Figure 5.0 Joan of Arc Festival, Place des Pyramides, Paris, May 8, 1988.

Vichy

Philippe Burrin

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Vichy

Philippe Burrin

Vichy: the name is symbolic of a regime that lasted only four years yet is deeply ingrained in the memory of the French. This assertion needs no documentation, substantiated as it is by countless films, novels, political speeches, and works of history. Fifty years later the atmosphere still becomes charged with passion whenever conversation turns to this period. Even the calls for an end to the debate attest to the persistence of this particular memory.

There are obvious reasons why Vichy has been so difficult to forget. The regime was an exception, as the location of its capital indicates. Paris, which had been France's center through monarchy and revolution, was dethroned by a city previously noted chiefly for its medicinal hot springs. True, the so-called government of national defense also abandoned Paris during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), but not for so long a period. And true, Vichy did not leave Paris of its own volition: Pétain wanted to return to the capital, but the Germans objected. Nevertheless, the obligatory encampment in central France accorded admirably with the new regime's rural-oriented "deep France" outlook.

Obviously Vichy is also remembered because it grew out of France's defeat at the hands of the Germans and coincided with a period of occupation, with its attendant division and suffering. Memories of that period are still vivid in the minds of many people living today, people in a position to influence both public debate and scholarly research.

Finally, and more fundamentally, Vichy is remembered because it offers a convenient contrast to other regimes. The Fourth Republic grew out of resistance to the German occupation and rejection of *L'État français* (as the Vichy regime officially called itself, in opposition to *la République française*). Similarly, the Fifth Republic

reacted against the Fourth, but because the founder of the Fifth was General de Gaulle, the new regime contributed as much if not more to the condemnation of Vichy. Politicians often invoke the history of Vichy in order to marginalize antirepublican groups and, at times, to discredit political enemies of whatever camp.

Is there anything unusual about this? If memories of Vichy are alive today, is the situation any different from, say, that of the Third Republic in the late nineteenth century, when people looked back to the Second Empire? Or from the period after the revolution of 1848, with its memories of the July Monarchy? And Vichy itself, for that matter: the regime defined itself in opposition to the Third Republic, just as the Third Republic had defined itself in opposition to the Second Empire.

Indeed, this series of regimes can be followed all the way back to the beginning: the French Revolution was the major rupture, the matrix of all that followed. Within a period of a few years nearly all possible forms of government were tried. The experience left the stamp of historical conflict on French political culture, by which I mean that France has tended to conceive of its conflicts in historical terms and to conceive of its history in terms of conflict. It also made memory a key element in the definition of all subsequent regimes as they searched, in one direction or another, for a stable equilibrium.

Each of those regimes was obliged to situate itself in relation to the great founding event as well as to what preceded it and what grew out of it. Each carried with it the memory of a predecessor, whether as model or anti-model. The Revolution, animated by the Promethean ambition to create a new society and a new man, ended by placing an enormous burden on the future: the past became a dynamic agent, its divisions constantly replayed, with the result that all postrevolutionary regimes, including the republics, have been to one degree or another "memory regimes."

The Third Republic, which looked to the future, also forged a tradition for itself and worried about integrating the country's prerepublican past. Still, memory clearly played a more important and more central role in those regimes that can properly be called reactionary. The Restoration, the Second Empire, and Vichy were all attempts—each with its own distinctive features—to turn things around, to set the clock back, though admittedly each of these regimes was obliged to strike some sort of compromise with changes deemed to be irreversible. The success of these attempts at reaction diminished over time, moreover, to judge by the decreasing duration of each successive regime (1815–1848, 1851–1870, 1940–1944) compared with the lengthening intervals left to the Republic to establish its roots.

In this family of reactionary regimes Vichy nevertheless enjoys a place apart, which entitles it to be called *the* memory regime par excellence. Although it resembled its predecessors in seeking to tailor the future to the pattern of the past, it also differed from them in a number of important ways: it did not aim to restore a pre-

vious regime, it did not attempt to restore power to political leaders or social groups that had held it before, and it did not try to revive the glory of a defunct empire.

Vichy's memory was filled with pure representations, the quintessential one being "France," but a France that was no longer linked to God through a divine-right monarchy and even less associated with humanity by way of a universal form such as the republic. Vichy was a deliberate, persistent, and futile effort to organize reality around such a memory, to reconstruct a national spirit in which the memory of a mythologized past would shape the perception of the present to create a unified way of feeling, thinking, and acting.

An Ambiguous and Shifting Past

Before examining this project of Vichy's, however, we must digress a moment to recall briefly what the *État français* was and how it was perceived by contemporaries. We will then be in a better position to appreciate the subsequent work accomplished by memory, the way in which it in turn organized the reality of a period whose experience was ambiguous, shifting, and divided.

There was a great deal of diversity in the Vichy regime, and chronology cannot be neglected. The picture of Vichy that certain elements of the Resistance, especially the Communist Party, tried to paint in the immediate postwar period—that of a uniformly black regime, totally abject before the occupying power and completely united in its oppressive policies against the French—has been substantially modified by subsequent historical research.

In fact, the regime harbored a number of rival tendencies, to the point where Stanley Hoffmann has proposed calling it a pluralist dictatorship. Other scholars have noted various phases in the regime's sinister evolution, with Laval's return to power in April of 1942 marking one turning point, followed by another in November of 1942, when the extension of German occupation to cover all of metropolitan France placed the principal reins of government in Laval's hands. Still others have tried to connect Vichy with the prewar and postwar periods, noting the prevalence of xenophobia before 1940 and the increasing state intervention in various aspects of French life after 1945.[1]

It is now clear that Vichy was not a monolith. Nevertheless, despite its internal diversity and evolution over time, there are good reasons for seeing the regime as fundamentally unified. As often happens, the outcomes and consequences of Vichy's policies did not always coincide with the original intentions or calculations of the policy makers. Some programs went awry, while others veered out of control, but these failures were not all the result of unforeseeable circumstances, such as the fact that the occupation continued for four years during which the Germans demanded ever greater sacrifices as the fortunes of war turned against them. Some

of the failures were ineluctable consequences of the logic inherent in the regime's initial choices and goals.

To put it in a nutshell, the outcome was a foregone conclusion from the moment Vichy decided not simply to accept the consequences of defeat but to attempt a national revitalization in its wake. Once it was decided that the war was definitively lost, the only thing left to do was to save what could be saved. When Pétain announced that the time had come for France to break with Great Britain and pursue its own national interest, he was in effect assessing the outcome of the policies of the interwar period as many others did: mutual security had failed and the alliances to which France had committed herself had proved disappointing, not to say dangerous. France, the marshal declared, was left "alone to face her destiny." She had no choice but "to free herself from so-called 'traditional' friendships and hostilities."[2]

In the short run the defeat made it possible to embark on a renewal of French institutions, perceived as the only guarantee of a better future. Because France's new leaders had become convinced of the need for such a renewal *before* the war, they were all the more inclined to believe that the judgment of the battlefield had confirmed their analysis. In launching their effort to revitalize the nation, they set forth their priorities. No one expressed those priorities more clearly than the radical right-wing writer Charles Maurras, despite the marginal role that he played at Vichy.

In *La Seule France*, a book that he published in 1941, Maurras drew the following parallel: in 1429, Joan of Arc chose to go to Reims and the king's coronation even though by continuing her military campaign she might "have shortened by twenty years—who can say?—the fight to drive the English out of France." But, "then as now," the military aspect of the situation was only one element. "As harsh as the English conquest was, it was merely the effect of more profound causes that would have remained even if the English had left. The conquest grew out of France's division, fragmentation, enfeeblement, and anarchy.... The war might have been ended, but not without breaking out again soon thereafter as a result of the new divisions that would soon have engulfed a France without a Leader."[3]

Maurras treated the military struggle against the occupying power as secondary. A thorough overhaul of the nation took priority over regaining control of French territory and full sovereignty within its borders. To be sure, Vichy's leaders, whose views were by no means uniform, never defined their task with such clarity and rigor. Nevertheless, their actions followed the lines that Maurras had sketched out. And given the unforeseen course that the war would take, it was this establishment of a link between acceptance of defeat and national reform that would turn out to be the crux of the issue.

Vichy had counted on a rapid end to hostilities, which would have allowed the government, though left to rule an admittedly grievously wounded and subjugated nation, to concentrate on building a new France. Despite the forecasts of a quick

end to the war, however, the battle continued to rage. England refused to give up, and Germany, it turned out, lacked the power to force England to do so. The French government was obliged to accommodate itself to a continuing occupation, which exposed it to daily pressures from the occupying power. Instead of a regime obliged to accept a German-dictated peace, Vichy became the regime that collaborated with the Nazis.

In order to preserve what autonomy the armistice had allowed it, and above all to outmaneuver London and de Gaulle and hold on to the Empire, which, along with the fleet, was the principal guarantee of that autonomy, as well as to pave the way for peace on the most favorable possible terms, Vichy made the strategic decision to adopt a policy of collaboration, a choice that was a logical consequence of the armistice that its leaders had sought. The collaboration in question was to involve mainly economic matters; it was to avoid open conflict with London and alignment of France with the Axis powers. Yet it was based on a wager that the Third Reich would ultimately win, or at any rate that the British would certainly not win.

Vichy's leaders claimed that this policy was based solely on a "realistic" assessment of the situation. But their realism was hampered by their own domestic policy preferences, to

FIGURE 5.1 André-Paul and Louis Simon, *Long Live France, Long Live the Marshal;* poster.

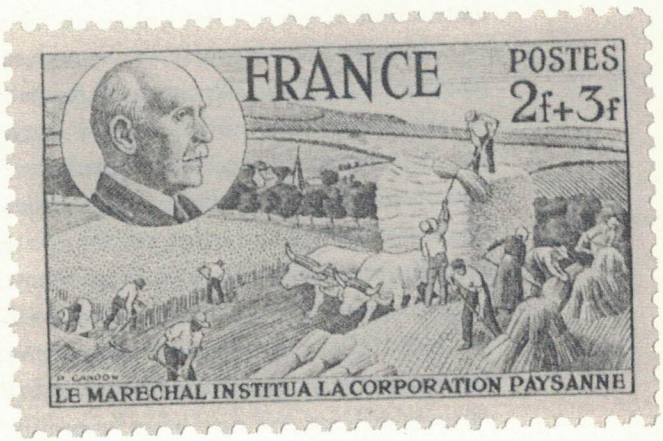

FIGURE 5.2 *The Marshal Established the Peasant Corporation;* postage stamp, 1943.

which they clung even as the war raged on and which ultimately led the regime into a blind alley. If the government renounced the policy of collaboration, it would risk losing all remaining autonomy while remaining vulnerable to German retaliation. To quit France for North Africa in order to join the Allies would have meant giving up any chance of authoritarian reform in France for the foreseeable future.

The events of November 1942 proved that the leaders of Vichy, Pétain above all, refused to acknowledge the utter futility of their initial decisions. Instead, they clung to their policies, showing, to be sure, some signs of doubt and foot-dragging but never more than hinting at any possibility of fundamental change. Collaboration continued to be advocated and practiced, and while Vichy now bargained more than ever with the Germans, it nevertheless accepted responsibility for enforcing the recruitment of French workers for "compulsory labor service" in Germany (the so-called Service de Travail Obligatoire, or STO) as well as for deporting Jews.

Meanwhile, the National Revolution remained on the agenda, although much of the original enthusiasm had gone out of it. By the autumn of 1943, Pétain and Laval separately sought to revive the National Assembly. At the same time they turned to the Milice, a paramilitary national militia, to maintain order, and both leaders would back its oppressive activities right to the bitter end. By agreeing to remain in power after November 1942 and thus choosing to owe their political survival to the occupying power, they ended up being made to look like partners and accomplices to Nazi perfidy. Ultimately Pétain was reduced to claiming that he had wished to serve as France's "shield," a wretched end to a policy that began with very different ambitions.

Although Vichy's course was by no means predetermined, the lines of force that it eventually followed were present from the beginning. In hindsight the regime can be said to have been unified, which is just how it appeared to many resistance fighters and to much of the French population immediately after the Liberation. Vichy thus entered history as the antithesis of the republicain tradition, the anti-Republic. Simultaneously, people who now saw the regime in the blackest of terms forgot that initially, especially in 1940 and 1941, many contemporaries to whom the future still seemed opaque were quite ambiguous in their attitudes toward Vichy.

Indeed, the regime's very inception was ambiguous. Continuity and rupture coexisted. Pétain did not come to power in the manner of Louis Bonaparte, who dispensed with legality only after being duly elected. Nor did his government take power by proclamation, as the government of national defense did in 1870 in the wake of military defeat. In July 1940 the Third Republic voted itself out of existence and transferred full power, seemingly quite legally, to Marshal Pétain.[4]

After the war there were attempts in various quarters to challenge the legality of this vote on the grounds that it was not a free or deliberate decision by the deputies

of the National Assembly. Nevertheless, the fact is that the deputies, none of whom protested the armistice, knew exactly what they were doing, and the vast majority of them were ready to trust their fate to the man of the hour, onto whose shoulders they were perfectly willing to shift responsibility for whatever ensued. Was this the result of a failure of nerve or of a deep sense of blame for France's failure? In any case the vote was an expression of the collapse of democratic values among the very people sworn to uphold them.

Vichy was in no sense an antirepublican conspiracy led by a seditious gang ready to take advantage of the country's disarray in order to impose their own counter-revolutionary beliefs. It was first and foremost an expression of the authoritarian metamorphosis that afflicted much of the republican establishment. More specifically, the regime grew out of ideas developed by a loose network of small reformist groups coupled with a widespread collapse of faith in democratic values that began in the 1930s and was completed by the defeat. The collapse of faith in democracy affected nearly the whole of the French elite and much of the population as well.

True, the new regime was to a large extent the revenge of the Republic's mortal enemies, along with all who had merely paid lip service to republican values. The extreme right could not restrain itself from applauding the overthrow of *la gueuse* (literally "wench," a derogatory term for the Republic) and quickly threw itself into the breach. Yet it failed to win places in the government for its leaders. Maurras was excluded, and such aspiring leaders as Déat, Doriot, and Bucard left Vichy to try their luck in Paris. It was not until early 1944, however, that Déat, Henriot, and Darnand joined the government under pressure from the Germans, indicating not that Vichy had become a fascist regime but that it now contained a notable fascist presence.

The Catholic Church, which had reluctantly acquiesced to the Republic, offered the new regime its enthusiastic support, especially during the first two years, a time of inflated hopes of a new role for the Church. But Vichy never allowed itself to be defined as a pro-Catholic regime. Although Pétain and Darlan allowed the Church a much greater role than it had recently enjoyed and harped on the old theme of a "Christian France," in the end they found it preferable to limit their concessions rather than revive long-dormant religious conflict.

In fact, Vichy employed officials of many stripes and drew support from a fairly broad segment of the political spectrum, including dissident left-wing fringe groups. A solid core of reactionaries and men who had been involved with the fascist-oriented extreme right of the 1930s, such as Benoist-Méchin and Marion, was joined by others of varied background and outlook, all convinced, however, of the virtues of authority after the doubly chastening experience of the Popular Front and the defeat. Among them were former liberals such as Flandin and Barthélemy, technocrats like Bichelonne, and even René Belin, a former leader of the anti-

Communist wing of the C.G.T. (Confédération Générale du Travail, a labor union), who was supposed to demonstrate that the new regime enjoyed backing among workers and was keen to enlist the support of all social classes.

Even if well-intentioned people had continued to join the government in numbers as large as in the summer of 1940, the regime still would have been far from establishing itself on a firm footing had it not received the support of people of more modest background but decisive importance: civil servants at all levels apparently felt no particular compunction, given the vacuum created by the legislature's resignation, about taking up the reins of a government at long last turned over to those with the "competence" to keep its machinery running smoothly. Defections in the first two years were rare, even in the diplomatic corps.[5]

Nor did the army withhold its approval. After hesitating for a short time after the armistice, it threw its full support to the new government, whose ranks swelled with military officers. The Army of the Republic helped to bury the Republic: Pétain, unlike Hindenburg, was not a monarchist who had agreed to serve a republican government against his innermost convictions. He had served the Third Republic and no other power throughout his long military career. In fact, he had been a distinguished military leader in the previous regime, just as Pierre Laval had been a distinguished civilian leader.

We see the same divorce between army and republic, but for diametrically opposed reasons, in the behavior of the first man to challenge Pétain's authority. After de Gaulle escaped to England, where on June 18, 1940, he issued a call to the French to continue the struggle against the Germans, he broke with a government—the Pétain government—that was duly constituted and at that point still represented the government of the Republic. The transfer of power was approved only three weeks later, and the ensuing inception of *L'État français* changed de Gaulle's status in a way that he could not possibly have foreseen when he rebelled. Gaullism sprang primarily from a rejection of the armistice, not of the National Revolution.

It was not just the elites and the bureaucrats of the Republic who welcomed the new regime with open arms. The desperate situation of France in the summer of 1940 inclined much of the population to accept a strong government. Given the disarray that followed the defeat, the widespread disaffection with parliamentary democracy, and the general relief at the cessation of combat, many people were only too glad to welcome a government that promised to get things back in hand. For many long months the resistance would have to grope its way in darkness.

Pétain was the chief beneficiary of this climate of opinion, as shown by his triumphal journeys through the free zone from the autumn of 1940 on. To judge by figures gleaned from the postal censorship records, the government and its ministers never enjoyed more than limited popular support. The National Revolution aroused little enthusiasm or even sustained interest. The people were primarily con-

cerned with two things: food and the repatriation of French prisoners of war. Darlan and especially Laval bore the brunt of dissatisfactions to which Pétain alluded publicly as early as the spring of 1941, but he himself would remain exempt from the public's wrath for some time to come.[6]

And yet, immediately after meeting Hitler at Montoire, he had personally assumed responsibility for a policy of collaboration that would soon encounter considerable hostility: "I alone shall be judged by History." Once anti-English sentiments triggered by the massacre at Mers el-Kébir had dissipated, the majority of the French clearly hoped for a British victory; they rejected a policy of collaboration whose benefits were by no means evident but which raised the danger of a disastrous confrontation with France's former ally.

As in Nazi Germany, people in France distinguished to an astonishing degree between the leader and his minions, reviving the ancestral myth of the good king flanked by wicked advisors.[7] Pétain, to be sure, encouraged such confusion both by his acts—such as the dismissal of Laval in December 1940, which many people quite wrongly interpreted as a repudiation of Montoire—and by the image he created through speeches and public appearances.

He rarely, for example, struck a note of command, intimidation, or threat. An interesting exception occurred in a message delivered on August 12, 1941, in which, after denouncing the "veritable malaise" from which the French were suffering, he announced a series of harsh new measures. Citing his "duty to defend" France, he said: "I put an end to the mutinies in 1917. I put an end to the rout in 1940. Today I want to save you from yourselves."[8] As consent evaporated, the regime's repressive vein rose to the surface; the Milice was already in gestation.

Ordinarily Pétain used a very different tone: that of persuasion, exhortation, and preaching, filling his speeches with Christian references that were not without effect on a population still deeply imbued with Christian culture. He addressed the French as "my friends," "my dear friends," and even "my children," speaking as a father or a pastor.[9] He was at first the providential man, the honored savior, prepared to sacrifice himself: Pétain "gave the gift of his person" to France in its hour of greatest need. Later the father began to sound more like a grandfather, the savior more like a martyr. Six months after the "ill wind" speech of January 1, 1942, Pétain made a show of his chains in order to win his compatriots' assistance: "In the partial exile that has been imposed on me, within the limits of the quasi-liberty that I am allowed, I aim at doing my duty to the fullest possible extent. Every day I work to rescue this country from the asphyxiation that threatens it, from the troubles that lie in store. Help me."[10]

Pétain offered the French a range of perceptions and images. Some—a large minority—subscribed to the program of National Revolution that he set forth; as events unfolded, they would either withdraw into inaction or enlist in the Milice.

FIGURE 5.3, 5.4, AND 5.5 "Love," "Képi," "Eyes"; three plates from *The Marshal's Alphabet* (1941).

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The others—certainly far more numerous—felt for Pétain a loyalty, or at any rate a respect, that they believed he deserved because of his glorious past and advanced age, his image as the savior-martyr of his country, and his role as a symbol of national continuity. Over time this admiration and devotion turned to compassion and pity more often than hatred.

To many French people Pétain and Vichy were not at all the same thing. Because of their respect for the man, however, they were loyal in a sense to the regime he headed. This attitude, a product of various assumptions and expectations, slowly eroded without vanishing altogether, and surely it is a crucial factor for explaining some of France's later difficulties in coming to terms with the past. In September 1944 a majority (58 percent) in France felt that Pétain should be acquitted. In the summer of 1945, after the discovery of the Nazi concentration camps, their number had dwindled to 17 percent. But in the 1970s and 1980s it rose again to more than 30 percent (35 in 1976, 31 in 1983).[11] Vichy is condemned in toto, but Pétain is still judged separately.

Here there is a considerable gap between the judgment of the public and that of historians, among whom there is universal agreement that Pétain headed the regime until the autumn of 1942 and bore ultimate responsibility to the very end. Even at the time it was clear that the government of Vichy saw itself as something other than a Roman-style dictatorship for extraordinary times. Beyond purging the bureaucracy and stifling political life, the steady stream of measures that the regime adopted in its very first months heralded an ambition of global reform.

To take just one example, the "Jewish statute" of October 1940 can hardly be described as an ad hoc measure. It apparently pleased many people and was passively accepted by the majority, without noticeable opposition, in contrast to what happened in the summer of 1942 when the police began arresting and deporting large numbers of Jews. The widespread protests that erupted then stemmed from compassion for the victims combined with a now deeply ingrained hatred of the occupying forces.[12]

Furthermore, Pétain himself was constantly issuing messages and proclamations to explain his ambitions and goals. Indeed, his role in the articulation and formulation of Vichy's program was so central that it is hard to see how, in this respect, the regime can be separated from the man.

The "Reconstruction of the National Soul"

To pool energies and revitalize the nation: that was Pétain's goal, and he alone would establish the lines that that revitalization was to take, a road map to a radical utopia. In the present context it matters little how this project was carried out and to what extent its goals were realized. Because various tendencies coexisted within the

regime, and because the war did not end and the occupation continued, certain corrections, detours, and amplifications were required.

The new order was to be based on so-called natural communities: family, commune, occupation, region. Revitalized, these would again become the nation's essential skeleton. The family, the "essential cell," the "very foundation of the social edifice," was to be restored by returning women to the home and encouraging a higher birth rate. Young people were to be better educated and disciplined in school. Occupations were to be organized, with cooperation among the various categories of productive workers being the touchstone of social harmony. And among those productive workers a special place was to be reserved not only for artisans but especially for peasants, who were once again to be France's backbone.

This strategy was designed to foil and defeat the nation's principal enemy, individualism, which eroded social bonds and sapped France's strength. It would restore the "concrete" reality of *corps intermédiaires*, organizations standing between the individual and the state and said to be the only real framework within which individual liberty made sense. The state, for its part, was to be the culmination of the hierarchy of natural communities, capping them without crushing them. A strong state was necessary, but Pétain rejected *étatisme*, especially in its extreme totalitarian form. "Family rights," he affirmed, "are prior and superior to the rights of both states and individuals."[13]

The strong state was to be a state "reduced to its genuine functions"[14] and based on principles of authority and hierarchy in accordance with a thoroughly military model. Such a state would need elites, who would have to be raised and trained without regard to social origin. At the summit one man would govern, taking advice from a select few and seeking the consent of the many. There was to be no place in this system for political parties, much less for a unique party. Pétain chose instead to have a single organization of veterans to convey messages between himself and the general public.

The goal of the whole enterprise was to revitalize the nation. Pétain stressed the role of the school in this regard, along with that of youth organizations, which were charged with instilling into French youth a team spirit, solidarity, a sense of service to the community and of obedience to the authorities. In place of a France undermined and divided by conflicts among parties and special interests, and, more profoundly, by individualism and materialism, there would arise a new France, its energies mobilized by a "new spirit," a "spirit of social and national communion."[15]

Pétain defined his project as an "organic realignment of French society."[16] The goal was to reattach those parts of the nation that had been severed from the main body, or, varying the metaphor, to bring back into the flock sheep allowed to stray by "bad shepherds." Along with the theme of inclusion, there was a parallel theme of exclusion that Pétain never discussed publicly: groups recently arrived and

deemed unassimilable, such as Jews, were to be weeded out. The nation was to be brought together by persuasion if possible, but if necessary by force: the government would act for the good of the people, if need be against its will. Like any project based on an obsession with unity, Vichy's unification project incorporated the potential for exclusion and repression from the outset, and these tendencies would be strengthened as the unity of the people with its leaders was increasingly deferred.

Vichy's project is often characterized as counterrevolutionary, and the regime is sometimes taken to represent Maurras's triumph.[17] A coincidence of values and goals does not imply identity, however. Pétain had no intention of restoring the monarchy, nor was he concerned with expunging the French Revolution from history in order to bring back what it had eliminated.

Clearly the marshal's philosophy of man and society, according to which individuals need supervisory authority and are properly subordinate to the community, derived from the counterrevolutionary tradition. But the nationalists of the late nineteenth century had already integrated this aspect of counterrevolutionary thought into their own thinking, in addition to which they had made their peace with the Revolution, which was now an accepted element of the nation's past. Pétain, too, accepted the Revolution, though reinterpreted in the light of his own values.[18] If he continued to celebrate Bastille Day and kept France's tricolor flag, he replaced the old triad of republican values—liberty, equality, fraternity—with a new triad of his own: work, family, fatherland. Nevertheless, he did not condemn the old values outright, arguing instead that they needed to be limited and complemented by new ideals. Yet his words and actions in effect negated the core of the old republican values to which he continued to pay lip service.[19]

For late-nineteenth-century nationalists, monarchy was no longer viable, but republicanism was not up to what they saw as the essential task. They therefore invented "France," a timeless, eternal, ideal form that had found imperfect embodiment in a series of different regimes. Pétain was a fervent if unimaginative disciple of this line of thinking. What was central to his project was not the question of the type of regime but the question of "France." The purpose of *L'État français* was to protect and revitalize the substance of France, and this included a wish to purge France of all that was not properly a part of it or that claimed to transcend it.

It would, however, take more than institutional reform or a new governmental structure to revitalize "France." Beyond enumerating a series of fundamental principles, Pétain had strikingly little to say about constitutional reform. This discretion was only partly the result of circumstances, actual promulgation of the constitution having been put off until peace was concluded. Although the point has been little noted, the fact is that the precise organization of the state did not matter to him as much as social and national reform did, society and the nation being the only pro-

found realities. Pétain's stated ambition was to "rebuild society" and "reconstruct the national soul."[20]

Underlying this vast project was the conviction that there existed an "eternal France," the bedrock of any possible salvation. The defeat provided a unique opportunity to rediscover that bedrock, and the best way to do it was to promote a return to the soil. In 1938, Pétain said that "prosperity, like victory, puts us to sleep," whereas "defeat always awakens the French."[21] He took his generation's experience from 1870 to 1940 and turned it into a philosophy of history. Defeat did not frighten him, and he was prepared to accept it for its virtues.

In so doing he explored an avenue first opened up by Ernest Renan, who, after France's defeat in 1870, asked if the country would "continue down the slope of national enfeeblement and political materialism as it had been doing" or "respond to the knife that had been plunged into its living flesh as Germany did in 1807 by taking its defeat as the beginning of an era of renewal." The comparison with Prussia in 1807 was a staple topic of conversation at Vichy, where the idea was again that war could be "more useful to the vanquished than to the victor."[22]

Thus the defeat was seen as an opportunity for reflection, a pooling of energies, and a new commitment to the essence of the national identity: Vichy was above all the memory of this mythical kernel, a concept that could not be formed until two Napoleons had tested the limits of national power. It was also a highly French concept, an exemplary expression of which can be found in the myth of Vercingetorix, which was so very different from the mythical soil from which the dreams of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany drew their sustenance.[23] Could a nation that celebrated defeated warriors such as Vercingetorix and Joan of Arc as heroes kindle with passion for a "Thousand-Year Reich"?

The way to rediscover "eternal France" and, along with it, a promise of survival, was to return to the earth: the earth which does not lie, which "continues to be your solace," which "is the fatherland itself."[24] In order to restore the substance of France it would be necessary to "reroot, so far as possible, Frenchmen in French soil" by putting an end to those practices that led to "the best elements in every class" being "uprooted" and condemned to a life of "wandering in a bureaucratic desert" (*nomadisme administratif*).[25]

The land was a key category in the Pétainist vision, which was far more than an expression of nostalgia for the past. Evoking the future of France, which was to become "what it should never have ceased to have been, an essentially agricultural nation," Pétain added that "like the giant of myth, [France] would recover her full strength by reestablishing contact with the soil."[26] The earth had literally magical powers, which guaranteed that the nation would regain its identity and its strength.

Finally, history itself testified to the existence of an eternal France and offered its portion of comfort. For what was history but a series of successes and misfor-

tunes, with success in each instance growing out of misfortune? Pétain's sententious, moralistic style, much given to the timeless present and to natural metaphor, nicely captured his belief in "eternal certitudes."

"One day, a peasant, a neighbor of ours, sees his crop destroyed by hail. He does not lose hope in the next harvest. He continues, with the same faith as before, to plow the same furrow to receive tomorrow's seed."[27] The point of this little parable was of course France's defeat, here reduced to a natural disaster that could be overcome by persistence, stubborn determination, and courage to "withstand the inevitable staunchly and patiently."[28] Suffering not only brings redemption but guarantees it: France is eternal because it persists even through the cycle of victory and defeat.

Vichy's project was a radical one in the proper sense of the word, a search for roots blessed with the power of eternal survival. Was this too vague to qualify as a project? If the details were never really worked out, the central vision was clear enough. Whatever vagueness there was came from the quaking emotion that inevitably accompanies any dream of returning to a golden age.

Everything in Pétain's vision expressed a powerful aspiration to escape from time: it was the reactionary utopia of a nation challenged by disruptive socioeconomic change and by more dynamic nations on the attack. Ultimately Vichy was a regime that no longer wished to confront history, that wanted no further part of it so long as history meant continuous creation. The destiny of France was to experience fortune and misfortune: What did Hitler and Nazism matter alongside such an "eternal certitude"? Vichy's policy expressed nothing more than the wish to go on living of a country that had retreated into its own backyard.

Nevertheless, the memory of a timeless France that Vichy hoped to turn into an active presence was already dated: it was as old as Pétain. It was the memory, exalted as myth, of a man and a generation: the memory of a vanishing society of craftsmen and peasants, of contested moral and political values (service and sacrifice), and of a historical experience interpreted as a timeless paradigm (the cycle 1870–1918–1940). Last but not least, it was also the memory of a set of images inherited from nineteenth-century nationalism, the imagination of a national community transformed into an eternal reality.

Paradoxically, it was through this reactionary memory that Vichy revealed its modernity: ex-republicans attempted to restore not a regime but a substance that transcended both monarchy and republic or formed their common foundation. Benjamin Constant had seen the truth as long ago as 1814: any authority that attempted to restore the Ancien Régime "would try to claim that it was merely reviving ancient institutions. But those ancient institutions would simply be absurd and unfortunate innovations."[29] The judgment applies to Vichy all the more in that its primary ambitions were to rebuild society and reconstruct the national soul.

Vichy did not go so far in its efforts to modernize as to conceive of its project as the fascist regimes did, in totalitarian terms. To be sure, "reconstructing the national soul" implied a need for resolute action to transform both the society and the educational system. Consider, for example, the major importance that Pétain attached to schools and the values they were supposed to instill into the minds of French students. Or consider the steps taken to encourage folklore and popular traditions.[30] Reviving old costumes and forms of expression was supposed to rekindle interest in the communal experiences of yesteryear. Fundamentally, however, Vichy had blind faith in the belief that the "old" could be restored if traditional institutions were once again allowed to exercise their full influence on society.

Were the French fully aware of how utopian this project was? Did they even perceive that there was a coherent, overall plan? It was in fact quite easy to hear the official rhetoric as an echo of the kinds of things that people said at home or to interpret Pétain's words in the humblest of terms as befit the circumstances. He celebrated the earth at a time of shortages; he extolled the family in a time of separation; he appealed to authority in the midst of war. The radical goals of the Pétainist program could be obscured, the program itself reduced to a panacea for a time of trial, an act of faith in the country's survival, and, in its innermost but perhaps most comforting aspect, a profession of national identity. The continuation of the war, which prevented Pétain from carrying out his program, brought him a popularity that it would have been difficult for him to achieve in peacetime, but at the cost of misinterpretations and ambivalence.

A Vivid Memory

The Vichy regime did not revitalize France as it had hoped, nor did it restore the nation's independence and grandeur. Instead it first divided the nation, then united it in opposition to its policies of repression and collaboration, which chiefly served the interests of the Germans. Instead of "reconstructing the national soul" by filling it with memories of an invented "France," it left vivid memories of a very real France that continues to be a source of embarrassment and outrage. During Pétain's trial, Mornet, the prosecutor, spoke of "four years to be stricken from our history." The idea was bizarre and striking, especially in its expression of a fervent desire to forget. But the past that we try to forget has a way of coming back to haunt us.

The history of the memory of Vichy—or, at any rate, of its public memory—is a good example of this, as Henry Rousso has shown in a remarkable and path-breaking book.[31] There is no need here to go into the wealth of detail he offers about the phases of repression and activation of Vichyite memory or about the propagation of what he calls "the Vichy syndrome." It will suffice to note the overall pattern of evolution, especially the turning point that occurred in the 1970s, before moving on