Pétain, Henri Philippe (1856–1951), French army officer, head of state of the Vichy government (see under Vichy). In World War I he halted the Germans at Verdun (1916), thus becoming the most beloved French military hero of that conflict. In 1917 he was appointed French commander in chief and in 1918 was made a marshal. He later went to Morocco, where he brought the joint French and Spanish campaign against Abd el-Krim to a successful conclusion (1926). He was briefly (1934) war minister in the cabinet of Gaston Doumergue. In 1939, Pétain was named ambassador to Spain after France had recognized the new regime under Francisco Franco, who had served under Pétain in Morocco.

In World War II, when France was on the brink of collapse, Premier Paul Reynaud recalled (May, 1940) Pétain from Spain and made him vice premier in an effort to bolster French morale with the name of the hero of Verdun. Believing that the nation's defeat was inevitable after the collapse of its military forces, Pétain urged that France sue for an armistice, and on June 16 he succeeded Reynaud as premier. The armistice went into effect on June 25, and more than half of France was occupied by the Germans. On July 10, 1940, a rump parliament suspended the constitution of the Third Republic, and Pétain took office as “chief of state” at Vichy, in unoccupied France. The Vichy government was fascist and authoritarian. Pétain sought to improve the lot of France and of French prisoners of war by collaborating “honorably” with Germany, but his popularity decreased as he yielded to harsh German demands and obtained little in return. In Apr., 1942, Pierre Laval took power, and thereafter the marshal was chiefly a figurehead.

After the Allied invasion of France (June 6, 1944) Pétain was taken, allegedly against his will, to Germany. In 1945 he voluntarily returned to France to face treason charges. His trial (July–Aug., 1945), at which much contradictory evidence was heard, ended with conviction, a sentence of death, degradation, and loss of property. General de Gaulle, then provisional head of the French government, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment in a military fortress. Detained at first in the Pyrenees, Pétain was later transferred to the island of Yeu, where he died.

See biographies by R. M. Griffiths (1970) and C. Williams (2005); Roy, J., The Trial of Marshal Pétain (tr. 1968).

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