

Marc Bloch and the *Strange Defeat*.

In a course on the historiography of Second World War France, in which the aim is both to study historians in terms of their context (to see why they wrote what they wrote) and also to comprehend the production of historical knowledge as something involving far more than professional historians, there could be no better starting-point than March Bloch. For with the Second World War, Bloch, one of the most eminent historians of his generation and among the greatest French historians of the 20th century, found himself fighting in defence of his country for the second time in a quarter of a century. He assumed the role of soldier and citizen, and this cost him his life on 16 June 1944 at the hands of the Gestapo chief in Lyon, Klaus Barbie, who in the late 1980s, was to be condemned by a French court for crimes against humanity.

As a participant in events, Marc Bloch never stopped analyzing them with the insight and perspective of the historian. In particular, he wrote an account of the central catastrophe of French history in the 20th century, the defeat by Nazi Germany in 1940, which he completed in a blaze of energy and concentration in the late summer and autumn of 1940. The book, *The Strange Defeat*, was published posthumously, once the war was over, in 1946. It was not so much a private document as one written from Bloch's own compulsion to understand contemporary events in historical terms and for a posterity that he knew he might not live to see. The aim of studying the text is not to assume that it is the last word in historical analysis of its subject, for clearly it is not, and could not be without access to the archives - as Bloch would have recognized. Rather it is to see how a major historian responded to an event of which he was part, and in what terms he did so. We shall compare Bloch's views with the latest work on the subject, Julian Jackson's *The Fall of France* (2003), in order to measure alternative ways of viewing the subject 60 years on. This lecture will not give a detailed discussion of *The Strange Defeat* - that will be the subject of discussion in class and a student presentation. Rather it will place Bloch in his historical context and suggest some of the issues that arise from an historiographical approach to the book.

1. Marc Bloch and the Second World War.

Marc Bloch's personal history intersects with that of the Second World War in a number of ways. In writing *The Strange Defeat*, he bore witness to the collapse of France. As we shall see later in the course, the use of legal procedures has been one means used by societies (or states) to arrive at a moral judgement on traumatic events e.g. the trials of Pétain and Laval immediately after the war, in 1945, and the string of trials of Vichyite French officials in the 1990s - René Bousquet, Paul Touvier, Maurice Papon. The question of whether the kinds of analytical truths that historians tell are compatible with such legal settling of accounts has emerged as a key issue.

But Bloch's approach is rather different. For he borrows a quasi-judicial format, or at least metaphor, in order to bear witness as a citizen and historian. Hence in part one of *The Strange Defeat* he establishes his own credentials both as a witness to the events in question (what he was able to see and why) and as a Frenchman with a deep love of his country, who had already fought for it with distinction in the Great War. He also presented himself as a Jew:

'if not by religion, which I do not practise [...] at least by birth. I derive neither pride nor shame from this, being, I hope, a sufficiently good historian to know that racial predispositions are a myth and that the very notion of a pure race is a particularly flagrant absurdity when people pretend to apply it, as in this case, to what in reality was a group of believers once recruited from across the mediterranean, Turkish and Slavic worlds.'ⁱ

Having established his reliability, Bloch then presents his 'testimony' as a witness to the defeat, which forms the second part of the work and consists of a searing indictment of the French military leadership for bureaucracy, inefficiency and defeatism. In the last and most historically-informed part of the work, 'A Frenchman examines his conscience', Bloch widens his testimony to French society and politics as a whole. He includes here a form of confession. 'I belong to a generation of Frenchmen who have bad conscience', he writes near the end of *Strange Defeat*, referring to the soldiers of the Great War who were only too happy to return to

‘normality’ rather than renewing France.ⁱⁱ And he critically assesses the educational and university systems for their part in the defeat. But overall, Bloch acts as a witness for the prosecution, using the metaphor of a judicial investigation to establish a hierarchy of responsibilities for the catastrophe of 1940.

Marc Bloch confronted other, equally central aspects of World War Two France. Having retreated to Dunkirk with the disintegrating First Army, with which he was a staff officer (he held the post of chief of petrol supplies for the most heavily motorized formation in the French army), Bloch was evacuated to Britain before being returned via Southampton to Normandy in a vain effort to reform the Army. Caught by the German advance in Rennes, capital of Brittany, Bloch slipped into civilian clothes and returned to his family in the country house in the department of the Creuse, where he wrote the *Strange Defeat* in July-September 1940.

Bloch, therefore, like so many others, ‘returned home’ (as Pétain had asked them to in the summer of 1940), and followed the logic of Pétain’s position of getting on with life, rebuilding France, to overcome the defeat. Bloch did this not at Pétain’s behest but because there seemed no alternative. But it was this logic on which Pétain’s initially overwhelming support was built. Yet almost immediately, Bloch confronted the reality of the Vichy régime’s particular and divisive domestic agenda, in the form of its exclusionary policies against Jews, foreign and French, which were introduced without any pressure from the Germans in autumn 1940.

Since 1919, Bloch had made his career at the University of Strasbourg. The academic staff of the university was evacuated to Clermont-Ferrand when the Nazis re-annexed Alsace-Lorraine in 1940 and ‘nazified’ Strasbourg University. But as Bloch began his teaching in Clermont-Ferrand in the autumn of 1940 (where he and his family moved), he was exposed to Vichy’s Statut des Juifs and subsequent anti-semitic legislation, which defined Jews in racial terms and began to exclude them from public life, including banning them from university teaching. Bloch protested, and in early 1941, the government exempted him among ten prominent Jewish

academics (several of whom had served in the Great War). Bloch transferred to Montpellier University in the winter 1941 (for the warmer climate since his wife was in frail health). Here he continued to teach for another 18 months before dismissal.

The experience of Bloch in this period was an exemplary tale of Vichy antisemitism – the humiliation of having to lobby for job, the experience of ‘social death.’ Bloch had to break his close relationship with Lucien Febvre and their radical history journal *Annales*. He did not take up a plan to emigrate to the New School in New York (he had grown-up children and an aged mother). He opposed the Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF) which was drawn into the machinations of collaboration. What underlay Bloch’s shock and anger was the pride of the deeply assimilated Jew who believed in the values of the Republic which were now comprehensively flouted. When he presents his credentials as a witness in *Strange Defeat*, Bloch comments that his ancestors had been part of France for five generations and had fought for their country:

‘My great-grandfather was a serving soldier in 1793; [...] my father was one of the defenders of Strasbourg in 1870 [...] I was brought up in the traditions of patriotism which found no more fervent champions than the Jews of the Alsatian exodus.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Bloch faced a further aspect of the political realities of Vichy - its impotence to prevent the Germans doing whatever they wished. In November 1942, with the German occupation of the southern zone, Bloch automatically lost his job and indeed fled for his life back to his country retreat. In the interim, his Paris apartment and library had been confiscated by Nazis and stripped of their contents.

It was thus a logical (but by no means automatic) step that led Bloch - despite all his family obligations, and being in mid-fifties – to join the Resistance. In 1942, while still teaching at Montpellier, he contributed to Comité Général d’Etudes (CGE) - with Pierre-Henri Teitgen, which was concerned with planning the post-war future. He had two sons in the Combat network. In late 1942 or early 1943, t Bloch joined another movement, Franc-Tireur, through contacts in the university of Clermont-Ferrand. He felt the need to act and recognized that sacrifice might be necessary to

achieve the end of the German occupation which he believed could not last. He moved to Lyon where he regional chief of Franc-Tireur, cooperating with Combat and Libération-Sud in the Mouvements Unis de la Résistance, the umbrella group in southern France. He wrote anonymous articles for *Les Cahiers Politiques*, an underground review, on educational reform. He helped plan the insurrection to follow D Day. But betrayed, he was arrested by the Gestapo, on 8 March 1944. He was tortured and killed in mid-June, but after hearing news of the Normandy landing.

Besides defeat, Vichy antisemitism, Resistance and martyrdom, Bloch also intersected with the Second World War in another way – his celebrated text, *Apologie pour l'Histoire*, translated as *The Historian's Craft*. He wrote this in response to what he saw as the corruption of the social and historical sciences during the war. It remains a foundation text on history as a discipline.

Finally, Bloch also intersects with the Liberation. Of course, he was dead and thus physically absent. But his memory was a significant presence. Febvre had Bloch's fate on his conscience and paid him a warm tribute. His reputation as a historian was confirmed as the *Annales* became the review of the Sixième Section of Ecole des Hautes Etudes Pratiques, later the current Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. It was perhaps the most famous historical review in the world from the 1950s to the 1980s. Bloch also became an exemplary figure for the preservation of the integrity of the professional historian's activity in the most dangerous and polarized years of the century without ceding the citizen's duty to act.

2. Marc Bloch the historian.

Bloch was born in 1886, the son of an academic (Professor of Classics, at the Ecole Normale Supérieure [ENS], from an Alsatian Jewish family. He grew up in Paris and was deeply affected as a youth by the Dreyfus Affair. He went to the elite ENS in 1904. He was a reservist in the First World War - ten of 41 in his ENS year died.

In 1919, he taught in the newly recovered University of Strasbourg, along with

Lucien Febvre. It was there that the two hatched the *Annales* project, with its transnational embrace, intellectual openness to other disciplines and concern with long-term social, cultural and economic (rather than event-driven political) history. Bloch was medievalist. His key works: *The Royal Touch* (1924); *French Rural History. An Essay on its Basic Characteristics* (1931). *Feudal Society* (1939-40).

3. The Strange Defeat.

Having established his credentials in part one of *The Strange Defeat*, part two is a stinging indictment of the lack of fighting spirit of the French army in 1940, which Bloch had been well-placed to observe personally. He was particularly harsh on the defeatist commander of his own First Army, General Blanchard, whom he overheard anticipating a general capitulation. But more generally, Bloch condemned the High Command for its lack of fighting spirit, its organizational rigidity, and its intellectual failure to anticipate the new kind of warfare with which the Germans presented it.

‘The world belongs to those who like the new’, he remarked. ‘That is why, having encountered the new face to face [in the form of the German invasion] and having been incapable of dealing with it, our High Command not only suffered defeat: like those boxers who have become slow due to overweight and are thrown off balance by the first unexpected blow, they accepted it.’^{iv}

But the root cause was much deeper even than this. For Bloch concluded this second section of the *Strange Defeat* by commenting that: ‘At the bottom of their hearts, [the generals] were ready in advance to despair of the very country that they were to defend and of the people who supplied their soldiers.’^v

This led Bloch to his third part (which we shall discuss in our second session). In this, Bloch extends the analysis of the defeat to the whole of French society and politics. Here Bloch more specifically uses his sense of historical perspective to pass in review different social or political formations (communism, the workers, business, the press, the educational system, the middle classes) to suggest that the deep sources of the defeat lay in French society and to a loss of vigour and confidence.

He begins by noting the difference between the experience of the two world

wars (his four years as a soldier in 1914-18 is an important point of comparison throughout). Space and time transformed had been transformed between the wars. Particularly interesting is his comment on the impact of aerial bombardment ('I shall never be able to witness unmoved the look of terror on the faces of children running in village streets from falling bombs'), something that was less overwhelming in 1914-1918. But compared to 1914-18 he argued that national solidarity and military resilience had failed in 1939-40. People shirked their duties. Nonetheless, in one of the most interesting passages of the this third part of *Strange Defeat*, Bloch compares the state of mind of the French during the two mobilizations, 1914 and 1939, and finds much that was similar. He rejects myths about 'war enthusiasm' in 1914 (and here anticipated recent scholarship) while pointing to the real spirit of patriotism that did greet the war, which was seen as forced on the French in 1914 as in 1939. In other words, neither defeat nor defeatism in 1940 were inevitable.

However, Bloch argues that the initial commitment to the war in 1939 was undermined by a serious of divisions and difficulties that had largely arisen in the inter-war period. These left the French (and British) weakened in the face of the German offensive when it came nine months later. These weaknesses included a selfish trade union movement, which failed to distinguish between domestic class conflict and the enormity of the danger posed by Hitler. This was made 'far worse by the incredible contradictions of French communism.' But Bloch was in no sense an anti-labour conservative. For he goes on to excoriate the French bourgeoisie, which intellectually, he claims, had switched off after the First World War and failed to remain informed about the new and dangerous world of the inter-war period (counteracting this, of course, had precisely been a central aim of the *Annales*). Rather, they had reacted in exaggerated ways to what I called the 'malaise' of the 1930s, to the new tensions in French society, the emergence of industrial conflicts and the labour movement. In a telling sentence, Bloch, having attacked the anti-modern, anti-urban bias of Pétain's discourse, remarks that:

'A great many people who sit in the driver's seat today - or think they do - have never ceased to regret the docility which they believe to be inherent in all mildly successful peasant societies.'

And he goes on to find the fundamental fault in a failure to modernize and industrialize, which had put France at the mercy of Germany, the supreme European power of the machine age.

‘The donkey-car may be a friendly and a charming means of transport,’ he went on, ‘but if we refuse to replace it by the motor-car, where the motor-car is desirable, we shall find ourselves stripped of everything - including the donkey.’

In these passages, Bloch is talking not just about the defeat but about its consequences in the reactionary, anti-modern bias of Vichy and the economic domination by Nazi Germany - about the nature of both of which, Bloch was remarkably far-sighted. Yet it is also interesting that Bloch had himself been the leading historian of *rural* France, and that the *Annales* had tended to downplay contemporary history and above all political and military history.

Bloch goes on to subject the educational system - including history-teaching - and the political regime to scrutiny. And while he could be excoriating in his expression (the ‘party machinery had already [before the war] begun to give off the smell of dry-rot’, and ‘the men who govern us today were for the most part brought up in a land of mental bogs’), he also brought his usual balanced judgement to bear on the issue - pointing out that the parliamentary regime was not so inherently flawed as was widely supposed in 1940, and pointing out the vigour of its performance during the Great War. He also pays tribute to reforms which were attempted, especially by the centre-left Popular Front government of 1936-7

In conclusion, Bloch comes back to what might be called a failure of social leadership, that of the ‘French bourgeoisie’ and its decisive failure to come to grips with the issue raised by the Popular Front. In that, he placed a good measure of responsibility on academics and higher education for having failed to achieve the intellectual and political enlightenment necessary to cope with the changed world, including the threat of Nazi Germany.

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How is one to assess this work? Marc Bloch undoubtedly gives a graphic and deeply perceptive account of the shortcomings of the French military in 1940 in part two of *The Strange Defeat*, and also an engaged but balanced discussion of the divisions of inter-war French life and the malaise of the 1930s. In both regards, we might consider his book as an important primary source - the experience and views of a very well-informed and analytically acute contemporary, who writes from a specific position (or set of positions), viz. a deeply assimilated Jew, a man imbued with the values of the political culture of French republicanism, a patriot who had already fought with distinction for his country in the Great War, and a successful historian at a leading French university and as such a man with an international reputation.

But does the third part of *The Strange Defeat*, 'A Frenchman Examines his Conscience', actually explain the second, the testimony of the witness to the military disaster of 1940? The point has been contested by modern, revisionist historical writing, best summarized by Jackson's *The Fall of France*. The military outcome in 1940 was much closer than it might seem, and the result more contingent than Bloch allowed. Conversely, had Britain been defeated, much of what Bloch laid at the door of inter-war France could have been levelled at inter-war Britain, but was not, owing to the successful British resistance and ultimate victory against Nazi Germany. In other words, Bloch's explanation of defeat in 1940 may be hugely over-determined.

Should the question be left there? Or is there a further possibility, that we need to understand *The Strange Defeat* as a particular genre - the literature of defeat, marked by confession, atonement and revival. The parallel with Ernest Renan's *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1873) is instructive. This work by a leading philosopher also accounted for 1870 in terms of French decadence and failure to modernize. But if the Franco-Prussian War had not occurred, which it might well not have, the question would not have been posed - or not in those terms. The language of expiation and renewal was in the air in the late summer of 1940, as it tends to be after the trauma of defeat. We have seen that Pétain and the 'National Revolution'

provided one set of responses. Perhaps we might best understand Bloch as implicitly - and on occasions explicitly - recommending a different set of responses, based on the values and experiences that I have discussed. In a telling passage in part three of *The Strange Defeat*, he writes:

‘If we turn back on ourselves we shall be lost. Salvation can be ours only on condition that we set our brains to work with a will, in order that we may know more fully, and get our imaginations moving to a quicker tempo.’

This was the diagnosis that preceded the recommendation of reforms - which is exactly what Bloch wrote on in the Resistance press in 1942-44. In short, we should perhaps consider *The Strange Defeat* as part of the literature of redemption and salvation that accompanies defeat. And because the war in fact continued (as Bloch knew full well it would, though many in France ignored this fact in mid-1940), it perhaps therefore stands as one of the first texts of the French Resistance.

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ⁱ L'Etrange Défaite, p. 23.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, p. 187.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p23.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 144.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 144.