

**Pétain and the French:  
Authority, Propaganda, and Collaboration in Vichy France,  
1940-1942**

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**MARSHAL PHILIPPE PÉTAIN ADDRESSES THE FRENCH  
OCTOBER 30, 1940**

Frenchmen,

I met, last Thursday, with the chancellor of the Reich.

This meeting has both raised hopes and caused worry. I owe you an explanation about it.

Such a meeting, four months after the defeat of our armies, was only possible thanks to the character of the French in the face of adversity, to the immense recovery effort to which they have lent themselves, to the heroism of our sailors, to the energy of our colonial leaders, and to the loyalty of our indigenous populations.

France has recovered. This first meeting, between the victor and the vanquished, marks the first step toward the recovery of our country.

I freely accepted the Fuhrer's invitation. I acted under no compulsion, nor did I follow any diktat.

Collaboration was proposed between our two countries, and I accepted the principle. Its terms will be discussed at a later date.

To all those who await the salvation of France, I wish to say that salvation is already in our hands.

To all those who would doubt the noble sentiment of our thought, I wish to say that a Frenchman's first duty is to have faith.

To the doubters and the defiant, I would remind that the virtues of reserve and pride, when taken to an extreme, become mere stubbornness.

He who has taken over the destiny of France has the duty to create the most favorable atmosphere for safeguarding the country's interests.

It is with honor, in order to uphold French unity – a unity dating back ten centuries – and as part of the active construction of the new European order, that I set forth today on the path of collaboration.

In this way, in the near future, the burden of the suffering of our country may be eased; the plight of our prisoners may be improved; the cost of the occupation may be reduced.

In this way the demarcation line may become less rigid and the administration and resupplying of our territory may become less challenging.

This collaboration must be sincere. It must be free of any thought of aggression. It should be a patient and trusting effort.

The armistice, in any event, is not the peace. France is held by numerous obligations to the victor. At least she remains sovereign. This sovereignty requires her to defend her soil, to douse differences of opinion, to snuff any dissidence in her colonies.

This policy is my own. The Ministers are accountable only to me. It is me alone that history will judge.

Until now, I have spoken to you as a father. Today, I speak to you as a leader.

Follow me. Keep your faith in the eternal France.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Pétain, *Discours aux Français; 17 juin 1940-20 août 1944* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 94-6.

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## INTRODUCTION

Europe's twentieth century was full of dictators, including Benito Mussolini in Italy, Adolf Hitler in Germany, and Francisco Franco in Spain. All these men led extremely nationalistic, counter-revolutionary movements and, through military and political force, became heads of state in their respective countries. They and their movements originated in the southwest of Europe, and a quick look at the map raises a question: what about France? Located among these countries, France also experienced a nationalist, conservative dictatorship in the first half of the twentieth century, under Marshal Philippe Pétain. France's experience, however, was unlike that of any other Western European nation – though it may well be compared to that which befell the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and to that of several other Central and Eastern European lands in the same time period. The difference derives from the means by which these men came to power. Unlike Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, Pétain did not lead a nationalist revolution to place himself in power and overthrow the existing government. Instead, Pétain was placed at the head of an interim régime as the result of foreign intervention in France. When Hitler's armies invaded France in the summer of 1940, the Third Republic crumbled. As a result, the French

Parliament did away with the Constitution of the Third Republic and voted Pétain into office, endowing him with emergency powers.

While he was certainly just as militaristic, nationalistic, and counterrevolutionary as dictators in neighboring countries, Pétain did not seek an overt revolution and was not involved in the process of overthrowing the régime he replaced. Instead, the establishment of the Vichy régime and of Pétain as Head of State was brought on by the Nazi invasion and by the occupation of France. The continued occupation and control of France by Nazi Germany throughout World War II paradoxically meant that Vichy, an allegedly authoritarian and nationalist régime, had no agency over itself. Furthermore, if we define the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,”<sup>2</sup> as German sociologist Max Weber did before World War I, one could easily argue that the French state *ceased to exist* under Germany’s occupation. In order to create a semblance of independence that would both justify its existence and allow France to remain at least as a phantom state, the Vichy régime centered its agenda on collaborating with Germany. It focused on minimizing direct control by Germany of France, and on convincing France’s population of its own legitimacy, in order to exert some control over them.

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *Politics as Vocation*, translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1968, 2.



The French post-war narrative of the Occupation held for a long time that collaboration had been forced on France by Germany. All of France had resisted the Nazis, and had been led in that resistance by Charles de Gaulle and by the Résistance. In 1972, however, Robert Paxton published a scholarly study that would make him famous, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. More than forty years later, it remains an authoritative analysis of the Vichy régime. In it, Paxton claims that collaboration was not a German policy forced upon a reluctant France, but rather “a French proposal that Hitler ultimately rejected.”<sup>3</sup>

The publication of *Vichy France* triggered a radical revision of the historical narrative surrounding Vichy. Instead of a nation of resisters, France now became a nation of collaborators: anti-Semites, fascists, and perpetrators. The discourse has evolved since then, making room for the shades of grey of a heterogeneous French population. French film director Louis Malle dealt with the grey zones of Vichy and the question of collaboration in *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) and *Au revoir, les enfants* (1987). In both, he presents everyday collaboration as a choice deriving from circumstances and from opportunism, rather than from a fascist ideology. Like much of the work depicting the French wartime experience, though, Malle’s films focus on the experience of individuals – peasants, children,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 1972, 51.

and members of the bourgeoisie – but avoid dealing directly with the Vichy régime itself.

Much of the historiography of Vichy has arisen as a reaction to the pre-Paxton resistentialist myth, as an attempt to demonstrate how thoroughly Vichy had collaborated. These works focus on the French nature of the Vichy régime – and more often than not on the strong anti-Semitism already prevalent in France before 1940. Vichy's anti-Semitism and its role in the Holocaust seem to sit at the center of most post-Paxton analyses of the Vichy régime. Paxton himself wrote on the topic in collaboration with Michael Marrus, in *Vichy France and the Jews*, as well as in the introduction to *Hunting Down the Jews: Vichy, the Nazis and Mafia Collaborators in Provence, 1942-1944*, by Isaac Leventel and Bernard Wiesz. Despite the academic fertility of the topic, outside academia the question of the accountability of the Vichy régime has remained explosive and controversial. Not until 1995 did Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic, publicly acknowledge that “the criminal folly of the occupiers was seconded by the French, by the French State,” and recognize France's responsibility for the deportation of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children to Nazi extermination camps.<sup>4</sup>

The Holocaust was not a French creation, however, and Vichy's anti-Semitic policies were only one piece of the régime as a whole. While Vichy's

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<sup>4</sup> Marlise Simons, “Chirac Affirms France's Guilt in Fate of Jews,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1995, [www.nytimes.com/1995/07/17/world/chirac-affirms-france-s-guilt-in-fate-of-jews.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/17/world/chirac-affirms-france-s-guilt-in-fate-of-jews.html).

anti-Semitic policies and involvement in the Holocaust must not be overlooked, I believe that their study has often overshadowed the study of Vichy as a whole. By focusing the study of the Vichy régime on its anti-Semitic policies, one risks losing sight of the establishment and structure of the régime itself, Pétain's role as a middleman between the Nazi State and the French people, and the complex relationship between Pétain, the Vichy régime, and the French. In a way, these features reveal more about France's experiment with twentieth-century politics and wartime ideologies than any one particular policy. In fact, as the Vichy régime was a puppet of the Third Reich, its policies were largely influenced by Nazi ideology and needs, while the structure of the régime and its connection to the French masses were much more of a French creation. Thus, my work does not focus on the policies of the Vichy régime but rather on its techniques of representation and on its political potential.

Furthermore, while certain anti-Semitic policies were put in place as early as 1940, the systematic persecution of France's Jews did not begin until 1942. Consequently, the focus on Vichy's anti-Semitic policies has often shone the most light on the latter years of the Vichy régime, skipping over the transition from the Third Republic into the French State and the establishment of the Vichy régime. 1942 also marks Pétain's removal from the office of Head of the Government, and so the primary scholarly focus on Vichy has often concentrated on him as a figurehead rather than as a true political player. The silence surrounding Pétain's

political career is particularly remarkable in the context of his popularity as Head of State.

Henry Rousso has analyzed the evolution of French discourse surrounding Vichy in *The Vichy Syndrome* (1987) and again in his collaboration with journalist Eric Conan, *Vichy: An Ever-present Past* (1998). Rousso briefly evokes the importance of Philippe Pétain, but fails to develop his argument. This overlooking of Pétain is consistent with the purpose of his work: he addresses the historiography of Vichy rather than Vichy itself. And Pétain has not always been a large part of that historiography. While Paxton certainly refers to Pétain often, he draws a line between the Vichy régime and Pétain, choosing the former as the focus of his study. Pétain's biographers, for their part, have also struggled with how much emphasis to place on Vichy in relation to Pétain. Marc Ferro's impressive tome, *Pétain* (1987), deals entirely with the period following 1940, while Pierre Servent, author of *Le mythe Pétain: Verdun ou les tranchées de la mémoire* (1992), makes that same year the end date of his work. Herbert Lottman divides his work, *Pétain: Hero or Traitor?* (1985), into two roughly equal halves, one before and one after 1940 – although the period prior to 1940 represents almost nine-tenths of Pétain's life. While Lottman is certainly enlightening, I favor Ferro and Servent's choices to deal with Pétain's pre- and post-1940 biographies separately. Pétain's background is evidently pertinent to any study of his person, but the conditions of the Vichy régime had a radicalizing effect upon all French society, and particularly those in power. Thus Pétain's actions and

decisions as Head of the French State can only be understood within the context of Vichy. This is why I have chosen to concentrate my study on Philippe Pétain and on the Vichy régime between 1940 and 1942, when Pétain held the office of Head of the Government.

Throughout this essay, I use the term *power* to mean political and national sovereignty, or the ability to create and institute laws and policies. By *authority*, I refer to the ability to influence others, often through a semblance of power. Max Weber, whose definition of the state I quoted earlier, believed that “a criterion of every true relation of imperative control [that is, of authority] is a certain minimum of voluntary submission.”<sup>5</sup> He isolated three types of authority: bureaucratic, traditional, and charismatic. When I use these terms I mean them in the following context:

- *Traditional authority*: “resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them.”
- *Charismatic authority*: “resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. (New York: The Free Press), 1947, 324.

individual person and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.”

- *Bureaucratic authority*: “resting on a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.”<sup>6</sup>

To assert that Pétain and the Vichy régime had very little *power* is hardly controversial. But I posit that they had considerable *authority* – all three types of Weber’s authority ideals, in fact. This authority was not innate, but rather the product of a purposeful and direct campaign to appeal to the French public and to influence public opinion in Pétain’s favor. This authority, or ability to influence others, was crucial to the Vichy régime, particularly when we place Vichy in the context of France’s democratic and populist history. Since the French Revolution of 1789, popular sovereignty had become a cornerstone of French politics. Given Vichy’s lack of power and (as will be discussed later) dubious constitutionality, the Vichy régime had to derive all its authority from the people, at the very least making it seem that it was fulfilling its end of the “social contract.” As time passed and it became evident that the war would not be ending any time soon, the continued existence of a French régime, even an authoritarian one, reassured the French that they would not be dealt the same hand as Poland, where Germany had taken over the government entirely, had established a reign of terror and

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<sup>6</sup> Weber, 328.

indiscriminate violence, and was pursuing an aggressive campaign of cultural and ethnic cleansing. Avoiding “polandization” and fostering a stable French nation became Pétain’s primary goals, and maintaining his authority by becoming a national symbol were key parts of his plan to attain them.

Pétain and his régime attempted to shape their public image in multiple ways. To keep up their semblance of power and consequent authority, they needed to unite an intersectional French wartime population. At the same time, they sought to appease their Nazi overseers, in order to preserve what little room for maneuver they enjoyed by avoiding an outright occupation of the whole of France. This balancing act – attempting to please both Nazi Germany and a French population recently defeated by it – permeated most, if not all, of Vichy’s policies while Pétain was Head of the Government. I seek to demonstrate the difficulty of this process and the paradox involved in leading a nationalist, authoritarian régime while under occupation by an equally nationalist and significantly more authoritarian régime that had usurped the “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” within France. I posit that the driving force of the Vichy régime, at least until the spring of 1942, was not ideology but rather the need to ensure its own continuation. Each of the following chapters focuses on one of the Vichy régime’s methods to exert its authority within that context. The method studied in each chapter aligns roughly with each of Weber’s types of authority – traditional, charismatic, and bureaucratic, respectively – though the

three often intersect and are far from a perfect representation of Weber's ideal types.

Chapter One focuses on the events of a trial of interwar leftist politicians, which unfolded fitfully between 1940 and 1942. It follows that odd trial from its inception to its abandonment, introducing the recurring themes of the Vichy régime, Pétain's attempts to exert his control, and the decline of his authority. While Vichy's power was severely limited, the Riom Trial reflects the régime's efforts to create an appearance of legality and continuity from the legal system set in place by the French Revolution – not unlike the traditional authority Weber described.

Chapter Two digs deeper, past the overt actions of the Vichy régime and into indirect attempts at shaping public opinion through the press. It presents an analysis of various methods the Vichyist press used to turn Pétain into a national symbol, as well as the evolution of Pétain's public image and its treatment and reception by bystanders, collaborators, resisters, and perpetrators. By exploiting the press and manipulating Pétain's charismatic authority, Vichy was able to exert control over the population of France.

Lastly, Chapter Three pushes past Pétain's public persona and analyzes the political situation and limitations of the Vichy régime itself and of Pétain within it, from its inception in 1940 to its extirpation in 1942, when Germany occupied the entirety of French territory. This chapter deals largely with the idea



of bureaucratic authority, and studies the difference between the régime's actions in private and in public: the relationship among Vichy's policy, its propaganda, and the limits of its authority.

The first two chapters, which examine public perceptions of Pétain and Vichy, are based chiefly on primary sources. I worked primarily with newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, and eye-witness accounts of the events – most in the original French. Unless cited otherwise, all translations into English are my own. The last chapter rests more on secondary sources, as it deals with inner workings of the régime recorded primarily in archives closed to the public or inaccessible from the United States. The chapters do not follow each other chronologically. Instead, they span the same period, using different lenses to analyze how the Vichy régime worked at different levels to shape its image and to lend itself authority: overt actions of the régime, manipulation of the press, and inner workings of the régime and its relationship with Germany. By examining the interplay among these different levels of political action, I hope to shed some light on the ambiguities faced by the Vichy régime and on the dilemmas Philippe Pétain sought to resolve.

## CHAPTER I: THE TRIAL OF THE REPUBLIC

*“When you try a murderer, it is quite simple. You have the Article in the Code. He has killed somebody. The Code says: you must not kill. But [t]here is no Code for politicians, for Ministers, for ex-Ministers. You must draw one up in your mind before applying it.”*  
Léon Blum, *Léon Blum Before His Judges*, 1943.<sup>7</sup>

On May 10, 1940, German forces pushed through the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg and invaded France. A month later, on June 14, they reached Paris, sparking panic and leading to the infamous Paris exodus, with civilians and soldiers alike fleeing Paris for the as-yet uninvaded south. The government fled as well, to Bordeaux, and later to the southern spa town of Vichy. Paul Reynaud, the center-rightist Prime Minister of France, left the government, and Marshal Philippe Pétain, who had earned himself the title of the Hero of Verdun for his role in World War I, found himself at the head of a government (and a nation) in chaos, facing imminent defeat. Given Poland’s fate the previous year, panic over a probable Nazi occupation spread. A week later, however, on June 22, 1940, an armistice was signed in Compiègne, ending hostilities with Germany and allowing for only a partial occupation of France and an (allegedly) independent government to be formed in the unoccupied, southern

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<sup>7</sup> Léon Blum, *Léon Blum Before His Judges*, (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1943), 134.

half of France. Vichy was to serve as its capital, and Pétain as its Head of State, endowed with full emergency powers.

The defeat had been traumatic. France had fallen to Germany in a scant six weeks, the inhabitants of its capital reduced to a panicked, confused, and conflicted mass of refugees. It was not long before people started pointing fingers, accusing the army of incompetence, the pre-war government of unpreparedness, the French of complacency. Whether it existed or not, the “fifth column” became a constant presence in discussions of France’s fate and future. Why had the Popular Front nationalized the war industries? Why was the French Air Force so small and weak? Why had Léon Blum, the leftist Prime Minister of France for two terms between June 1936 and April 1938, supported mad movements for disarmament and collective security?

While the Vichy régime was allegedly in control, Nazi Germany began dictating France’s policies as soon as the armistice was signed. With German officers indirectly in charge of governing France, the Vichy régime’s duties were largely symbolic. Thus, as France rallied around Philippe Pétain and his new order, the question of determining responsibility for the war and subsequent defeat fell to Pétain and his Vichy régime. In the aftermath of the French army’s defeat and the collapse of the Third Republic, the Vichy régime sought to cement its authority by calling upon the law and France’s judicial tradition. On August 8, 1940, *La France Au Travail* announced the “Grand opening gala of the Supreme

Court at Riom,” a town near Vichy, where those supposedly responsible for France’s defeat would be tried. The régime drew together a special tribunal, presided over by Pierre Caous – by all accounts a fair judge. Under Vichy law, however, all judges had to take an oath of obedience to Marshal Pétain and served at his pleasure: “what [was] expected from [them was] to render services but not justice.”<sup>8</sup> The official purpose of the new Court was to prosecute

The Ministers, ex-Ministers and their immediate subordinates, as well as their accomplices and co-authors: (1) having committed crimes or offences or betrayed the duties of their office, by acts which have contributed to the passage from the state of peace to the state of war, before September 4, 1939, and acts which subsequently aggravated the consequences of the situation thus created; (2) having for an unspecified period committed acts of misappropriation or corruption and embezzlement of funds, or betrayed the duties of their office by speculating upon the value of national money and misusing the funds under their control.<sup>9</sup>

The charge of “betray[ing] the duties of their office” was a new one, created by Pétain, and the court determined that he had the power “to grant retroactive effects to a repressive law.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the Vichy régime empowered itself to unilaterally try any former minister for breaking a previously nonexistent law. Furthermore, the scope of the trial and ensuing investigation were limited to the period between 1936 and 1940, so that Pétain himself could not be implicated in the trial for having served as Minister of War in the early 1930s. In the same way, General Maxime Weygand who, like Pétain, had risen as a symbol of France’s

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<sup>8</sup> Felix Gouin, introduction to *Léon Blum Before His Judges*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Denis Bredin, *L'Infamie*, (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2012), 78.

former glory and promise for the future, was exempted despite having served as Chief of Staff of the French Army, as Inspector of the Army, and as vice-president of the Supreme War Council until 1935. 1936 had marked the rise to power of the Popular Front, a coalition of leftist parties headed by Léon Blum, which had remained in power until 1938, when Edouard Daladier, of the Radical Socialist Party, had become Prime Minister – a position he had retained until March 1940. Indeed, the time frame investigated in the Riom Trial left no question as to whom the Vichy régime held responsible for France's defeat: the Popular Front and the French Left as a whole. In this way, the régime could develop its authority at the same time as it discredited its political enemies, tying Pétain and his régime to France's values and traditions.

On September 3, 1940, Pétain enacted a new law allowing for the detention of “individuals dangerous to the national defense and public security.”<sup>11</sup> On September 7, the men Pétain and his régime saw as responsible for the war, the leading members of the Popular Front, began to be arrested: Léon Blum, Prime Minister from June 1936 to June 1937 and then again from March to April 1938; Edouard Daladier, Prime Minister from April 1938 to March 1940; Paul Reynaud, Prime Minister from March to June 1940; Pierre Cot, Minister of Aviation from 1936 to 1938 and supervisor of the nationalization of the Air Force industries; Guy la Chambre, Minister of the Air Force from 1938 to 1940; Maurice Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army from 1931 to 1940;

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Bracher, *Riom 1942; Le Procès*, (Paris: Omnibus, 2012), iii.

Robert Jacomet, Controller-General of Army Administration; and Georges Mandel, Minister of the Interior in 1940.

Blum, Daladier, and Reynaud were indicted based on their roles as Prime Minister of France between 1936 and 1940. Camille Chautemps, however, who had succeeded Blum as Premier in 1937 and had remained in office for a full year, was never indicted – a fact that Blum himself pointed out during his trial. Chautemps was a member of the center-leftist Radical Party, but had often sided against the Left as a whole and against Blum in particular on various issues, such as the question of intervention in the Spanish Civil War. In 1940, in fact, he had joined Pétain's régime, and his absence from the trial was no mistake: at the time of the trial, Chautemps was abroad, "charged with an official mission by the Government and by the Head of the State."<sup>12</sup> The Riom Trial was not meant to seek justice; it did not matter who had done what, as long as they sided with Pétain and his régime. Riom was a show trial, a political tool intended to serve as Vichyist propaganda.

Despite the quick action of the Vichy régime in assembling the court, the process of initiating the trial was a long one. Hundreds of witnesses had to be called, thousands of files gathered and studied. Furthermore, the courthouse in Riom, which had previously housed only a local court of appeals, had to be refurbished in order to house the Supreme Court, incurring expenses to the sum of

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<sup>12</sup> Blum, 29.

600,000 francs.<sup>13</sup> The appearance of the courthouse was just as significant for the Vichy régime as the trial that would take place in it, as one of the primary purposes of the trial was to demonstrate the régime's power and legitimacy; the régime required a grandiose courthouse and a legal spectacle to enhance its traditional and legal authority. Even so, the delay was curious, dictated largely by political reasons the Vichy régime chose to hide under the cover of remodeling and researching.

In the midst of the delay, Pétain promulgated Constitutional Act No. 7 on January 27, 1941, establishing that, since ministers (and former ministers) were “responsible to the head of state,” they could be convicted personally by him for betraying the duties of their office, independently of the Supreme Court.<sup>14</sup> Pétain subsequently formed a Council for Political Justice that conducted a private investigation of the actions of the so-called traitors. On October 16, 1941, more than a year after the arrests, he declared on the radio, in one of his addresses to the French, that they had all been found guilty and would therefore be imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> There was still no word from the court at Riom.

If Pétain's purpose had been solely to seek out and punish the men he saw as traitors to France, this would have been the end of the Council and of the Trial. Instead, he went on in his speech to claim that, in order to maintain “the separation of powers” between the executive and judicial branches, the Riom

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<sup>13</sup> Bracher, vii.

<sup>14</sup> John Laughland, *A History of Political Trials* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 68.

<sup>15</sup> Pétain, *Discours aux Français*, 201.

Trial would proceed as planned, as quickly as possible.<sup>16</sup> The perception of the separation of powers was important at many levels: for one, it was important for Pétain to be perceived separately from his régime, as will be discussed in Chapter Two. At the same time, an appearance that Vichy was an entirely legal and legitimate régime was fundamental for Vichy's purposes. On February 19, 1942, the Supreme Court finally opened its doors and the first session of the Riom Trial started.

The legal elements surrounding the trial –the establishment of a new Supreme Court, the official approval of the ex post facto effect of the new law concerning the duties of office of ministers, the detailed purpose of the court, and Pétain's emphasis on the separation of powers, among others – were highly publicized in an effort to prove the lawfulness of the Vichy régime's actions. France had a long juridical tradition, dating back far before the trials of the French Revolution and given new vigor after the Dreyfus Affair. The Riom Trial could help to link the Vichy régime to that tradition, lending it legitimacy.

The trial's foremost purpose was not to seek justice or even vengeance, but to convince the public of Vichy's authority to try France's former leaders – and, of course, to prove that the Popular Front, and the Third Republic as a whole, had been responsible for the present state of affairs in France, thus justifying the establishment of the French State in place of the Republic. The régime tried to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



create an appearance of fairness and justice (as well as the alleged division of powers Pétain spoke of), but, after the Head of State had gone on the air and publicly declared the defendants guilty, no semblance of fairness or division of powers could sugarcoat the purpose of the Riom Trial.

In order for the trial to serve Vichy's intended purposes, the régime tried to restrict access as much as possible and to control media coverage, guiding the press' message while at the same time giving the impression of openness and making sure Riom was highly publicized. While many journalists and envoys were invited to witness and report upon the trial, attendance was strictly controlled. Invitations were only extended to journalists and to three dozen "handpicked" diplomats and state employees, whose rooms were searched by police.<sup>17</sup> The town was flooded with policemen, and anybody staying for more than 24 hours needed to apply for a permit.<sup>18</sup> About 120 journalists were allowed into the courthouse, half of them German, the rest from the occupied northern zone of France, from the "free" southern one, and from various countries that were either neutral or allied with the Axis powers. The Vichy zone journalists were all given a list of rules and guidelines to follow in covering the trial. On the first day, there were eight items on the list, such as "Explain, whenever possible, that the trial concerns the state of things from which the catastrophe arose, so that the French people, thrown into despair, have the opportunity to pass an

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<sup>17</sup> *Le Procès de Riom, par un Témoin* (Paris: Librairie des Sciences et des Arts, 1945), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Bracher, viii.

enlightened judgment on the methods used by *the Government that victimized them*.”<sup>19</sup> The last item on the list distributed on that first day may be the most revealing of all: “Return often to the fact that the Marshal’s policy in all fields has been inspired by the *necessity* that follows the evidence presented: *France is condemned to build a new regime or die*.”<sup>20</sup>

By means of the Riom Trial, Pétain and his régime intended to discredit not only their political opponents, but the entire political system they had overthrown. They argued that the defeat of France could be traced back to the “weakness of the public spirit, itself determined by the decomposition of a régime fallen into the hands of a certain Blum, a certain Paul Reynaud, or a certain Daladier.”<sup>21</sup> France could heal only after “extirpating the roots [of the moral weakness] from the very heart of the country.”<sup>22</sup> The judges of Riom tried not only the individuals before them, but their entire political system. Blum was questioned entirely on political grounds, on the application of his Forty-Hour Week Act and of the Nationalization Act, which had nationalized the war industries, allegedly weakening the French army and arsenal, his speeches on disarmament, and his ideas on collective security.<sup>23</sup> Blum, like the other putative culprits, defended himself well on all counts, explaining why, for instance, the

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Maze and Roger Genibrier, *Les Grandes Journées du Procès de Riom* (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1945), 324.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jean Jacoby, *1940* (Paris: Les Libertés Françaises, 1941), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Thouvenin, *Les Premiers actes du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris: Imprimeries Mont-Louis, 1940), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Blum, 39, 107, 113, 122-23.

war industries had been nationalized before others, pointing out when the judges mistook dates and facts or misquoted him, and giving long speeches in his defense, questioning the very nature and purpose of the trial:

Does not the fact of having placed military affairs outside the discussion, on the one hand, and of omitting artificially, during the period of 1936 to 1939, one of the Governments which were in power during that time, on the other hand, give tangible, concrete and striking evidence of a political motive aimed against certain men regarded as being the especial incarnation of a particular political creed – the motive which is at the bottom of this trial?<sup>24</sup>

On such occasions, the censorship service was quick to add new items to the press' guidelines. "Leave out M. Daladier's declarations about military failure"; "In Léon Blum's intervention, erase the entire section that questions the government from 1929 to 1936"; "Do not quote General de Gaulle's name in M. Daladier's explanations (strict ban)."<sup>25</sup> Between February and April 1942, over 80 items were added to the list, including "as a rule, to summarize the last few points, cut out anything that calls into question Marshal Pétain's management."<sup>26</sup>

Many of the censorship guidelines were made specifically in reference to Germany, such as a ban on printing Daladier's assessment of Germany as "impatient to see the French judged."<sup>27</sup> Despite the Vichy régime's claims of independent action, many suspected that Adolf Hitler and the Nazi State were

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<sup>24</sup> Blum, 30-1.

<sup>25</sup> Maze, 325-6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Maze, 324.

behind much of the Riom Trial.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the Nazis “demanded that all the files be sent to them, and that they be allowed to search the lawyers crossing the demarcation line between the occupied zone and the free zone in the south.”<sup>29</sup> One possible reason for this intervention is that Hitler was not completely satisfied with seeing France occupied, split in two, and made to sign an armistice in the same train car Germany had been made to at the end of World War I, and that he wanted specific retaliation for the “guilt clause” of the Treaty of Versailles, by which Germany had been forced to accept full responsibility for World War I. Germany had been able to fight against the guilt clause – at least through its propaganda –by arguing that responsibility for the war had been forced upon the German nation by the infamous Diktat, which had not been a willing admission of guilt. Hitler did not want to give France the option of repudiating its admission of guilt, and so he wanted a French court, organized by the French State and staffed by French judges, to try the alleged instigators of the war and to declare their guilt.<sup>30</sup> It is not altogether surprising, in this light, that there existed much tension between Germany’s and Vichy’s intended purposes for the trial.

In fact, the trial was covered quite differently by the many “Frances” involved; the press in the occupied and unoccupied zones saw the trial as having two different purposes. The contrast between the press coverage of the trial in the northern, occupied territory and the unoccupied Vichy zone is quite nuanced:

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<sup>28</sup> *Le Procès de Riom, par un Témoin*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Laughland, 70-1.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Procès de Riom*, 4.

neither rejected the trial as a whole, but the two had different ideas about its content. In the “Free Zone,” the trial was treated as an investigation of why France had *lost* the war, hence the focus on disarmament, the war industries, and public sentiment, for instance. In the occupied zone, however, coverage emphasized “the reasons why the French government of 1939 declared war on Germany, even though it had officially expressed her goodwill toward France.”<sup>31</sup>

The distinction is significant. The Vichy party line was that, by collaborating as much as possible with Germany, France would receive better treatment in a peace treaty than the other belligerents. The so-called Free Zone enjoyed limited freedom under the armistice, and Vichy politicians feared that by declaring themselves the instigators of the war against Germany, which seemed to be Hitler’s intended result for the trial, they would be giving Germany a legitimate reason to establish stricter regulations in the Free Zone. Thus they avoided the topic of responsibility for the war as a whole as much as they could. In the occupied territory, however, the worst had already happened and the Nazis were in Paris, eternal symbol of France. The German embassy and its officials, led by Otto Abetz, were unmistakably in control, and so the focus was largely on appeasing the Germans, who controlled the majority of the media anyway, and

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<sup>31</sup> *La Gerbe*, in Henri Michel, *Le Procès de Riom* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1979), 328.

thus bemoaned that not enough people were being prosecuted and held responsible for declaring war on Germany.<sup>32</sup>

The “Free French,” the London-based resistance movement headed by General Charles de Gaulle, supported the idea of a trial to “assign responsibility for the disaster,”<sup>33</sup> though they did not exactly agree with Pétain on who the guilty parties were or on how the trial was being carried out. As arrests of members of the Popular Front began in 1940, de Gaulle stated that “there will certainly one day be a real trial of responsibility in France,” but that many of the accusers at the Riom Trial would sit on the defendants’ bench.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Jean Oberté, also a member of the Free French, spoke from London on the radio program “Français parlent aux Français,” stating that what was “lamentable” about the trial was that France’s “dirty laundry was not washed within the family” but “under the eyes of the Germans.”<sup>35</sup> “After the war,” he continued, “we will be able to erect a real tribunal with real judges, but today it is a farce.”<sup>36</sup> De Gaulle and the Free French rejected the specifics of the trial – the German involvement, the political aspect, certainly the list of defendants. But they did not reject the premise of a trial to hold specific individuals accountable for France’s defeat.

In the midst of this tension and as more and more restrictions were placed on what could and could not be printed regarding the trial, the Vichy press moved

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<sup>32</sup> Michel, 322.

<sup>33</sup> Bracher, iv.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Bracher, viii.

<sup>36</sup> Bracher, ix.

away from the fanfare and thorough coverage with which it had initially treated the trial and began to ignore it instead. The press wrote broadly of the “enormous and serious work of the Court,” of the 30,000 statements taken, the 100,000 pages of the file, or the 900 deposed witnesses, and cited questions posed by Caous and his fellow judges every once in a while. But it rarely printed any of the defendants’ responses, and eventually stopped writing about the trial altogether.<sup>37</sup> In response to this silence, and as the Résistance began to take shape, the underground press of the Résistance movements, which had remained silent on the topic when it had first arisen, began to write on the trial. They drew their information from the state press, from gossip, from journalists or members of the small audience at Riom friendly to their cause, and even from the British Broadcasting Corporation. In March 1942, *Combat*, one of the primary newspapers of the Résistance, published both a large segment of Daladier’s declarations before the court and a list of the censure guidelines distributed to the Vichy journalists. It condemned the trial and labeled it a “political farce.”<sup>38</sup> Later that same month, on March 15, Hitler criticized the Vichy régime’s handling of the trial:

A trial is taking place these days in France, whose main characteristic is that not a word is spoken about the guilt of those responsible for this war. Only a lack of preparation for war is being discussed. We are here looking at a mentality which is

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<sup>37</sup> Henri Michel, *Le Procès de Riom* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1979), 316.

<sup>38</sup> *Combat*, in Michel, 315.

incomprehensible to us but which is perhaps better suited than any other to reveal the causes of this new war.<sup>39</sup>

In April, in light of Hitler's disapproval, the change in public opinion, the inability of the Vichy régime or its press apparatus to bring the focus back to the shortcomings of the Third Republic and the Popular Front, and the thorough restructuring of the régime, the trial was adjourned indefinitely by the Vichy régime under the pretense of needing further evidence and "investigative measures."<sup>40</sup> Over a year later, in May of 1943, the trial was quietly shut down, with no further sessions and with no final verdict – it had become an embarrassment to Hitler and was no longer fulfilling the Vichy régime's purposes. The trial was making the Supreme Court (and by extension the Vichy régime) seem ridiculous and unfair; coupled with Hitler's disapproval, this meant that the trial had become dangerous to Vichy's continued existence.

The accused men were held in captivity throughout the trial, but on April 5, 1943 the German press agency Deutsches Nachrichten Büro announced that the German government had learned that "the American and English governments plan to capture certain personalities residing in France in order to create a counter-government." Thus, the German government had decided to transport Daladier, Blum, Gamelin, Reynaud, and Mandel to Germany.<sup>41</sup> Despite being sent to various concentration camps, the Riom defendants survived the war and returned to France after the peace, just in time to witness Pétain's own trial.

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<sup>39</sup> Laughland, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Cot, *Le Procès de la République*, vol. I (New York: La Maison Française, 1944), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Bracher, xxi.



To a degree, the Riom Trial can serve as a microcosm of the entire Vichy régime, in terms of the patterns of public opinion and of collaboration with Germany, the manipulation and role of the press, and the Vichy régime's portrayal of itself, Pétain, and their political rivals. The Trial was an elaborate process intended to depict the Vichy régime as a natural continuation of France's political and juridical tradition and to bend public opinion in its favor, playing upon public perceptions of political rivals and the reasons for their defeat. The Riom Trial was both a natural progression and a necessary part of the régime's approach to these issues. At the same time, it reflects the régime's inability to control public opinion and the sharing of clandestine ideas, which played a significant part in Pétain's loss of authority, particularly after 1942.

Moreover, the trial raises questions regarding the relationships between Vichy and Berlin, between the Occupied and the Free Zones, and between Vichy and the Résistance. Pétain's unilateral declaration of the defendants' guilt in 1941, followed by his request that the official trial continue, reveals a distance between Pétain and the régime as a whole. The trial's strange timing – the declaration of the opening of the Court in 1940, Pétain's personal judgment in 1941, the first sessions in early 1942, the trial's postponement in April 1942, and then its annulment in 1943 – hints at underlying political waves and at tensions that shaped the Vichy régime's actions.

Furthermore, the trial and its initial success depict a French preoccupation with their alleged moral decay and how, in Robert Paxton's words, "the 'system' had let France slip from the heights of 1918 to the depths of 1939."<sup>42</sup> Even the Free French, the Vichy régime's opponents, showed an interest in identifying and judging the parties responsible for France's traumatic defeat. As Vichy France signed the armistice of June 1940, entered the road to collaboration, and looked to the future after the war, the idea of redemption, for France as a whole and for its military in particular, was one of the most significant in the French consciousness. Pétain and his régime played upon this desire, as well as the chaos and trauma of the defeat, as they began to shape what would become Vichy France.

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<sup>42</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 189.

## CHAPTER II: VICHY'S PÉTAÏN

*“In the past, as a king was put to the ground, the herald, after having cried ‘The king is dead!’ cried: ‘Long live the king!’ A France, the France of yesterday, is lowered to her grave, but a new France is born. She is born at the very moment of surrender, from our mistaken hopes and from our will to live.”*

*“La France Continue,” *Le Journal*, June 18, 1940.*

As the German Army closed in on Paris and defeat seemed more and more evident in the summer of 1940, French reactions were mixed. Henry de Kerillis, writing for the nationalist newspaper *Époque* on May 23, argued that this was not simply a war of supplies, but also one of morale. “A nation which has thousands of years of history behind it does not allow itself to be wiped off the map in ten days, nor let itself be buried with scarcely a struggle,” he argued, repeating a common sentiment of the time. France had too glorious a past to be erased from the map in such a way. Others evoked Joan of Arc, who had led the French in battle against her occupiers during the Hundred Years War, and argued that France, “a country chosen by God,” had always found the savior she needed in her time of need.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> José Germain Drouilly, *Notre Chef Pétain* (Paris: La Technique du livre, 1941), 15.

The question of the hour, however, was whether this savior should stand his or her ground and continue fighting Germany, hoping for reinforcements from the English and the Americans, or accept France's defeat, sign an armistice with Germany, and simply attempt to preserve France as well as possible until the end of the war. Paul Reynaud, Prime Minister of France at the time, was a partisan of the first plan. After Paris fell, he wished to remove the government to the French territories in North Africa and continue the war from there. On the other hand, General Maxime Weygand, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, openly maintained that the battle was lost and that France needed to seek an armistice. So did Philippe Pétain.<sup>44</sup> While Reynaud spoke of political alliances and governments in exile, Weygand and Pétain, veterans of the First World War and living symbols of France's once-glorious army, spoke of massacres on the front and anarchy in France if the government fled and continued the war from abroad. Fleeing and continuing to fight from abroad would inevitably leave everyone who remained in France open to violence at Nazi hands – including retaliatory violence for any action taken by the French government in exile and its army.

World War I had taken its toll on France, where so many battles had taken place and so much blood had been spilled. The memory of that war, dragging on for four years despite early promises that it would be done by Christmas, had to be a constant presence in the mind of French politicians and of the population alike as they contemplated the two options. As Paris fell under German control

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 168

and as the French fled southward, seeking shelter and peace in unoccupied territory, many chose to focus on the possibility of an end to the war and a restoration of life as they knew it. An armistice and a temporary government led by one of France's heroes promised the least bloodshed and the quickest return to normalcy. "Today France is in danger," claimed the French News Service on June 15, 1940, "and Weygand has come."<sup>45</sup>

The next day, on June 16, in the southern town of Bordeaux, where the government had temporarily settled after leaving Paris, "the fate of France [was] decided."<sup>46</sup> Reynaud resigned and appointed Pétain as the new Prime Minister. Pétain immediately addressed the people of France, as he often would over the following four years: "Are you prepared to search with me, like soldiers after the fight, with honor, for the means by which to end the hostilities?"<sup>47</sup>

A week later, Pétain sent a delegation, led by General Charles Huntziger, also a World War I veteran, to the town of Compiègne, in the occupied north, to discuss armistice terms with Germany. The ensuing armistice provided for Germany's occupation of more than half of France, including the entire Atlantic littoral, a severe reduction of the French army, and the disarmament of its navy. The southern territory, often called the "Free Zone" and "Vichy France," was left

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<sup>45</sup> *Inside France; Excerpts from the French Press*, vol. I, no. 4 (New York: French News Service, June 15, 1940), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Emile Condroyer, "C'est là que Pétain et Weygand veillent sur le destin de la France," *Le Journal*, June 18, 1940.

<sup>47</sup> "Êtes-vous prêts à rechercher avec moi, entre soldats après la lutte et dans l'honneur les moyens de mettre un terme aux hostilités?," *Le Journal*, June 18, 1940.

unoccupied, governed from the town of Vichy. Vichy had been chosen because of its location (within the Free Zone but central to France as a whole so that it was only a short distance from the demarcation line) and because, as a spa town, it was outfitted with enough hotels to house the entire government and various visiting dignitaries, ambassadors, and journalists. The Vichy government was technically in charge of the administration of the Occupied Zone, but as little more than a puppet in the hands of Germany, its power was limited.

On July 10, the French National Assembly met to ratify the armistice and to discuss the next steps the government should take. It was decided, by a vote of 569 to 80, that a new constitution was needed. The Third Republic was “voted [...] out of existence,”<sup>48</sup> and in its place a new “French State” was formed, headed by Pétain, who now “unite[d] in his person the powers of the Head of State and those of the Head of the Government.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite the National Assembly’s role in the passage from one régime to the next, the constitutionality and legality of the change were dubious. In granting Pétain full powers, the Assembly was, for all intents and purposes, dismissing itself and the constitution, leaving Pétain to single-handedly draft a new constitution and shape the new French pseudo-state. Furthermore, as we have seen above, Pétain was not the only man toward whom public opinion had turned in the face of France’s defeat; Weygand was also seen as an option, “a fireman,

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1970), 248.

<sup>49</sup> “Par 569 voix contre 80, l’Assemblée nationale donne tous pouvoirs au maréchal Pétain pour promulguer la nouvelle Constitution,” *L’Eclaireur de Nice*, July 10, 1940.

ready to go wherever the fire broke out,” as the Radical-Socialist newspaper *Dépeche de Toulouse* had put it on May 21, 1940. Given Germany’s influence and occupation, the questionable legality of the dissolution of the Third Republic, and the possible splintering in public support between Pétain and Weygand, the Vichy régime needed a means by which to unify France and to present at least a semblance of power, even if it was simply a mirage.

To ensure its success and to create that image of authority, the Vichy régime, largely composed of right-wing, counterrevolutionary individuals, devised two mechanisms. The first was disparaging the Third Republic, its policies, and its leaders; a pursuit of Weber’s “traditional authority” that culminated in the events of the Riom Trial. The second was turning Pétain into a national figure and symbol in such a way that rejecting him (and, by extension, the Vichy régime) would have amounted to rejecting France itself, which aligned more closely with Weber’s ideal of charismatic authority. Luckily for Vichy, France had long been predisposed to elevating military heroes into national symbols and, more often than not, national leaders: Napoleon stands as the strongest example, followed by his nephew, Napoleon III, and perhaps even Louis XIV before either of them. Pétain, however, had witnessed in his youth the rise and fall of two military men who, like him, had not sought to be elevated into national symbols but had nevertheless found the role thrust upon them: Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had become a symbol of the Left through the Dreyfus Affair, and General Georges Boulanger, whose propaganda had revolutionized mass

politics in the 1880s by appealing directly to each region and by presenting him as apolitical, playing upon different political ideas and issues depending on the populations they addressed.<sup>50</sup> Pétain went on to play a role similar to that of Dreyfus and of Boulanger, becoming a symbol beyond his own politics and personality, deployed by the Vichy régime as a tool to appeal to reluctant populations, to garner public support, and to keep France united even as her political and social climate threatened to rip her apart at the seams. In an age of charismatic leadership, Vichy looked to Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, who had seemingly rescued their countries from the factionalism and disillusionment that had followed World War I and replaced them with unity and nationalism. Pétain was meant to fill a similar role.

Pétain had been strongly shaped by the movements surrounding Dreyfus and Boulanger. Born in 1856, he had witnessed the “Civil War in France,” as Karl Marx dubbed the Paris Commune of 1871 and ensuing political conflicts between the French Left and Right, as well as the entirety of the Dreyfus Affair and its continuing effects on French politics. More recently, France had faced another “civil war,”<sup>51</sup> as Robert Paxton calls the period of conflict between the Left and Right from 1934 to 1937. On February 6, 1934, multiple conservative groups had taken to the streets and attempted to overthrow the republic, leading to 16 deaths and 655 casualties when the police had fired into a crowd from a barricade.

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Burns, *Rural Society and French Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>51</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 243.



Paxton returns often to the events of February 6, which he calls “the Right’s Dreyfus Affair.”<sup>52</sup> In light of these events, it is not surprising that Pétain considered internal discord and national disunity to be one of the greatest threats to France even before the Occupation.

At the same time the Third Republic had been taking shape in the late nineteenth century, “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” (“Liberty, equality, brotherhood”) had been made into the national motto. The phrase found its origins in the French Revolution, France’s most iconic period of internal discord and political factionalism, and remained a battle cry for the Left; it had been painted on the walls of the commune in 1871. Once he became Head of State and Head of the Government in July 1940, Pétain changed the motto of France to “Travail, famille, patrie” (“Work, family, fatherland”), replacing the leftist ideals of the Revolution with conservative but relatively uncontroversial nationalist values. Those three values, along with national unity, became some of the most recurrent themes in his speeches during his four years in office. Like Boulanger before him, Pétain realized that an apolitical, nationalist figure could draw support from all across the political spectrum, uniting the French population around a single symbol.

Furthermore, the very nature of Vichy – an authoritarian state under foreign occupation and administration – implied strict political and military

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<sup>52</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 245.

limitations. Unable to express his authority through politics and the military, Pétain turned instead to public opinion and to the press. The régime undertook a campaign of media manipulation, as well as direct appeals to the people, through Pétain's visits to the countryside and his charisma and approachability, fomenting an appearance of massive support from the public. Once it seemed that a fair portion of the population looked up to Pétain as a strong national leader, the rest would follow out of complacency and a mob mentality. This campaign proved tremendously effective, to the point that the Pétainist myth, which "eliminated from the memory of the Occupation all but the image of the Marshal," still holds sway over large sections of the French population today.<sup>53</sup> To embed Pétain and his authority so thoroughly into the fabric of the French consciousness, the régime played upon a variety of sensitivities, connecting him to the French tradition of military heroes and national figures, presenting him as a charismatic symbol of the French nation, and tying him to the French values of Christianity and family.

In fact, media depictions of Pétain seemed to meld all these axes together, blurring the line between charismatic and traditional authority. His personal attributes and military background, which lent Pétain an air of incorruptibility, discipline, and patriotism, went into forging the "myth of the Marshal," an uncontestedly charismatic source of authority. But it was the French tradition of symbolic national figures and heads of state that allowed him to succeed as a

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<sup>53</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 302.

charismatic leader in the wake of the Third Republic's fall. Ken Jowitt, who has addressed the seemingly antithetical mixture of traditional and charismatic authority in the context of Leninist régimes, argues that what endows charismatic leaders with authority is "not only the availability of socially mobilized clusters, but also the charismatic leader's [...] possession of qualities that, at least in a formal or structural sense, are consistent with the defining features of the society to be transformed."<sup>54</sup> And in fact, because of the wide array of leaders and régimes France had experienced over the previous century, any charismatic trait attributed to Pétain could be given a precedent; France had been ruled by children and by elders, had had saintly kings and military emperors, presidents and despots alike. If the press could link Pétain's charismatic attributes to a pre-existing French tradition of leadership, it could turn him into a legitimate national symbol and gather the "minimum of voluntary submission"<sup>55</sup> inherently required to exercise authority.

When, on June 17, 1940, his words dripping with messianic symbolism, Pétain declared that he was giving France the gift of his person, the myth and miracle of the marshal became a matter of public record. In the midst of their crisis and despair, the people of France embraced the myth of the marshal, creating a self-feeding cycle of charisma and validation that cemented his authority. It was easier to focus on "having confidence in the great leader who has

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<sup>54</sup> Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>55</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 324.

taken charge of our armies” and on “believing in the soldier of France”<sup>56</sup> than on France’s defeat – or so the press would have had the French believe. Pétain provided the public not only with a national hero but also with a foil to the unstable, short-lived, and often corrupt politics of the Third Republic. Following in the footsteps of Boulanger and his grab-all populist politics, Pétain tried to break free of the traps of Third Republic politics and presented himself as an apolitical man thrust into power for the national good. Like Boulanger, he spoke little of specific politics and instead crafted his rhetoric around ideas of national unity and national revolution<sup>57</sup>—though Vichy’s lack of power under Germany’s occupation was also a major factor in the crafting of Pétain’s apolitical persona. In any case, the press embraced Pétain as a symbol: “the image of France as everybody wanted her to be again.”<sup>58</sup>

In order for Pétain to remain a national symbol of universal appeal, the Vichy régime had to carefully craft his message to just barely *touch* on topics significant to the French population, without going into enough depth to raise questions and to create possible conflict or dissent. To this purpose, Pétain’s frequent and famous addresses to the French nation, broadcast over the radio and printed in Vichy newspapers and pamphlets, were far from the honest, straight-from-the-heart speeches he would have had his audiences believe; they were

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<sup>56</sup> “La Progression allemande continue de s’exercer dans la direction de la côte – M. Paul Reynaud expose au Sénat la gravité de la situation et dit ses raisons d’espérer,” *Le Temps*, May 23, 1940.

<sup>57</sup> “Union nationale,” *Le Temps*, 7 November, 1940.

<sup>58</sup> René Benjamin, *Le Maréchal et son peuple* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1941), 48.

“collective productions,”<sup>59</sup> wherein Pétain would “enounce ideas, his ‘writers’ would clothe them in words, and he would then ‘correct’ the style and content.”<sup>60</sup> Their intent was to demonstrate Pétain’s understanding of the issues most important to France and to link his message to them until he became a sort of image of France as a whole himself. Whatever his fate, France would share it.

According to the press, Pétain had become “the living symbol of the unity and independence of the homeland,” representing the hopes of the entire nation.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to tell to what degree this assessment was accurate, public opinion being a practically non-existent entity under an authoritarian régime – a fact that even the Vichyist newspapers of the period acknowledged.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, while the press may have sought to present itself as independent and unbiased, strict censorship is one of the most widespread elements of an authoritarian régime; any newspaper legally operating within Vichy France served largely as a mouthpiece for the Vichy régime when so required. We saw in the last chapter the extreme levels of censorship, which dictated not only what could not be printed but what *should* be said or emphasized. By allowing the press to continue existing (allegedly) independently of the régime while controlling its message, Vichy could make it seem as if a free press were agreeing with its measures. Vichy could have very well created an official régime newspaper to share these views, but its

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Flood, “Pétain and de Gaulle; Making the Meanings of the Occupation,” in *France at War in the Twentieth Century; Propaganda, Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 89.

<sup>60</sup> Griffiths, 347.

<sup>61</sup> “Le nouveau régime,” *Le Temps*, 14 May 1941

<sup>62</sup> André Siegfried, “La mesure de l’opinion publique,” *Le Temps*, 22 February, 1942.

bias would have been too evident. The fact that it was the major newspapers of the Third Republic that were printing these stories, praising and agreeing with Vichy, lent the régime a sense of legitimacy. Of course, the French were not unaware of this scheme and a strong underground press began to develop as Vichy's policies grew stricter. However, even the underground press of the Résistance, which began to gather momentum in 1942, together with other strongly anti-Vichy individuals, were often reluctant to speak against Pétain, preferring a Frenchman who sought to maintain France, albeit under a dictatorship and occupation, to the German who might replace him, acting in France as Hans Frank had in Poland. Pétain had risen as a sanctified figure in France and had become the object of a cult of personality similar to those of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, the epitomes of charismatic authority.

While we must remain skeptical about the portrayals of Vichy in the official press, even the underground press acknowledged Pétain's massive popular support. In *Pétain-Laval*, an anonymous anti-Pétainist, anti-Vichyist pamphlet anonymously published in London in 1942, the author admitted that "there are still numerous Frenchmen, even in Occupied France, who hesitate to judge him harshly."<sup>63</sup> He justified that attachment to Pétain by explaining that "France has always liked old men," so that in her time of crisis and despair she had "eagerly swallowed the myth of the old man," come to her rescue.<sup>64</sup> Contrary to the

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<sup>63</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, translated by Michael Sadleir (London: Constable & Co Ltd, 1942), 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 43.

“resistance myth” that held that France had rejected Vichy and collaboration from the very beginning, there was barely any organized resistance until well into 1941. Even then, it was difficult for the Résistance to decide whether to support or oppose Pétain – Henri Frenay’s *Combat*, one of the first clandestine newspapers of the Résistance, quoted Pétain and Foch in its masthead until 1942.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the Résistance and its underground press enjoyed very little popularity until fairly late in the war. Barely two million people, roughly 5% of the French population in 1942, read any of the underground press.<sup>66</sup>

In the mainstream media, Pétain was represented as a sort of holy figure beyond his own messianic words of June 1940. The discourse of the time embraced him as a “savior” with a “merciful destiny” and a “virtuous force,”<sup>67</sup> “absolving errors committed as long as the guilty parties’ repentance carries the strong will to make amends.”<sup>68</sup> In his own addresses to the French nation, Pétain emphasized religious imagery, making reference to “our daily bread” when speaking of agricultural reform, for instance, and thus presenting participation in his reforms as a religious imperative and creating a link in the minds of agricultural workers between himself, a quasi-religious figure, and their own work, the duty of the pious.<sup>69</sup> Even in the Occupied Zone, newspapers depicted him in arguably religious scenarios, like that of a humble woodworker fixing his

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<sup>65</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Marcel Ophüls, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, directed by Marcel Ophüls (1969; New York: Milestone Film & Video, 2001), DVD.

<sup>67</sup> “Heureux Auspices,” *Le Temps*, 3 December, 1940.

<sup>68</sup> “Discipline Française,” *Le Temps*, 9 April, 1941.

<sup>69</sup> “Notre pain quotidien,” *Le Temps*, 31 March, 1942.

ship under the gaze of Marianne, symbol of France, who could be construed as a Virgin figure on the pages of the highly conservative newspaper in which it appeared.

Towards the end of 1940 Alphonse de Châteaubriant wrote a profile of Pétain for his Paris-based newspaper, *La Gerbe*, comparing him to Saint Louis during the crusades, raising his hands to the heavens and pleading with God for the sake of his people “when the Saracens launched the Greek fire upon the towers.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, *Le Temps*, in the Free Zone, compared the Council of Ministers’ oath to Pétain to the “famous sessions of the First Empire.”<sup>71</sup> The link in these cases was not simply to previous rulers of France, but to rulers on France’s most glorious occasions, so that their glory and France’s triumph under their régimes would be associated with Pétain. Every aspect of Pétain’s public persona was linked back to one French trait or another and to the idea of a tradition of French leadership dating back to time immemorial; even his voice during radio addresses was described as “coming down to us from our furthest fountainheads, [...] like the clear and sweet song of the Loire, greeting its banks with its measureless honesty.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the rhetoric surrounding Pétain, which played upon the traditional legitimacy of patriarchal authority, presented Pétain as a father, “speaking directly to his children,” whose duty was

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<sup>70</sup> Alphonse de Châteaubriant, “Le Maréchal m’a dit,” *La Gerbe*, 28 November, 1940.

<sup>71</sup> “Napoléon au Conseil d’Etat,” *Le Temps*, 1 September, 1941.

<sup>72</sup> Alphonse de Châteaubriant, “Lettre à Monsieur le Maréchal Pétain,” *La Gerbe*, 11 November, 1940.



consequently to “listen and obey immediately.”<sup>73</sup> His age, 85 when he assumed office, helped further this point, giving him an aura of wisdom and gerontocratic authority. While the anti-Pétainist press claimed that Pétain was senile and had only two hours of lucidity each day, journalists and diplomats who interacted with him reported that he was in fact “full of infinite wit and wisdom.”<sup>74</sup> Pétain, went the party line, *was* France, and going against him would be equivalent to turning against the homeland and the national ‘family’ in their time of crisis.

The press seemingly found it impossible to separate Pétain from his military identity. Rare was the mention of Pétain that did not label him “the victor of Verdun and the restorer of a battered France”<sup>75</sup> or a “soldier-citizen.”<sup>76</sup> Pétain’s name and his title of Marshal became practically interchangeable. Even outside a strictly military setting, as during an interview for the Paris-based newspaper *La Gerbe*, his mien and attitude lent themselves to the portrait of “an old war chief, keeping watch for surprises and constantly lacing and relacing his cuirass against the blows of destiny.”<sup>77</sup> In the aftermath of France’s defeat, it is hardly surprising that the country turned to past military victories for reassurance. Pétain and his military career provided a direct link to them, partly because of his own military merits and partly by his very age; having been born in 1856, he served as a bridge between the gilded glory of the Second Empire and Vichy France. Even on

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<sup>73</sup> “Le danger,” *Le Temps*, 19 March, 1941.

<sup>74</sup> Ophüls.

<sup>75</sup> “L’Union des combattants gage de l’unité française,” *Le Temps*, 18 September, 1940.

<sup>76</sup> “L’Unité des deux France,” *Le Temps*, 3 November 1941.

<sup>77</sup> Alphonse de Châteaubriant, “Le Maréchal m’a dit,” *La Gerbe*, 28 November, 1940.

occasions when Pétain held a secondary role, as in the July 31, 1941 *La Gerbe* article on the return of a group of French prisoners of war to their homes, Pétain appears as a hybrid of military hero and religious icon, with a “medallion-worthy profile” and a “bright sunbeam making his golden kepi shine like a sun over the crowd.”<sup>78</sup>

These crowd scenes, reminiscent of Émile Zola’s naturalist portrayals of the Second Empire, are one of the most recurrent motifs in the depiction of Pétain and his régime. Out of over 300 articles discussing Pétain in the Lyon-based newspaper *Le Temps* between January 1940 and April 1942, almost one fourth depict the Marshal visiting different regions of France to meet with crowds of adoring Frenchmen. This was no coincidence: in January 1942, *Les Documents Français* published a report specifically devoted to “Information,” referring to propaganda. The report discussed the role of propaganda in Vichy France and how it was carried out, and pointed out particularly that local Vichy-appointed delegates were in charge of, among other things, “letting the greatest possible number of Frenchmen know the work of the Marshal through the most direct and efficient means: public meetings.” In Marseille alone, where no previous public meetings had been held by a local delegate, 56 gatherings took place between June and November 1941.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “Un beau retour,” *La Gerbe*, 31 July, 1941.

<sup>79</sup> “L’Information,” *Les Documents Français*, January 1942.

The stress on Pétain's charismatic and traditional roles was meant to cover his lack of an overt bureaucratic one; despite having been charged with the creation of a new constitution in 1940, Pétain never produced one, and instead ruled by ad hoc constitutional decrees. By relying entirely on his emergency powers, Pétain strengthened his rule, as people feared adding political instability or a power vacuum to the existing emergency. At the same time, he avoided undermining his own authority by creating limitations to which he might have to adhere, or by establishing a law or policy he might prove unable to enforce. He avoided routinizing his régime by taking on a bureaucratic role that would limit his charismatic and traditional ones. Even when the press discussed Pétain's limited bureaucratic role, it upheld the traditional and charismatic elements of his persona, emphasizing his titles of Marshal of France and of Head of State, together with his independence from parliamentary regulation. When discussing an interview he conducted with Pétain, René Benjamin, author of the thoroughly Pétainist pamphlet *Le Maréchal et son peuple*, describes a smiling Pétain fantasizing about creating a very small senate, comparable to the Seven Sages of Greece, and a Consultative Assembly akin to the royal advisers.<sup>80</sup> In 1941, *Le Temps* had celebrated that France “finally has at her head a man worthy of the history and of the traditions that had created the honor and the universal prestige of France.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin, 9.

<sup>81</sup> “Confiance et obeissance,” *Le Temps*, 1 March, 1941.

This is not to say that there was no bureaucracy or administrative body within the Vichy régime. Germany was willing to allow the charade of French independence to continue in Vichy largely because it meant an easier occupation. The Vichy régime had to administer the internal affairs of the Free Zone, including education, labor, and internal order. As Head of the Government, Pétain chaired a Council of Ministers, whose job it was to carry out those roles, as will be examined in Chapter Three. Pétain distanced himself from the Council and its administrative role in the public eye, however, in order to maintain his appearance as an apolitical, charismatic figure.

It is difficult to judge just how widespread these images of Pétain were over time within specific areas or groups, but we can triangulate periods of unrest and areas of tension fairly accurately from the evolution of press discourse and content. The self-awareness of the press about its role as a shaper of public opinion is evident in a February 22, 1942 article run by the Vichyist newspaper *Le Temps* and entitled “A Science in Progress: The Measuring of Public Opinion.” In it, André Siegfried studied the evolution of polling in America as a mechanism to measure public opinion. The mechanism was complex, he argued, but “it is necessary, for the common good, that public opinion be known, and that it be known first and foremost by the government itself.” Even in non-electoral régimes, he reasoned, “it becomes practically impossible to maintain a régime if it is not upheld by consent, whether it be the majority’s or at the very least a very significant minority’s.” No régime could overlook public opinion. And while the

Vichy régime did not carry out any sort of polling to measure its approval ratings, we see its consciousness of the evolving public opinion of Pétain through the evolution of media depictions of Pétain, as well as through contrasting images of him presented by newspapers not sanctioned by the Vichy régime. The very existence of Siegfried's article points to a tension between the régime's official portrayal of itself, for German eyes, and what it tried to communicate to the French population, particularly when we consider when it was written. The attack at Pearl Harbor had just taken place, bringing the United States into the war. In that context, the mixture of referencing the United States and emphasizing the importance of public opinion and support for the success of a régime might have been *Le Temps*' way of hinting at the possibility of an Allied victory and the collapse of the Third Reich. By early 1942, public opinion in France had begun to turn toward the Allies, as we will examine in Chapter Three.

The nature of each author or publisher reflected the purpose of their depictions of Pétain, the Vichy régime, and the state of the war. *La Gerbe*, for instance, was based in Paris, which was under direct Nazi occupation and, as such, somewhat removed from the Pétainist influence. Instead, it was directly influenced by the Nazis and thus reflected the views that the Nazis wanted to spread, which did not always favor Pétain or the Vichy régime (whereas newspapers from within the Free Zone were only *indirectly* under the influence of the Nazi machine). For instance, during a period of tension between Pétain and the German ambassador to France, Otto Abetz, when Pétain dismissed Pierre

Laval (the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers and the Vichy minister closest to Abetz and the Nazi régime and ideology as a whole) from his cabinet, *La Gerbe* published a cartoon portraying the Vichy régime's beloved National Revolution as nothing but a hysterical pregnancy, much expected but incapable of delivering on its promises. This same tension led to the disparate portrayals of the Riom Trial in the press from the Occupied and Free Zones. Only papers published in the Free Zone can be said to have represented Pétain specifically as his régime wished it, and even then only within the limits set forth by the Third Reich. Pétain himself had to operate within parameters set by Abetz and by other German officials in France.

We can also assume that *Pétain-Laval* was largely intended to discredit Pétain and his régime on the international stage. Given that London, where *Pétain-Laval* was published, was also the seat of Charles de Gaulle's Free French, there is a strong possibility that the author sought to draw attention to the failures of Pétain as a leader in order to muster support for de Gaulle –another military and charismatic figure in French politics who would, toward the end of the war, rise as a symbol of France and of her resistance. On the other hand, *Le Franc-Tireur* (“The Sniper”), a newspaper of the Résistance operating in Vichy territory, was addressed to the people in France and, especially those in the so-called Free Zone; its aim was to spark a revolution within France and to increase numbers in the Résistance – hence the constant phrase “DO NOT DESTROY *Le Franc-Tireur*; pass it on to a friend.” Outside its borders, France could be presented as a

single entity, suffering under the rule of a single individual who thus served as the symbol of a régime to be defeated. Within France, however, the situation was very different. The black and white scenario presented abroad did not hold, as the reality of the Vichy régime and the occupation revealed the myriad grey spaces between collaboration and resistance, between good intentions and the common good. Pétain could be painted as a villain and as a traitor in England, but in France his image was full of ambiguity, and this contrast is evident in the different types of resistance press.

In *Pétain-Laval*, a theory was set forth that, in fact, Laval had been responsible for Vichy policy all along and that Pétain had been little more than a “mantelpiece,”<sup>82</sup> playing along with Laval’s plans out of a selfish desire for political power. Pétain was labeled as “pro-clerical, reactionary, a friend of Charles Maurras [one of the French fascists], and an enemy of the Republic.”<sup>83</sup> All of this was fairly accurate, and presented an alternative to the Pétainist storyline. The author undermined himself, though, through his seemingly paranoid claims of a Pétain-Laval conspiracy dating back to the 1930s, in which Hitler and Pétain had conspired to bring about the fall of France.<sup>84</sup> In the end, *Pétain-Laval* functioned under the very premise of the myth of the Marshal, as it aimed to refute the *myth* with putative *fact*, to change the image of Pétain from the

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<sup>82</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 18.

hero of France he pretended to be to the head of its fifth column.<sup>85</sup> Either way, Pétain remains the most significant figure in Vichy – even if he was subjugated to Laval and to the Nazis.

*Le Franc-Tireur*, on the other hand, still held all the primary personages of Vichy responsible for France's defeat and collaboration, calling for Laval, Pétain, Darlan, and "Pucheu and Co." to take responsibility for their actions once the war came to an end.<sup>86</sup> In fact, in January 1942, *Le Franc-Tireur* published an incendiary imitation of Zola's legendary "J'Accuse," accusing Pétain, "through political ideology, through pride and through gluttony for personal power [...], of being the principal responsible party for the defeat, the capitulation and the dishonor [of France]."<sup>87</sup> The staff of *Le Franc-Tireur* held no fondness for Pétain and they attached to his role as Head of State maximum responsibility for the fate of France. But they did not allow that to blind them in the grand scheme of things, as the author of *Pétain-Laval* did when he dismissed Pétain as "stupid" and "a fool" in order to place full responsibility on Laval.<sup>88</sup> In a way, *Le Franc-Tireur* is the only true rejection of the myth of the Marshal; even in pushing back against the Vichy régime, *Pétain-Laval* perpetuated the myth of the leader endowed with superior skill and authority, although it became a beast to be fought against instead of followed, with two heads instead of one – Pétain, who held the

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<sup>85</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 18.

<sup>86</sup> "Vous avez peur..." *Le Franc-Tireur*, April 1942.

<sup>87</sup> "Nous Accusons," *Le Franc-Tireur*, January 1942.

<sup>88</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 26.



authority, and Laval, who held real power. On the other hand, *Le Franc-Tireur*, working from within Vichy territory, stripped Pétain of his “exceptional qualities,”<sup>89</sup> treating him as another cog in the machine – albeit the most prominent one.

The Pétainist reaction to these negative depictions was to label them as unpatriotic propaganda “not seeking the salvation of France.”<sup>90</sup> As mentioned earlier, however, there was a definite evolution to the Pétainist discourse, reflecting a change in public opinion between Pétain’s ascension to power in 1940 and mid-1942. At first, the press emphasized Pétain’s righteousness and his “complete and absolute” authority as Head of State.<sup>91</sup> By December of 1941 this authority had become subject to “the current situation in France”<sup>92</sup> and the “exceptional period”<sup>93</sup> that the French were living through. Whereas Pétain had originally been tasked with producing a new constitution almost immediately after coming to power, by January of 1942 Vichy’s press claimed that creating a new constitution while France faced the occupation would taint it and make it a product of France’s “original sin.”<sup>94</sup> In fact, the claim from January 1941 (already fairly laughable at the time) that “one of the great merits of Marshal Pétain, since the conclusion of the armistice, has been completely maintaining the rights of France, [and that] thereby the role of France in the world has not been diminished

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<sup>89</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 358.

<sup>90</sup> “Les droits et les devoirs présents des Français,” *Le Temps*, 15 August, 1941.

<sup>91</sup> “Gouvernement d’hérarchie,” *Le Temps*, 12 February, 1941.

<sup>92</sup> “Discrétion opportune,” *Le Temps*, 4 December, 1941.

<sup>93</sup> “L’assentiment de l’opinion,” *Le Temps*, 8 December 1941.

<sup>94</sup> “Le gouvernement et la nation,” *Le Temps*, 9 January, 1942.

or changed,”<sup>95</sup> was completely rejected one year later.<sup>96</sup> By the end of 1941, Pétain’s rule was justified by reasoning that “certain negotiations can only be conducted, on the French side, by political men with the right to act without direct oversight.”<sup>97</sup> In fact, by 1942, the majority of newspaper articles mentioning Pétain did so only in order to emphasize the people’s obligation to obey Pétain, to “do nothing that might endanger the unity of the nation, [...] without which any attempt at restoration would culminate in nothing.”<sup>98</sup>

It was at this time that the Riom Trial finally started. The timing cannot be overlooked. Pétain had already passed judgment on the “traitors” of the Third Republic in his speech of October 16, 1941, as mentioned earlier. Thus the Trial’s timing (and its taking place at all) was meant to lend the Vichy régime legitimacy, and to condemn Pétain’s political rivals at a time when Pétain’s image as symbol and savior of France was being threatened.

Even fervent anti-Pétainists acknowledged that this change in the depictions of Pétain’s régime did not dissuade people from continuing to support Pétain himself. There was a marked distinction in the press between Pétain and his régime, and even as the tide turned against the régime, Pétain himself retained significant public approval. If anything, Pétain remained a national symbol while Pétain’s ministers, primarily Laval, took on the political identity of the régime,

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<sup>95</sup> “Solidité de l’empire français,” *Le Temps*, 7 January, 1941

<sup>96</sup> “Le gouvernement et la nation,” *Le Temps*, 9 January, 1942.

<sup>97</sup> “Discrétion opportune,” *Le Temps*, 4 December, 1941.

<sup>98</sup> “Le Grand devoir,” *Le Temps*, 28 January, 1942.

drawing the bulk of the negative press and public opinion. In fact, in 1942, through the direct influence of Abetz, Laval became Prime Minister and Head of the Government of France. From this point on, Pétain was seen as a figurehead, even by the greater French population. Even underground, anti-Pétainist newspapers such as *Le Franc-Tireur* reflected this evolution: its heading in December 1941 read “Monthly to the extent of the possible and by the grace of the Marshal’s Police.” By April 1942, Laval’s name had replaced the Marshal’s. Despite Pétain’s evident demotion, however, it still benefitted the Vichy régime to perpetuate the image of him as endowed with at least a certain degree of authority, since the almost universally negative view of Laval would have given traction to the Résistance movement if Pétain had not remained as a symbol of the régime.

Unable to exert any true power, Pétain and the Vichy régime sought to create the appearance of it through their manipulation of the media. In doing so, they gave birth to both the myth of the Marshal and the Pétainist myth, the former endowing Pétain with a hybrid of charismatic and traditional authority and the latter spreading it through the phenomenon of mimetic desire. When it appeared that the bulk of the public favored Pétain, those who were unsure about him felt compelled to join his cult. The régime’s manipulation of the press was largely met with success, to the point that even when public opinion had turned against the régime as a whole, Pétain remained a national symbol, since his authority derived from his identity as “the World War I victor, the cautious hoarder of French

blood, the bulwark against revolution, the wise father,” and not his political role.<sup>99</sup> Even as the press changed the tone with which it spoke of Pétain to reflect popular discontent and the evident relegation of Pétain to the role of figurehead, it emphasized the distance between Pétain the symbol and Pétain the politician, emphatically admitting its “relative ignorance of the political events that take place between governments and chancelleries.”<sup>100</sup>

Benjamin phrased it best in 1941, in the very first page of his work: “What a privilege to live at the time of a man who we know – no, we are certain – will surpass history and will enter immediately into legend; the adventure of his life has so captured hearts and so calls forth the poet instead of the historian!”<sup>101</sup> The myth of the Marshal does not present us with a history of Pétain in the slightest, but rather with a history of Vichy. Through the myth, Pétain became a one-dimensional figure whose purpose was to represent a political agenda, much as Alfred Dreyfus had decades earlier. Thus, while it is certainly necessary to understand the origins of Pétain’s mythos and to study the contrasting representations of Pétain by the Vichyist, Résistance, and German-controlled presses, they only provide us with a snapshot of Pétain’s role in Vichy France. To fully understand the significance of these representations, it is necessary to place them in their historical context, side by side with the events of the War and the Occupation as well as the actions and laws of the Vichy régime.

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<sup>99</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 236.

<sup>100</sup> “Les droits et les devoirs présents des Français,” *Le Temps*, 15 August, 1941.

<sup>101</sup> Benjamin, 1.

### CHAPTER III: PÉTAİN'S VICHY

*“I used my power as a shield to protect the French people... Every day, a dagger at my throat, I struggled against the enemy’s demands. History will tell all that I spared you, though my adversaries think only of reproaching me the inevitable. [...] I prepared the way for Liberation by preserving France, suffering but alive.”*  
Philippe Pétain, *Procès du Maréchal Pétain*, 1945.<sup>102</sup>

The Vichy régime went to extraordinary lengths to superimpose the Pétain myth as a veneer of authority and control on the face of the Occupation. In attempting to forge and sustain the Myth of the Marshal, however, the régime also demonstrated its weakness. Strict regulation of the “display, diffusion, [and] sale of photographs, engravings, drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, stamps, effigies, and, in general, of any portrait of the Head of State” in 1941 reveals a tension between the rise of Pétain as a symbol of France and growing discontent with his perceived inability to do anything beyond shaking hands and making speeches.<sup>103</sup> We have studied the role of Pétain as a propaganda tool and as a device for shaping public opinion. In order to understand the rationale behind the strict separation of Pétain’s public image and relationship with the press from the

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<sup>102</sup> Philippe Pétain, in *Procès du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris: High Court of Justice of the French Republic, 1945), 9.

<sup>103</sup> “La reproduction des traits du chef de l’Etat,” *Le Temps*, 27 July, 1941.

Vichy régime itself, we must now turn to that régime: to its organization, purpose, powers, and limitations. In the previous chapter, we met Pétain, the ostensibly Great and Powerful Wizard, and discussed the decline of his image and perceived role between 1940 and 1942, as well as the rise of underground anti-Pétainist movements. Now, let us meet the men behind the curtain, the men of Vichy who took on the bureaucratic and political roles Pétain avoided— or, rather, hid from the public eye. By studying them and their work as politicians and diplomats, we can understand the purpose of Vichy, its manipulation of French public opinion, and the role of Pétain as Head of State.

Herbert Lottman concludes the foreword to his biography of Pétain, *Pétain: Hero or Traitor*, by acknowledging “the possibility that the same person might be a resistance fighter with respect to the Axis powers and the founder of a dictatorship that borrowed much of its techniques and philosophy from the very Nazi and Fascist régimes he wished to resist.”<sup>104</sup> While I find “resistance fighter” too strong a label for Pétain’s case, there is an undeniable duality to his role. Pétain was no fascist. He was, however, conservative, reactionary, militaristic, and staunchly nationalist – a product of France’s late nineteenth century. How could a man of such convictions willingly subjugate himself and his homeland to a foreign state, particularly to the one responsible for France’s great humiliation in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871? Pétain’s most basic purpose derived

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<sup>104</sup> Herbert Lottman, *Pétain: Hero or Traitor?* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1985).

precisely from those values: he sought to preserve France, the homeland for which so much French blood had been spilled under his command in World War I – and yes, he sought to preserve the Vichy régime and his position within it as well. Certainly he had further ambitions, but his words, actions, and legislation over the course of World War II held that one primary tenet at the core of his régime.

Pétain embodied the perfect post-Dreyfus Affair military man: he was strongly guided by hierarchy, order, and nationalism, and he kept himself out of politics, though he leaned heavily to the right. In World War I, he had gained much popularity among the troops because of his reluctance to spill French blood and his endless attempts to make life easier for the soldiers. After decades of military service and command based on those principles, Pétain was aware that his authority derived primarily from his ability to mobilize public opinion and nationalist sentiment. Getting tied down in politics would have implied splintering his support base, as he would inevitably have had to come out *for* or *against* any number of controversial issues. Furthermore, given the nature of the Nazi occupation, Vichy legislation would inevitably have restricted civil liberties and sapped French resources; whoever imposed such legislation would meet with overwhelming public disapproval. Most importantly, siding with a single French faction would shatter his image as the living symbol of all of France. Such a fate would weaken, if not destroy, Pétain's authority, delegitimizing the Vichy régime and leaving France open to a full occupation and administration similar to that

which had befallen Poland. To avoid that fate, Pétain avoided publicly taking on a political or bureaucratic role within the Vichy régime, delegating such duties to his Council of Ministers, over which he presided as Head of the Government and whose members he appointed and dismissed more or less at will until 1942.

From the beginning of the occupation in 1940, until the full occupation of French territory in 1942, Pétain used the political and bureaucratic aspects of the Vichy régime to appease Hitler and “uphold French unity.”<sup>105</sup> His political ideology was only secondary to this purpose – yet another reason for the ad hoc nature of his reign. Instead of catering to his own political ideology, which we can assume was fairly constant, Pétain had to work around the events of the war, which were far from stable. A constitution or legal code could have been crafted to reflect his ambitions if they had been led by pure ideology, but no constitution could have been flexible enough and made the necessary provisions to face the volatile nature of the occupation.

It is difficult to summarize the structure of the Vichy régime, because it was never formally established. The constitution of the Third Republic was repealed by the same vote that made Pétain Head of State on July 10, 1940. Henceforth, Pétain dictated the shape of the new régime through constitutional acts. Constitutional Act No. 1 of July 11 read:

The National Assembly gives full powers to the Government of the Republic, under the authority and signature of Marshal Pétain, for

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<sup>105</sup> Pétain, *Discours aux Français*, 95.



the purpose of promulgating by one or many acts a new constitution for the French State. This constitution shall guarantee the rights of labor, family, and country.

It shall be ratified by the Nation and applied by the Assemblies that it will have created.

This constitutional law, discussed and adopted by the National Assembly, shall be enforced as State Law.<sup>106</sup>

While the creation of new Assemblies of some sort is explicitly prescribed in the first constitutional act, their existence depended on the creation of a new constitution that Pétain never produced. That same day, in his second constitutional act, Pétain declared that he had “full governmental powers,” including “legislative power, with the Council of Ministers, until the formation of the new Assemblies,” and the power to “promulgate laws and ensure their execution.” Constitutional Act No. 3 dissolved the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>107</sup> Little by little, all recognizable elements of the French government were eliminated and their powers concentrated in Pétain, who could carry them out or delegate them until further notice as he saw fit. He cemented his supreme authority and unlimited power through his use of the royal “we” throughout his entire régime.

The Vichy régime lacked any real organization. Paxton provides one of the best and most thorough analyses of it in *Vichy France*, in which he describes the constant shaping and reshaping of the Council of Ministers and its policies. This improvised method of governing is typical of charismatic régimes as a

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<sup>106</sup> Jean-Pierre Maury, “Le Gouvernement de Vichy,” Perpignan University’s Law and Politics Cyber Library, last modified 1998, <http://mjp.univ-perp.fr/france/co1940.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> Maury.

whole, in which offices and laws are made and unmade on an ad hoc basis, as the leader sees fit, both in order to avoid a bureaucratization of power and to maintain a constant state of crisis that justifies continued extreme measures. Between 1940 and 1942, there were seven major governmental shifts; just within the first year of Pétain's rule, there were four ministers of foreign affairs, five ministers of the interior, five ministers of education, and six ministers of industrial production.<sup>108</sup> Through all the changes in the Council of Ministers, two individuals remained and accumulated offices: Pierre Laval and Admiral François Darlan, one of Pétain's most trusted advisors. Between July 1940 and November 1942, Pétain enacted four different plans establishing a course of action in case something befell him. Instead of establishing a clear order of succession, each version of the act named a single individual to replace him: Laval (July 12, 1940), then an individual to be elected by the Council of Ministers (December 13, 1940), then Darlan (February 10, 1941), and once again Laval (November 17, 1942).

Laval became a figure of great eminence within the Vichy régime and has often been depicted as the true political force behind the Vichy government. Born in Châteldon, a village 20 kilometers south of Vichy, to a working-class family, Laval demonstrated over the years an ability to weather the political turmoil of France's twentieth century. He started his political career in 1903, when he joined the Socialist Party and campaigned for strikers' rights and trade unionism. As World War I continued, however, and in light of the Bolshevik Revolution, the

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<sup>108</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 200.

Socialist Party, renowned for its pacifist leanings, began steadily losing popularity. When the Socialist Party split into the Communist Party and the Workers' International in 1920, Laval left the Party and ran for office as an Independent. Over the years he began to accumulate wealth and, little by little, make his way to the center-right. In January 1931, he became Prime Minister of France, and then again in June 1935. He joined the Pétain government on June 23, 1940, and by September of that year counted as the only Third Republic parliamentarian left in the government. This ability to be the last man standing is curious, given his sheer unpopularity. Maurice Thorez described him as “a stinking crossbreed of a hyena and a reptile, whose minuscule size is made up for by a triple dosage of depravity.”<sup>109</sup> His appearance was no more appealing:

Upon his face, a horrible grimace that seems to split his face in two, revealing a couple of yellowing fangs; he has the withered, olive-colored skin of a knave; upon his sunken forehead, hair that once was black; stuck to his lower lip a cigarette butt, and in his eyes a fleeting, insolent, cruel gaze.<sup>110</sup>

And yet, when Reynaud resigned on June 16, 1940 and named Pétain as his replacement, Pétain had a clear idea of who he wanted in his Council and immediately presented a list of ministers, including Laval at the head of the Ministry of Justice. Laval rejected the offer, however, demanding instead to be made Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position Pétain had allotted to Paul Baudouin. After much debate, Laval accepted a position as minister without portfolio on

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<sup>109</sup> Maurice Thorez, *Pierre Laval Lugarteniente de Hitler en Francia* (Buenos Aires: Anteo, 1943), 3.

<sup>110</sup> Thorez, 3.

June 23, *after* the government had sued for an armistice. When the French State replaced the Third Republic and Pétain established his first Council of Ministers as Head of State on July 12, 1940, he made very few changes to his June 16 list of ministers. But, significantly, he named Laval Vice President of the Council.

The first months of the Vichy régime had been filled with chaos. An armistice had been signed, allowing for the German occupation of much of France but acknowledging the right of the French government to administer the entirety of France. A Demarcation Line, however, impeded travel between the two zones, particularly for government officials, so that communication between them, especially regarding the establishment of the new government in Vichy, was practically impossible.<sup>111</sup> The limitations of the Vichy government's scope and powers had not been clearly established, but one thing was certain: the government's most important duty was to normalize relations with Berlin. On July 14, Otto Abetz, a member of the German delegation in Paris, reported to Berlin that Laval would like to arrange a meeting in Paris. Five days later, Laval crossed the Demarcation Line and became the first French minister to return to Paris, where he met with Abetz.

General Huntziger, who had headed the delegation sent to Compiègne in June to sign the armistice with Germany, had turned to Weisbaden, where the German Armistice Commission was based, to establish a connection with General

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<sup>111</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 53.

Wilhelm Keitel, his German counterpart. But he had met with little success. Baudouin had attempted to reach Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's Foreign Minister, via the German embassy in Madrid – to which Pétain's cabinet had turned earlier in the summer to open armistice negotiations – but was equally unsuccessful. Consequently, the relationship between Laval and Abetz grew over the following two years and eventually became the strongest link between Vichy and Berlin, as the Vichy-Weisbaden military communication channels gave way to the Paris-Berlin civilian ones.<sup>112</sup> From his position as Vice President, Laval had made himself an indispensable part, if not the most important one, of Vichy's foreign affairs.

With a diplomatic channel open between Vichy and Berlin, the emphasis turned to the nature of the relationship between them. The Vichy régime and collaboration are practically synonymous; the very nature of the régime was one of appeasement and collaboration with Germany, an entire government doing its best to please its occupier by all means possible with the hope of avoiding harsher restrictions at the end of the war. To this purpose, when Pétain and Hitler met and shared their infamous handshake at Montoire in October 1940, the Vichy régime signed an agreement stating that “The Axis Powers and France have an identical interest in seeing the defeat of England accomplished as soon as possible. Consequently, the French Government will support, within the limits of its ability,

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<sup>112</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 64.

the measures which the Axis Powers may take to this end.”<sup>113</sup> In return for this support, France would receive “the place to which she [was] entitled” in the “New Europe.”<sup>114</sup>

Independently of any agreement with Germany, Vichy had a stake in England’s defeat. In a broad sense, France could not expect a peace treaty to replace the restricting armistice until the war had ended, and Vichy ministers did not envision an outcome in which Germany lost. In their eyes, the sooner the Allies were defeated, the sooner the war would end, and the sooner all aspects of French life would be normalized. The defeat of England in particular, though, would mean an end to Charles de Gaulle’s London-based insurgency, as well as the defeat of Winston Churchill, whom Vichy politicians had particularly disliked ever since, on June 16, 1940, following the defeat at Dunkirk and France’s fall, he had proposed a “Franco-British Union.” Under that arrangement,

France and Great Britain shall no longer be two nations, but one Franco-British Union.

The constitution of the Union will provide for joint organs of defence, foreign, financial and economic policies.

Every citizen of France will enjoy immediately citizenship of Great Britain, every British subject will become a citizen of France.

...

During the war there shall be a single War Cabinet, and all the forces of Britain and France, whether on land, sea or in the air, will

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<sup>113</sup> William Langer, *Our Vichy Gamble* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947), 94-5.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

be placed under its direction. It will govern from wherever best it can.<sup>115</sup>

Jean Ybarnégary, Minister of State in Reynaud's last Council, rejected the offer, exclaiming "Better to be a Nazi province. At least we know what that means."<sup>116</sup> Churchill was unlikely to let a Frenchman take over his position and, in light of France's defeat, the new Franco-British administration's "govern[ing] from where best it can," seemed to imply governance from Britain. Given the ministers' certainty that Hitler would soon win the war, their inability to foresee what Hitler's reign would come to mean over the following years, and the historical enmity between France and Britain, it is not entirely surprising that Ybarnégary and other conservative politicians would take issue with such a proposition. Some also argued that the Union was just a British ploy to lay hands on as much French territory as possible. And indeed, France's colonies were one of the most significant factors in her desire to see Britain defeated, since the longer the war went on the higher the chances became of France's colonies being invaded by a foreign power.

For decades, France had been a breeding ground for factionalism, political conflict, and enmity. The Paris Commune of 1871 and the rise of communism in the early twentieth century had brought the right and left into direct conflict. In the wake of that conflict, "the empire was the only direction in which a Frenchman could brandish the flag" without appearing to be advocating war

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<sup>115</sup> Avi Shlaim, "Prelude to Downfall: The British Offer of Union to France, June 1940," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1974), 50.

<sup>116</sup> Shlaim, 53.

either alongside Stalin or alongside Hitler.<sup>117</sup> Thus the empire became a strong symbol for the Vichy régime of its goal: keeping France united socially, politically, and physically. After Britain's preemptive bombardment of the French Navy's port at Mers-el-Kébir, in French Algeria, on July 3, 1940 – which had caused over 1,000 French deaths – nobody could argue that France's empire was safe from British attack. The Gaullist seizure of French Equatorial Africa on August 28 and the British-Gaullist expedition that arrived in Dakar on September 20 became a tipping point in Franco-German relations. From that point on, France's colonies seemed in more direct danger from Britain and its Allies than from Hitler. Furthermore, France hoped that due to its collaboration, when the war ended, Germany would grant France some of Britain's former colonies. First and foremost, however, France wanted its colonial territories to remain French, and, though it may seem counterintuitive to a modern reader, in the summer of 1940 Germany's swift victory seemed the best way to ensure the survival of the French empire.

Shortly thereafter, on October 28, because of Laval's successful diplomatic relationship with Abetz (who had by now become Germany's ambassador in Paris), Pétain made him Minister of Foreign Affairs (even as he retained his post as Vice President of the Council). Perhaps the relationship between Laval and Abetz gave the Vichy régime an impression of camaraderie between the two governments. Or maybe the régime decided to take the perceived

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<sup>117</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 57.



diplomatic ease as an opportunity to flex its muscles. Either way, the following month marked a change in Vichy policy, from complete deference to the Nazis to a series of attempted unilateral actions against Nazi regulations. While Vichy politicians had previously been happy to move toward German customs inspections on the national frontiers as an alternative to the strict Demarcation Line, they now demanded certain concessions in return. On December 1, they “declined to make the occupation costs payment.”<sup>118</sup> Most significantly, they cut off ongoing negotiations regarding a possible return of the government to Paris, and informed the German Armistice Commission that “Marshal Pétain had decided to move the seat of government to Versailles.”<sup>119</sup>

Germany rejected these actions. On December 10, Hitler stated in a secret directive to his generals regarding the possible occupation of the rest of France, that “if France becomes troublesome, she will have to be crushed completely.”<sup>120</sup> The timing was less than ideal, however, as he was turning his eyes to Eastern Europe; Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in the spring was already months in the planning. Subduing the Vichy régime and stabilizing the Western front would allow Hitler to turn fully to the East and to the USSR. Furthermore, a complacent collaborationist government in France meant that the Nazis required only a skeleton occupying force, as the Vichy régime would take charge of the French

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<sup>118</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 79.

<sup>119</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 79.

<sup>120</sup> William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 821.

population and subdue internal opposition. Much as the Vichy régime attempted to appease the French through the symbol of Pétain, Hitler's ministers sought to subdue the Vichy government itself through symbolic spectacle. When they rejected Pétain's move to Versailles, they did so by returning the ashes of Napoleon's son, the Duke of Reichstadt, for interment at Les Invalides, in Paris.

The Vichy régime and its propagandists (led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Baudouin, now at the head of the Ministry of Information, established on December 13, 1940) converted the return of the Duke of Reichstadt's ashes into an opportunity to reiterate the symbolic value of Pétain and the deep roots of militaristic, charismatic, authoritarian leadership in France. These events are reflective of the régime's standard operating procedure between 1940 and 1942. Germany made a demand, Vichy offered to overfulfill the demand in return for certain concessions, Germany did or did not agree, and Vichy twisted the events in the press to make it seem that everything had been its own plan from the start. Just as the Vichy régime was in constant flux and re-designed as needed, so were Vichy's policies and relationship with Germany. When Hitler had demanded German base rights in North Africa in July, for example, Pétain had famously refused, in what some call "Vichy's first resistance."<sup>121</sup> But he had accompanied his refusal with a bid for wider negotiations, in which German base rights could be addressed.<sup>122</sup> In a similar fashion the Vichy régime had at first

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<sup>121</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 61.

<sup>122</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 61.

opposed war contracts between German industrial representatives and French industrialists. When the Minister of Industrial Production, René Belin, realized that French industrialists were accepting the contracts in any case, however, he agreed to allow them as long as a French office got to control who got what contracts and if negotiations were opened as to the type of materiel they would produce.<sup>123</sup>

The aim of this game of give-and-take was to come away from the negotiating table with a win, a concession Germany had originally not intended to offer, even if the result was a net loss for Vichy in another sector. What France needed, as Laval told Hermann Göring in early November 1940, was results that “strike people in the eye;”<sup>124</sup> the French would be open to collaboration as long as they could see positive results. By Nazi standards, the Vichy régime’s continued existence was justified primarily by its ability to maintain internal order in France itself and to reduce the troops, diplomatic personnel, war materiel, and money Germany had to invest in the occupation. If Hitler had wished to expend the resources necessary to take by force what he wanted from France, he could have done so. But negotiation (and consequent concessions) presented a lower net cost. Furthermore, in order to gain any concessions, the French had to meet all the original German demands and then offer something further to make up the difference, so that Germany walked away with more than it had asked for in

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<sup>123</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 54.

<sup>124</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 77.

return for a symbolic concession. After the war, Vichy officials claimed that in giving the Nazis more than they had asked for, the Vichy régime had been proving its willingness to cooperate and avoiding giving the Nazis reason to take over direct management and enforcement of their demands and regulations. Critics of the régime argued that Vichy had gone beyond what was necessary in collaborating with the Nazis, because they shared an agenda. Both arguments are certainly true in specific examples and in the case of particular individuals. But as a rule, Vichy's dealings with the Nazis were dictated by the need to maintain internal order, thus maintaining its authority in Nazi eyes, and the potential for propaganda and shaping public opinion, maintaining its authority with the French. Coming away from the negotiation table with a concession or two meant that, even while Pétain avoided it, the Vichy régime itself could claim certain bureaucratic authority. In order to earn this or that concession, however, Vichy had to give the German representatives something to tempt them and to make them willing to negotiate. Once Vichy had started down this road, it eliminated the possibility of ever refusing a German request and trying to claim the moral high ground.

In the meantime, Laval had been busy in his capacities as Vice President of the Council, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and as a sort of unofficial envoy from Abetz within the Vichy government. On November 29, 1940, he promised Abetz he would “bring pressure” on Pétain and his régime to “support more

aggressive plans in Africa.”<sup>125</sup> On December 9, he addressed the Council, assuring it that aggressive action in Africa would not lead to open war with Britain. The next day, however, he told German Generalmajor Walter Warlimont that France’s actions would surely cause the British to retaliate. He also told Robert Murphy, an American journalist, that he “hoped” Britain was defeated, so that Britain would “pay the bill and not France.”<sup>126</sup> Laval had been stretching himself thin, trying to please Abetz and manipulate the Vichy Council of Ministers, as well as trying to take on the bulk of its political duties and decisions. At first, Pétain had largely overlooked Laval’s actions, happy to have results to show the public. Laval’s close relationship with Abetz had also seemed to provide some room for the Vichy régime to flex its muscles. But Germany’s rejection of Vichy’s unilateral actions – particularly Pétain’s symbolic move to Versailles – showed that Vichy had found the limits of Germany’s willingness to negotiate. Now that Pétain was aware of how far Vichy could push with its collaboration, Laval’s duplicity and manipulation were no longer an acceptable price to pay for his diplomatic value.

Relations between Pétain and Laval had never been easy. Pétain was a man of strict principle who, albeit possibly misguidedly, believed that protecting the homeland was one of the most important tenets of French civilization. Laval’s changing political alliances and the mysterious means by which his political

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<sup>125</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 85.

<sup>126</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 85.

enterprises had lined his coffers, however, had given him the reputation of a power-hungry mercenary. His close relationship with Abetz and the Nazis made him appear to have turned his back on France for personal gain. Pétain and Laval's ideals, politics, and interpretation of the purpose of Vichy were radically different, which led to much tension between the two.

Beyond his duplicity and manipulation of the Vichy ministers, Laval owed his fall from grace to the tides of public opinion. While Vichy had been able to twist Hitler's rejection of Pétain's move to Versailles into a story about Napoleon and France's great past, thanks to the return of the Duke of Reichstadt's ashes, Laval had ultimately failed to secure the move, which would have held great symbolic value and fed countless news cycles. Laval had thus failed to shape public opinion through his diplomacy and weakened Vichy's bureaucratic authority. Furthermore, Laval had risen slowly as a foil to Pétain in the public eye – legitimately enough, as he had taken on the administrative and political role of the government while Pétain had taken the public and symbolic one. His persona also figured in public opinion and in the image of the Vichy régime; unfortunately for him, Laval was simply not a charismatic figure. He was rumored to have been the driving force behind the armistice and the Vichy government, despite not having joined the Council of Ministers until late June, and to have hand-picked Pétain to be the face of the régime, “[not] expected to do anything, except be an

ornate mantelpiece or a statue on a pedestal,”<sup>127</sup> a rumor of little credibility but which, regardless, persists even today. While Pétain was largely regarded as a patriotic hero answering France’s call in her hour of need, Laval had been depicted as a man with “no patriotic sense whatsoever, merely insatiable personal ambition,”<sup>128</sup> and as a man that “the entire people of France both hate and despise.”<sup>129</sup> Consequently, in December 1940 Laval proved unable to improve Vichy’s political image and bureaucratic authority as well as damaging to the personal and charismatic aspects of the régime.

For months, Laval had been climbing the Vichy ladder, bolstered by his close relationship with Abetz and the Nazis. In a way, he had served as a buffer between Vichy and Berlin. Germany’s rejection of Vichy’s unilateral policies in late 1940, however, had shown Pétain and the Vichy ministers how far they could push Germany in their negotiations. Once they felt they could successfully operate within those limits, Laval’s diplomatic role was no longer worth suffering Germany’s man within their régime. On December 13, 1940, Pétain called a meeting of the Council of Ministers at which he asked all ministers to submit a letter of resignation. He accepted only those of Laval and the minister of education. Laval was then escorted back to his hotel so that he could gather his

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<sup>127</sup> *Pétain-Laval*, 11.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>129</sup> Henry Torrès, *Pierre Laval*, translated by Norbert Guterman. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), vi.

belongings. Special security escorted him to his home at Châteldon, where he was placed under house arrest, with all lines of communications to Paris cut off.<sup>130</sup>

The Vichy régime depended on two factors for its continued relevance: a “minimum of voluntary submission” by Frenchmen<sup>131</sup> and a good relationship with Berlin and the German representatives in Paris. Laval’s good rapport with Abetz had originally earned him a free pass when it came to public opinion. But his failure to smooth over Pétain’s move to Versailles with the Nazis, or to gain any leeway in Vichy’s other attempts at asserting itself against Germany, meant that Pétain was no longer willing to overlook his drawbacks. Yet his dismissal should not be regarded as an attempt by Vichy to change its policy of collaboration or to distance itself from Germany. Pétain named Pierre Flandin to replace Laval as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and together they attempted to continue Vichy’s diplomatic agenda, meeting with diplomats and envoys from other neutral countries.<sup>132</sup> Pétain’s dismissal of Laval continued Vichy’s trend of spinning its concessions to Germany into French successes; Pétain might not have moved to Versailles, but he had rid himself of Laval, Germany’s man in Vichy.

While Vichy had not openly intended Laval’s dismissal to alter Franco-German relations and had, in fact, kept Laval’s policies in place, German’s attitude toward the Vichy government changed radically as a result. Abetz, who had risen to his position as ambassador because of his ability to negotiate with

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<sup>130</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 92.

<sup>131</sup> Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 324.

<sup>132</sup> “Les membres du gouvernement chez le Maréchal Pétain,” *Le Temps*, January 2, 1941.



Laval, stormed into the Free Zone with a flock of Nazi officers and took Laval to Paris. Henceforth, the implicit threat was that if Pétain and his Vichy ministers could not keep the French in check, Germany could set up a competing government in Paris, headed by Laval and directly controlled by Abetz, which would eliminate the need for any further concessions to Vichy.

Furthermore, Abetz refused to deal with Flandin, Laval's replacement, and toyed with cutting off Radio Vichy from the Occupied Zone, as well as permanently closing down the crossing points along the Demarcation Line.<sup>133</sup> Writing to Mussolini in June 1941, Hitler stated that "France is, as ever, not to be trusted."<sup>134</sup> Local newspapers reflected the shift in the Franco-German relationship, and *La Gerbe*, based in Paris and thus controlled by the Nazis, ran a series of cartoons over the spring of 1941 depicting Pétain and his National Revolution in rather unflattering terms. One showed a Vichy politician standing outside the office of the Council of Ministers, receiving a phone call from France herself and ordering his secretary to hang up. At the top of the cartoon, a quotation attributed to "the press" read: "The past few weeks have been tragic in the extreme. Will the tension between Paris and Vichy finally end?"

This situation severely undermined Pétain's authority with Germany and strained the Paris-Vichy relationship. Yet it also strengthened Pétain's image with the French, as Abetz's interference cemented Laval's image as a German pawn

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<sup>133</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 105.

<sup>134</sup> Shirer, 850.

and gave legitimacy to Pétain's claims to be protecting France's integrity and keeping his régime free of German influence. The tension between Pétain and Laval and between Vichy and Paris, as well as the evident antagonism toward Pétain in the Nazi-controlled Parisian newspapers, bolstered Pétain's image as a bastion of French nationalism and independence within Vichy.

At the same time, the Vichy régime and its propagandists accused Parisian newspapers of "exploiting" the tension to sell papers. And, indeed, after Laval's dismissal, the Vichy régime had started a campaign of reconciliation with Germany, now needing more than ever to appear benign in order to avoid the creation of a competing Laval government. When Abetz had refused to deal with him, Flandin resigned, and Pétain started to look into ways to reopen the diplomatic channel between Vichy and Paris (and, by extension, Berlin), even toying with the idea of offering Laval his post back.<sup>135</sup> In the next best move to reinstating Laval, Pétain assembled a new Council of Ministers at the end of February and appointed Admiral Darlan, Minister of the Navy and "Germany's friend,"<sup>136</sup> to the positions Laval had previously held (Vice President of the Council, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of the Interior). Abetz was willing to deal with Darlan and so, if conditions had been different, Darlan's rise to power might have yielded the expected results. But the evolution of the war dictated Vichy's fate.

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<sup>135</sup> "Le Maréchal Pétain a proposé à M. Pierre Laval d'entrer dans le gouvernement," *Le Temps*, February 10, 1941.

<sup>136</sup> Shirer, 923.

France's colonies were the only bargaining chip the Vichy régime had left and so, in an attempt to take France back to her previous relationship with Germany, Darlan offered Hitler three major military concessions in the summer of 1941: "the use of Syrian airfields and military supplies stocked in Syria to help Rashid Ali's rebellion in Iraq; the use of the Tunisian port of Bizerte as a supply route for Rommel's Afrika Korps; and eventually, a German submarine base at Dakar."<sup>137</sup> In return, Germany slightly reduced the occupation costs Vichy had to pay, relaxed security at crossing points along the Demarcation Line, and released French veterans of World War I from German POW camps – symbolic concessions to keep France content and avoid conflict as Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa. When Britain caught wind of France's concessions, however, Anglo-Gaullist forces pushed into Syria, where serious fighting developed over the summer. On July 14, France's national holiday, Vichy forces surrendered Syria to Britain. Darlan had given away the last of Vichy's leverage, and now France's empire, which heretofore had symbolized France's prowess and wealth in the face of the occupation, was lost. Furthermore, Darlan had publicly announced Germany's concessions in *Le Temps* back in May. Now that Syria was lost, though, Germany had no intention of following through on its end.<sup>138</sup> Darlan's military and diplomatic failure was one of the most public of the Vichy period.

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<sup>137</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 117.

<sup>138</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 124.

When Darlan approached Abetz about further negotiations in August, he was turned away. The rejection is hardly surprising. Germany's relationship with France was primarily a non-reciprocal one, and if Abetz and the other German politicians and ministers ever agreed to negotiations or concessions, it was only because it was *easier*. Receiving the full approval and support of the Vichy régime meant that fewer German forces were needed to carry out any operation, and that Hitler could retain his front of legality and legitimacy for a few more weeks or months. A reduced occupation payment or a couple hundred fewer French POWs were not too much of a hardship. At this point in the war, however, Vichy and its ministers were more dependent on France's internal order and collaboration than Germany; the only value of the Vichy régime in Nazi eyes was its ability to keep the Western front relatively quiet and allow Nazi forces to focus entirely on the newly opened Eastern front and the invasion of the USSR. The possibility of a Laval régime in Paris was ever-present, so Vichy could not risk rattling its cage too much. If Abetz refused to meet with Darlan, there was little he could do about it without appearing too problematic and tempting Hitler to give Abetz and Laval the go-ahead to overthrow Vichy.

The months that followed were some of the toughest for Vichy. Unable to negotiate with the Nazis for lack of bargaining chips and diplomatic consequence and forced to maintain its policy of collaboration, Vichy had to make do with the situation. Meanwhile, living conditions kept deteriorating. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States withdrew its diplomatic corps from France, much

to Vichy's chagrin, since it had lent the régime a strong sense of legitimacy. Furthermore, between the British blockade, the loss of the colonies to de Gaulle's forces, and the Allied bombings in the Occupied Zone, it seemed that often an Allied victory implied a French loss. At the same time, the occupation meant that conditions did nothing but deteriorate; because of German requisitions, France had gone from being one of the wealthiest countries in the world to a skeleton economy. France had roughly 35% of the coal of prewar years for its own use, and oil supplies were at one-tenth the prewar level.<sup>139</sup> By the end of the war, France was the worst nourished occupied territory in Western Europe, with caloric intake having fallen to 1500 calories per day in regions with a black market, and lower still where there was none.<sup>140</sup> In light of the tremendous deterioration of living conditions in France, public opinion started to turn severely against Vichy and even Pétain, whose authority was crumbling as his lack of power became evident. Vichy had carefully crafted Pétain's image to avoid any links to the régime's bureaucracy and politics in an attempt to unite France under an apolitical leader. Due to Germany's ever-increasing demands and limitations, however, it is possible that the avoidance of a bureaucratic role ultimately served to reveal how devoid of true power Pétain's authority was.

Operation Barbarossa, however, drew Germany's attention away from France and gave the French (and by extension Vichy and Pétain) some breathing

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<sup>139</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 237.

<sup>140</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 360.

room. With the entrance of the United States into the war, the possibility of Hitler's defeat started to grow more and more likely. Thus 1941 marked the beginning of open hostilities and resistance movements against Germany, collaboration, and Vichy, such as the symbolic carrying of two bamboo fishing poles around town: "deux gaules," a blatant reference to de Gaulle and his Free French.<sup>141</sup> In a way, this was the most dangerous period for the Vichy régime: Hitler had allowed the régime to exist and even to assert some degree of independence from the Nazis under the condition that it keep the French subdued and peaceful. As the Résistance began to take shape and public opinion turned against Vichy and Germany, leading to increasing public unrest and resistance, the Vichy régime started to lose its appeal, both in French and Nazi eyes. In response, Vichy increased Pétain's public appearances and organized more local rallies. Vichy-associated newspapers devoted more and more articles to fluff pieces about Pétain and his travels. They also emphasized the *British* character of many of Vichy's defeats and losses, drawing a link between them and de Gaulle, so that even as the internal Résistance began to gain steam, Gaullism reached arguably its lowest point in public opinion between late 1941 and early 1942.<sup>142</sup>

It was at the start of 1942 that Pétain pushed for the Riom Trial to start, in an attempt to rally the people around him and against the 'common enemy' of Blum and the Popular Front. In part, he wished to lend the Vichy régime

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<sup>141</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 238.

<sup>142</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 240.

legitimacy and make it appear powerful even in the face of its declining influence. If Vichy could no longer negotiate with Germany or play a role at the international level, a grandiose trial could draw attention away from the international stage and demonstrate Vichy's continuing power and influence in the domestic sphere. At the same time, pushing for the official trial to continue even after he had passed his personal judgment on the defendants on October 16, 1941 demonstrated his desire to separate himself from the régime as a whole. As we examined in Chapter One, however, the Riom Trial soon spiraled out of Vichy's control. As the Résistance gathered momentum within France, taking on a decidedly leftist character, public opinion turned against the Riom court and the Vichy régime it served. Instead, it favored Blum and his fellow Popular Front ministers. Germany's overt desire for them to be condemned and punished served to encourage support for them among the discontented French population.

The Riom Trial was a further failure for the Vichy régime at the international level. Hitler had hoped the trial would calm down the situation in France and, at the same time, produce a definitive assertion of France's responsibility for the declaration of war in 1939. Vichy, however, was using the trial for its own purposes: to investigate and prosecute those responsible for the *defeat* of France, not for the war itself. This, too, fit within the scheme of France's negotiations with Germany: Hitler had asked for a trial of those who had dared to declare war against him, but Pétain produced instead a trial of those who had lost the war. Perhaps if Vichy's aims had been met with success, subduing French

resistance to the occupation and bringing the French population back under Vichy's control, Hitler would have been satisfied to let the trial carry on. But in the end, the trial was a tremendous failure both for Pétain's purposes and for Hitler's. In a way, it served to reinforce Hitler's belief that Pétain's Vichy régime was no longer capable of controlling the situation in France.

It was in these conditions that Laval, with Abetz' support, finally returned to Vichy in April 1942. This time, however, Laval did not take the position of Vice President of the Council, but of President in full; Pétain was reduced to Head of State, while Laval became Head of Government. While the Vichy régime remained in name, Laval formed a new Council of Ministers, replacing all but one of the ministers: significantly, Joseph Barthélemy, the Minister of Justice. This choice is particularly interesting since Laval unceremoniously postponed the Riom Trial when he arrived in office, and finally cancelled it altogether in the early spring of 1943, a few weeks after finally dismissing Barthélemy who, as Minister of Justice, would have been overseeing the trial all along. For his part, Pétain remained in the régime in name only, in order to lend Laval's Vichy legitimacy and to lend it the charismatic authority that escaped Laval. Even after Laval's return, Pétain remained a sympathetic national figure, capable of drawing adoring crowds even in occupied Paris as late April 1944.<sup>143</sup> Though public opinion had begun to turn away from him in late 1941 and early 1942, it is possible that his relegation in the spring of 1942 made him seem a victim of

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<sup>143</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 236.



Laval's unscrupulous politics and thus a sympathetic figure for the oppressed French public. Despite the changes in the régime, however, the die was cast, and Franco-German relations did not return to the relative ease of the Laval-Abetz rapport of 1940 – unsurprising, as Laval could no longer give Germany what it wanted: a peaceful and compliant French population. Throughout the summer of 1942, Laval attempted to meet with German officers in order to negotiate food quotas and conditions for French POWs. But he succeeded only in meeting with Fritz Sauckel, Germany's General Plenipotentiary for Labor Deployment, who dodged his requests and claimed to have no authority to deal with the subject.<sup>144</sup>

The shift from Pétain to Laval as Head of Government did not go unnoticed or unremarked by the Résistance. *Le Franc-Tireur*, as mentioned earlier, changed its header starting with its April 1942 issue, from “Bi-monthly, as far as possible, and by the grace of the Marshal's police” to “Bi-monthly, as far as possible, and by the grace of Pierre Laval's police.” Constable & Co Ltd. gathered the series of articles on Laval published anonymously in the newspaper of the Free French, *France*, and published them in London in a single volume under the title *Pétain-Laval*. The book made public and easily accessible outside of France the conspiracy plot the author believed to be at the heart of the Vichy régime, in which Laval had been planning France's defeat and the creation of an authoritarian régime since before the war and Pétain had been Laval's puppet all along. It was at this time, as mentioned in Chapter Two, that even the Vichyist

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<sup>144</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 314-5.

and collaborationist press began to mince words about Pétain, depicting his régime as a product of the “exceptional period” they were living through, rather than as the natural evolution of France’s government.<sup>145</sup>

Sauckel’s Order No. 4, on May 7, 1942, sanctioned the use of force to obtain labor in all occupied territories. On June 15, Sauckel himself presented Laval with a choice: either increase “labor volunteers” or establish labor conscription. This meeting resulted in the infamous relève system, by which one French prisoner of war would be released for every three French skilled laborers who volunteered to work in Germany.<sup>146</sup> France soon became Germany’s second largest source of foreign labor (after Poland), and its single largest source of skilled labor.<sup>147</sup> After the spring of 1942, Germany granted France no more concessions; Germany either took or demanded whatever it required. Resistance increased daily and Laval was unable to give Germany the benefits it expected in return for its negotiations and concessions, namely an easy and cheap occupation for Germany. Thus, on November 8, 1942, the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht phoned Laval and demanded that France grant access to its airfields in North Africa within the hour. The next day, “the Germans got Bizerte without concessions.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> “L’assentiment de l’opinion,” *Le Temps*, 8 December 1941.

<sup>146</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 311.

<sup>147</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 311.

<sup>148</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 316.

In response to this exchange, Laval requested a meeting with Hitler in order to discuss France's role in the war, to which he agreed. When Laval arrived at Munich at four in the morning on November 10, Hitler had already made the decision to invade the rest of France. In his diary, Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano describes the pitiful scene of Laval and Hitler's meeting:

Laval, with his white tie and middle-class French peasant attire, is very much out of place in the great salon among so many uniforms. He tries to speak in a familiar tone about his trip and his long sleep in the car, but his words go unheeded. Hitler treats him with frigid courtesy... The poor man could not even imagine the fait accompli that the Germans were to place before him. Not a word was said to Laval about the impending action – that the orders to occupy France were being given while he was smoking his cigarette and conversing with various people in the next room.<sup>149</sup>

Ever the lover of symbolic dates, Hitler ordered his Nazi forces to cross the Demarcation Line and invade the remainder of France on November 11, 1942, 24 years after the signing of the armistice at Compiègne that ended World War I. Pétain had gone to bed before the “invasion” began. By the time he woke up, the Free Zone was no more. Indeed, the invasion hardly warrants such a name, as the so-called Free Zone had been under Nazi control since 1940 and Vichy's concessions to Germany throughout their negotiations had incrementally equaled conditions between the Occupied and Free Zones. November 11, 1942 simply made the situation official – and made the political reality of Vichy public,

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<sup>149</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, in Shirer, 924.

effectively destroying the appearance of power that the Vichy régime had worked so hard to create and thus depriving it of its authority.

The two years following the total occupation were the hardest of the war for France. There was no more armistice army, no fleet, and no French empire. Yet Vichy remained, as did the occupation costs. Internal disorder rose, the Résistance started to come out into the open, Vichy and Pétain lost their mass following, and even the Nazis acknowledged that Laval was “universally detested.”<sup>150</sup> In the meantime, the United States sent an official representative to the Gaullist Committee of National Liberation, and de Gaulle convened a Consultative Assembly in Algiers. Although the Vichy régime was not dismissed and Hitler kept Laval as Head of the Government and Pétain as Head of State, Vichy’s semblance of independence or legitimacy had vanished – they now lacked not only power, but authority as well.

On September 27, 1943, Pétain attempted to change Constitutional Act No. 4, stating that if for any reason he became unable to carry out his duties as Head of State before drafting a new constitution, the role of Head of State should be assumed by a council composed of seven men: an admiral, two Attorneys General, a rector of the Université de Paris, a French ambassador, the Vice President of the Council, and General Weygand. If Pétain’s incapacitation were to become permanent, the council was to call a meeting of the National Assembly,

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<sup>150</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 324.

though Pétain did not say what the National Assembly was meant to do.<sup>151</sup> On November 13, he drafted a new and final version:

If we were to die before having created a new Constitution of the French State, ratified by the nation, whose promulgation, by one or more acts, has been planned by the Constitutional Law of July 10, 1940, the constituent power mentioned by Article 8 of the Constitutional Law of February 25, 1875 will return to the Senate and to the Chamber of Deputies currently adjourned, which together make up the National Assembly.<sup>152</sup>

The Nazis did not allow either amendment to Constitutional Act No. 4 to be announced, let alone enacted. Instead, Pétain was assigned a “German shadow” to follow and supervise him. Starting in December, all French “legislation” had to be “submitted to German scrutiny.”<sup>153</sup>

In his last months in office, Pétain tried to extricate himself from the system he had so strongly contributed to starting in 1940. He had allowed himself to become a figurehead and a national symbol, leaving the more hands-on governing of the Free Zone and the diplomatic dealings with Germany to his ministers. By supporting the policy of collaboration and, most importantly, the system by which his ministers would negotiate with and make concessions to Germany in return for symbolic tokens to help curb public opinion, Pétain had signed his fate and that of all of France. Once he had acknowledged Germany’s supremacy and allowed his régime to be so closely tied to Hitler’s, he could not take it back without making himself look like a hypocrite. Since his authority was

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<sup>151</sup> Maury.

<sup>152</sup> Maury.

<sup>153</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 325.

very largely based upon his public perception as an honorable man, such a move would have brought on the end of his régime altogether. Pétain might not have been the one negotiating with Germany or organizing labor and industry in France. But when he agreed to become the public face of Vichy and to tie his very person to the régime, he firmly established himself in the middle of any debate about Vichy and its politics.

Pétain wanted to avoid tainting his role as a symbol of France by mixing his public persona with politics, but that does not mean he was disconnected from the political sphere of Vichy. He crafted his speeches meticulously, meeting with his ministers and going through multiple drafts, carefully addressing “the people’s collective unconsciousness.”<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, his political involvement, though it may have unfolded behind the scenes, demonstrates the agenda of a man attempting to salvage the country he had been fighting for since he joined the army in 1876, not that of a ruthless profiteer taking advantage of France in her time of need.

On October 22, 1941, the Nazis had announced that 50 French hostages would be shot in retaliation for the assassination of a Nazi officer in Nantes, then 50 more the next day if the assassins were not arrested.<sup>155</sup> In response, Pétain had attempted to offer himself as hostage “to prevent [...] mass reprisal executions.” He also called on the French to “stop the assassinations which prompted the

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<sup>154</sup> Ophüls.

<sup>155</sup> Shirer, 956.

reprisal killings.”<sup>156</sup> When Laval had grown dangerously close to the Nazis and had attempted to manipulate Vichy policy to fit Abetz’ plans, Pétain had stepped in and dismissed him. When it had become evident that the situation in France was beyond his control, Pétain had attempted to return its authority to the National Assembly and to restore the status quo ante bellum. And when the Allies landed in French territory on D-Day in 1944, he issued orders for the French population to remain “quiet and orderly” and to avoid taking sides.<sup>157</sup> Pétain wanted first and foremost the continuation of France and of a legitimate French government. The nature of Europe’s new order after the war was secondary to him as long as France was in it. Over the course of the Occupation, or at least as long as he was Head of the Government, Pétain demonstrated that he was willing to pay any price, no matter how immoral or inhumane, to ensure France’s survival.

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<sup>156</sup> “Pétain Offers Self as Hostage,” *Florence Times*, October 22, 1941, Florence, Alabama.

<sup>157</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 325.

## CONCLUSION

*“The official rehabilitation of Vichy has never been in the making, even if those who ardently desire it are speaking out with fewer inhibitions than before. The real issues lie elsewhere. The inevitable question is that of the general attitude of the French people in the whole during World War II.”*

Eric Conan & Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-present Past*.<sup>158</sup>

On May 7, 1944, by order of Otto Abetz and the German Embassy in Paris, Philippe Pétain left Vichy and crossed into the northern zone of France. In August, he was unceremoniously sent to Belfort, at the German border, then finally to Sigmaringen, in Germany; the Nazis feared a possible Pétain-de Gaulle alliance, now that France was a “battle ground” once again and “innocent Frenchmen [were] suffering the consequences.”<sup>159</sup> Pétain did not return to France until mid-1945, when he was tried for high treason by a new French Supreme Court.

In 1942, Pétain had put his political rivals on trial for betraying the duties of their office. The trial had ended badly, with Blum and Daladier using it as a platform to denounce Pétain and his régime and Gamelin remaining silent after an

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<sup>158</sup> Eric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-present Past*, translated by Nathan Bracher. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 2.

<sup>159</sup> Pétain, *Discours aux Français*, 336.



initial statement rejecting the authority of Vichy and of the Supreme Court at Riom.<sup>160</sup> In light of the events at Riom, there is a certain poetic justice to be found in Pétain's trial. It was now Reynaud and Daladier accusing Pétain of having betrayed not only the duties of his office, but the entirety of the French nation, and condemning his "cowardice, defeatism, treachery, trickery, and intrigue."<sup>161</sup> Pétain further evoked the Riom Trial when he declared on the first day of his trial that the court had no authority to judge him and that, consequently, he would remain silent for the entirety of the trial, just as Gamelin had done in 1942.<sup>162</sup> Unlike the Riom Trial, however, the trial of Pétain was brief – from July 23 to August 15, 1945 – and the Court reached a swift decision: on August 15, Pétain was sentenced to death.

A poll taken in August 1945, however, revealed that less than one percent of the responders believed that Pétain deserved the death sentence; 74% believed that he deserved life imprisonment or a less severe sentence, and 17% declared that he should have been acquitted. Charles de Gaulle shared Pétain's belief that social turmoil and public disapproval could be fatal to France,<sup>163</sup> and so as France faced this new crisis after the Liberation he spoke up in defense of his former mentor, after whom he had named his oldest child. Between Pétain's old age, de Gaulle's words, and public outrage at his conviction, Pétain's sentence was not

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<sup>160</sup> "Riom Trial Opens," *The Glasgow Herald*, February 19, 1942.

<sup>161</sup> "Pétain's Silence at Grim Trial," *The Courier-Mail*, July 26, 1945.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Rousso,, *viii*.

carried out. Instead, he was sent to the Ile d'Yeu, off the Atlantic coast, to live out the rest of his days in exile.

On July 23, 1950, Pétain died in his sleep, accompanied only by a nun. He had always stated that he wished to be buried at Verdun, the site of the battle that had so marked his life and made his reputation. The government of the Fourth Republic, however, refused the request, and Pétain was buried unceremoniously in the graveyard in the Ile d'Yeu. The slab over his grave reads simply "Philippe Pétain. Maréchal de France."<sup>164</sup> His home, the Ermitage at Villeneuve-Loubet, which had been confiscated along with all Pétain's other property after the trial, was then torn down. Like other controversial sites in France, such as the former site of the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris, where 13,152 Jewish immigrants had been held in detention for five days under inhumane conditions in the summer of 1942, the government kept the property and repurposed it in such a way that its past use is no longer discernable; at the site of the Vélodrome d'Hiver there is now an office for the Ministry of the Interior, while a physical therapy treatment center run by the Social Security Administration now stands where Pétain's home once stood. Despite attempts by the French government to separate those sites from their historical meaning, the symbolism of the institutions established on the ruins is resonant. The strict control of Pétain's burial site and of his property demonstrates a desire not to turn Pétain into a martyr and to avoid creating any pilgrimage sites. To this day, however, Pétain's grave is "always decorated with

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<sup>164</sup> Lottman, 381.

wreaths, small vases of flowers, potted plants, [and] plaques marking a visit or a pilgrimage.”<sup>165</sup>

Pétain kept no journals and never wrote any sort of memoir. On October 30, 1940, after his meeting with Hitler at Montoire and his announcement of Vichy’s new policy of collaboration, Pétain declared his sole responsibility for the Vichy régime: “It is me alone that history will judge.”<sup>166</sup> Yet the jury seems still to be out; many historians have dealt with Vichy, but they largely avoid passing specific judgment on Pétain himself. Biographers of Pétain point openly to the dichotomy of his role: hero or traitor? Coward or defender of the nation? But they rarely seem to draw any conclusions, beyond the fact that the dichotomy exists. In French schools, the Vichy régime is treated within a larger unit about the Second World War, subdivided into topics such as “the World in 1939,” “the World in 1945,” “Resistance and Resisters in Europe (1939-1945),” “the World at War from 1942 to 1945,” and “The French Resistance.” But little attention is given to the structure of the Vichy régime or to the political purge that followed Liberation.<sup>167</sup> Conan and Rousso argue that this attitude toward the history of Vichy derives from an anachronism in how children are taught:

Children have been made very sensitive to problems dealing with xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism, to the point of transposing their present perception of the issues into the historical period

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<sup>165</sup> Lottman, 381.

<sup>166</sup> Pétain, 96.

<sup>167</sup> Conan, 184.

under study, and that weakens their ability to pay attention to other aspects of the subject, as well as their ability to analyze.<sup>168</sup>

Instead of speaking about the impossible choices people had to make during the War and the Occupation, teachers often turn the issues of Vichy into an anachronistic, black-and-white issue of right versus wrong. Over the past few chapters, I have tried to demonstrate that Pétain's choices as Head of Government from 1940 to 1942 do not fit in that sanitized right-versus-wrong storyline. From the decision to surrender and to collaborate with Germany instead of signing Churchill's Franco-British Union, to continuing as Head of State after Hitler had stripped the office of all authority and replaced Pétain with Laval in 1942, Pétain had to consider all possible consequences without today's anachronistic certainty of where Hitler's dictatorship would lead. Pétain's popularity between 1940 and 1942 and his position between a rock and a hard place, however, detract from the black-and-white narrative found in schools. In black-and-white, good-versus-evil narratives Pétain is meant to play the role of the evil, fascist dictator. France has overcome the resistentalist myth, according to which the French resisted Vichy and the Nazis, but the idea that an overwhelming majority sided with and supported the alleged villain of the story would badly confuse the storyline. Thus the more abstract and controversial nature of a true discussion of Vichy and Pétain has been erased entirely from the mainstream. Rousso examines the relationship between Vichy (including Pétain) and a present-day French population that sees Vichy and Pétain as history, not between Vichy (Pétain

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<sup>168</sup> Conan, 193.

included) and the wartime population with which it interacted directly. Hence Rousso's emphasis on schooling, and his belief that the Pétainist myth, which turned the Marshal into "a disembodied abstraction, an object of fantasies and tenacious enmity,"<sup>169</sup> is a product of the post-Liberation revisionist memory of Vichy. I argue, however, that this myth originated during the Second World War itself, not through historical memory or revisionism but through a purposeful manipulation of public opinion by the Vichy régime and press, which sought to cement Pétain's authority and Vichy's survival.

The ambiguities of Pétain's choices, the dilemmas he faced, and the impossible position in which France found itself, meant that Pétain and Vichy *needed* to turn Pétain into that "disembodied abstraction" of which Rousso writes, so that he was never tied to any one particular ideology or action plan, and could approach each decision on its own. Vichy might have sought to make the relationship between Pétain and the French public seem easy – a natural evolution of France's predilection for charismatic leaders in uniform. But every detail of Pétain's persona and interaction with the people was carefully constructed. The Riom Trial demonstrates how inorganic that seemingly easy relationship was, and how calculated every public step the Vichy régime took really was. Pétain's public image was carefully crafted by a network of propaganda ministers, local prefects, and Vichyist newspapers. Pétain's French State was a phantom state, and Pétain needed the French to support him, to lend both him and his régime

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<sup>169</sup> Rousso, 294.

authority. With Nazi Germany claiming a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” within France,”<sup>170</sup> the only aspect left of a French state was the appearance of a legitimate French government given authority by popular sovereignty. Without that authority France would have become little but a Nazi colony, whether accorded treatment as harsh as Poland or not.

Pétain was a man of the nineteenth century, shaped by the Franco-Prussian War, by the Paris Commune, by Boulanger and Dreyfus, and by the political and social turmoil that Paxton describes as an endless civil war.<sup>171</sup> In light of these events, Pétain’s biggest fear was the disappearance of France as he knew it, whether through a crumbling of France’s national identity and a “fratricidal war,”<sup>172</sup> or through “polandization.” This fear, too, belonged more to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth: Hitler never so much as hinted at “polandizing” France and showed from the beginning a willingness to grant France relative independence as long as it earned him a cheap and easy occupation. Pétain’s nineteenth-century mentality and fears, however, dictated much, if not all, of Pétain’s agenda from 1940 until 1942, as reflected by his speeches, by his National Revolution, by his adamant rejection of a strictly political role in the public eye, and by his eagerness to enter armistice negotiations rather than suffer an exile government or surrender France’s sovereignty to Churchill’s Franco-British Union.

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<sup>170</sup> Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, 243.

<sup>172</sup> Pétain, 338.

None of this is to say that Pétain was an innocent, let alone a national hero. It was Pétain who initiated the policy of collaboration with Hitler and the Nazi State, Pétain who gave shape to the Vichy régime – which was responsible for the deportation of over a million French laborers to Germany and for the deportation to Nazi killing centers of 77,000 Jews. But while Pétain set the wheels of Vichy in motion, we have seen how his authority faded over time. It is hardly responsible to hold him accountable for policies designed and enacted by Laval and his ministers from 1942 to 1944. For his part, Pétain would have likely been happy if he could have simply lifted France off the map for the entirety of the war, and then put it back after the peace. He called for neutrality when France became a battle ground again, and he tried to return to the status quo antebellum when he lost control of the régime. But of course, most of the sources depicting Pétain available to scholars today come from the Vichy régime's propaganda machine, which inevitably present a picture of Pétain as a well-meaning defender of the French rather than as a dictator at the head of a puppet régime controlled by the Nazis. The lack of organization within the Vichy régime has made it difficult to pin down what policies and decisions Pétain proposed himself. Further research and the opening of new archives might reveal a much darker story and propel us into a new stage of the "Vichy Syndrome." In any case, the realities of the war and occupation meant that Pétain, Vichy, and France as a whole ended up playing a bigger role in World War II and in the Holocaust than many would have preferred.

Pétain needed the French to rally around him, both to quell his fears about national disunity and to lend him the minimum of compliance needed to keep the Vichy régime afloat. If Pétain had lost his authority, Germany would not have hesitated to replace him with either Laval or a German *Gauleiter*. To maintain his authority among the French people, Pétain had to appear reluctant to give in to German demands, and to make it seem as though France were receiving some benefit from collaborating with Germany. Hence the endless compromises, and the granting of more than had been asked for, in return for symbolic concessions. The importance of symbolism in Vichy cannot be overstated, as the entire régime was itself a symbol. At the same time, Pétain needed to make the Nazis believe that he was happy to collaborate. He had to make it seem as though he were doing everything in his power to benefit Germany. Otherwise, he risked replacement, or a fate for France similar to Poland's. These two extremes were impossible to reconcile, and we can see the tension between them through differences in the press of the Free Zone and of the Occupied one, as well as in the evolution and ignominious end of the Riom Trial.

To balance between the two contradictory poles, Pétain manipulated his image, the French public, and his Nazi audience. Combined with his silence at his own trial and with the lack of diaries or of memoirs, this purposeful manipulation of his persona means that we may never be able to understand the “real” Pétain, the Pétain who pulled the strings behind the curtain while his ministers took on the public political and bureaucratic duties of the régime. We may never be able



to draw a firm line between where Pétain ends and Vichy begins, though the many changes instituted after 1942 certainly give us some insight. The combination of Pétain's persona with Vichy, though, gives us a picture of France under the Occupation and of what drove public opinion and official policy, as well as of how the combination of a nationalist dictatorship with a quasi-colonialist foreign occupation could possibly have sustained itself for four years. Pétain the individual has been lost to history in favor of Pétain the symbol of France and Vichy. Before 1940, he may have been the Hero of Verdun, but it was Vichy that made him the center of a cult of personality and placed him into the ambiguous and controversial position that he now holds in history. And it was to Vichy, and to the French, that Pétain offered himself as sacrifice on June 17, 1940, giving to France "the gift of his person, to ease her suffering."<sup>173</sup> From that point on, Pétain stopped belonging to himself and lost his previous, private self, becoming one with the myth of the marshal and with Vichy's fate.

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<sup>173</sup> Petain, 57.

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