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Petain: Verdun to Vichy (Military Profiles)

Robert B. Bruce

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Few figures in modern French history have aroused more controversy than Marshal Philippe Pétain, who rose from obscurity to great fame in the First World War only to fall into infamy during the dark days of Nazi occupation in World War II. Pétain's brilliant theories of firepower and flexible defense, as well as his deep empathy for the soldiers of France and the horrific trials they endured on a daily basis, mark him as one of the greatest Allied generals of World War I. Yet today he is best remembered as the nearly senile marshal who was handed the reins of power in France in the midst of the disastrous 1940 campaign and tasked with seeking terms from Nazi Germany. His leadership of Vichy France from 1940 to 1944 and his postwar conviction of treason and lifetime exile to the Ile d'Yeu made him a scapegoat for the nation.

This later perception forever tainted Pétain's military reputation as a soldier who served France his entire life and led the French Army through the crucible of Verdun, the morale crisis of 1917, and on to final victory in the Great War. He was despised for his actions as an octogenarian in June 1940. With the bulk of the French Army already destroyed and Paris itself wide-open to attack, Pétain, then eighty-four, immediately sought an armistice with Germany to halt further bloodshed. While others fled, Pétain took what he considered the braver course by staying and doing what he could to safeguard the remnants of his army and his nation. So began his descent into collaboration, treason, and the destruction of all that he had accomplished and stood for throughout his life.

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