



Afb. 1: Philippe Pétain and Adolf Hitler shaking hands in Montoire-sur-le-Loir under the watchful eyes of German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, a few months after the French capitulation (October 1940). Source: German Federal Archives, <https://bit.ly/3jtfKhB>.

## Destroying Democracy: Philippe Pétain and the Vichy Alternative to the French Republic

Jelle Lammerts van Bueren

In this article, Jelle Lammerts van Bueren explores how and why Philippe Pétain revolted against the democratic institutions of the Third French Republic during the ruling years of the Vichy regime (1940-1944). He does so by analyzing Pétain's radio speeches as well as the anti-democratic laws that were implemented by his regime. A general destruction of democracy was, however, never achieved in France.

In 1973, a group of five right-wing political activists abducted the coffin of a famous French Field Marshall from a cemetery on the small Atlantic island of Île d'Yeu. The group had been formed by Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, a Nazi collaborator during the Second World War and a former member of the pro-colonialist terrorist organization OAS (*Organisation Armée Secrète*).<sup>1</sup> Tixier-

<sup>1</sup> During the final days of the Algerian War for Independence, multiple French generals founded the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS). The organization aimed to prevent Algerian independence by conducting terrorist attacks in Metropolitan France and French Algeria. Its members also tried to assassinate French president Charles de Gaulle, yet failed to do so.

Vignancour put his close friend Hubert Massol - a fellow member of the *Alliance Républicaine pour les Libertés et le Progrès* - in charge of the group. They demanded that the coffin would be reburied at the military cemetery of Douaumont, among the victims of the Battle of Verdun. The impact of the action was enormous. French authorities began a manhunt for the kidnappers and completely locked off Verdun, while the national media were covering the story uninterrupted. Following a chase of three days, French policemen eventually arrested Massol.<sup>2</sup> After interrogating him,

<sup>2</sup> At the time of his arrest, Massol was giving a live press conference, demanding the reburial at the Verdun cemetery.

the national police finally recovered the coffin and brought it back to its original burial site. There, president Georges Pompidou paid his final respects to the Field Marshall by placing flowers on his grave.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for the uproar concerning the coffin was that it belonged to the most controversial figure in contemporary French history. The man in question was Philippe Pétain, who had saved the French army from certain defeat at Verdun during the First World War while collaborating extensively with the Nazis during the next war.<sup>4</sup> One of the largest projects of his so-called Vichy regime, named after the location of the seat of government, was the implementation of the *Revolution Nationale*. This counterrevolutionary reform program consisted of a series of anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic measures that proposed an alternative to the prewar institutions of the French Republic. By analyzing both Philippe Pétain's radio speeches as well as the anti-democratic laws that were implemented by his regime, this article will aim to answer the question of how and why Philippe Pétain revolted against the democratic institutions of the Third French Republic during the ruling years of the Vichy regime.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Eric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-present Past* (Hanover: University Press of New England 1998) 21. Remembering and honoring Pétain's actions in the First World War has always been a difficult subject for French presidents and often societal backlash was large, either from the left or the right. Deciding not to honor his military accomplishments at Verdun could be regarded as disrespecting a French hero, while honoring him was seen as an affront to the Jewish community and the resistants who had given their life fighting for a free France during the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> Frans G.I. Jennekens, *Philippe Pétain: De Ondergang van een Idool* (Soesterberg: Aspekt 2018) 32-36; 53; 110.

***During World War II, the democratic institutions of the French Republic were actively destroyed***

**The Ambiguous Remembrance of Vichy**

Following the war, Pétain claimed that he had only collaborated with the Germans to preserve France from a harsh occupational regime. He was not alone. Even the postwar courts that had to try Pétain's actions were deeply divided on whether he should be convicted at all.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the postwar French historiographical stance was that Pétain had been forced to collaborate due to the terrible circumstances he had been confronted with. France had, after all, been faced with a full military defeat against a completely superior enemy. Most prominently, historian Robert Aron presented the "shield-sword thesis", which stated that Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces, had been the sword that attacked the Germans, while Pétain had been the shield, protecting the mainland from

<sup>5</sup> These speeches can be found in several books, written by Philippe Pétain himself, published posthumously in Paris, in 1989. They originate from the following sources: Philippe Pétain, *Paroles aux Français: Messages et écrits* and *Discours aux Français*. It should be noted that the Vichy regime lost most of its already limited power following the definitive German occupation of the Zone Libre. For a more elaborate report on this so-called Fall Anton, please see: Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2012) xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Wright, "Vichy Revisited," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 34 (1958): 4, 501-514, here: 507. Pétain himself spoke of the danger of polonisation. This term refers to the idea that France would face the same fate as Poland in case of refusal to meet German demands, effectively becoming a German colony filled with ghettos and labor camps.



Afb. 2: Pro-Pétain slogan displayed at the headquarters of the *Action Française* in Lyon (November 1940). Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3Gi3Xvi>.

German colonization.<sup>7</sup>

The historiographical interpretation of events changed significantly from the 1970s onwards. According to a new generation of international historians, some ministers in Pétain's government were indeed fighting for a free France while being supervised by the Germans. However, most of these ministers, including Pétain, were at the same time convinced that radical and anti-democratic renovations were required to achieve a new, stronger France. The most prominent historian in this new line of thought was Robert O. Paxton, an American scholar who did not solely use French primary sources, but also consulted American and German ones.<sup>8</sup> He concluded that certain French

politicians actively attempted to destroy the democratic institutions of the French Republic.<sup>9</sup> According to historians Thomas R. Christofferson and Michael S. Christofferson, it was Pétain who took the lead in this process.<sup>10</sup> As the following sections of this article will show, Pétain was indeed highly concerned with the institutional frameworks of the Third Republic and made no secret of his desire to get rid of them.

#### The First Signs of Major Change

In June 1940, six weeks after the German invasion of France had begun, a fierce debate was raging within the French war cabinet. While prime minister Reynaud acknowledged that the war was lost, he hoped to continue the fight against the Germans from the French colonies. Pétain - the then vice-prime minister - opposed him and called for an armistice. Supported by the mostly right-wing, conservative majority of the cabinet, Pétain got his way and was

<sup>9</sup> Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust*, 58; Paxton, *La France de Vichy*, Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Christofferson and Michael S. Christofferson, *France during World War II: From Defeat to Liberation* (Fordham: University Press 2006) 34-35.

immediately appointed as Reynaud's replacement.<sup>11</sup> He started negotiations with the Germans and managed to conclude a temporary truce on June 22, 1940.<sup>12</sup> The conditions for the armistice were harsh and humiliating. France lost Alsace-Lorraine to the *Reich*, its army was largely disarmed, and the French fleet was forbidden to leave port.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a big part of the French nation was put under direct German occupation. Only the southeastern part of the country, the *Zone Libre*, was left to French administrators. However, the Germans kept considerable influence there as well. Pétain's new government, which was to lead the new French state in the *Zone Libre*, decided to reside in the small spa town of Vichy.<sup>14</sup>

Via the *Radio Nationale* - which was led by the previously mentioned Nazi collaborator Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour - Pétain regularly informed the French people about the wartime situation. A few days before the armistice, he first explained why he blamed the prewar democratic institutions for the French defeat. According to Pétain, France had lost its traditional values, while Germany had used its traditions to grow stronger and overwhelm the weakened French republic. He stated that the French nation had become weak, feminine, and unable to mount an appropriate defense

against the superior German mindset.<sup>15</sup> In a second speech only three days later, the newly-appointed prime minister ranted against the prewar urbanization of France and expressed that he wanted to focus on France as a historically agrarian society again. He subsequently compared the state of France after its crushing defeat to the state of a field after a bad harvest.<sup>16</sup> The farmers would straighten their shoulders, get back to work, and sow a newer, better crop.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***Motherhood was revered and Mother's Day was elevated to a national holiday***

The most important question was how Pétain would translate his utopian-traditionalist vision into policy. After all, the republican institutions were still in place and Pétain was merely a prime minister without dictatorial powers. To this end, Pétain's main parliamentarian ally, the conservative former prime minister Pierre Laval, pressured his colleagues into giving Pétain emergency powers to govern without parliamentary supervision. According to Laval, "parliamentary democracy had lost the war and had to fall."<sup>18</sup> As a result, Pétain obtained massive parliamentarian support, even from socialists like Léon Blum.<sup>19</sup> On July 11, 1940, the parliament

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford: University Press 2013) 56-57; Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy 1940-1944* (Paris: Les Productions de Paris 1954). Poliakov, *Bréviaire de la Haine* (Paris: Calmann-Levy 1951); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Yale: Quadrangle Books 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust*, 57-59; Robert O. Paxton, *La France de Vichy* (New York: SEUIL 1972); Wright, "Vichy revisited," 506-507.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> "Armistice between France and Germany," *The American Journal of International Law* 34 (1940): 4, 173-178.

<sup>14</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 35-38. One of the reasons that the spa town of Vichy was chosen was because of the large number of luxury hotels.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Pétain, "Discours du maréchal Pétain radiodiffusé le 17 juin 1940," in: *Paroles aux Français: Messages et écrits*, ed. Philippe Pétain (Lyon: Lardanchet 1941).

<sup>16</sup> Pétain, "Appel du 20 juin," in: *Paroles aux Français*.

<sup>17</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Original text in French: "La démocratie parlementaire a perdu la guerre, elle doit tomber." (Own translation.)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

granted Pétain absolute power, after they had allowed him to rewrite the French constitution a day earlier.<sup>20</sup> The French parliament had taken itself down and would no longer form an obstacle to Pétain's vision.

As *chef d'état*, Pétain made no secret of his plans for a new France. In a third radio speech, in July 1940, he justified his dictatorship, expressed his hatred toward international capitalism and socialism, and stated that he wanted to fight for a new economic order of agrarian autarky.<sup>21</sup> Pétain, as the last prime minister of the Third Republic, wanted to destroy the democratic institutions of that very same republic. Assisted by Laval and the parliament, Pétain thus ended democratic rule in France and instituted his dictatorship. Although he had not revealed his policies in a detailed manner yet, Pétain already expressed his interest in exploring a more authoritarian form of governing that would eventually also see an active partaking in the deportation of the French Jews.

### **Even saying the word "republic" out loud was forbidden**

#### **Vichy's Revolt Against the Democratic Republic**

Following the devastating defeat during the German invasion, Pétain stated that the French nation had to reinvent itself completely. According to the new French dictator, the battle cry of the French Revolution – "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" – was no longer useful to French society since it had weakened the French spirit.<sup>22</sup> Important French ideals, like

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>21</sup> Pétain, "Appel du 11 juillet 1940," in: *Paroles aux Français*.

<sup>22</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 43; 46. (Own translation: "liberty, equality, brotherhood".)

Catholicism and the accompanying paternalistic family, had been lost as a result of republicanism and parliamentarianism. Pétain consequently replaced the motto with a new chant, namely "*travail, famille, patrie*."<sup>23</sup> With this symbolic replacement, once again announced on the *Radio Nationale*, the *Revolution Nationale* commenced.<sup>24</sup> Vichy's main inspiration in this counterrevolutionary reform program was Charles Maurras (1868-1952).<sup>25</sup> This antisemitic, monarchist politician led the *Action Française* movement, which was known for its adherence to nationalistic Catholicism and its anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian ideas.<sup>26</sup> It had been founded during the Dreyfus Affair - in which a Jewish captain in the French military had been wrongfully accused of German espionage - and showed clear tendencies of antisemitism.<sup>27</sup> Maurras himself was a

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46. (Own translation: "work, family, fatherland".)

<sup>24</sup> Debbie Lackerstein, *National Regeneration in Vichy France: Ideas and Policies, 1930–1944* (London: Routledge 2016) 79-80; Klaus Mehnert, "The Armistice of Compiègne; French Constitutional Acts of July 10, 1940; Speeches of Marshal Pétain of October 11, 1940, and of October 30, 1940," *The XXth Century* 3 (1942): 1, 77-80, here: 78-80.

<sup>25</sup> H.R. Kedward, "Patriots and Patriotism in Vichy France," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 32 (1982), 175-192, here: 175-176.

<sup>26</sup> S. Wilson, "The Action Française in French Intellectual Life," *The Historical Journal* 12 (1969): 2, 328-350.

<sup>27</sup> Laurent Joly, "D'une guerre l'autre. L'Action française et les Juifs, de l'Union sacrée à la Révolution nationale (1914-1944)," *Revue d'histoire Moderne & Contemporaine* 59 (2004): 4, 97-124, here: 97.

strong proponent of anti-immigration laws and the expulsion of foreigners and elements of "French decadence," including Protestants, Jews, freemasons, and communists.<sup>28</sup>

Maurras' ideas were incorporated in three distinct ways, resembling the new motto of the French state. Firstly, in terms of "*travail*", Pétain argued for a corporatist economic system. He believed that capitalism and socialism were partly responsible for the decline of the French nation and were the reason for what he perceived as unprecedented decadency. The national economy would, therefore, have to be organized along professional lines to avoid any potential class struggle.<sup>29</sup> An important element of the new economic policies, aligned with the traditionalist spirit of Pétain's beliefs, was that France had to return to its agrarian roots. Via the framework of the *Revolution Nationale*, Pétain turned this traditionalist idea into actual policy. Family farms were granted large amounts of land for free and



Afb. 3: Propaganda poster of the *Revolution Nationale* portraying the "decadent" Republic on the left and the "disciplined" *Etat Française* on the right (1940-1942). Source: *L'Histoire Par L'Image*, <https://bit.ly/3GiDa1Q>.

<sup>28</sup> Kedward, "Patriots and Patriotism in Vichy France," 175.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Vaucher, "National Revolution in France," *Political Science Quarterly* 57 (1942): 1, 7-27, here: 21-23; Mehnert, "The Armistice of Compiègne," 79-80.

members of agrarian families who owned such a farm were much less likely to be sentenced to death in criminal court.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, in terms of "*famille*", these larger families were also part of another component of the *Revolution Nationale*, namely the restoration of the traditional, paternalistic family in correspondence with Maurras' teachings about Catholicism. Following radio announcements on the importance of this element, Pétain issued multiple decrees that were supposed to force women to stay at home and take care of the children, while the men were working to provide for their families.<sup>31</sup> Married men who applied for government jobs were given preference over unmarried men. Women lost the right to control their income, which was immediately transferred to a man in the family.<sup>32</sup> For these policies, Nazi ideology was regarded as exemplary. In Nazi Germany, women had been forced to stay at home and raise as many children as possible before the war, which, according to Pétain, had given the Germans more young men to serve in the army.<sup>33</sup> To encourage French women to act more like German women, motherhood was revered and Mother's Day was elevated to a national holiday.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Vaucher, "National Revolution in France," 21; Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 39; 52-53.

<sup>31</sup> Pétain, "Discours du maréchal Pétain radiodiffusé le 17 juin 1940".

<sup>32</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Pétain, "Discours du maréchal Pétain radiodiffusé le 17 juin 1940".

<sup>34</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 45.

The third series of measures, aligned to the concept of “*patrie*”, consisted of the unwanted policies and the anti-democratic laws that were implemented in the *Zone Libre*. Although the Third Republic had only been temporarily dissolved in July 1940, republicanism was later totally renounced by the Vichy government.<sup>35</sup> Referring to France as a republic became punishable by law and even saying the word “republic” out loud was forbidden.<sup>36</sup> Apart from these symbolic laws, there were also concrete plans to ban certain groups from French society. The groups that - according to the nationalistic, Catholic, and antisemitic ideology of Maurras - were destroying *la France profonde* were isolated from the rest of the population.<sup>37</sup> The unwanted freemasons, communists, Jews, and Romany lost their citizenship and those without a French father were even prohibited from working in the public sector.<sup>38</sup> A particularly dark episode of the unwanted policies was the deportation of a great number of French Jews by the Nazi and Vichy authorities, motivated by Nazi pressure and the ideological willingness of Vichy.<sup>39</sup> To facilitate his policies, Pétain called the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 37-38; 60.

<sup>36</sup> Civilis, “French Democracy Underground,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 18 (1942): 1, 14-28, here: 14; 17.

<sup>37</sup> (Own translation: “the true France.”)

<sup>38</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 39-40; 42.

<sup>39</sup> For a more extensive account on the Vichy crimes against the Jewish population, please see the following work by Marrus and Paxton: *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). Although the original work was written in 1981, this second edition comprises another thirty years of scholarship on the subject.

paramilitary *Légion* onto the scene to arrest the aforementioned “unwanted” of French society and to maintain public order.<sup>40</sup>

Pétain’s *Revolution Nationale* would be practiced for almost a year. It showed the Marshall’s commitment to this long-term project with its habits, symbolic and practical laws, and a new form of paramilitary law enforcement. However, the Vichy government was mostly unable to execute its policies, because of the constant pressure of German occupation (for which the French themselves had to pay).<sup>41</sup> The corporatist state never achieved its goals since the Germans transported most French resources to the *Reich*. Besides, Frenchmen were forced to work in Germany as “emergency laborers”. French women thus remained part of the workforce when they replaced their deported husbands or were forced into prostitution to feed their children.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, in 1942, the illusion of a new French order was definitively broken when the *Wehrmacht* occupied the *Zone Libre* to prevent Vichy France from joining the Western Allies.<sup>43</sup> Pétain would officially remain in office without any

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<sup>40</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, “Marshal Pétain’s Address to the French People in Vichy,” speech of August 12, 1941, <https://bit.ly/3FVAPZj>, accessed on June 10, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Vaucher, “National Revolution in France,” 17-18.

<sup>42</sup> Christofferson and Christofferson, *France during World War II*, 44-45.

<sup>43</sup> Robert O. Paxton and Nathalie Marquès-Léal, “Le régime de Vichy, Était-il Neutre?” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 194 (1999), 149-162, here: 149; Claude Langlois, “Le Régime de Vichy et le Clergé: d’après les ‘Semaines Religieuses’ des Diocèses de la Zone Libre,” *Revue Française de Science Politique* 22 (1972): 4, 750-774, here: 750.

executive power for the remainder of the war and when the Allies got too close he was forcefully transferred to Sigmaringen in Germany.<sup>44</sup> His efforts to replace French democracy with an authoritarian system, motivated by the shame and humiliation of the defeat against the Germans in June 1940, did not work out.

### Conclusion: Vichy After World War II

During his term as prime minister and later *chef d’état* of France, Philippe Pétain delivered multiple speeches condemning the Third Republic and introducing his vision for a new, more authoritarian French future. Pétain was shocked by the German victory and blamed the institutions of the Third Republic, its allies, and its values for the capitulation. In his view, only by imitating Germany could the French nation restore itself to its rightful place in a postwar European order. Although he implemented multiple anti-democratic policies, the general destruction of democracy was never achieved. After the war, France returned to its democratic system, albeit with many changes compared to the structures of the prewar republic.

Vichy would always remain a sensitive topic in the French political arena. As discussed, certain French historians regarded Pétain’s collaboration as a positive act of sheltering France from German occupation. Most politicians, however, denounced the Vichy past, although there were also those who argued for the rehabilitation of collaborators. For example, the leader of the French right-wing *Front National* party, Jean-Marie Le

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<sup>44</sup> Jennekens, *Phillipe Pétain*, 176-182. Allegedly, Pétain protested heavily against this transfer away from French territory. When the war was nearing its end, he fled to the Swiss border and handed himself over to French authorities. He was initially condemned to death. However, president Charles de Gaulle intervened and changed his sentence into lifelong imprisonment.

Pen - when campaigning for presidential candidate Tixier-Vignancour in 1965 - stated that “it was much easier to resist from London than from France.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, he referred to how Tixier-Vignancour (and Pétain) had been brave enough to remain in France and face the Germans, while his political opponent, Charles de Gaulle, had fled to London. This call for the rehabilitation of the collaborationists has haunted the French (extreme) right since the end of the war.

Even today, there are political movements and leaders, like Éric Zemmour of the nationalistic right-wing movement *Reconquête*, that adhere to Aron’s “shield-sword thesis”, portraying Pétain and Vichy as a way to protect the French population. Additionally, the *Rassemblement National* (renamed from *Front National*) struggles with the pro-Vichy image that is still connected to it. Although the party aims to dissociate itself from Le Pen’s Vichyist remarks, it remains to be seen whether the French (extreme) right will ever manage to fully bury the Vichy spirit with Pétain at the cemetery of Île d’Yeu.

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<sup>45</sup> Julian Jackson, “General de Gaulle and His Enemies: Anti-Gaullism in France Since 1940,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999) 43-65, here: 65.