



CHARLES DE GAULLE, MYTHOLOGIZED, YET BETRAYED, PART II OF III

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II. De Gaulle vs. Pétain - The Defeat And Rejection Of The Armistice

The trial of Marshal Pétain took place from July 23 to August 15, 1945. Prosecutor Mornet was the only magistrate who did not take an oath of loyalty to the Marshal, not out of insubordination, but because he had been retired for several months. The jurors, on the other hand, were chosen from parliamentarians who had not voted for full powers, and representatives of the various Resistance movements. Found guilty of colluding with the enemy and of high treason, the court condemned Pétain to death for national indignity and the confiscation of property. But let's go back to 1938, the beginning of the quarrel and the rupture between Pétain and de Gaulle.

De Gaulle - Pétain, Two Opposing Destinies Linked By History

It was at the request of [Daniel-Rops](#), editor-in-chief at [Plon](#), that de Gaulle undertook the publication of his reflections on the military profession. He again took up the book, *The Soldier*, written ten years earlier for the Marshal, which the latter seems to have left in some drawer, collecting dust. He revised, completed and enlarged the manuscript and gave it the new title, *France and its Army*. In August 1938, de Gaulle brought the proofs to the publisher and informed the Marshal of its imminent publication. That the book was undertaken at the behest of Pétain, de Gaulle wanted to mention clearly in a Forward, the draft of which he sent to Pétain.

An exchange of letters and unfriendly words ensued. Pétain, annoyed at having been presented with a *fait accompli*, asserted that "this work belonged to him," that he reserved the right to oppose its publication. In opposition, De Gaulle contended that the Marshal could give him orders in military but not literary matters. Eventually the two men met and worked out some sort of agreement.

Afterwards, the Marshal sent the Foreword which he wished to see placed at the beginning of the book. For his part, de Gaulle directly sent to Plon, without warning Pétain, a slightly modified dedication which would finally be published (it excluded the allusions, desired by Pétain, to chapters II to IV and to the years of writing, 1925-1927): "To Marshal Pétain, who wanted this book to be written, who directed, with his advice, the writing of the first five chapters, and thanks to whom the last two are the story of our

victory."

The battle of egos ended in a definite break between the two men. The dedication disappeared in post-war reissues. For Pétain, de Gaulle would henceforth be "a vain, presumptuous and ungrateful young man." For de Gaulle, Pétain was "an exceptional man, an exceptional leader," but who was "finished by 1925," an "old man," a "sad husk of a past glory," who "chased after honors."

In March 1935, Pétain already confided to the future [General Alfred Conquet](#), "I know de Gaulle has height, confidence, a tenacious will, fine talents, an incomparable memory. But I have a problem with him myself." Still according to Conquet, Pétain would have agreed to allow de Gaulle for promotion in 1938. De Gaulle's admiration for Pétain seemed to gradually fade during the [Rif War](#) (1925). He did not reproach the Marshal for the success in pacifying Morocco, obtained in collaboration with the Spanish forces of the directorate of [General Miguel Primo de Rivera](#).

De Gaulle was not and never would be a primary anti-colonialist. His son Philippe, explained that, on the contrary, he praised the prodigious example of the Romans in Gaul, "from which they learned so much," and even said: "Only imbeciles do not recognize colonization, even if it was not always tender, because of their own barbarism. They forget that they were colonized because they themselves were incapable." And again: "Americans have always considered colonization to be exploitation. But it is first of all development! It is clear that they were not colonized by the Romans."

The policy of the American colonists and their government towards the Amerindians had been, it is true, ruthlessly and indelibly marked by massacres, the ripping up of treaties and deportations. After this treatment, the Indians of North America existed only in homeopathic doses (unlike those of Hispanic America), and the American leaders could not be inclined to imagine the possibility of a humanist and developmentalist colonization.

But anti-colonialism was not at the heart of the dispute here. What de Gaulle criticized Pétain for was having accepted the mission of the Republican-Socialists [Painlevé](#) and [Briand](#) to go to Morocco to replace [Marshal Lyautey](#). De Gaulle sided with Lyautey, the monarchist, the anti-assimilationist colonialist, respectful of local culture, who wanted to spare Abd El Krim, against Pétain, the republican, obeying the orders of the Left Cartel, and a government that was secularist and assimilationist, and who wanted at all costs to put an end to the revolt.

The comparison between Pétain and de Gaulle did not fail to arouse the indignation of many adulators and despisers, but it was nonetheless rich in lessons. These two soldiers, these two statesmen, triggered all kinds of passions, adulation and recognition as well as hostility and hatred. Two lives, two opposing destinies, which nevertheless remain linked by history. One, Pétain, son of a plowman, "victor of Verdun," glorious Marshal of the War of '14, "pacifier of Morocco," academician, old head of state of Vichy who had been recalled, condemned to death, struck with national indignity for collaboration with the enemy, who died covered with shame, isolated in his cell, at the age of 95 (1951).

The other, de Gaulle, son of a professor in [khâgne](#), rebel general, rebellious, leader of Free France, winner at the Liberation, who resigned in 1946, returned in 1958, was elected first president of the Fifth Republic, retired after having being disowned in a referendum (1969), and who died alone in his residence in La Boissière at the age of 79 (1970). One, Pétain, the Republican soldier, agnostic, great seducer of women, a handsome man, a hardened bachelor, who married a divorced woman at sixty, Annie, the faithful and loving companion throughout the years of glory and sordid mess-ups. The other, de Gaulle, the Republican soldier, fervent Catholic, man of letters, brilliant lecturer, charismatic leader with ungrateful but distinguished physique, married at the age of thirty-one to a young woman, the advisor and unwavering support of all his life, "Yvonne without whom nothing would have been done."

Two exceptional careers, two dazzling but late ascendancies. Colonel Pétain was 58 years old and in early retirement when the First World War broke out. He was elevated to the rank of Marshal of France in 1918 for services rendered to the Republic. Twenty-five years later, an 84-year-old man was elected by the National Assembly to bring about a new Constitution of the Republic (a draft Republican Constitution, which was signed by Pétain in January 1944, but never brought into effect).

In 1945, definitively on the sidelines, the President of the Republic, [Albert Lebrun](#), remarked that everything was done in form only – the change of government, the armistice, the scuttling of the assemblies. During the vote for full powers "to the government of the Republic under the authority of Pétain," on July 10th, 1940, out of 649 parliamentarians present, 569 voted for and 80 against. [Among the favorable votes 286 were from the Left and from the Center-Left, 237 from the Right and Center-Right, and 46 were left blank.

The deputies of the Left were those who were elected on May 3, 1936 under the colors of the Popular Front, with the exception of the Communists who were excluded from the chamber by the [Daladier](#) government, following the German-Soviet pact. Refusing to see the conflict as a patriotic war, the

Communist Party was then seen as an objective ally of the enemy. By the decree of September 26th, 1939, the deputies who had not broken with the [PCF](#) were stripped of their mandate and interned, along with many nationals of enemy nations, regardless of their race or religion]. But in June 1940, the support for Pétain was nearly complete within the political class and almost total in public opinion.

When General de Gaulle founded and led Free France, in June 1940, he was 50 years old (he was thirty-four years younger than Pétain). But on the other hand, in 1958, he is a relatively old man - he is 69 years old - who, after being invested on June 1st as President of the Council by the National Assembly (329 votes in favor and 224 against), had the Constitution of the Fifth Republic adopted on October 4th and was elected President of the Republic by an electoral college of 80,000 electors on December 21st of the same year.

Pétain, de Gaulle, two warlords, two statesmen with the same firmness of character and the same independence of mind, at least when they were young. Two officers who had similar physical courage and the same detestation of privileges and compromises. Two leaders who, when they believed that the interests of the nation, the Republic and the people demanded it, could be inflexible, if not ruthless. Pétain, reputed to be thrifty in life, did not hesitate to have 50 soldiers shot to put an end to the 1917 mutinies; military above all, he suppressed the revolt of the Rif under the orders of the [Cartel des Gauche](#); head of the French state during the Occupation, he was held responsible for the deaths of nearly 60,000 deported-resistance fighters and the disappearance of 75,000 Jews out of 330,000 Jews present in metropolitan France. [25,000 French Jews and 50,000 foreigners, including 12,000 foreign Jews who took refuge in the Free Zone, who were handed over to the German authorities after the general invasion of November 1942; the Jews of the Maghreb countries, some 400,000 remaining beyond the reach of the Occupier; a lower proportion than that of the other occupied European countries but nevertheless higher than that of Mussolini's Italy, where 7,800 Jews disappeared during the German occupation of Italy, from September 1943 to May 1945].

The American and Canadian historians, [Robert Paxton](#) and [Michaël Marrus](#), and their French heirs, [Henry Rousso](#) and [Jean-Pierre Azéma](#), claimed to upset the reading of the history of the Vichy regime by asserting against Robert Aron that the French State not only collaborated but even anticipated German orders. Paxton, on the other hand, avoids dwelling on the fact that his government refused entry to European Jewish refugees into the United States and made it very difficult for them to obtain visas. Anxious to better reflect the complexity of things, Franco-Israeli historian Alain Michel has cast aside many of Paxton's blunt assertions. We know the hysterical reactions of many mainstream media

when journalist [Éric Zemmour](#) allowed himself to severely criticize the Paxtonian doxa.

De Gaulle, for his part, remained silent in the face of the extrajudicial repression of 1944-1946 (from 10,000 to 40,000 deaths depending on the sources). He was indifferent to the exodus of a million French people from Algeria (in 1962) and the disappearance of 2,000 to 3,000 of them. He refused to repatriate Muslim "refugees" who do not return to "the land of their fathers." sacrificing 60,000 to 80,000 Harkis massacred by the [FLN](#) and the [ANP](#). He did not hesitate either to eliminate his enemies of the [OAS](#) (which five times tried to assassinate him), with the help of the "long arms" of the [SAC](#) (Civic Action Service) or even secret agents, and "[barbouzes](#)" of the [SDECE](#). However, all of these facts need to be put in their proper perspective, or "contextualized" as we say today. Were de Gaulle and Pétain more implacable in the conduct of war or in internal repression than the great politico-military leaders of the twentieth century, such as, Clemenceau, Joffre, Foch, Roosevelt, Truman, Churchill or Mussolini, to name a few? We can discuss this. Either way, we are also light years from the death tolls of the twentieth-century berserks Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Lenin, Pol Pot, etc., with their loyal collaborators.

The Rejection Of The Armistice And The Reasons For The Defeat

The [Épinal print](#) caricatures pitting Pétain the defensive against de Gaulle the offensive, forged after World War II, must be qualified. Pétain was not fundamentally against the offensive; he wanted it to be efficient and as inexpensive as possible in human life. His doctrine was to avoid attack at all costs in favor of a more rational combat in which preparation and firepower prevailed. It was thanks to this method that French losses decreased year after year during the First World War. But in November 1918, the positions were reversed: Pétain advocated attack, while General Foch held him back. The defensive method, Pétain would later say, "corresponded to a period when our equipment was completely insufficient." If he did not get "his" offensive, which was set for the morning of November 14, it is because three days earlier, on November 11, 1918, the plenipotentiaries signed the Armistice in the [Rethondes Glade](#).

It seems that the opposition of Pétain and de Gaulle over the importance of the use of armored units has been exaggerated. In the 1930s, military writings on the use of armored units were abundant in France, as in Great Britain and Germany. Generals [Jean Estienne](#) and [Edmond Buat](#), or Colonels [Michel Bouvard](#), [Aimé Doumenc](#) and Pierre Dufour, to name a few, were all, like de Gaulle, supporters of a motorized army, followers of tank and armored squadrons. On the other hand, the effectiveness of the tank-plane pairing in "Lightning War" (Blitzkrieg of Guderian and Rommel) would be clearly

demonstrated in the campaign in Poland, in 1939.

Pétain was probably not so out of step as some have said, judging by some of his words. On April 9, 1935, in a speech at the [École supérieure de guerre](#), he warned against the temptation to freeze military art, under penalty of being surprised by the adversary: "Mechanized units are capable of giving operations a pace and amplitude hitherto unknown. The plane shattered the framework of the battle, formerly limited to the range of artillery shots, and changed the conditions for strategic action. The essential rules of the art of war risk being deeply affected. One can even wonder if the plane will not dictate its law in the conflicts of the future... In fact, victory will belong to the one who will be the first to exploit the properties of modern machines and combine their action, at whatever level (on the technical level as well as on the strategic level), to eliminate the means of resistance of the enemy." The ideas he expressed in a speech in Saint-Quentin on October 4, 1936, even seem very close to those of de Gaulle. The thesis of the defensive army, which prevailed after Versailles, "has had its day," he said, "While using and developing as much as possible the fortifications fortunately established on our borders, we must orient our activity in such a way as to deploy a powerful force on land and in the air immediately, which will be of a nature which will evoke respect in the potential enemy."

Historians have not ceased to wonder about the circumstances of the defeat, but many questions remain to this day still undiscovered or undiscerned. As Temporary Minister of War, in the government of the radical-socialist Gaston Doumergue, Marshal Pétain clearly declared before the Senate army committee on March 7, 1934: "The forests of the Ardennes are impenetrable, if we make special arrangements." These ambiguous and unfortunate remarks were later used to criticize him, for having agreed to reduce the army budget to allow a recovery of public finances. And from here, to blaming him for the defeat, there is only one step that some have not failed to take: The transfer of the "original fault" to Pétain is practical, for it enables the debate to be closed by prohibiting opening it.

Historians are still divided on whether France's rearmament began in 1934 or 1936, but the military budget did not really increase dramatically until 1938 and 1939. In order to lessen the responsibility of the military, Vichy presented defeat as inevitable, claiming that the Wehrmacht was superior in numbers and weapons. Conversely, after the Liberation, radical and socialist politicians responded that the governments of the time had provided all the necessary funds. According to them, the equipment existed in abundance, the responsibility for the defeat rested exclusively with the soldiers unable to use the weapons placed at their disposal.

However, this must not lead to the conclusion that the high command of the French army was just a bunch of sissies or old skinflints. The possibility of the Germans crossing the Ardennes had been known and feared by the French military since the early 1930s. As early as 1932, the question had been asked by [General Weygand](#), but the balance of power was then still in favor of France. After Hitler came to power, this concern increased. Weygand's staff felt that the Sedan sector absolutely needed to be strengthened and that 15 days would be needed to ensure an appropriate response.

In January 1935, Weygand retired and his rival, [General Gamelin](#), succeeded him. But the question arose again, in March 1937, with [Colonel Bourguignon](#), who commanded the tanks of the 2nd Army in the Sedan sector, and then in 1938, with [General Prételat](#), who was designated commander of the 2nd Army in the event of war. Prételat even organized a "framework" exercise with his staff to find out under what conditions the 2nd Army could stop a German Blitzkrieg attack across the Ardennes, at the limit of the Maginot line, and then resist until the arrival of reinforcements.

Unfortunately, when General Prételat reported back to Gamelin on the conclusions of this exercise, his findings were condescendingly referred to as "his dear, little pet theories." Generalissimo Maurice Gamelin decided to play the defense card to the limit, taking refuge behind the Maginot line. In the final analysis, it was not Germany's numerical or technological superiority, nor the general incompetence of high-ranking military personnel that led to France's defeat, but rather the strategy of the high command, the inability to manage or control the clash of egos, and the incredible stubbornness of Gamelin who had repeatedly received information from Belgium, indicating that the German offensive would target the Ardennes.

There is also a crucial factor that must be taken into account here: The wave of pacifism and anti-militarism which overwhelmed France in the 1930s and for which the political class (socialists, communists and radical socialists alike) was largely responsible. To understand this, we must not be fooled by the fact that the pacifists and anti-militarists of the interwar period became patriots or even nationalists in 1944.

But the weight of this attitude is not measured only by the yardstick of the more or less passive fraternization of the PCF leaders with the occupiers until 1941. Let us not forget that. Twelve of the seventeen socialist ministers (SFIO) of the Popular Front government in March 1938 were removed from the party at the time of the Liberation; 60% of Radical and Radical Socialist parliamentarians prudently withdrew from political life under Vichy; 20% supported the regime; and 20% resisted. The group of

eighty parliamentarians (self-qualified at the Liberation as "the first resistance fighters on French soil," a designation which rightly irritated many Gaullists), voted against full powers ("To the government of the Republic, under the authority and signature of Marshal Pétain, has the power to bring in a new Constitution"). But the majority government voted this way, not in the name of national defense, of patriotism or of warmongering, but out of fear of "authoritarian temptations," or "fascist drift," or a military coup.

This made all the difference in de Gaulle's own fight. The General had little esteem for the politicians of the Third Republic, or for the "routine" Right, which "does not want to change anything," and "understands nothing," nor for the "Left of the" Popular Front, "which ended with capitulation: The abdication of the Republic into the hands of Pétain." He refused the Armistice, and his fight and resistance were above all anti-German. Conversely, the "Group of Eighty" waged a primarily political struggle, by defending the institutions, the status quo of the Third Republic. All-in-all, he wanted to continue to perpetuate the system of parties and assemblies without really reforming it.

The example of the socialist [Leon Blum](#) deserves to be cited in this regard. "I think, for my part," he wrote in 1931, "that, in the moral dispositions in which the war had left the peoples of Europe, it was possible for a great nation to take the initiative of total disarmament... I think that if a Nation had offered itself in this way, that it had, of its own accord, threw down its arms, without prior agreement with the other States, without stipulation of reciprocity, it would in reality have run no risk, because the moral prestige that it would have won would have made it unassailable, invulnerable, and the strength of the example set by it would have forced all other States to follow suit." ("Problems of Peace, Security through Disarmament").

This was the same Blum who deplored in *Le Populaire* of March 3, 1934: "The old men whom the fascist mob [of February 6, 1934] brought back to power [[Doumergue](#) and Pétain] have returned to the arms race." Or again, on October 30, the day after Pétain spoke before the House Finance Committee: "Marshal Pétain cynically declared that very soon he will request a special budget to increase supplies and equipment." It was also the socialist [Jules Moch](#) who called Pétain to the rostrum and protested against "your obvious desire to return to the professional army." It was the Communist newspaper [l'Humanité](#) which proclaimed that "the scarecrow Hitler is a pretext," and that the first duty of youth is to oppose all plans for militarization en masse. It was [Thorez](#) who recalled Lenin's slogans in 1934: "To transform imperialist war into civil war." Such words, irresponsible and reckless, could not but fail to arouse contempt and even hilarity from Hitler and his colorful officers. But as we know, France from

1933 to 1938 was thinking of much more than war.

An important point must now also be stressed: The Third Republic was a system of assembly; It was from the Chamber of Deputies that all the ministerial staff, who set the rules of the game, were recruited. The military, on the other hand, was nothing more than the "boot" of the politicians, and thus unable to awaken the indispensable patriotism of the French. After the Liberation, [Georges Bernanos](#) would say: "If there had been more [Darnand](#) in 1940, there would have been no militiamen in 1944." Paraphrasing the author of [Under the Sun of Satan](#), we may say that "if the French had fought like de Gaulle during the Battle of France, they would not have been ultimately victims of the weakness and cowardice of their political leaders."

The alleged vast plot of Pétain intended to seize power at all costs to destroy the Republic, establish the dictatorship and throw France into the arms of the occupier is cheap propaganda. (The former socialist, who became a patriot, [Gustave Hervé](#), author, in 1935, of *C'est Pétain qu'il nous faut!* (*It is Pétain That We Need*), was a supporter of the struggle on African soil, in 1940. The radical minister of the Popular Front, [Pierre Cot](#), who also advocated the appeal to Pétain in 1935, ended up as fellow-traveler with the PCF and the USSR). The "providential man," the eighty-four-year-old chosen by the parliamentarians of the Third Republic in June 1940, was never more than someone expedient.

The truth about this affair was expressed bluntly, as early as 1945, during the Pétain trial, by one of the freest and bravest minds of his generation, the future [General Georges Loustau-Lacau](#), who had returned from the concentration camp in Mauthausen, where he had been deported for acts of resistance: "I owe nothing to Marshal Pétain, but I am disgusted by the sight of the men who, in this enclosure, try to pass on to an old man, nearly a hundred years old, the full slate of all their mistakes." On August 17, 1945, de Gaulle commuted the death sentence pronounced against the Marshal to life imprisonment, thus putting an end to thirty-three years of at first good, then distant, and finally antagonistic and hostile relations.

Appointed Brigadier General the day before his death in 1955, the Béarn native, Georges Loustau-Lacau was one of the most decorated French soldiers of the two world wars. The 203rd class of Saint-Cyr (2016-2019), which had chosen to bear his name to honor him, was renamed by the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces because of Loustau-Lacau supposed anti-communist and anti-Semitic stances in the 1930s. Loustau-Lacau was nevertheless cleared of these accusations, before his official funeral at the Invalides, more than sixty years ago.

This precedent is unique in history, de Gaulle had even refused to rename the Pétain class. In fact, where things are now going, other censors, jealous guardians of single thought and political correctness, should not fail to demand that we also rename the Clémenceau class, or that Voltaire be removed from the Pantheon for the same reasons. A large number of figures, among the most illustrious of French culture, could then find themselves thrown into the garbage, in the name of anti-racism, anti-Semitism or anti-colonialism.

As President of the [CFLN](#), since October 1943, de Gaulle signed on April 21, 1944, the ordinance on the organization of public powers, after the Liberation, providing to grant the right to vote to women and on September 30, 1944, the ordinance creating social security. De Gaulle's role has sometimes been contested in the case of social security, but it was he who provided the impetus. Other promises of war would then be quickly realized: The creation of the Atomic Energy Commission, nationalization of Renault factories, nationalization of the major deposit banks and the Banque de France, nationalization of air transport, creation of works councils, expansion and unification of family allowance systems, health insurance, accident insurance, and pensions for employees, etc.

All these reforms are best explained as the will of de Gaulle than by the program of the National Council of the Resistance (March 15, 1944), drawn up by resistance members of the PCF and the [SFIO](#). Significantly, the General avoided any reference to the [CNR](#) program, when announcing the principles of his government's actions in the speech of September 12, 1944, at the [Palais de Chaillot](#).

On November 13, 1945, de Gaulle was unanimously elected President of the government by the members of the Constituent Assembly. But very quickly a serious political crisis broke out within the tripartite government (Gaullists, Socialists and Communists). De Gaulle was, as we know, hostile to the assembly regime which had led to the disaster of 1940, to the return of the party system and to anything resembling the restoration of the Third Republic.

For him, the cup was full; as a result, he resigned: "The exclusive party regime has reappeared. I disapprove of it. But unless I forcefully establish a dictatorship which I do not want and which would undoubtedly turn out badly, I cannot afford to prevent this experience. I must therefore withdraw." His absence from the political scene would last twelve years.

[Part I](#) and [Part III](#)

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The image shows a statue of Charles de Gaulle in Bucharest.

