

FOREWORD: THE FALL OF FRANCE

Sylvia Townsend Warner

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ilya Ehrenburg, who has been described as the 'most renowned journalist of his generation' (Rubenstein, p.1) was born in Kiev in 1891. He was the only son of a Russian Jewish family, and grew up against a background of political turmoil and widespread anti-semitism, although his father's status as an assimilated, Russian-speaking Jew protected the family from the worst effects of the latter. Both factors, however, were to affect him profoundly throughout his life.

Political engagement came early, with Ehrenburg manning the barricades of a failed revolution at the age of fourteen years, and joining the Bolshevik underground when he was just fifteen – a move which led to a short prison term in 1908. On his release, he moved to Paris where he met Vladimir Lenin, then worked with Leon Trotsky in Vienna before quitting both the Bolshevik Party and politics in 1909.

Although sometimes seen as an apologist for Joseph Stalin, Ehrenburg's ideological stance is both more complex and more ambiguous than that: he was happy to satirise both capitalism *and* communism. However, journalistic assignments in Germany in 1931 resulted in articles voicing his concern at developments there, reinforced his anti-fascist outlook and led to a more wholehearted embrace of communism as the surest bulwark against fascism.

On the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, Ehrenburg went to Spain to cover events for *Izvestia*, and in 1937 he helped organise the International Writers' Congress in Defence of Culture in Valencia, Madrid and Paris. The British delegation included Sylvia Townsend Warner, and although she met Ehrenburg in Madrid (Harman, p.165) there is no record of ongoing correspondence between them, in the published letters and diaries at least.

By 1940 the Soviet Union was allied to Nazi Germany but Ehrenburg continued to write against fascism and the anti-semitism it entailed. It is his vociferous anti-fascism which makes Warner the obvious choice of writer to contribute a Foreword to Ehrenburg's pamphlet. However, this can probably also be regarded as a marker of her status as a prominent member of the British Communist Party.

After the war Ehrenburg's journalism and his novels continued to attract praise in the Soviet Union, but his association with Stalin left him vulnerable, and after publishing memoirs in which he admitted to having known that some of Stalin's victims were innocent, he was publicly denounced by Nikita Krushchev.

Ilya Ehrenburg died in Moscow in 1967.

HARMAN, Claire. (1989) *Sylvia Townsend Warner. A Biography*. London, Chatto & Windus.

RUBENSTEIN, Joshua. (1996) *Tangled Loyalties. The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg*. Tuscaloosa and London, University of Alabama Press.

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This is not the first French war that Ilya Ehrenburg, famous novelist, Soviet citizen and very much citizen of the world, has seen. Living in France before 1914 he was a correspondent on the Western Front in the war of 1914-18. Since then he has lived for many years in France, knowing it closely and dispassionately – and perhaps, in his eye-witness reportage from Vienna in February 1934, from

Spain during the Civil War, observing some cloudy symbols of the catastrophe which he witnessed in 1939-1940.

Between May 9th and June 9th, 1940, the German Army, having entered France through Belgium, crossed the Meuse, flouted the Maginot Line, reached the Channel, cut off the Belgian Army, the British Expeditionary Force and a considerable part of the French Army, havocked the north-eastern provinces, and swept forward to Paris. On May 17th prices on the Paris Bourse rose sharply, and the first refugees appeared in the street. On June 9th the Government left Paris. During the next day Parisians wondered whither it had gone – until the evening, when a black fog, drifting in from the burning oil-tanks, became a more immediate preoccupation. On June 14th the enemy entered Paris, where they found the Military Governor, the police, the staffs of public utility services, and those who were too old, too inform, too poor, or too witless to get out – in all less than one-tenth of the population of the city.

On June 14th, too, as I find in a diary: “*Onlooker*, broadcasting on the events of the week, urged hearers not to be too much overawed by the fall of Paris. It was less important than the steadfast courage of people in this country.”

For a month and a little over, then, France was News ... a flaring presaging comet in all men’s eyes. Before, we had heard little about France. We have heard but little since. Before, we learned, briefly, that all was going well. Since, we learn that all goes ill. There have been some books, memoirs, disclosures, but they have not told us very much, for some are but personal impressions hastily thrown together, and in others the grinding of the axe, the paying-off of old scores, have invalidated the narrative. Ehrenburg’s *Fall of France* (first appearing, last August and September, as five articles in *Trud*, the Soviet trade union paper) has a different ring. It records what he witnessed before and during the fall of Paris, and describes the aftermath in both occupied and unoccupied France. Compact, incisive, vivid (in the accounts of the sufferings of the French people almost unbearably so), it matches a

ruthless narrative to a ruthless march of events. Analysing the causes which prepared the downfall of the Republic, and survived it, and still persist, malignant as ever, it is much more than that easy thing, an indictment. It is a diagnosis.

As a diagnosis, it contains an element of hope. But for us, perhaps, it would be most useful read as a warning. It may be that *Onlooker* was right, that the courage of people in this country was more important than the fall of Paris. But the French did not lack courage. During ten months of defeat – defeat at first a slow paralysis, then a strychnine poisoning convulsion, they displayed a great deal of the courage known as “bulldog”. . .the kind of courage that holds on with its teeth while its hindlegs are being lifted off the ground. What was needed in France was not courage to face the enemy, but courage to find out the truth, and face that.

Across the Channel the chalk cliffs of France remind us that we were once part of the continent of Europe. We are not so much an island that we can afford to ignore the lesson of what happened in a country so close to ours in social structure and development. Till now, we might have pleaded that the lesson was hard to decipher. Ilya Ehrenburg’s book removes that excuse.

Foreword to Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Fall of France Seen through Soviet Eyes*. London: Modern Books, n.d.