



Georges Mandel and the Third Republic

Par John M. Sherwood

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15. The First Resister

Ce qui compte dans la guerre, ce n'est pas un échec, c'est l'implacable volonté de ne jamais plier.

Mandel

AFTER THE FIRST German breakthrough in May, France was compelled to consider seriously the possible consequences of losing the war. If Paris were evacuated and the government transferred to North Africa, for instance, the way might be left open for a revolutionary movement or a coup d'état. This particular possibility was so disturbing to many government leaders, that they allowed it to influence their behavior even before defeat was certain. Reynaud hesitated to dismiss Weygand and Pétain because they might establish a rival government and split the country. For similar reasons, Mandel instructed all members of Parliament to leave the capital with the cabinet and stayed in Paris and Tours until the last moment to ensure that his instructions were carried out. Later, he also advised the deputies and senators in the provinces to join the government in Bordeaux so that they would be available to support a decision to leave for North Africa,¹ and also possibly so that he could watch them.

That Mandel had indeed once feared a revolutionary outbreak seems clear from Ambassador Bullitt's report of May 28, that "both Reynaud and Mandel now expect a Communist uprising and butcheries in Paris and other industrial centers as the German army draws near." He added that Mandel had asked personally that morning whether the shipment of American submachine guns could not be speeded up.² Mandel seems to have changed his mind, however, for General Spears reports that he finally discounted the danger of a revolutionary movement because the people had been shocked into passivity and their leaders had been drafted.³

By contrast, a fear of disorder remained uppermost in the mind of General Weygand.⁴ One reason he insisted on an armistice was that, like Bazaine in 1870, he believed part of the army had to be kept intact to preserve order in the country. To enforce his point of view, he was willing to go to any lengths. His unverified announcement to the cabinet that Maurice Thorez had established a Communist government in Paris may only have been a mistake, but to his opponents it seemed more like a trick. More serious was his personal revolt against the government. To overthrow Reynaud and have Pétain or someone else invested, he pitted his personal prestige and authority against the Premier's, refusing to surrender to the Ger-

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on resistance from North Africa. As Daladier testified, he, Mandel and others who were soon to leave the country, believed that no matter what happened in France it would still be possible to organize resistance overseas.²³

On the evening of the nineteenth, their bags packed, Mandel, Blum and other *jusqu'aboutistes* gathered with Herriot to await instructions for departure. They thought that the cabinet intended to fly to Algiers and that the members of Parliament would embark on the *Massilia*, a steamship that had recently arrived. After waiting most of the night, they were finally informed that the government had postponed departure until after a cabinet meeting to be held that morning.²⁴

At the meeting on the twentieth it was decided that instead of leaving directly for Algiers, the government would depart in the afternoon for Perpignan, close to Port Vendres on the Mediterranean, where they would be out of German hands but still in a position to go to Algiers if the enemy advanced too far or the armistice terms proved too severe. On the basis of this information, Jules Jeanneney and Léon Blum left immediately for Perpignan, believing that Parliament was to join the government there. But shortly afterward Admiral Darlan told Herriot that facilities at Port Vendres would be inadequate to embark all the deputies. He suggested that they leave as originally planned on the *Massilia*, which unfortunately had been unable to reach Bordeaux because the Germans had mined the Gironde River during the night. But cars would be provided to take them to Le Verdon, a port one hundred kilometers along the coast, where the *Massilia* was anchored.²⁵

Following Darlan's instructions, some thirty of the representatives at Bordeaux made their way on the afternoon of the twentieth to Le Verdon. Among them were Mandel, Daladier, César Campinchi, Jean Zay, and Pierre Mendès-France. Mandel was accompanied by Madame Bretty and his daughter. The fact that so few deputies showed up has frequently been taken by Pétain's followers as an indication that most of the representatives wanted to stay in France, and that only a frightened few—mostly Jewish—anxious to save their lives, fled on the *Massilia*.²⁶ It is true that many of the passengers were Jewish, but it is also true that some of the deputies in the confusion at Bordeaux had not received word of the embarkation.²⁷ Others, whose baggage was loaded on the ship, either were prevented from getting to Le Verdon or changed their minds at the last minute. All of the senators, except Tony Révillon, decided not to embark for fear of being separated from the government while important decisions were being taken. They resolved instead to follow the ministers to Perpignan.²⁸

The representatives at Le Verdon, however, unaware of what had hap-

pened to their colleagues, were concerned that so few were ready to depart. The complete absence of any of Pétain's supporters should have warned them that the government might not leave Bordeaux after all. Louis Marin, in any case, expressed his fears of this to Mandel, who replied, "I have no more confidence in the government than you do, but I must get to North Africa."²⁹ Clearly he had given up all hope of accomplishing anything in France, and was determined to leave, whatever the other cabinet members or anyone else did. The absence of Blum, Jeanneney, and Herriot disturbed him not in the least. Reynaud's failure to join the other advocates of resistance seems to have been taken for granted. The one man whom Mandel tried to persuade to accompany him was General Bührer, the commander in chief of the colonial army.³⁰ But even his refusal did not change Mandel's plans. "The *Massilia*," he later told a friend, "was not a flight. It was above all a mission."³¹ To a deputy who wondered why so few of their colleagues were with them, Mandel said, "There are enough, and even perhaps too many, to constitute a resistance government."³² The time of delay and doubt was over. Mandel had decided to act.

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While the deputies were traveling to Le Verdon and embarking on the *Massilia*, the leaders in Bordeaux who favored an armistice were doing everything possible to delay the departure of the government. When General Weygand received word on the morning of June 20 that the French armistice negotiators would be received by the Germans sometime after 5 p.m., he persuaded Pétain that this information warranted a postponement of the move to Perpignan.³³ The delay gave the opponents of departure time to organize. On the twenty-first Pierre Laval led a delegation of deputies and senators to browbeat President Lebrun into either remaining in France or resigning from office. Unlike Pétain, Laval was as well aware as Mandel of the crucial nature of the president's office. He told Lebrun:

If the head of the state, the ministers, and the presidents of the assemblies leave France, the ministers who remain behind will no longer have the authority to speak in the name of the country. What is worse, the president of the Republic, in taking the seals of the state with him, will also take with him the government of France; he will be the sole master of policy.³⁴

Lebrun and the ministers in favor of departing were unable to overcome the obstacles placed in their way by Weygand, Laval, Pétain and others, and finally were forced to remain in Bordeaux. Blum and Jeanneney, already en route to Perpignan, were told to return, as was the staff of the Ministry of Colonies.³⁵ But no one bothered to tell the deputies at Le Verdon about

the change in plans. Expecting to leave immediately, they waited on their ship from the evening of the twentieth until the orders to depart arrived shortly after noon on the twenty-first.

Charles Pomaret, Pétain's minister of the Interior, has charged that the *Massilia* incident was a trap set by Admiral Darlan to get certain deputies out of the way while the armistice was signed.³⁶ It was Darlan who had insisted that they leave on the *Massilia* while the government went to Perpignan. And it was Darlan who allowed the orders to be sent to the commander of the ship on the twenty-first to leave for Casablanca. The least that can be said is that he, Pétain, and the other ministers were not opposed to the departure of the most active advocates of continued resistance and did nothing to keep them in France.

It was only after two days at sea, on the evening of the twenty-third, that the passengers on the *Massilia* learned the government had stayed at Bordeaux and concluded an armistice. Campinchi's suggestion that the ship be turned about and head for England was not acted on, for they realized that Commander Ferbos, openly antagonistic toward the passengers, would refuse.³⁷ It was also impossible to return to Bordeaux because of wartime regulations forbidding a request for new orders. They had no choice but to proceed to Casablanca where some of the deputies still hoped to organize resistance.³⁸

The ship arrived on the morning of the twenty-fourth and was met by M. Morize, deputy governor of Morocco, who would not let the passengers debark.³⁹ That afternoon, however, Mandel and Daladier received permission to visit Resident-General Noguès at Rabat. They were given an official car and accompanied by M. Fourneret, the head of the Sûreté Générale in Morocco. In Rabat, when they learned that Noguès was in Algiers, they placed a call to his office there, only to be disappointed once again. The general was out but would call back when he returned. While waiting to hear from him, Daladier went to see Madame Noguès and Mandel made a fateful visit to British Consul General Hurst. Later, when they were finally able to talk to Noguès, Mandel tried to persuade him to act immediately, but he replied that nothing could be done before they had more precise information about the armistice and knew what the Bordeaux authorities were doing. Mandel angrily told him that "Bordeaux represents nothing," and ended the conversation. He and Daladier then returned to the *Massilia* in Casablanca as they had promised.⁴⁰

Until that moment Mandel had hoped that Noguès would carry on the war. For days the General had been sending telegrams to the Bordeaux government advising it to come to North Africa and to transport all available men and equipment across the Mediterranean. On the seventeenth he had wired Weygand:

The army, air force, and navy all demand the continuation of the struggle in order to preserve our honor and keep North Africa for France. . . . If the government has no objection, I am ready to take responsibility, without formal authorization, for the continuation of the war with all the risks that that action involves.⁴¹

Although he was convinced they would be able to hold out in North Africa, he was desperately short of men and equipment. He asked the British to send reinforcements and received the discouraging reply that it was impossible for the moment to dispatch an expeditionary force.⁴² On the night of the twenty-third he was further disheartened by the news that the Pétain government had stopped the shipment of men and matériel across the Mediterranean. What finally convinced him that resistance would be impossible was the refusal of the naval authorities to support him once they learned that the armistice agreement left the colonies and the fleet in French hands.

In view of the circumstances, Noguès' acceptance of the armistice is completely understandable. What is remarkable, however, is his animosity toward Mandel, who shared his belief that resistance should have been continued. Because of him, Mandel was prevented from leaving for England. He was arrested, never to know freedom again, and set on the road to his assassination in 1944. The ostensible cause of Noguès' action was the visit Mandel had made to the British Consul in Rabat.

On the night of the twenty-fourth London had learned, probably from Hurst, that Mandel and a number of other deputies had landed in Morocco. Churchill immediately decided to send Lord Gort and British Minister of Information Alfred Duff Cooper, an old friend of Mandel, to persuade them "to form a new French government in North Africa to carry on resistance."⁴³ There was no secrecy about the mission. On the morning of the twenty-fifth, when Hurst and General Dillon, British liaison officer in North Africa, were notified that Duff Cooper and Gort would arrive at Rabat that evening, they informed General Noguès, who refused to receive the British representatives and ordered the *Massilia* sent into the harbor so that they could not contact the passengers.⁴⁴ He also instructed Admiral Harcourt, the naval commander at Casablanca, to use all means, "including force," to prevent Mandel from leaving the ship or telephoning.⁴⁵

Thus when Duff Cooper and Gort landed at Rabat on the evening of June 25, they were advised by Deputy Governor Morize not to try to see Mandel, for otherwise "he would be compelled to take steps that he would much regret." Duff Cooper agreed, but he asked Hurst to tell Mandel that everything possible would be done to get him out, and a ship would be sent from Gibraltar the next day if necessary.⁴⁶

A close guard was kept on the two Englishmen until, finally convinced

that nothing could be accomplished in Morocco, they left on the twenty-sixth for Gibraltar. Noguès, returning that morning to Rabat, then sent orders to Admiral Harcourt to allow the passengers to leave the *Massilia*, except for Mandel, who was to be placed under house arrest.⁴⁷

To the authorities at Bordeaux, Noguès reported that Hurst had asked him for permission to embark the passengers from the *Massilia* on a British destroyer. "I expressed my surprise and my indignation at such a request and formally rejected it."

In answer to my questions, M. Hurst told me that Mandel had made the request to him the day before yesterday. . . . I informed M. Hurst that on behalf of my government I forbade M. Mandel to leave for England. I ordered the Admiral [Harcourt] to watch for the arrival of the English destroyer and to prevent any clandestine landing. I have informed M. Mandel through General Michel that at the least incident, at the first attempt to contact the British consul, I would not hesitate to have him arrested.

The remarks of M. Hurst and the results of the investigation into the visit to Morocco of M. Duff Cooper establish that M. Mandel after his arrival contacted the British consulate and that it was at Mandel's instigation that the Minister of Information made the trip.

Separating the case of the former Minister of the Interior from that of his colleagues, I am considering sending Mandel away and placing him in a residence under the control of the police.⁴⁸

In accordance with Noguès' orders, when the *Massilia* was allowed to return to shore on the twenty-seventh, the other passengers were set free, but Mandel, in a new violation of his parliamentary immunity, was placed in police custody. Along with Madame Bretty, he was sent to Ifrane, a fashionable summer resort in Morocco, where he was lodged in a hotel under guard.

At his trial after the war, Noguès tried to defend his actions as measures to protect Mandel against demonstrations being organized by the supporters of Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français. He was sent to Ifrane because it was "the most agreeable place for him to wait." The man assigned to guard him, said Noguès, was "the friendliest, the nicest policeman in Casablanca." The General concluded: "I don't think he suffered. On the contrary, he was protected there, and I think he was better off at Ifrane."⁴⁹

In spite of Noguès' professed concern for Mandel's well-being, it is evident from his report to Bordeaux on the twenty-sixth that he placed Mandel under house arrest and sent him to Ifrane to prevent him from escaping to England. One would have expected a more sympathetic attitude from the military commander in chief in North Africa, who himself believed that the war should have been continued. But through fear of the wrath of the Bordeaux government should Mandel be allowed to escape, or because of

a personal resentment of politicians, widely shared by military men in 1940, or because he could not conceive of opposing the constituted authorities,⁵⁰ Noguès did everything in his power, legal and illegal, to restrain Mandel.

A few days later, believing that Mandel was still on the *Massilia*, Churchill ordered the admiralty to attempt to capture the ship. The British navy, however, was unable to work out a plan, and Mandel, in any case, was already at Ifrane. "Thus," writes Churchill, "perished the hope of setting up a strong representative French government either in Africa or in London."⁵¹

On June 18 de Gaulle had made his famous speech calling for the continuation of the war, but the British government was reluctant to recognize the relatively unknown General as the head of French resistance. The growing French refugee colony in London also had serious reservations about de Gaulle. Some of them were opposed to supporting a military man, others disliked his assumption of personal leadership, and still more were waiting to see whether some organization would not be formed in the colonies that would enjoy greater authority and legitimacy.⁵² Even de Gaulle was hoping that a more prominent leader would appear. "If *any one* of influence would come forward!" he exclaimed. "Any one—any one!"⁵³

Mandel's arrival in Casablanca had revived waning expectations that he would be the man. When Lord Perth learned that the *Massilia* had reached North Africa, he declared to French friends, "I have great hopes for Georges Mandel.... That man can be a Clemenceau." For two days the French émigrés shared his hopes and were optimistic that Mandel would be able to form a government in North Africa, with which General de Gaulle would then have collaborated. They believed that Marshal Pétain and Mandel had a secret agreement to divide the responsibility for governing France while disavowing one another in public.⁵⁴

Mandel's arrest dashed these hopes and led the English on June 28 to accept General de Gaulle as head of all free Frenchmen. It was at best a *mariage de convenance*, and Churchill always regretted the failure to liberate "the first resister."⁵⁵ In 1944, in the midst of his perennial difficulties with de Gaulle, he was heard to murmur: "Ah, if only I had been able to rescue Mandel."⁵⁶