

# Why France Wants to Abolish Its "LAND of the LIVING



One-fourth of them probably will be dead within six months. . . . French criminals about to embark for the penal colony in Guiana.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first of a series of six articles dealing with the history of, and conditions in, the famous French penal colony in Guiana. The series is especially timely in view of Premier Blum's present efforts to abolish the colony.

PARIS.

**E**IGHT HUNDRED men were spared a one-way passage to France's official limbo last autumn, when the government of Leon Blum canceled the annual shipment of convicts to Cayenne.

The prisoners were ready. "La Martiniere," the notorious prison-ship, was in harbor at the Ile de Re. Steam was up. It was circulating not only in the engines, but also in the gruesome pipes about the prisoners' cages—ready to scald any insurrection into quietude.

Down in Guiana all was ready too—the heat, the fever, the stench, the jungle.

Orders came through to halt the expedition. The People's Front government was the first in France whose gorge had risen effectively against the abominable penal system to which that batch of prisoners was doomed. The humanitarian air of the Blum cabinet prevailed.

Late in December, just before Parliament adjourned, a law abolishing the "bagne"—the penal colony—was offered the Chamber. It provided for the distribution of criminals eligible for deportation among the prisons of France, and dealt with other details of the nation's criminal regime. The law was tabled. Too many other more pressing legislative problems had to be considered. There the matter rested.

Does this mean the end of the penal institution which has done so much to discredit French justice in the eyes of the world? Certainly, if the Blum government has anything to do with it. Less certainly, if Blum should fall. His successor may not be so sympathetic to the fate of a mere 5000 or so specimens of the worst elements of the land. The "bagne" has lasted, in its present form, since the 1850s. Maybe it will just keep on.

The idea of sending criminals to rot in a prison colony in Guiana began with Louis XV—and Premier Leon Blum will end it if he has his way

**I**F that should be so, France will continue to be the only modern top-flight nation which continues the practice of deportation for its criminals in general. Czarist Russia used Siberia. Britain once—years ago—used the American continent and then Australia. Portugal recently sent her convicts to Angola. The government of India exported undesirable natives to the Andaman Islands. Stalwart Signor Mussolini still sends political enemies to the Lipari Islands. But generally the principle of deportation of ordinary criminals is discredited, except in France.

The French "bagne" is unique in modern penal procedure. Unique in function, unique in horror, unique in bungled purpose, unique in depravity. It has no merits, and all the vices. Down there, on that torrid, sickly, rain-drenched coast, they call it the "slow guillotine."

The brilliant notion of sending criminals to rot in the swamps and jungles of Guiana originated in the time of Louis XV. Maybe it was an idea of that gentleman himself, he who was called, for no special reason that historians remember, "The Well Beloved."

It was in 1763 that the "most evil elements of Paris" were first shipped out of France for Cayenne. In the new land, it was fondly hoped, they would not only cease from bothering civilized people like the Parisians, but would also develop great wealth for the mother country through exploiting the riches of that newly-discovered region which might turn into an El Dorado, if it wasn't that already.

There were 14,000 thugs, bandits, and killers in the original shipments. But the plan failed disastrously. They all died in six months or so. Fever, plague, snakes, wild beasts, savages, bad or too little food, the general incapacity of the white man to adjust himself to primitive life on the knife-edge of the Equator, destroyed them, as their successors die to-



Napoleon III and Eugenie. He revived the institution in the 1850s.

day. The "Well Beloved," once he had an idea, hated to give it up. Why be a king, if you can't be right, right or wrong? So he tried it again in 1766. The results were identical.

Ideas die slowly in France. Today the notion behind the Guiana penal colony is the same that motivated King Louis XV. It is to get rid of a lot of disagreeable people, and at the same time produce great wealth for the mother country.

**T**HE first part of the notion might be all right, except that in practice it exaggerates. A man sentenced to five years by a jury for a comparatively unimportant crime is just as likely to die in Guiana, just as unlikely ever to return, as the most hardened lifer.

As far as the second part of the notion is concerned, Guiana has never been profitable for France. The mother country, instead, is paying out, annually, a good many million francs for the sake of

## The Truth

"Devil's Island" is a name in the popular mind, with oppression whole. French penal system which Guiana) six miles away.

Devil's Island is one of three (Safety) which cluster together of colony and has been reserved for year confinement there of Capt. which he was later acquitted. At The World War crammed it.

