

# GENERALISSIMO OF THE FORCES

## Pen-Picture of Gamelin

**G**ENERAL Gamelin, the commander-in-chief of the French forces (and soon probably of all their allies) is a little man scarcely 5 feet 4 inches in height and weighing not much more than a hundred-weight. He was one of the few generals who came out of the Great War with a reputation as a strategist, and as Supreme Commander of all the French armed forces he holds a title not held by any soldier of France since Napoleon.

### Descended from Five Generals

He was born in 1872 (the year after the Franco-Prussian War) in Paris at No. 262 Boulevard, St. Germain, just across from the War Ministry, in whose shadow he played war games as a child. On his father's side he is descended from at least five generals, one of whom served under Louis XVI. His father, Zephirin Auguste Joseph Gamelin, became Controller-General of the French Army after he had been gravely wounded at Solferino, during Napoleon III's fight against the Austrians.

He first went to the Collège Stanislas, a strict and scholarly Catholic school with considerable social standing and a military flavour. One of his teachers was Mgr. Henri Marie Alfred Baudrillart, now Cardinal Baudrillart, who still remains one of General Gamelin's best friends. At Stanislas, methodical Maurice further disciplined his mind by memorising ten lines of prose at night (because it was harder than poetry) and reading a book of philosophy a week. After Stanislas he entered St. Cyr, French Sandhurst, where in 1893 he finished first in a class of 449.

### Service in Algeria

There followed three years of service with the 3rd Regiment of the *Tirailleurs Algériens*, because he wanted to see some rough service, and three years with the Army's Geographical Service, because he liked to paint landscapes in water colour, survey and map. In 1899 he was admitted to the War College, where he studied tactics under Lieut.-Colonel, later Marshal, Foch, who particularly noticed his qualities. He graduated in 1902 with the commendation of "très bien."

### Secretary to Joffre

During the next four years he had various field commands and in 1906 he became orderly officer to General Joffre, then commander of the 6th Infantry Division in Paris. In 1912, when Joffre was promoted to the Supreme War Council, Gamelin was chosen

as Joffre's *chef de cabinet*, or military secretary. During this time the French General Staff was discussing (but only discussing) the possibility of a German violation of Belgian neutrality to attack France. Gamelin made a study of it and wrote out a defence of such an attack. That was the germ of Joffre's Instruction No. 2.

During those critical days General Joffre, who had called Gamelin "one of my red blood corpuscles" came to admire his little aide's unflinching composure as well as his swift and incisive tactical foresight. Paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, he observed: "If this is philosophy, it is time all generals were philosophers."



"... The first since Napoleon"

As France's No. 1 Soldier, Gamelin has continued the Maginot Line to the sea, mechanised the Army to a point below Germany's, but at which he thinks it can be most effective, extended the conscript period from a year to eighteen months, to two years—this over the bitter opposition of most French politicians. He has confidence in the Army he has built. During the Munich crisis he believed the French Army was ready to fight, and General Gamelin quietly went to London to tell the statesmen so. He got about the same attention that he got in 1936 from M. Sarraut when he told the Government he could chase the Germans out of the Rhineland if they wanted him to.

### Not a "Colourful" General

General Gamelin is generally characterised as colourless. That, however, is the way the French have learned to like their generals best. Napoleons I and III had plenty of colour, but they did not pay off at the finish. In 1889 colourful General Boulanger came close to seizing the country. The colourful military cliques of the century's turn—on one side the Catholics and reactionaries; on the other the

Radical Socialists and Free-masons—gave France its Dreyfus case. Nowadays no French soldier votes, and on the subject of politics the Army is known as *la grande muette* (the big dumb woman). Particularly in these times, France wants her soldiers mute and professional, and the mutest and most professional is Maurice Gamelin.

The good grey little General leads a good grey little life. Just before 9 o'clock each morning he leaves his apartment on the third floor of a five-story house at No. 55 Avenue Foch, near the Arc de Triomphe. He is driven in a staff car to his office in a long-low, old-fashioned building at No. 4 bis Boulevard des Invalides, below the gold dome of Napoleon's tomb.

### Prodigious Memory

General Gamelin is very easily approached, his voice is quiet and he is always calm. ("It's no use getting angry at things, it's a matter of indifference to them.") His well-trained memory is still prodigious. He is said not only to know every road near any French frontier, but also to know by name and sight every French officer down through the rank of colonel. He is not chummy with his staff, but treats them with what they call "benevolent formality."

### Friend of Badoglio

The General usually wears, except on ceremonial occasions, a dark civilian suit. He does not mind the numerous luncheons and dinners he has to attend, likes to go out in the evenings, to hear opera and ancient music. If he stays home he reads. His library is stocked principally with philosophy, folklore, political and military history and treatises on his other old favourite: map making. He has few friends, but one of his best, oddly enough, is that other able professional, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, of Italy. On his 55th birthday General Gamelin married. He and his wife, who is as neutral-toned as her husband, have no children. Madame la Générale enjoys going to manoeuvres.

### Two Anecdotes

Even the few anecdotes about this thoroughly professional little man take on some of their subject's small, neat dignity. Last year, visiting a Chasseurs' encampment on a mountain plateau, he shook hands with familiar old-timers and was taken to the picket line to see some of the St. Bernards who do the outfit's liaison work. Gravely the General knelt down and shook hands with the best of them, too.

On Bastille Day, down the Champ-Elysees rolled one of the most blazingly colourful military parades ever seen. There were white-plumed Republican Guards in scarlet and blue; bear-skinned, red-coated, white-cross-belted British Guardsmen; rakish, bereted *Chasseurs à pied* (Blue Devils); smart ski-shouldering Chasseurs Alpins; bearded Foreign Legionnaires; burnoused Spahis with shoulder-slung rifles on Arabian ponies or brandishing lances on racing dromedaries; turbaned brown Madagascar rifle-men; sun-helmeted white Colonial scouts; fezzed black Senegalese sharpshooters; earthshaking, ear-shattering tanks—all ablaze with the armed might of Imperial France. In the reviewing stand, half-hidden behind politicians and visiting dignitaries, stood a little man with grey hair, a small grey moustache, in a small blue-grey uniform—Commander-in-Chief Gamelin. He could hardly be seen. But the troops knew he was there, and so did the people.