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The Stained Portrait of the Victor of Verdun:

Philippe Pétain's Controversial Legacy

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The year 1940 was France's darkest hour. The French armies, which throughout the Great War withstood the German onslaught, collapsed in a matter of weeks before the unstoppable advance of the *Wehrmacht*. In this hour of need, the people looked for a reassuring figure who would save France and deliver her to safety. For this noble and difficult task came Marshal Philippe Pétain (1856-1951). The Victor of Verdun seemed to be the perfect man for the task. He was a reassuring figure in a time of significant instability. To the people of France, Pétain's public image was a blank portrait, and everyone filled this portrait with what they wished from the marshal. Socialists saw the marshal as the most republican of the French High Command. Conservatives saw in Pétain a Catholic traditionalist who would morally govern France. The majority of the French people trusted that the marshal would protect the French Republic. However, they were mistaken. Pétain hated the Third Republic (1870-1940), especially its political structure and education system. Up to 1940, Pétain was able to keep these views private. However, when Pétain took control of the reins of power, he began to act on his anti-republican views. His wishes for French autonomy led him to suppress resistance elements in France. This, coupled with Vichy's increasing collaboration with Germany, drove the French

people to question the objective of the Vichy government and the man who led it. It became increasingly clear that Pétain did not wish for a French republican liberation, but he wanted a place for an authoritarian France in a German Europe. Pétain's policies revealed his true ideas to the French people, forever staining the once pristine portal of Marshal Pétain.

Philippe Pétain was a complicated figure with complex political leanings. His peasant upbringing played a great part in moulding his ideas.¹ Pétain was by no means a devout Catholic, but he "retained a deep respect for the Church, which had played a significant role in his childhood."² Moreover, Pétain's rural childhood made him suspicious of the modernizing aspects of urban French society. He deeply resented the public education system. As the historian Nicholas Atkin (1960-2009) noted, "Pétain nurtured a mistrust of the *école publique* [public school system] and was especially suspicious of its teachers, who he believed were motivated by left-wing and anti-patriotic sentiments. By contrast, he possessed a soft spot for Catholic education which he felt had been unfairly victimized by the "godless Republic."³ Thus, it is not surprising that when Pétain came to power in 1940, one of his first actions was to criticize the education system.⁴ Pétain's enlistment in the army further cemented his conservative views. During the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), to which Pétain had no connection, Pétain privately showed two views characteristic of conservative traditionalist beliefs. Firstly, he did not concern himself with the question of Alfred Dreyfus's (1859-1935) guilt or innocence. Rather, Pétain displayed a religious anti-semitism typical of his time; he believed that if Dreyfus was not guilty of treason, he ought to have been guilty of something else.⁵ Secondly, Pétain "considered it

¹ Nicholas Atkin, *Pétain* (London, UK: Longman, 1998), 1.

² Atkin, *Pétain*, 4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

inappropriate for military men to engage in politics."⁶ This latter view was critical to shaping Pétain's public image leading up to 1940. He largely distanced himself from publicly announcing his political views.

By 1914, Colonel Philippe Pétain was certainly not expecting new breakthroughs in his career.⁷ At the time, he was 58 years old and looking forward to retirement.⁸ However, in 1914, Pétain rose to the occasion and answered his country's call. This would become a recurring theme with Pétain. He saw himself as a noble warrior called upon by destiny to save his homeland. Similarly, in 1940, he waited until he was called upon to take power and did not initiate a seizure of power by himself.⁹ During the years of the First World War, Pétain deservedly earned a sterling reputation. He prioritized powerful artillery barrages and was more reserved about infantry assaults; this "quickly established Pétain as one of the most humanitarian generals."¹⁰ Moreover, Pétain was exceptional at building personal bonds with his troops. He took the risk of visiting the front in person. During these visits, Pétain "purposely wore a grey overcoat which hid his rank."¹¹ Pétain, a general at the time, was certainly one of the few in the French High Command willing to risk visiting the men in the trenches. Such fraternization was not just uncharacteristic of the French High Command, but it was actively discouraged as a pointless risk. Pétain's humbleness here, and the brotherly comradeship he showed built bridges between him and his men, and ensured his ascent to prominence in French eyes. Further, Pétain's brave defence of Verdun earned him the nickname 'Victor of Verdun.'¹²

⁶ Atkin, *Pétain*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

In addition, Pétain once again saved France during the 1917 mutinies. Angered and distrustful of the French High Command, French soldiers refused to undertake any more suicidal assaults. These mutinies endangered the cohesion of the French army. Pétain was chosen for his excellent reputation with the troops for the sensitive task of ending these mutinies. He wisely handled the mutinies with a level of comradeship he had presented to his men before. Now as Commander-in-Chief, Pétain visited the front, awarding medals and gifting cigarettes. Moreover, out of the 554 death sentences given to mutineers, only 49 were carried out, further showing Pétain's humaneness.¹³ Despite the approval of Pétain's actions in public opinion, some elements of the French left criticized the general for suppressing a proletariat revolt against a capitalist war. However, there is no denying that Pétain saved the French Republic from two critical dangers. On December 8, 1918, Pétain was made a Marshal of France.¹⁴

Between 1920 and 1931, Pétain "sat on all the key military committees; in 1925 he returned to active service when he fought in the Rif."¹⁵ In 1934, Pétain briefly served as Minister of War, and in 1939, went on a short ambassadorship to Spain.¹⁶ There are two significant aspects of this period: Pétain's fame from the First World War remained, and he did not publicly show strong opposition to the Popular Front and the left leanings of the government as a whole. This is not to say that Pétain was silent. During the interwar years, in his interviews, articles, and speeches, Pétain displayed his leaning towards traditionalist conservative values characteristic of his generation, which earned the marshal a decent following in the centre-right.¹⁷ However, he did not display the anti-republican views which defined his later policies. Thus, when 1940

¹³ Atkin, *Pétain*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

approached, Pétain's image was still shining in French eyes, as he was the one to save the republic twice and continued in its service.

The year 1940 carried many catastrophic events for the French people. The armies of France, which had for four years withstood the German enemy during the First World War, collapsed in four weeks before the *Wehrmacht's blitzkrieg*. Millions of refugees filled French roads, trying to flee the approaching invaders. During this time of great uncertainty, France sought reassurance about her fate. In these troubled times, Marshal Pétain was called again to rule France in her hour of need. The choice of Pétain as a figurehead was not impulsive. Pierre Laval (1883-1945), a prominent French politician with ambitions to match his experience, was among the first to suggest the marshal as a head of state. On October 27, 1939, Laval met with Elie J. Bois (1878-1941), editor of *Le Petit Parisien*. Laval discussed a proposal for the marshal's ascension to power. When Bois gave his reservations based on Pétain's age, Laval had a firm reply that summarized his views on Pétain: "That doesn't matter. What will be asked of him? To be a mantlepiece, a statue on a pedestal!"¹⁸ Laval saw Pétain as a king on the chessboard of French politics. Pétain would have immense symbolic power but would not have the ability to make independent moves. Of course, Laval did not announce these views to Pétain.

Finally, the awaited time came. Marshal Pétain, Victor of Verdun, once again answered the call of his homeland and accepted the position of Prime Minister of France on June 16, 1940. Later, Pétain became Chief of the French State, a title which further symbolized his authoritarian anti-republican views. On June 16, the marshal addressed the nation in a speech that carried a semi-religious tone. This was characteristic of Pétain; he finally had his divine mission to rebuild the French nation. Pétain "announced that he had given France' the gift of his person' to relieve

¹⁸ Atkin, *Pétain*, 63.

its suffering."¹⁹ To hear the marshal's voice was a reassuring sign for French citizens, many of whom subscribed to the cult of personality Pétain acquired over the years. Also, reassuring was Pétain's announcement that he would seek an armistice with the enemy. This was very comforting to the French people, many of whom were still shocked by the crushing defeat; an exit from this miserable war was desired. On June 20, Pétain gave another speech, the highlight of which was his promise to remain in France and undergo the suffering of her people. Most people were assured by Pétain's apparent sincerity. Pétain had saved the Third Republic before and would once again save it. A few, like General Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), saw through Pétain's traditionalist rhetoric. Pétain did not wish for the survival of the republic. His true colours gradually began to show, forever staining his once pristine image. Two significant factors made this shift in Pétain's public image: Pétain's public dealing with the Nazi invaders and his oppressive policies which aimed to help the German war effort.

None of Pétain's public appearances was as shocking as his appearance with Hitler (1889-1945), on October 24, 1940, at *Montoire-sur-le-Loir*. Based on Pétain's wishes for the "start of a new relationship with Germany," Pétain wanted to meet Hitler in person.²⁰ This meeting had been preceded by a meeting between Laval and Hitler, during which Hitler fooled Laval into believing that France would have a place in a Nazi Europe. A similar atmosphere was present during the meeting between Hitler and Pétain. Hitler purposely showed the utmost respect to the marshal, who, in turn, was impressed by Hitler. Most importantly, critical issues were not discussed. Occupation of the north, occupation costs, and French POWs became secondary issues. Pétain instead focused on his aim to earn a better relationship with Germany. During this meeting, a photograph of Hitler and the marshal, the famous handshake, made headlines

¹⁹ Atkin, *Pétain*, 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

throughout the world.²¹ This photograph showed Hitler and Pétain in a friendly atmosphere, forever staining Pétain's public image. It was clear that this meeting was not between equals, nor was it a meeting between soldiers, as Pétain would have described it. Instead, it showed Pétain's subservience to France's enemies. Pétain, always concerned with how the public viewed him, recognized the damage the meeting had done. On October 30, 1940, he addressed the nation in a speech that carried a heavy defensive tone.²² Pétain explained that he met with Hitler on his own free will. He further explained the benefits of collaboration: "Prisoners would be released and occupation costs reduced."²³ These empty promises were an unsuccessful effort to win over the French population. In reality, Pétain was trying to secure his place so that he could reshape France. He ended his speech with an unsure statement, concluding that only history "would tell whether his policy was correct."²⁴ The meeting at Montoire was a turning point for Pétain's public image.²⁵ Many of his supporters saw the marshal as siding with the German invader. Furthermore, the meeting signified a turning point in the politics of Vichy, as it would officially pursue collaboration with the Third Reich.

Vichy's leadership would further collaborate with Germany, oppressing the French people for an illusion of political independence. This, of course, further dragged Pétain's public image into the gutter. The many crimes of the Vichy government ensured that blood was on Pétain's hands. An intense debate remains on how much power Pétain truly held, especially before the German occupation of the south in November 1942. However, some aspects of Pétain's reign were certain. As part of Pétain's powers, as of July 11, 1940, he could make laws,

²¹ Jules Roy and Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Trial of Marshal Pétain* (Bethesda, MD: Notables Trials Library, 2011), 15.

²² Atkin, *Pétain*, 139.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pierre Tissier, *The Government of Vichy* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2010), 39.

appoint ministers and government officials, and grant pardons and amnesties.²⁶ Thus, Pétain had his fair share of responsibility for the actions of his government. Under François Darlan's (1881-1942) and Laval's leaderships, the Vichy government had undergone military collaboration with Germany and actively suppressed resistance elements. Vichy infamously participated in the Holocaust, with a half-hearted attempt made to distinguish between French Jews and foreign Jews.²⁷ The result was catastrophic. Moreover, Pétain had evil adventures of his own, such as his strong backing of the Riom Trial (1942). Here, he hoped to expose the governments of the Third Republic, especially the Popular Front era, as the architects of defeats. Ironically, the trial was dismissed as it was exposing Pétain himself. In 1940, the people of France entrusted Pétain to deliver the Third Republic to safety. Gradually, it became clear that Pétain wanted to build an authoritarian France and destroy the French Republic. These dark episodes forever tainted the once clean portrait of Victor of Verdun.

Marshal Philippe Pétain remains a controversial figure in French history. During the Great War, Pétain valiantly and bravely defended France. He won a valiant victory at the Battle of Verdun, earning him the nickname Victor of Verdun. In 1917, Pétain brilliantly ended the mutinies of that year, which threatened the cohesion of the French army. Thus, Pétain was deservedly awarded a marshal's baton in 1918. The marshal enjoyed fame for the services he had done for his country. In 1940, Pétain was called upon to lead the nation during its most dire hour of need. Many looked at his clean public image as a reassuring sign. However, many misjudged Pétain, for he did not wish to protect the republic. Instead, he wished to build a new authoritarian France. Pétain's advocating for collaboration, and the many criminal actions of his Vichy government, ensured that Pétain's shining star had now lost its lustre. Pétain's policies in Vichy

²⁶ Atkin, *Pétain*, 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

showed his true colours to the French people. His once pristine public image became a stained portrait.

About the author

Hamza Elshakankiri is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree in History at the University of Regina. His primary research interests are mainly in modern military history, and he hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in this field. In his free time, Hamza enjoys creating short documentaries about important historical battles. He also enjoys collecting medals and military awards from the Victorian era and the World Wars.

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