

NEW CALEDONIA AND THE FALL OF FRANCE

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ATTEMPTED BETRAYAL BY ISLAND'S GOVERNOR

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The fall of France found New Caledonia of two minds -- one was to follow de Gaulle and the other to support Petain. Although it was evident that the greatest majority of the islanders were for de Gaulle attempts to place the colony under the control of Vichy nearly succeeded.

Governors often succeed one another with amazing rapidity. Three arrived and left in 1939 and the last of the series entered office on October 21 after the outbreak of war. He was Governor Pelicier.

Upon the fall of France Henri Sautot, then French Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides, took a clear equivocal stand with de Gaulle. Pelicier, on the other hand, showed himself to be sinuous and double-faced. Nevertheless the New Caledonian General Council on June 24, 1940, intimated its decision to fight alongside the British Empire. That evening 3000 people demonstrated in favour, marched to the British Consulate and sang the national anthems of the two countries.

Notwithstanding the decision, the "Official Journal" of July 31 published a decree of the Petain Government concerning the judiciary and police, also that every legal decision must carry the formula: "In consequence the Marshall of France, head of the French State, orders....." The people interpreted this as a betrayal. For how could official decrees be published or executed in the name of that Government after the General Council's action.

To a demonstration in the street two days later the Governor offered the explanation that the so-called "new constitution" was not promulgated. The General Council censured the Governor for acting without first

consulting the council.

The Governor reaffirmed his promises of political and economic co-operation with the British Empire but people lost faith in him. On the night of August 18 about 8 o'clock Government House was rocked by the explosion of a piece of dynamite which broke the windows on the ground floor. In the garden the police found another stick with a half-burned fuze. A sentry in the rear of the building noticed nothing unusual. Acts of the Governor at the same time both officially denied and admitted the Petain Government to the confusion of the islanders.

A special session of the Council on August 28 demanded the departure of the Governor. The Governor left on September 4 for France and Vichy appointed Lt-Col Maurice Denis, military commander in the French Pacific to succeed him in the meantime. Within a week letters from settlers expressed the general sentiment and a free referendum of the population was asked for. Insistent requests failed to produce results.

To show the people's feeling against the Governor it was decided by the de Gaulle Committee in Noumea to hold a public demonstration, assembling at 5 on the morning of September 19 in front of the Noumea Town Hall.

The march of events in the previous days caused the Governor to send for the "Dumont d'Urville", a French gunboat. This arrived on September 18, and the "Admiral Charner" was on that day on its way from Indo-China. The idea was to keep the population cowed. The demonstration was an open secret and Governor Denis proclaimed a state of siege. (To be continued)