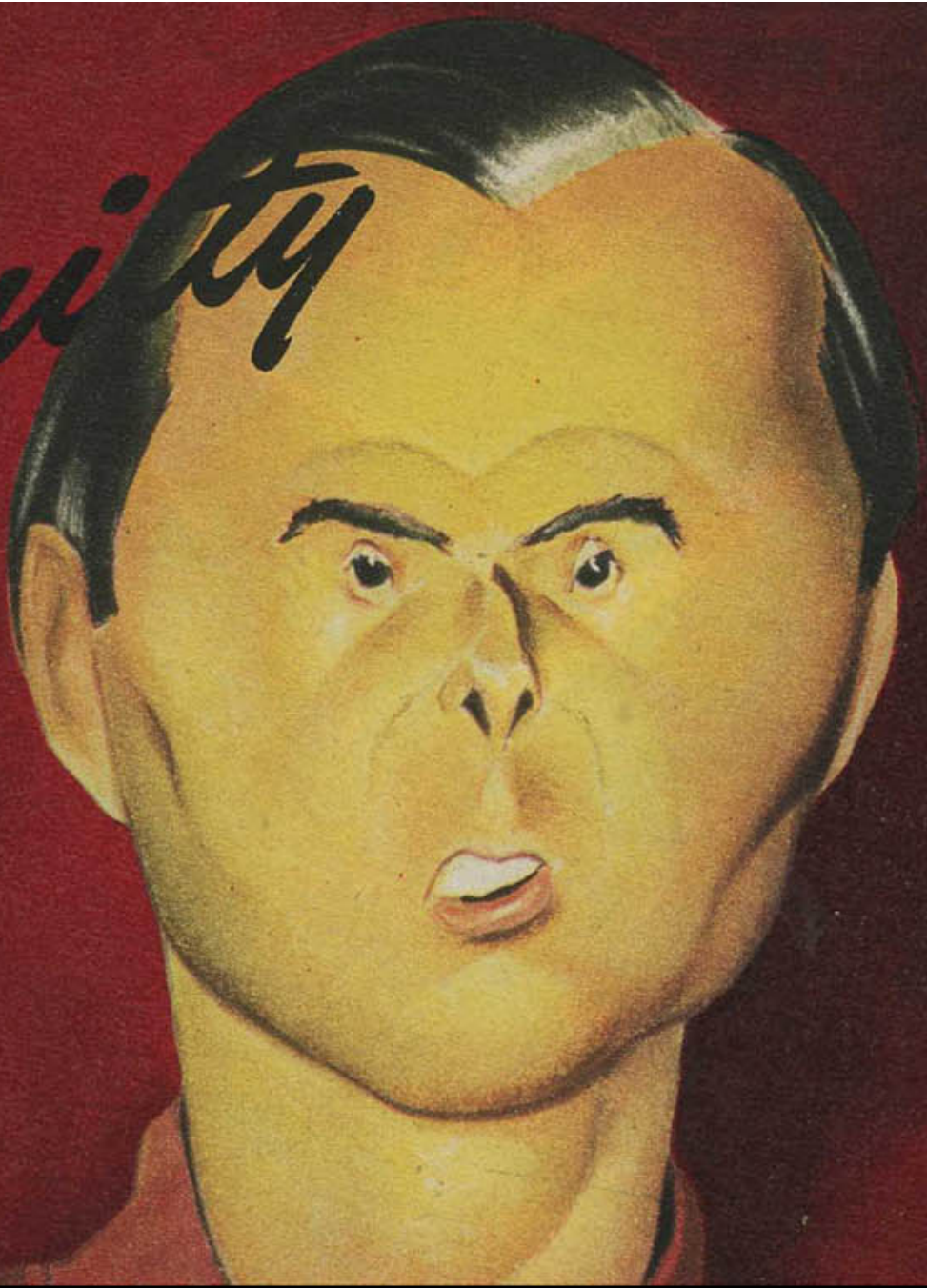


THE *Guilty*



LEON MARIE JOSEPH IGNACE DEGRELLE

WHAT Adolf Hitler counted on as a source of strength has turned out to be a fatal weakness. In every country marked down for conquest, the Master Corruptionist was able to buy up rotted souls—men willing to betray their people for money or preferment—but in every case, these abominable treacheries only stirred the populations to deeper fury and fiercer resistance. The shame of a Quisling has made every Norwegian willing to die rather than submit, and Karl Hermann Frank, Czechoslovakia's Judas, is more hated than bloodthirsty Kurt Daleuge.

In Belgium it is the name of Leon Marie Joseph Ignace Degrelle that steels the resolution of every man, woman and child. What adds to the rage of Belgians is that they underestimated the menace of the slick-haired demagogue, letting him run free instead of being placed before a firing squad to pay the penalty for treason. Even when it became known that he was taking Nazi money and Hitler's orders, sapping the foundations of national unity, a tolerant people contented themselves with putting the traitor in prison when he should have been shot or hanged.

It must be admitted, however, that Degrelle was a good deal of a joke in the beginning. His first known activity, after being kicked out of the University of Louvain, was the sale of "miracles" to poor ignorant peasants. Fragments of the true Cross, bones of the saints and that sort of thing. The Catholic hierarchy soon branded him as a vulgar charlatan, putting the police on his trail, and Degrelle prudently switched to other and safer kinds of petty swindling.

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Handsome, plausible and glib, politics eventually appealed to him as a field for his talents, but repeated bids for office resulted in defeat. Nothing seemed more certain than that the "man with the electric voice" would remain a local windbag, but in 1935, Adolf Hitler began the development of fifth columns in other countries, and Leon Degrelle was his choice in Belgium. Even more important than money, the Nazis gave him a slogan. "Watch out for the Red Peril. Down with Bolshevism!" Starting a political movement that he called Christus Rex—Christ the King—the unscrupulous rascal quickly gained a following by his lurid warnings against "Unholy Russia." Cardinal Van Roey, to be sure, denounced him as a blasphemer, but Degrelle simply changed the name to Rexists, and went on with his campaign.

In every country, there are racial, religious and class prejudices that can be played on, and with plenty of Nazi funds to spend, the Rexists turned Belgium into a bedlam. Inflaming hates and discontents, bribing and lying, Degrelle gained political strength to a point where Premier Paul Van Zeeland felt the necessity of taking the field against him. A bitter campaign exposed the traitor's intrigues and German affiliations, and in the election the Rexists polled only 69,000 votes against 276,000. Admittedly a Nazi tool, Degrelle should have been tried for treason, but the Belgians, being a democratic people, shrank from such decisive action.

This was a criminal blunder, for in 1938 the Rexist leader attempted a *putsch* under orders from Berlin. Assembling an "army" of petty criminals and professional malcontents, Degrelle started a march on Brussels, bellowing his intent to save Belgium from Bolshevism. The government put down the uprising easily enough and without much loss of life, but once again decided against stern measures, merely putting the leader and some 250 of his followers behind bars.

Notwithstanding these failures, Hitler still retained faith in the "man with the electric voice," and when the Germans marched into Brussels, one of their first acts was to release Degrelle and put him in as *Gauleiter* of the captured country. A storm of protest greeted the appointment,

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and neither Nazi firing squads nor Brown-shirt clubs could force the Belgians to accept the rule of one whom all despised. Sabotage and open revolt reached such proportions that General Alexander von Falkenhausen had to demand a change. "Degrelle," he reported, "is our worst enemy." Even the presence of the creature—the fact that he breathed Belgian air—proved such an irritant that he was asked to leave the country.

By way of saving his face, Degrelle announced that he had raised a Walloon regiment for service on the Russian front, and dashed off with a spectacular flourish somewhat marred by German grins and Belgian hoots. At last reports (and from Berlin, at that), the phony was buying wine and dancing with prostitutes in taverns far behind the fighting line. His caution, however, pleases the people that he betrayed. They do not want anyone else to deal with Leon Marie Joseph Ignace Degrelle. It is a pleasure they reserve for themselves. ★★★

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