

► *He yearned for surrender in World War I — and achieved it in 1940.*

PÉTAIN: TRIUMPH OF A MYTH

BY HENRY TORRÈS

A WHOLE country with faith in one man . . . a man who had no faith in his country. These are primary elements in one of history's most tragic dramas.

For more than twenty years Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain had been a living legend.

A full professor in the Military Staff College at the age of forty-one, Pétain's promotion was held up because his heretical defensive views undermined the doctrine of offensive action advocated by the French General Staff. In August 1914, though past his fifty-eighth year, he was only a colonel threatened with old-age retirement. At the beginning of the war he led a brigade of six thousand men; at the end of the war he commanded an army of three million soldiers. Having distinguished himself as commander of a division at the Marne, of an army corps in Artois and an army in Champagne, on February 21, 1916, he was given the task of stopping the formidable German offensive at Verdun. He checked the enemy and won world fame as

the savior of his country. In the spring of 1917, General Nivelle succeeded Joffre. After the failure of his reckless offensive, Pétain was appointed generalissimo.

Aroused by the heavy and futile losses resulting from inadequate preparations, the soldiers were full of resentment and disillusion. Here and there the spectre of mutiny raised its terrifying head. Less severe in his acts than in his words, less impatient to repress outbreaks than to prevent them, moderate despite his rigor, Pétain won his most difficult victory over his own excited troops. The temper of the men calmed down; their morale was strengthened. The army regained its discipline and the country rallied around the army.

Ultimately it was Foch who played the decisive part in winning the war because of his energy, his swift intelligence, his prodigious gift for large scale maneuvering, his ability to overcome material difficulties and his infectious faith in himself, his soldiers and the eventual triumph of France. With

Clemenceau, he was the great artisan of victory. Yet it was the picture of Pétain that the demobilized heroes of Verdun cut out of the popular magazines. They wished to keep before them the image of his handsome face, so typically French, with its firm contour and marble pallor, its high forehead and imperious chin, its severe lips surmounted by the familiar mustache, and its clear gray eyes, more meditative than authoritative. The veterans liked to remember his noble bearing, his resolute but flexible gait, his gracious gestures and the soldierly pride which lent a natural solemnity to everything he did.

It was rumored that many amorous successes had marked his military career and sweetened his monotonous soldier's life. In France, such a reputation is always useful, and is regarded as complementary to the qualities necessary in a military leader. It was also said that his sense of humor, moderated in public by his austere reserve, expanded among his intimates with Rabelaisian vitality. Faithful to another national tradition, he liked good food and good wine, which in France is interpreted as the mark of a generous nature.

Essentially — and this was a dominant element in his prestige —

he is a French peasant. He has the French peasant's caution, reflectiveness, diligence and that slowness which is the economy of strength. And he was not an uprooted, transplanted peasant. He kept contact with the soil and his soldiers knew that he was able to discuss the most obscure questions of agricultural technique with agronomists, and the little problems of everyday life in the fields with farmhands.

Successive attacks on Pétain by Joffre, Foch, Clemenceau and Poincaré were published by academic editors and discussed in narrow circles. They did not weaken his prestige nor alter the instinctive gratitude felt for him by the immense family of war veterans. His name was to them inseparable from the great name of Verdun, from "that great duel before the whole universe, that unique and almost symbolic combat in the lists where he was the champion of France." Posthumous accusations made against him in the memoirs of these great shadows and the resulting polemics left the people indifferent.

In his *Mémoires*, written with characteristic bluntness and lack of bitterness, Joffre reveals that as early as April 1916, Pétain's tendency "to accept the will of the enemy" induced the Marshal, then

generalissimo, "to find some way of removing him from the battlefield of Verdun." Joffre writes:

At that very moment, the post of commandant of the army of the center became vacant. This was an occasion both to recognize the merits of General Pétain by a promotion and to accomplish his removal from Verdun, which seemed to me necessary. . . . During a field tour of the second army which I made with Pétain in July 1916, I was struck by his pessimism, and this impression was shortly afterwards confirmed to me by others. . . . As early as June, Foch's firm attitude during his visit to General Headquarters had calmed the excessive fears which Pétain had raised. The latter's confidence in the possible duration of resistance at Verdun was very limited.

Poincaré records in his memoirs that later, in 1918, Joffre made the following statement to one of the ministers: "I can see that Pétain has once again committed the same mistakes as when he demanded the surrender of Verdun to the enemy. As a matter of fact, the present situation can be saved if we seriously want to save it." And he writes further:

Loucheur, the energetic and clear-sighted Minister for Armaments, is most dissatisfied with Pétain, whom he regards as a dyed-in-the-wool defeatist, and who said to him only a few days ago: "We should initiate peace negotiations." When the Minister repeated these words to Foch, he replied: "To ask for peace now would be madness."

"Foch," explains Poincaré in

another passage, "says that Pétain lacks character. He notes that his relations with Pétain are good, and that in a secondary role, such as transmitter of orders, he would be perfect. But his fear of responsibility disqualifies him for the post of commander-in-chief."

As for Clemenceau, at the very moment when, in November 1917, he was forming what was to be the Cabinet of Victory, he spoke of Pétain to the President of the Republic, judging him, says Poincaré, with sympathetic clear-sightedness: "He is the best of our leaders, though full of bias resulting from complacency and long association with old comrades. His ideas are somewhat false; from time to time he indulges in regrettable expressions of pessimism and discouragement."

On December 13, 1917, speaking before the War Committee, the Tiger exclaimed: "General Pétain is under my orders. I must assume responsibility for everything he does, and I insist that he know it." Six days later he said to Poincaré: "Another of my worries is Pétain. Things aren't going so well and Pétain is too negative, too timid. Did you hear him the other day? We asked him: 'Will you hold out?' He did not say: 'I will hold out under such and such condi-

tions.' He said: 'I won't hold out unless . . .' The whole man is in those words." In the midst of the gravest danger that ever threatened the Allies, in March 1918, Clemenceau complained of Pétain's "exaggerated pessimism."

In June 1918, at another crucial hour, he told the President of the Republic: "Pétain is most provoking in his pessimism. Can you imagine, he told me, for example, that the Germans will beat the British in the field and that later the Boches will submerge us. Has a general the right to say such things or even to think them?" In Doullens, the intrepid Jacobin confided to his secretary, Jean Martet: "I had the choice between two men. One kept telling me that we were done for, the other walked back and forth like a madman, spoiling for the fight. I said to myself: 'Let's try Foch, at least with him we'll die with a rifle in our hands.' "

II

The evidence of those who knew Pétain best, in action under stress, adds up to an indictment of the man as defeatist, pessimistic, lacking in faith. But when has fact sufficed to slay illusion? Even after the testimony of Clemenceau, Joffre, Foch and others had been

made public and argued over, 20 of fashionable Paris applauded the poet, Paul Valéry, on January 22 1931, when he welcomed Marshal Pétain into the French Academy. Sparing him the customary unpleasant remarks which he reserved for Foch, M. Valéry addressed Pétain as follows:

Even when you inspired everyone with a confidence that no other leader had given, even when everything depended upon you, and your presence alone reassured the army, the government, the nation, the high command and the allies, you, Monsieur, too lucid a witness of the formidable efforts of the enemy, of the losses and incredible ordeals of our troops, never certain to the last minute that you would not have to give way, you refused until the very end to boast of victory.

Thus Paul Valéry interpreted the facts supplied by the most direct and best qualified of witnesses! Congenital defeatism was converted into the high virtues of modesty and restraint!

But the French people did not know or did not care to know all the facts, conclusive as they might be. Every veteran of Verdun — and through the constant reinforcement of that battlefield almost the whole French army was at Verdun — had fixed on Pétain as the embodiment of the collective glory in which each claimed his part. Every veteran remembered

that the Marshal had been as thrifty of French blood during the battle as in the repression of the mutinies.

In the French mind, Pétain came to represent the opposite of generals so bold as to be wasteful of human lives, or so eager for a brilliant *communiqué* as to drive their soldiers into costly adventures. In the depths of the nation, the myth grew up of one general, serene and wise, exact and just, expert and thoughtful, yet victorious in the end. By a strange historical about face, it was this myth that supplied an alibi for capitulation in 1940.

Following the victory of 1918, Pétain was appointed Vice-President of the Supreme War Council: in other words, he was retained as commander-in-chief in the event of a new conflict. The General Staff was thus placed under his authority. On February 18, 1922, a decree initiated by Maginot extended his powers; in addition to his post with the War Council, he was made Inspector General of the Army.

It took him nine years to perfect the defense plan which culminated in the Maginot Line. The credits for this project were voted by the Chamber in one session. But in the interval, the Marshal's latent popularity was revived by his successes in the difficult Riff campaign,

which he himself summarized upon his return to Paris in a deliberately modest statement on November 8, 1925: "From now on, Morocco will be quiet. Abd-el-Krim is no longer to be feared. My military task has been accomplished. I leave the rest to politics." In his sulking retreat, constantly haunted by an implacable foreboding of German revenge, Clemenceau did not fall dupe to the Marshal's calculated calm. His faithful Jean Martet has recorded the Tiger's words:

In this post-war period, while Germany is preparing, what is the French army doing? It is disarming. The High Command has apparently abdicated. Even in the face of constant violations of the Treaty of Versailles, no general has risked a protest. The age limit for our generals used to be 61. It has been extended to 62, 66 and finally to 70. Some day our country will pay dearly for this.

Clemenceau had provided in advance the answer to Pétain when the Marshal, on June 20, 1940, broadcast an indictment of the government and the nation. Said Pétain on that dismal day: "We tried to spare ourselves the necessary effort; today we have met with disaster." In the consummation he forgot, and many Frenchmen with him, that he had been the architect of that disaster. Pétain's and his General Staff's efforts between 1921 and 1931 had been

squandered on technical controversies which still remain unresolved. He was voted all the funds he asked for; he forged the defense weapon and he must be judged by the quality of that weapon.

In 1931, Pétain resigned from his two positions of Vice-President of the Supreme War Council and Inspector General of the Army, which were taken over by Weygand, and became Inspector General of Air Defense for the Territories. He accepted this relatively modest post without apparent bitterness and with a simple readiness to serve which fitted in with his legend. But judging by the results, he does not seem to have advanced the defense of his country in his new post. Not even his most eulogistic biographies, the dithyrambs devoted to him after his accession to power by General Lauré, General Audet, and Lieutenant-Colonels Montjean and Buot de l'Epine, record one significant decision, one vigorous reform, one energetic action directed toward galvanizing French air defenses and organizing an effective air force. Instead of the cry of alarm that would have carried tremendous weight from him, his staff wasted time on preparatory surveys, organizing committees, terminology, arguments as to the

competence of certain persons and personal rivalries. He gave no leadership to his department.

In 1934, upon the insistence of Weygand, Pétain accepted the post of Minister of War in Doumergue's cabinet, constituted after the fascist outbreaks of February 6. He declared in a statement to the press, carefully weighing his words to produce the maximum effect: "The President has told me that the country needs me. I have not shirked my duty. I have never engaged in politics and I shall not engage in them now."

The meaning of this declaration was clear. No one had asked him to engage in politics. He had been asked only to administer the army firmly, but it seemed to him the opportune moment to flaunt a facile "aversion" for politics, in order to separate himself from certain public figures whom anti-democratic elements were accusing of responsibility for all the domestic and foreign troubles that beset France. Thus Pétain entered politics by declaring that he was resolved to keep away from them. In reality he became a reactionary politician.

III

For a long time Pétain seemed loyal to the republican regime, and

profoundly imbued with that non-partisan spirit which a democratic government requires from its army chiefs. This explains why various cabinets entrusted him with the highest military responsibilities. Actually, this outwardly serene man nourished a violent ambition for personal power which he hid behind a mask of reserve.

In 1934, Paul Painlevé, the great republican and famous scientist who had appointed Pétain generalissimo in 1917 and had always supported him by his friendship and influence in popular circles, was no longer there to restrain him from entering upon the path of totalitarianism. Joffre, Foch and Clemenceau were dead. Pétain was the only remaining symbol of the victory of 1918. The Chamber of Deputies granted him the credits he demanded. It would have granted him even greater sums had he asked for them. Hitler had been in power for over a year but Pétain, Minister of War, failed to act against this menace. After Doumergue's resignation, General Maurin, Pétain's successor in the Ministry of War, appointed him a full-fledged member both of the High Military Committee and the Supreme Council for National Defense. This made him, in the words of his close collaborator, General

Lauré, "a high military adviser attached to the Prime Minister." General Lauré adds that "because of his cautiousness and competence, Pétain succeeded in exerting a great influence in the meetings of the High Committee." This influence is the exact measure of his share of responsibility for the defeat.

In March 1939, Premier Daladier appointed Pétain ambassador to Franco. In Spain, where his presence flattered the government to which he was accredited while it consummated France's policy of appeasement, he was received with a studied consideration which pretended to draw a distinction between his respected person and his execrated country. The Marshal amiably lent himself to this maneuver and in Burgos he acquired an even keener awareness of his greatness, his diplomatic prestige, his international fame. It also seems that his contact with the Spanish military dictatorship stimulated the ambition which Parisian Rightist groups had persistently tried to arouse for several years.

"Your spirit of sacrifice has gone too far," he had been told. "The day following the February riots, you and not Doumergue should have been called upon to form a Cabinet of National Union. If you

had refused the post of Minister of War, Doumergue's combination, deprived of your authority, would not have been able to survive, and President Lebrun would have been compelled to address himself to you, even though he feared to do so. You would have gone to Versailles and revised the constitution." Such was the song of the sirens.

In 1939, President Lebrun was at the end of his term, but Daladier persuaded him to run again, despite the anti-second term tradition, in order to prevent a contest which, at that grave moment, would have weakened the nation. In this way, Daladier blocked a maneuver which the parliamentary Right and the *Croix de Feu* were initiating in order to create a current of opinion for a plebiscite in favor of Pétain. After the re-election of Lebrun, Madame Pétain, who assiduously frequented Parisian aristocratic salons while her husband was in Spain, did not conceal her bitterness. "When the Marshal is needed for an ungrateful task, no one hesitates to drag him out of his retirement," she complained. "When order has to be restored in Paris, or our relations with Spain improved, when the mistakes made by others have to be repaired, it is he who is called upon and he is always

magnanimous enough to accept. But when it is time to choose a candidate for the highest office in the land, which would be the legitimate culmination of his magnificent career, he is eliminated." And Pétain's friends said that Daladier had sent him to Spain less to strengthen a badly compromised situation than to get him out of the way.

Such reflections, repeated and propagated, explain why, immediately after the Polish reverses of 1939, a group of politicians who had no faith in their country began to intrigue for a Pétain government whose main purpose would be the conclusion of a separate peace. Georges Bonnet and Anatole de Monzie, both members of Daladier's Cabinet, were at the head of this group. Pierre Laval, Gaston Bergery, Marcel Déat, Jean-Louis Malvy, Joseph Caillaux, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Jean Mistler, President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber, also belonged to it. Mistler went to consult Pétain in Spain in a special car supplied by de Monzie, Minister of Public Works. Summoned before the Foreign Affairs Committee and subjected to an interrogation drawn up by Bergery and Georges Bonnet, Daladier was supported

only by a minority of the committee's members. This put him on his guard; he adjourned the meeting of the committee and immediately initiated such energetic measures against the communist defeatists that the Pétainist defeatists were frightened and abandoned their plan.

Eight months later, when Paul Reynaud called upon Marshal Pétain and General Weygand in order to restore public confidence after the collapse of Gamelin, the Marshal brought with him his glorious past, his suspicious present and his deep-seated pessimism. The "constitutional defeatism" which had been so irritating to Clemen-

ceau asserted itself on June 13, 1940, at the council of Ministers in the Château de Nitray, when Pétain blamed the soldiers for the failure of their chiefs, and read a memorandum declaring that an armistice was the only solution:

The military situation is such that if the French government does not request an armistice, it is to be feared that the troops, no longer obeying their leaders, may become prey to a panic which would prevent the army from carrying out the smallest operation.

The legend of Verdun had been consummated in the reality of Sedan. It need only be added that Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain will be 86 years old next April 26.

SNUBBED

Freedom hurried down the street,
Edging through the crowd.
Former lovers, passing by,
Neither spoke nor bowed.

Having known the lady well,
Men forsook her arms —
Beauty, overlong possessed,
Loses all its charms.

— CHARLES G. CRELLIN