alert the High Command of the need for greater mobility. He sent a memo to eighty high officials, an unusually brazen gesture for a lower-ranking officer.

With the specter of Poland's destruction still fresh, he warned:

> The enemy would take the offensive with a very powerful mechanized force both on land and in the air; …because of this our front could at any moment be broken;…if we ourselves had no equivalent force with which to reply there would be a grave risk of our being destroyed…The French people must not at any price fall into the illusion that the present military immobility conforms to the character of this war. On the contrary, the motor gives to the means of modern destruction a power, a speed, a range of action, such that the present conflict will be marked by movements…[the] speed of which will infinitely surpass the most amazing events of the past. Let us not fool ourselves! The conflict which has began [*sic*] can well be the most widespread, the most complex, the most violent, of all those which have ravaged the earth.

The generals had long before heard enough from de

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Gaulle, and ignored his pleas.

With hard evidence that Hitler had aimed to invade Belgium and the Netherlands—two neutral countries—and would in all likelihood try again, Premier Daladier took to the airwaves on January 29 to deliver a scathing assessment of the Nazis' intentions. In a radio address to the French people entitled "The Nazis' Aim Is Slavery," he left no doubt about the nature of Hitler's regime:

> At the end of five months of war one thing has become more and more clear. It is that Germany seeks to establish a domination over the world completely different from any known in history.
>
> The domination at which the Nazis aim is not limited to the displacement of the balance of power and the imposition of supremacy of one nation. It seeks the systematic and total destruction of those conquered by Hitler, and it does not treaty with the nations which he has subdued. He destroys them. He takes from them their whole political and economic existence and seeks even to deprive them of their history and their culture. He wishes to consider them only as vital space and a vacant territory over which he has every right.
>
> The human beings who constitute these nations are for him only cattle. He orders their massacre or their migration. He compels them to make room for their conquerors. He does not even take the trouble to impose any war tribute on them. He just takes all their wealth, and, to prevent any revolt, he wipes out their leaders and scientifically seeks the physical and moral degradation of those whose independence he has taken away.
>
> Under this domination, in thousands of towns and villages in Europe there are millions of human beings now living in misery which, some months ago, they could never have imagined. Austria, Bohemia, Slovakia and Poland are only lands of despair. Their whole peoples have been deprived of the means of moral and

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> material happiness. Subdued by treachery or brutal violence, they have no other recourse than to work for their executioners who grant them scarcely enough to assure the most miserable existence.
>
> There is being created a world of masters and slaves in the image of Germany herself…
>
> For us there is more to do than merely win the war. We shall win it, but we must also win a victory far greater than that of arms. In this world of masters and slaves, which those madmen who rule at Berlin are seeking to forge, we must also save liberty and human dignity.

The conflict between France and Germany had remained, however, largely a war of words. The frontier with Germany was quiet throughout a bitterly cold January, the third coldest on record. Many parts of Northern Europe were experiencing the coldest winter in a century. In mid-January, temperatures plunged to below zero in Paris, Amsterdam, and Berlin. Another severe cold wave struck in mid-February.

By all conventional wisdom, the extreme cold and snow were deterrents to any potential overland assault. However, the six months of tension and inactivity since the declaration of war were wearing on the morale of the French troops. It was increasingly difficult for commanders to maintain discipline and a heightened sense of alert. Separated from their families, businesses, and farms, soldiers were granted more leave than regulations and circumstances normally would have allowed.

When they did take leave for Paris, soldiers found a city in which citizens were trying to go about their normal routines, and planning for their futures, almost as if there were no war.

The universities had remained open. Twenty-nine-year-old zoology doctoral student Jacques Monod had not been called

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had been signed a week earlier], he will try to get way without too much damage. I only regret that the English are too polite with him. They should not have bothered writing him long letters. They should have told him to piss off, without any further explanation."

Despite his skepticism about war breaking out, the new father was thinking about his family responsibilities. He shared his hopes for his children with his parents:

> *I would like to raise them as I was. I would like for them to learn naturally, effortlessly, almost without knowing it, that the love of beautiful things, critical thinking, and intellectual honesty are the three essential virtues. This way, they will like things for themselves, will judge for themselves. This way, they will be real men, as there used to be, they won't be fooled by intellectual snobs and political scoundrels. They will know how to live above and outside of a century which is only getting deeper into infamy, lies, and stupidity. I love you my dears because I know that it is because of you that I possess some of these virtues that I wish for them to have.*

Monod had not been called up during the first general mobilization, but France continued to make preparations, so he expected to be drafted in some capacity. He wanted to serve not merely as an *auxiliaire* in support of the regular armed forces, but as part of them. So, rather than waiting to be mobilized, he took the initiative to request officer training. Seeking a branch where he could use some of his scientific background, Monod hoped to join the engineers, specifically the 28th Engineering Regiment, because he learned that there was only one platoon in the military engineering group that was based at Versailles, near Paris. If he was accepted, he would be able to see Odette and the twins regularly. The training would take seven or eight months and would require Monod to study electricity, Morse code, radio, topography, and other technical subjects. Odette approved of the whole idea, as it was both a rearguard

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assignment and comparatively safer than other options, such as the air corps.

In February, Monod learned that he had been accepted and would have to report for initial training beginning sometime in mid-April. At the end of the month, he took a first step by applying for his heavy vehicle license, the *permis poids lourd*. Fond of riding his motorcycle around Paris, Monod would have to drive four- to thirteen-ton vehicles in the engineering regiment. He so impressed the examiner with his driving skills that he was also given a *permis transport en commun*—a license for transporting more than nine people at a time. He shared the news with Odette, who was with her mother and the twins in Dinard on the Brittany coast: "I demonstrated dizzying panache, balanced with prudent caution…The instructor assures me that it is a first [to obtain both licenses at the same time, without having applied for one]. As you might think, I am consumed with vanity." However proud Monod was, his most important credential still eluded him. He told his brother Philo, "The laboratory has been put on ice." Three years into his doctoral work, eight years past his bachelor's degree, and about to turn thirty, he was still not sure when he would complete his PhD.

The mobilization of men in all lines of work caused many disruptions. With much of the farm labor force mobilized, some food shortages were inevitable. Meat rationing and restrictions on the sale of alcohol were imposed. Another effect of the general mobilization was that many businesses were shorthanded. It was the possibility of landing a job that brought twenty-six-year-old Albert Camus to Paris from his native Algeria in mid-March. Camus was not called up for military duty when his fellow colonists were mobilized. He was exempted on account of having contracted tuberculosis when he was seventeen.

In the previous two years, he had worked as a reporter and editor of *Alger Républicain*, a fledgling left-wing daily. Although the war seemed far away from Algiers, its declaration spelled the end for the editorial positions that the paper, and especially Camus, had pursued.

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Camus's outlook was shaped by his very humble origins. His father, Lucien, an agricultural worker, died of wounds received at the battle of the Marne when Camus was less than a year old. He was raised by his mother, Catherine, a deaf, largely mute, and illiterate cleaning woman whom Camus adored. Camus and his mother shared their gasless, sparsely furnished apartment with his older brother, a partially paralyzed uncle, and his grandmother. Despite his poverty, with no books, newspapers, or even a radio at home, Camus exhibited academic abilities in reading, writing, and speech that were noticed early.

In primary school, Camus fell under the influence of his teacher Louis Germain, a freethinker devoted to secular, democratic principles, who instilled in his students the values of honesty and sincerity, along with a love for soccer. Germain became a father figure to Camus, gave him two hours of supplementary lessons each day, and encouraged him to go on to high school—as opposed to going to work, as most children Camus's age did.

Camus won a scholarship to a lycée in Algiers, where most of his classmates came from much more privileged backgrounds. Undernourished, pale, and shabbily dressed, Camus nevertheless carried himself with pride and dignity. In time, he charmed and earned the respect of his classmates. Young Camus learned to be equally at ease with people of all classes, but he identified with those who were, like him, poor underdogs.

It was in high school that his appetite for literature and philosophy blossomed, thanks in particular to his teacher Jean Grenier, himself a writer and philosopher. Reading Nietzsche, Malraux, Gide, and Grenier's own writing stoked Camus's ambition to write. It was also during high school that Camus contracted tuberculosis in his right lung. In his Algiers neighborhood, in the period before antibiotics, the disease was often fatal. Camus was hospitalized and underwent repeated pneumothorax therapy, in which his lung was deliberately collapsed. His survival was in doubt for some time. But he did recover, and his long convalescence

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gave him plenty of time to reflect on his mortality.

His early brush with death gave birth to an intense sense of purpose and urgency. The precocious philosopher began to make notes on the question of how, in light of the certainty of death, one should live life. “Should one accept life as it is?…Should one accept the human condition?” he jotted in a notebook. “On the contrary, I think revolt is part of the human condition.”

His sense of urgency spilled over into his romantic life. Before he turned twenty-one, while a philosophy student at the University of Algiers, Camus married a beautiful young woman, Simone Hie. Unfortunately, she was a morphine addict and the couple was estranged within a year, though not officially divorced until six years later. Being married was only a technicality for Camus, who became involved with a number of women, often at the same time.

Camus was determined to become a writer. After receiving his diploma in 1936, his original plan was to become a teacher like his mentors, a member of the civil service, and to write in his spare time. His tuberculosis, however, made him unlikely to be hired. Camus had to stitch together a series of odd jobs. He performed in a traveling acting company for Radio Alger, tutored students, and cofounded the Algiers House of Culture. He also wrote almost nonstop. He published his first book, a set of essays entitled *L’Envers et L’Endroit* (The Wrong Side and the Right Side) in 1937. The first printing was just 350 copies. The next printing would not be for twenty years.

Camus began work on a novel, but he still sought a steady income. He was offered and accepted, of all things, a job as a technician at the Institut de Météorologie at the University of Algiers, collating and organizing historical weather data. He performed his job well, grateful for the salary that enabled him to write in his off-hours. While working at the institute, he managed to complete essays for a second book, *Noces* (Nuptials), published in 1939.

Camus resigned his meteorological post when a better opportunity came along, one that would allow him to put his

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writing skills to work every day, and to be paid for it—as a journalist for the newly founded *Alger Républicain*. At first, Camus covered the routine beats of a city reporter: local government, courts, crimes, and car accidents. He soon initiated a literary review, penning his analyses of new works by Sartre, Huxley, and many more authors.

Working full time, Camus still managed to plot out his own body of work. At the outset of 1939, he jotted down his list of projects in his literary notebook. Among them were three works in three different forms: a novel, a play, and an essay, all on the philosophical theme of the absurd—the dilemma posed by the human search for meaning and the seeming indifference of the universe to that human concern. For several years, Camus had immersed himself in the philosophers and writers who had wrestled with how to respond to the absurd condition. Many previous thinkers had taken the path to nihilism, to the denial that life had any value. Camus was determined to develop a different view, one that both embraced absurdity as an essential truth and valued life to the fullest.

The declaration of war made Camus despair, both privately and publicly. He saw the war as another unnecessary, avoidable, disastrous, absurd chapter of history that would consume the lives of those who did not make it nor wish for it. He wrote in his journal: "They have all betrayed us, those who preached resistance and those who talked of peace. There they are, all so guilty as one another. And never before has the individual stood so alone before the lie-making machine…The reign of beasts has begun."

The day after the invasion of Poland, Camus wrote in *Alger Républicain*, "Never have left-wing militants had so many reasons to despair…Perhaps after this war, trees will flower again, since the world always finally wins out over history, but on that day, I don't know how many men will be there to see it."

Despite his total opposition to the war and his tuberculosis, Camus attempted to enlist, twice. He felt that it was a matter of expressing his solidarity with those who were being

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Reynaud traveled to London to confer with the British leadership about war plans. In particular, he wanted to discuss potential offensive measures that could be taken to prevent vital supplies, specifically Swedish iron ore, from reaching the Reich.

Even though Norway was neutral, Reynaud suggested that a force be sent to occupy the key port of Narvik. The premier found a like-minded ally in the Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, who had previously recommended the very same mission to Prime Minister Chamberlain. “The ironfields…may be the surest and shortest road to the end,” Churchill wrote in late 1939. Other officials concurred that the German war effort could not last a year without the ore.

Chamberlain, however, wanted to act only with the agreement of Norway and Sweden. Both countries rejected the plan. Disappointed but resolved to take some action, Churchill suggested to Chamberlain, instead of occupation, the mining of Norwegian territorial waters. This would force German cargo ships out from the protection of neutral waters and into international waters, where they could be seized or sunk. Chamberlain agreed to Churchill’s proposal and added to it the dropping of thousands of mines into German rivers and canals, as well as the bombing of the Ruhr industrial region of Germany.

Reynaud brought the proposals back to his cabinet. War Minister Daladier and Chief of Staff Gen. Maurice Gamelin rejected the mining of German waters and the bombing of the Ruhr, arguing that it would provoke Hitler to retaliate upon France.

The British went ahead with just the plan for the mining of key points along the Norwegian coast, dubbed Operation Wilfred. The date was set for the morning of April 8, with ships to begin heading for Norway on April 5.

Energized by this initiative, Chamberlain offered his assessment of the war to date to a gathering of his Conservative Party on April 4, 1940:

When we embarked upon this war in September last, I

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felt that we were bound to win, but I did think of course, that we might have to undergo some very heavy trials, and perhaps, very severe losses. That may be so still. But I want to say to you now that after seven months of war I feel ten times as confident of victory as I did at the beginning.

I do not base that confidence on wishful thinking, which is pleasant but dangerous…

When war did break out German preparations were far ahead of our own, and it was natural to expect that the enemy would take advantage of his initial superiority to make an endeavour to overwhelm us and France before we had time to make good our deficiencies. Is it not a very extraordinary thing that no such attempt was made? Whatever may be the reason—whether it was that Hitler thought he might get away with what he had got without fighting for it, or whether it was that after all the preparations were not sufficiently complete—however, one thing is certain: he missed the bus.

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CHAPTER 3

MISADVENTURES IN NORWAY

Castles in the air—they are so easy to take refuge in. And so easy to build too.

—HENRIK IBSEN (1828–1906), *The Master Builder*

AT TWO A.M. ON APRIL 3, 1940, THREE TROOP TRANSPORTS DISGUISED as coal ships left the German port of Brunsbüttel at the mouth of the Elbe River. They were followed by several more transports on the next several nights. During the night of April 6, fourteen destroyers and a heavy cruiser left their bases at Wesermünde and Cuxhaven, followed the next morning by two battleships from Wilhelmshaven, and the following night by torpedo boats, cruisers, minesweepers, and support vessels from Helgoland, Kiel, and Wesermünde. By April 8, much of the entire German naval surface fleet, more than fifty vessels in all, were at sea.

Seven months after conquering Poland, Hitler was on the move again and taking another bold gamble. His ships were headed not to Britain or France, however, but to Norway. One crucial objective lay a thousand miles away, above the Arctic Circle: the port of Narvik. Ten destroyers were to offload two thousand troops there to seize and hold the port. W-hour, the time of invasion, was set for the morning of April 9.

"Operation Weserübung" had been planned for months. Its primary purpose was to secure the source of Swedish iron ore for German industry. Germany imported more than ten

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million tons annually from northern Sweden. Much of that was transported by rail to Narvik, then shipped by sea to German ports. For several months Hitler and his commanders fretted that the Allies were plotting some maneuver that would deny Germany its ore.

They had good reason to worry, for at the very time that the German fleet was dashing for Norway, the British Navy was launching Operation Wilfred to mine the Norwegian coastal waters.

Norway was thus being approached by two navies on a collision course. Neither adversary knew that the other was on the move, nor did neutral Norway know that it was about to be engulfed in a broadening war.

THE GREAT GAMBLE that Hitler had taken was endangering his navy. The German command knew very well that the British Navy was much stronger. Its members hoped that the invasion would catch both Britain and Norway by surprise and that their objectives could be secured before either country could respond.

There was also a calculation in the British plans. If Germany reacted to the mining by attempting an invasion of Norway, the Allies would then have the pretense for breaching Norway's neutrality and pursuing their own occupation of vital ports such as Narvik.

The mining took place as planned early on April 8, which put British ships in Norwegian waters as the German fleet approached. The first encounter was between the British destroyer *Glowworm* and two German destroyers and the German cruiser *Hipper*. The *Glowworm* was badly damaged but managed to ram and damage the *Hipper* before sinking.

Other German ships were also sighted as they approached Norway. A Polish submarine sank a German troop transport ship, and the German cruiser *Blücher* was sunk by fire from a coastal battery guarding the entrance to the port of Oslo. But the Germans landed most of their troops safely at Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, and other ports. Paratroopers took

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control of airports and airfields.

A much smaller force landed at Copenhagen and seized Danish airfields, meeting little resistance. Under the threat of bombardment, the Danish government capitulated within six hours. The Germans captured most of their objectives as planned on April 9. Despite the many Allied sightings of, and encounters with, the German fleet, Hitler had taken the two neutral countries and the Allies by surprise.

THE FRENCH COMMAND was baffled. No sooner had Reynaud digested the welcome report of the successful British mining operation than a news flash of the German fleet's movement toward Norway reached him. He contacted Adm. Jean Darlan, who was completely unaware of any German maneuvers.

On the morning of April 9, as reports of German successes in taking ports came in, General Gamelin told Reynaud, "You are wrong to get excited. We must wait for more complete information. This is a simple incident of war. Wars are full of unexpected news."

The French and British governments pledged their full assistance to Norway. The newspapers condemned the German attacks on two neutral countries. *Le Figaro* asked, "Will the lesson be learned by other neutrals?"

AFTER THE SUCCESSFUL troop landings, the German Navy did not fare well. The next day, April 10, five British destroyers caught five German destroyers in Narvik harbor, sinking two and damaging the other three. Ten British dive-bombers sank a cruiser in Bergen. Then, on April 13, the battleship HMS *Warspite*, supported by nine destroyers, sank or crippled the eight remaining German destroyers that had offloaded troops at Narvik, as well as one U-boat. In just a few days, the German Navy had lost half of her destroyers and much of her entire surface fleet.

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despite the stress on his weaker left leg. He loved learning Morse code, which was required of everyone in his branch. He was getting good at transmission. The hardest part for everyone was receiving messages and learning the sounds of the dots and dashes, but Jacques found that his musical ear and sense of rhythm gave him an advantage. After receiving a package from Odette containing a blanket and some sweets, which earned him the envy of the barracks, he demonstrated his proficiency at the bottom of his return letter:

· _ _ _· _ · _ ·· _ _· *("Je t'aime")*

Jacques was able to confirm the official information that courses would begin in Versailles on May 7, so he would be in Montpellier for about twenty days in total. Odette was buoyed by Jacques's news and by his spirit. She wrote to his parents and marveled at his morale, his curiosity about everything, and the energy with which he approached every task. She told them: "I hope after the war, he will not want to remain in the Army!"

In three weeks, Jacques expressed only two complaints. First, when four days went by without letters from Odette due to problems with the mail, he wrote to her, "I've been feeling very isolated and far away from you…If only you knew how I am waiting for them, and how those four days are centuries." And second, he was so busy and isolated that he did not know what was going on outside the base. He asked Odette, "What is happening in the world my sweetheart? It seems to me that I don't know anything anymore. I have a hard time reading the newspapers, I read them irregularly and I really don't know anymore where things stand."

The Stranger

Camus could not help but read the newspaper, and he was much less optimistic about unfolding events than his fellow

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Parisians, or the propagandists at *Paris-Soir*. As the Norwegian front opened, he wrote to a friend, "Events are going at such speed that the only wise and courageous attitude to have is silence. This can be used as a sort of sustained meditation which will prepare us for the future." Camus felt that his only option was to "wait and work."

He was also not at all enamored with Paris, whose pace Camus found overwhelming. "You can't live here, you can only work and vibrate here," he told a fellow writer.

When he came back from *Paris-Soir* to his room at the Hôtel Madison, on the Left Bank of the Seine and facing the historic Saint-Germain-des-Prés church, he shut out the outside world and focused on his novel. He had worked at it, on and off, and in various versions, for more than three years. Threads of the story, its characters, and its atmosphere came from the people and places in Algeria he knew so well, as well as his reporting experiences with the *Alger Républicain*. Speaking of Algiers, he told Francine, "I see the form and content around me in the poverty…the simple people, and their resigned indifference. They give an image of a rather frightening world without tenderness." The protagonist-narrator of the story is Meursault, a clerk living in Algiers who is indifferent to events and conventions of everyday life. Meursault exhibits no grief at his mother's death, no interest in the question of marriage to his girlfriend, no remorse over his killing of a man, and, most important to Camus's philosophical intentions, no belief or interest in God, not even when facing execution. Camus explored several different titles such as *A Happy Man, A Free Man*, and *A Man Like Any Other* before settling on *The Stranger*.

When he arrived in Paris, he thought he had already written about three-quarters of the story. Thereafter, he wrote like "a desperate man," often suffering from headaches and fevers that tested his endurance. The challenge that he had given himself was to express a philosophical idea—the absurd—and reactions to it in novel form. It was a studied effort. Camus's extensive reading and literary reviews had

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made him an acute observer of literary styles. In a review he wrote of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), Camus suggested, "A novel is only philosophy put into images, and in a good novel, all the philosophy goes into the images."

To craft those images, Camus drew upon his own sense of isolation in Paris, of being a stranger. His first entry in his notebook after arriving in the city was:

> What is the meaning of this sudden awakening—in this dark room—with the sounds of a suddenly strange city? And everything is strange to me…What am I doing here, what is the point of these smiles and gestures?…
>
> Strange, confess that everything is strange to me.

He sent progress reports in love letters to his fiancée, Francine, as well as to Yvonne Ducailar, and to his former roommate and lover Christiane Gallindo, who typed his drafts. To Yvonne, he declared that he was working as if he were on a "tightrope, in passionate and solitary tension." To Francine, he explained, "I've never worked so much. This room is miserable. I live alone and I am weary, but I don't know if it's despite all this or because of it that I am writing all I wanted to write. Soon I will be able to judge what I am worth and decide one way or another."

At times, he sensed the story was all falling into place, telling Christiane that "at certain moments, what power and lucidity I feel in myself!" Other days, he despaired. After rereading all that he had written, he wrote to Francine that "it seemed a failure from the ground up."

The urgency with which he wrote was also spurred by the uncertainties created by the new developments in the war. As much as Camus tried to insulate himself in his room, when at *Paris-Soir* he could not avoid hearing the news and feeling the anxiety in the capital. One letter to Yvonne began, "I am writing to you from the newspaper office, amid the general hysteria created by events here. Men will die by the thousands so there is something to be excited about." Indeed, he might be one of those soldiers, as he was due to take

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another examination for the draft in May. He assured Yvonne, "I don't care if I am accepted. What I have to do and live through, I can do as well in the middle of battle as in the middle of Paris." He then added in Meursault-like fashion, "As for the risks of death, they are of no importance."

On May 1, he completed his first draft of *The Stranger*. He wrote immediately to Francine:

> *I am writing to you at night. I have just finished my novel and I'm too overexcited to think of sleeping. No doubt my work isn't finished. I have things to go over, others to add and rewrite. But the fact is, I've finished and I wrote the last sentence. Why do I turn immediately to you? I have the manuscript in front of me, and I think of all it cost me in effort and will—how much involvement it required—to sacrifice other thoughts, other desires to remain in its atmosphere…I am going to put these pages in my drawer and start work on my essay, and in two weeks I'll take it out again and rework the novel.*

Blunder

With the loss of the protection of their destroyers, and the ability to withdraw if necessary, the relatively small force of German troops in Norway was very vulnerable. Hitler was so concerned that his generals had to talk him out of abandoning Narvik.

The Allies decided to mount a counterattack to retake some ports. The original plan was to concentrate on Narvik. But Norway's King Haakon IV requested that Trondheim also be recaptured. The British complied with the king and divided their available assault forces between the two objectives.

One force was landed both north and south of Trondheim, with the mission to attack it from the flanks. The soldiers never reached the town. The British were outflanked by the Germans, who had complete command of the air. The British

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were forced to retreat, then ordered to evacuate a little more than a week after landing. The Trondheim assault forces suffered more than 1,500 casualties without taking any ground.

A second force landed near Narvik. With their original strength reduced by the Trondheim mission, it was decided not to attempt an assault on Narvik right away and to wait to amass a larger, overwhelming force. By early May, nothing had yet happened.

With the crisis in Norway averted, Hitler turned his attention to other plans.

THE DEVELOPMENTS IN the Norway campaign were followed very closely in both London and Paris. The failure to take Trondheim and the delay in attacking Narvik would have dire political repercussions. The first major operation of the war under Chamberlain's direction had been bungled, no matter how rosy a picture the prime minister tried to paint to the House of Commons on May 7, of how the British troops "man for man showed themselves superior to their foes."

The opposition mocked his explanation for the "reverse" in Norway with shouts of "Hitler missed the bus"—painfully reminding Chamberlain of his boast a month earlier. Then, a succession of speakers voiced their doubts about Chamberlain's leadership.

After patiently waiting his turn, Leo Amery, a friend and fellow party member of Chamberlain's, held the floor for more than an hour: "I confess that I did not feel there was one sentence in the prime minister's speech this afternoon which suggested that the government either foresaw what Germany meant to do, or came to a clear decision when it knew what Germany had done, or acted swiftly or consistently throughout the whole of this lamentable affair." Amery continued, "What we have lost is one of those opportunities which do not recur in war. If we could have captured and held Trondheim…then we might well have imposed a strain on Germany which might have made

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CHAPTER 4

SPRINGTIME FOR HITLER

We have assured all our immediate neighbors of the integrity of their territory as far as Germany is concerned. That is no hollow phrase: it is our sacred will…The Sudetenland is the last territorial claim which I have to make in Europe.

—Adolf Hitler, September 26, 1938

While nine German divisions (120,000 troops) had been committed to the invasion and occupation of Norway and Denmark, 136 divisions, more than 2 million men, had been amassing on the German border with Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and France.

They had not gone unnoticed. In the Netherlands, all military leaves had been cancelled and all personnel ordered to join their units. The civilian population was asked to limit rail travel in order to facilitate the troop recall. All public buildings and installations were placed under armed guard. Holland, a neutral country, was assembling the largest army in its history.

Phone calls started coming into the French command just after midnight on Friday, May 10. At one a.m., General Gamelin was awakened with a message from an agent who was behind enemy lines: “Columns marching westward.” Premier Reynaud received urgent word from Brussels that both the Belgian and Dutch armies noted increased activities on their

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front.

As dawn broke, Germany attacked across a 175-mile-long front with Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. First, there were artillery barrages, then waves of bombers, then armored columns and troops invaded the Low Countries. In Holland, paratroopers seized forts and airfields.

Shortly after six a.m., the Belgians and Dutch both formally requested the assistance of the Allies. Within minutes, Gamelin was notified and the orders were given for French and British forces to cross into Belgium and to speed north to Holland—the long-planned maneuvers to establish a continuous line of defense across Belgium and Holland.

Reynaud had to withdraw his resignation and to put aside his differences with Gamelin. Hitler had preempted any change in leadership.

Gamelin prowled the halls of his command post, even smiling as he learned the direction of the German attacks. He had long planned for this clash of armies. Altogether the Allies had at least as many men as the enemy, about 152 divisions in total: 104 French, 15 British, 22 Belgian, and 11 Dutch. The French had a slightly larger number of tanks than the Germans, as well as a substantial advantage in artillery pieces. The Allies were outnumbered, however, in aircraft by about two to one, and in antiaircraft guns by almost three to one.

Gamelin was, one corporal observed that morning, "absolutely confident of success." He issued the order of the day to the troops:

> The attack that we had foreseen since October was launched this morning. Germany is engaged in a fight with us to the death.
>
> The order of the day for France and all her Allies are the words: Courage, energy, confidence.

Parisians awoke to a beautiful sunny morning, to choruses of birds, and the sound of air-raid sirens. A few planes flew over the city, but no one was sure whether they were French or

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German. Out of months of habit, few bothered to head to the air-raid shelters.

As bulletins came over the radio of the German attacks on the Low Countries, the collective response in France was "Finally!" After eight months, the long-anticipated battle had arrived. Civilians and soldiers alike appeared relieved that the tension had been broken, and they looked forward to the fight. "The Boches have business with somebody their own size now!" is what A. J. Liebling, Paris correspondent for the *New Yorker*, heard on the street. "They will see we are not Poles or Norwegians," said many. A corporal had recently written, "The real roughhouse is about to begin. So much the better! It will be like bursting an abscess!" Liebling's friend Captain de Cholet phoned that morning to say he was returning to the front. "It's good that it's starting at last. We can beat the Boches and have it over by autumn," the captain added.

At the offices of *Paris-Soir*, a military specialist told staff members, "That's it, Hitler has made his mistake."

That evening, Premier Reynaud addressed the country over the radio:

> Three free countries, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg, were invaded this past night, by the German army.
>
> They called to their aid the Allied armies.
>
> This morning, between seven and eight o'clock, our soldiers, the soldiers of freedom, crossed the frontier.
>
> This centuries-old battlefield of Flanders our people know well!
>
> Opposite us, hurling himself at us, is the centuries-old invader.
>
> Everywhere in the world, every free man and every woman watches and holds their breath before the drama that is about to play out…
>
> The French army has drawn its sword, France gathers itself.

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The official military communiqués for the day reported forty-four enemy planes downed over France, the Dutch claimed to have shot down seventy German planes and blown up four armored trains, and the Belgians assured that the German attack was contained at all points. The Dutch Army command at the Hague was "satisfied that they have the situation in hand." Allied losses were not reported.

Chamberlain, however, was one casualty of the momentous day. He resigned and Winston Churchill became prime minister.

MONOD TRIED TO intercept Odette. He had not yet received a reply to his letter of May 9, and he hoped that Odette had not left Dinard for their rendezvous. He hurriedly composed a short letter from his bed, where he was recuperating after receiving a shot of the typhoid/tetanus/diphtheria vaccine. Writing on graph paper with a shaky hand, Jacques said: "If I have not heard from you by tomorrow morning, I will think that you did not leave Dinard, and I will feel quite relieved. In any case my dear angel, if this letter comes to you in time, I beg you to postpone your departure until the situation and the events are clarified a bit. I beg you not to risk leaving the kids and undertaking such a trip in the current conditions."

Despite the German attack, Odette had in fact left Dinard for Paris. That morning, she had run into a friend in Dinard who was leaving for Paris in the afternoon and offered to take her along. She arrived at Jacques's barracks at eight in the evening, and after some waiting she was delighted to finally see Jacques. Despite ongoing air-raid alerts and the battle that was unfolding, he was allowed to spend the next day at home with Odette, where his brother, Philo, came to join them. Jacques briefed them on all of his activities at the Signaling School—the maneuvers and exercises, the courses in physics and radio, and the reports he was obliged to write as head of his section. He knew nothing more about the conduct of war than what was in the newspapers.

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THE NEWSPAPERS ON May 11 carried passionate appeals to patriotism and unity. In *Le Figaro,* Wladimir d'Ormesson penned a tirade against the enemy "assassins" and claimed, "We have unlimited confidence in the leaders of our armies. Behind the lines, let us be worthy of them." In *Le Matin,* Jean Fabry urged, "Let us have confidence in our soldiers and their commanders."

Those commanders were dealing with some of the surprises and setbacks of the first hours of the campaign. At Eben-Emael, the massive fortress defending key bridges over the Albert Canal, German gliders landed on the roof, where there were no defenses. The specially trained troops promptly disabled many of the fort's large guns. By the second day, the fort had surrendered. The Germans took more than a thousand prisoners at a cost of just six men killed.

The fort and the canal had been expected to hold up the German assault while the advancing Allied troops maneuvered into position. In one operation, the Germans had eliminated a vital element of the Belgian fortification system and secured bridges across the canal. They began flooding into Belgium. The quick loss of the fort was a setback; nevertheless, the Germans were proceeding on the course that Gamelin and his commanders had expected.

The military communiqués stated, and newspapers dutifully reported, that on May 11, Allied forces were advancing rapidly and thirty-six enemy planes were downed and, on May 12, Allied forces were in place on Belgian and Dutch soil, thirty enemy planes were downed, and the pressure on the Dutch had been ameliorated by the actions of the Royal Air Force. On May 13, a combined British and French force even landed in Norway, finally, and captured Bjerkvik, just north of Narvik. This was the first opposed amphibious landing of the war.

All seemed, or at least was reported to be, in control. The Allies' movement into Belgium and Holland was, according to *The Times* of London, "brilliantly prepared and executed."

Unfortunately, the armies were right where the Germans wanted them to be.

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The German invasion. Open arrows indicate the line of attack launched on May 10, 1940, against France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The closed arrowheads indicate the path of the "sickle cut" taken across France to cut off the French forces that moved north to repel the invasion of Belgium. (Map by Leanne Olds)

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The public was largely in the dark about the gravity of the rapidly developing crisis. Communiqués offered reassuring but completely vague statements about "hurling counterattacks" and "the enemy making an important effort in spite of increased losses." The press was operating under stringent military censorship, which prevented the reporting of much negative news. Despite being in the offices of *Paris-Soir*, Camus learned very little. The paper sought to maintain the public's faith by inflating claims and offering up pithy slogans. The pages Camus laid out reported that the Germans were losing a hundred planes a day and that "France has many trump cards in its hand and does not need to bluff."

More important, the government was also dangerously unaware. Early on in the battle of the Meuse, Premier Reynaud was being reassured that threats were being met. Finally, on the evening of May 14, he heard from Gamelin himself about the Army's precarious position. Reynaud was so alarmed that he sent an urgent message to Churchill to request more fighter planes: "If we are to win this battle which might be decisive for the whole war, it is necessary that you send at once ten more squadrons."

Churchill and his command were concerned about the RAF's losses and had to consider the need to defend England should Hitler continue to advance. And there was more startling news that evening—the Dutch Army was surrendering.

Before Churchill could even reply to Reynaud, the premier called the prime minister directly at seven thirty the next morning, Wednesday the fifteenth. "We have been defeated," he blurted in English. "We are beaten; we have lost the battle."

"Surely it can't have happened so soon?" Churchill replied.

"The front is broken near Sedan; they are pouring through in great numbers with tanks and armored cars," Reynaud explained.

Churchill said he would fly over to meet with Reynaud. When he landed on the sixteenth, the German front had already penetrated sixty miles beyond Sedan and was a little

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more than seventy miles from Paris. Churchill was told that the Germans were expected in Paris within a few days. Churchill met with Reynaud, Daladier, and Gamelin in an elegant room at the Quai d'Orsay. He saw "utter dejection" on every face. Gamelin went over the current war map, indicating how far the Germans had progressed. Churchill had been through such anxious moments in World War I. In 1914, the Germans' initial thrust carried them to the Marne, where they were finally halted and pushed back by counterattacks. He sought to quell the panic.

"Where is the strategic reserve?" he asked Gamelin. Churchill asked again in French, *"Où est la masse de manoeuvre?"*

Gamelin turned to Churchill, shook his head, shrugged, and said, *"Aucune."* None.

Churchill was stunned. The French had assumed that they could maintain a five-hundred-mile-long defensive front and had made no provision to meet any breakthrough. Churchill looked out the window to see clouds of smoke from bonfires in the courtyard onto which officials were dumping wheelbarrows full of documents.

Churchill needed to rouse the French leadership's failing spirit. He cabled London to ask for the ten squadrons that Reynaud wanted. His cabinet agreed, in spite of its concern for the defense of England. At a minimum, for the sake of history, England could say it gave the French the assistance that was requested.

French communiqués continued in their vagueness. On Wednesday night, the fifteenth, it was reported that in the area of Sedan "where the enemy had made some progress, counterattacks were ongoing with tanks and bombers."

THE NEXT DAY'S edition of *Le Figaro* stretched the truth of the battlefield situation:

> For the moment, the principal battle is taking place on the crossings of the Meuse…For the enemy, the concern

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> is to break the vast hinge at the elbow of the Meuse between the Allied armies of Lorraine [to the south] and Belgium [to the north]. In spite of the terrible shock, where all possible means were employed, this attempt has only partially succeeded. The surprise of the suddenness and intensity of the attack did not rattle the gallantry of the defenders. This valor is receiving incessant support…
>
> It will be, without a doubt, several days before the outcome of this battle appears more clear.

The morning communiqué for the sixteenth declared, "It is in the best interests of the conduct of operations not to furnish precise information on the actions in progress."

It was also in the best interest of civil order. German forces were dashing for the sea in order to cut off the northern armies. The rout was under way.

Odette had stayed in Paris, hoping to spend more time with Jacques, but he and the rest of his unit were confined to the barracks. They were only able to see each other very briefly in what Odette described as a "dark hovel" that served as a visitors' room. Odette decided to return to Dinard to be with the twins and her family. It was a difficult parting. Jacques felt great anguish at seeing Odette go, alone, to make a potentially hazardous journey. Odette did not know when she would see Jacques again, as the war seemed to be moving very quickly.

Relieved when he heard that she'd arrived safely in Dinard, Jacques told her not to worry if there were aerial bombardments, as he was safe. Moreover, he added, "In any case, I do not believe, I cannot believe, that the situation is as serious as some seem to think it is. It was much worse, on many occasions, in '14." Two days later he wrote, "It seems to me that after the first shock, everyone is regaining their strength and hope. At least that is what is happening here, but we hear only so much from the outside…My dear, I am

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maintaining the hope, the certainty that this nightmare will pass, that we will remain free, that we will be together, and we will love each other more and better than ever, if that is possible." In closing his letter the next day, he suggested, "Do as I do, don't listen to the radio too much, think about me as I think about you, be hopeful. It is a necessity and a duty."

Prayers

The Germans' thrust west meant they were bypassing Paris, at least for the time being. That brought some relief to the French government and kindled hope that the lengthening German spearhead might be vulnerable.

"Le Colonel Motor" de Gaulle had been given command of an armored division that, at the outbreak of the battle, still had no tanks. He was assigned the task of trying to halt the enemy in the region of Laon, about seventy-five miles northeast of Paris. De Gaulle was under no illusions as to the dire state of the Army. On May 16, during reconnaissance, he came across streams of refugees fleeing Belgium and, worse, many soldiers who had lost their weapons and their units: "At the sight of those bewildered people and of those soldiers in rout…I felt myself borne up by a limitless fury. Ah! It's too stupid! The war is beginning as badly as it could."

He resolved, "Therefore it must go on. For that, the world is wide. If I live, I will fight, wherever I must, as long as I must, until the enemy is defeated and the national stain washed clean."

De Gaulle received several battalions of tanks, about 150 in all, and assembled all of the forces he could muster in the vicinity. He attacked on May 17. Despite heavy pressure from Stuka dive-bombers, and the complete absence of his own air support, de Gaulle's division managed to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy. He attacked again farther west on the nineteenth, until he encountered overwhelming resistance.

Meanwhile, Premier Reynaud was thinking how the course

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his days digging trenches, and while he had jauntily reported to Odette, "I think that I missed my vocation of earthwork contractor," it was time to face the situation. He wrote Odette after Reynaud's speech:

My dear angel,

I am back from the cafeteria, where I heard Reynaud's speech at the Senate. His pure frankness and brutality let me think that there is still a chance to pull through. But even without believing the worst, we must still think about our kids, and what we would do if the total catastrophe were to materialize. We don't have to look far away, and I see only one solution. In case every hope was to be lost, you must try to find a way to England. Once there, you can seek asylum with [distant cousins] the Glehns and the Marshes.

After giving Odette their addresses, Jacques continued:

My darling, I am writing you all of these things coldly, without believing that they are real or possible…I am asking you to do and to organize everything as if it had to be carried out. I have total confidence in you and in your courage, my darling. I know that when the time comes you will do everything so that our children live free. As far as I am concerned, I will never believe in the total and final victory of those people, even if it would appear to be as total and final as possible. Trust me, my darling. I will find a way to rejoin you if there is nothing more that can be done here.

All of this being said, my darling, I should add that I don't believe a word of it. My courage and my trust rest on you. Not a minute, not a second, are you away from me, my darling. I hold you against me, my darling. I love you more than anything in the world.

Retreat

General Gamelin was finally relieved of duty. He was

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replaced by another World War I icon, the highly decorated, seventy-three-year-old Gen. Maxime Weygand. But it was too late for him or any other French commander to reverse the tide. The only hope for the isolated northern armies to survive was to make for the Channel coast and disembark there for England.

The operation was a British initiative. Lord Gort, commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), had alerted London that evacuation might become necessary. The Admiralty thought that at best 45,000 troops or so might be rescued, which would still leave the bulk of the BEF and all of the French Army stranded. By May 26, Gort's forces had withdrawn to the Dunkirk bridgehead.

Any British doubts about the necessity of evacuation were erased on the evening of May 27, when King Leopold of Belgium, without giving any notice to Britain or France or even his ministers, asked Germany for an armistice and surrendered unconditionally. The retreating British forces were now fully exposed on one flank; the Germans would have free passage through formerly defended territory straight to the sea.

To protect Dunkirk, the French First Army dug in at Lille and was ordered to fight to the last man in order to delay oncoming German divisions from reaching the bridgehead. Under constant bombardment from the Luftwaffe, a flotilla of all sizes of boats managed to evacuate an astounding 338,226 troops (198,229 British) over the span of nine days. More than 200 boats were sunk, the RAF lost 474 planes, casualties were heavy, and all equipment had to be left behind, but the scale of the evacuation was seen, particularly in Britain, as a miracle.

As always, the French authorities tried to cast the operation in the most favorable light. In the middle of the evacuation, the public was merely told that Allied forces were pursuing "with vigor, in the middle of constant combat, and in good order, the execution of movements decided by the command."

Churchill, however, reminded the relieved British

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