

Pétain, Philippe

(1856-1951), French World War I military hero and head of the collaborating Vichy government during World War II.

During World War I, Pétain distinguished himself as a hero while defending the fortresses of Verdun. In 1917 he was made commander-in-chief of the French armies under Marshal Ferdinand Foch, and a marshal of France in 1918. The French people viewed him as a symbol of their military victory.

When German forces succeeded in crushing the French army in June 1940, Pétain called for the cessation of armed conflict against Germany. On June 16 he was invited to head the new French government, which would rule over the southern part of France -the area not occupied by the Germans- from the town of Vichy. Pétain negotiated a truce with the Germans, and was wholeheartedly accepted as prime minister by the French people. They believed in his allegiance to France and his devotion to its honor. At that time, Pétain was 84 years old.

Under the leadership of Pétain and his assistant, Pierre Laval, the Vichy government collaborated fully with the Nazis. They supported the Nazi regime's anti-Jewish policies, including the deportation of French Jews to Concentration Camps. Pétain was motivated to comply with the Nazis by his "National Revolution" agenda. This was a program intended to transform France into a totalitarian, strictly unified country within the framework of the Nazi plans for a New World Order in Europe. Included within the outline of the "National Revolution" was the plan to eliminate Jewish influence in France. Pétain was apathetic to the fate of the French Jews whom he handed over to the Nazis.

After France was liberated in 1944, Pétain was convicted of treason by a French court, and was sentenced to death. However, General Charles de Gaulle commuted his sentence to life in prison due to his heroic World War I military record. He was banished to the island of Yeu, off the coast of Brittany in northern France. Pétain died there at the age of 96. (For more on Vichy, see also France.)