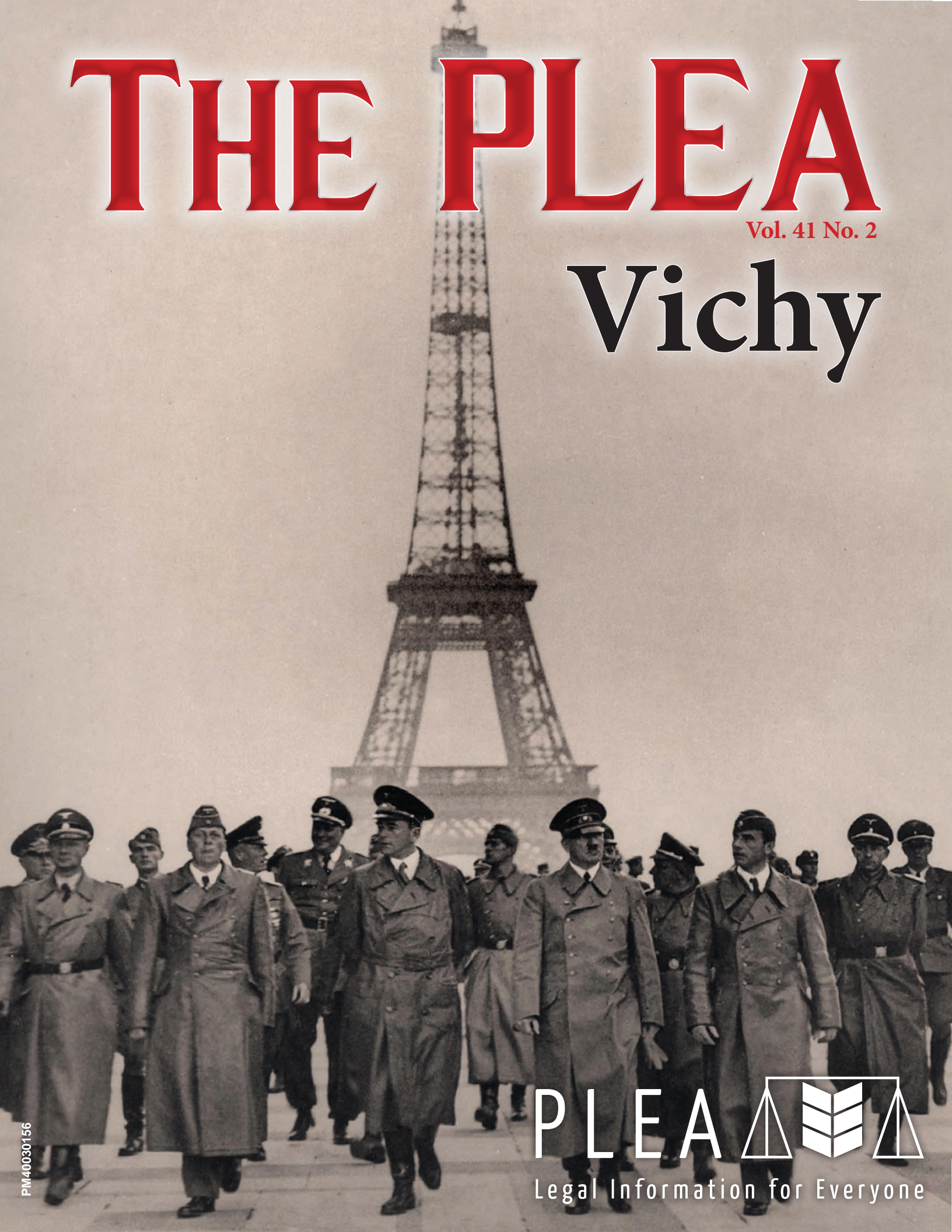


# THE PLEA

Vol. 41 No. 2

## Vichy



PLEA 

Legal Information for Everyone

## CONTENTS

### 3 The End of French Democracy

Can a democracy simply be voted out of existence?

### 6 The Emergence of French Fascism

How did political movements in the 1920s and 1930s help pave the way for Vichy?

### 8 Snapshots of Vichy

What did life look like in Vichy?

### 10 The Shadow of Vichy

Do our perspectives on history change?

### 12 Further Resources

Don't stop learning now!

One of World War II's most perplexing developments was the creation of Vichy France. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1940, Nazi Germany marched into the Netherlands and Belgium, en route to France. By June 14<sup>th</sup>, Hitler's armies were in Paris. On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, French leaders accepted defeat and signed an armistice agreement with Germany. Then in a shocking move, on July 10<sup>th</sup> France's legislatures voted to dissolve the French Third Republic and its constitution. In its place came the authoritarian and possibly fascist *État français*, commonly known as Vichy France.

What was Vichy France? How was it created? Who fought against it? And why are the lessons of Vichy relevant today? This issue of *The PLEA* explores these questions. It considers:

- how Vichy France was created,
- political movements that helped pave the way for Vichy,
- some aspects of life in Vichy, and
- how France has taken steps to acknowledge its Vichy past.

Ideal for most any reader, *Vichy* fulfills several requirements in Saskatchewan's History 20 curriculum. It will also be of interest to people curious about the history of World War II.



Legal Information for Everyone

† *Bundesarchiv*, via *Wikimedia Commons*

‡ *Public domain*, via *Wikimedia Commons*

§ *Creative Commons*, via *Wikimedia Commons*

ON THE COVER Adolf Hitler's first and only tour of Paris on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1940, one day after signing the Franco-German armistice. *Photo by Shawshots / Alamy Stock Photo.*



# The End of French Democracy



In a democracy, the people decide. Can the people decide to vote democracy away?

France did not fare well in World War II. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1940 Nazi Germany marched into the Netherlands and Belgium, en route to France. By June 14<sup>th</sup>, Hitler's armies successfully fought their way to Paris, perhaps the most admired city in the world. Left with few options, France accepted defeat on June 20<sup>th</sup> and signed

an armistice agreement with Germany. Under the agreement, all of France would continue to be governed by the French, at least on paper.

In reality, France was carved into two pieces. The German military would occupy the north, known as *Zone occupée*. In *Zone occupée*, French rule was subject to intense German military oversight. The south of France, known as *Zone libre*, would be under full French control. France's holdings in North Africa—Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco—also remained in French hands. Algeria had been integrated into France in 1848, while Tunisia and Morocco were ruled by local monarchs under the thumb of French generals. To help maintain control, France was allowed to keep a small military. As well, a small southern corner of France was taken over by Italy.

Officially defeated, France's lawmakers then did something extraordinary. Leading politicians said that France needed a new constitution. This was despite the armistice agreement requiring no such thing. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, France's legislatures voted on whether or not they would end the democratic French Third Republic. This would clear the way for a new constitution.

## Voting Away Democracy

The vote that destroyed the Third Republic wasn't even close. 569 legislators voted in favour of the proposal, 80 voted against. That said, 176 were absent: some were on a boat to North Africa with hopes of setting up a government-in-exile, a few were in jail, and some were in France but never showed up. If these absentees are factored in, it was still a landslide vote: almost 70% of France's legislators were in favour of ending the Third Republic.

**PEOPLE USED  
DEMOCRACY  
TO DESTROY  
DEMOCRACY.**

This vote to destroy a democracy has confounded people ever since. It has been argued that France's democratic self-destruction was a betrayal committed by France's political elite, who were seeking authoritarian power and closer ties with Nazi Germany. However, the move was widely supported by the public. Many common French people, tired of years of political gridlock and shocked by the country's sudden military defeat, were willing to try something new. As historian Robert O. Paxton argues, France's democratic suicide was "no revolution from above. It reflected almost unanimous French public opinion."<sup>1</sup>

Another disturbing aspect of the vote is captured by legal scholar Vivian Grosswald Curran. She points out that the destruction came through legal and democratic means. As she put it,

*France's Parliament...  
committed institutional*

*suicide by voting itself out of existence and creating a dictatorship, all in careful compliance with the French Third Republic's legal procedure.<sup>2</sup>*

In other words, people used democracy to destroy democracy. To be sure, not everyone agrees with Curran's analysis. Nonetheless, the simple fact that almost 70% of France's legislators voted to destroy one of the world's most-established liberal democracies—with wide public support—should give us all reason for pause.

## Vichy: The Authoritarian French State

There is very little to admire about what replaced the French Third Republic. The new French State created shortly after the vote is commonly called Vichy France.

Vichy is the name of the central French town where the new government was headquartered.

Philippe Pétain was appointed Vichy's head of state. Pétain was a popular and elderly war hero, who helped lead France to victory against Germany in World War I. He was given full power to create a new constitution.

Pétain and his cabinet were hostile to the ideas of democracy and liberalism. They blamed liberal ideals for weakening France. His new French constitution embraced far-right authoritarianism. The national motto was changed from *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) to *Travail, Famille, Patrie* (Work, Family, Homeland). This program of reform was called *Révolution nationale*.

*Révolution nationale* was an enormous setback for human rights. Personal and political freedoms were taken away, the economy came under tight control, the media lost most of its independence, and new laws targeted Jews. In these regards,



Vichy President Marshal Philippe Pétain meets Adolf Hitler, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1940. † HEINRICH HOFFMANN



Vichy France began to look a lot like Nazi Germany. And Vichy often collaborated with the Nazis.

As terrible as these changes were, Pétain and his government held on to wide public support in first years. Popular opinion in France was that Germany was going to win the war, so they may as well get on board with the coming European order.

## Resistance

Of course, not everyone supported Vichy. An underground opposition movement called the French Resistance formed. Historians have struggled to determine the number of people actively involved: estimates range from 2% to 20% of the population.

Some were resisters with a lowercase r. These resisters performed isolated acts of defiance. This could be as simple as raising a French tricolour flag, or helping a person hide from Vichy police. They never affiliated



Charles de Gaulle speaking from the BBC in London. The BBC spread news and coded messages across France, often including instructions for Resistance fighters. ‡  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN (KEYSTONE-FRANCE)

with a particular group. Capital R Resisters were active fighter groups. They formed and plotted underground, sabotaging the enemy, publishing newspapers, and helping the Allies.

The French Resistance was a colourful group. Predominantly young, they came from all classes, backgrounds, beliefs, and even nationalities. Some joined early, others had supported Vichy but then switched sides. A single goal united them: resisting Naziism and *Révolution nationale*. As Resistance expert Ronald Rosbottom said, “It began from the ground up, which is what’s remarkable.... Courage was suddenly needed.”<sup>3</sup> 🇫🇷

## DISCUSS

1. Vichy France was created through democratic, constitutional means. Why must we vigilantly guard our democracies from dictators and other authoritarians?
2. The French Resistance was a diverse coalition of people.
  - a) In the face of a common enemy, do we need to put aside our differences?
  - b) What compromises to your values would you be willing to make in the face of a common enemy?

## CHARLES DE GAULLE

Leadership of the Resistance is often attributed to a young French general and junior government minister, Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle rejected France’s armistice with Germany, fled to the UK, and set up a government-in-exile called Free France.

When de Gaulle fled, no other members of the French government came along. This put his leadership on shaky ground. A major step in de Gaulle establishing his authority came when the Allies took France’s African colonies from Vichy in November 1942. Free France could then establish a government in Algiers, then considered part of France.

When the National Council of the Resistance—a collection of resistance groups, political parties, and trade unions—formed in 1943, de Gaulle was officially recognised as the Resistance leader. Resistance became better-organised. This formal structure did not mean that all resisters marched to the same drum. The Resistance remained loose and unwieldy, but de Gaulle was its “leader.”

# The Emergence of French Fascism

Nazis did not introduce illiberalism, authoritarianism, or fascism to France. These ideas had been simmering for years.

**F**ascism is an extreme right-wing political ideology. It is characterised by things like extreme nationalism, a hate for outsiders and minorities, authoritarian rule, no real democracy, no rule of law, glorification of violence, and a drive towards war. The fascist goal is to overturn the existing order and create a “purified” nation and society.

Fascism emerged in the 1920s. Germany’s Adolf Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini probably are the world’s most recognised fascists. However, fascists could be found almost everywhere following World War I, including Canada.

France’s extreme-right and outrightly fascist political groups of this time included *Le Faisceau* (The Fascists, 1925), *Redressement français* (French Resurgence, 1926), and *Croix-de-Feu* (Cross of Fire, 1927). No group was exactly the same. But in general, they shared ideals like:

- replacing parliament with a king or dictator
- combining the power of the state with the power of corporations



Rioters face off against Paris police, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1934. Rioters were disorganised and lacked central coordination. ‡  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

- romanticising the role of the homeland and the peasant class
- adhering to strict Catholic religious values
- demonising immigrants, minorities, and left-wing politicians

Citizens were not immune to these ideas. As one indication, *Croix-de-Feu*, a paramilitary organisation, had almost half a million members by the mid-1930s. Debate continues

on whether they were simply authoritarian or all-out fascist. Historian Robert O. Paxton says “if [they] were fascist, fascism was powerful in 1930s France; if they were not, fascism was limited to the margins.”<sup>4</sup>

Extreme political conflicts sometimes spilled into the streets. Riots between the political left and the political right were common. The fighting contributed to growing frustration with France’s

## FRENCH COMMUNISTS

In the late 1930s, the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) was France's largest left-wing political party, in terms of membership. Most communists were committed anti-fascists. But the party was also tightly linked with Communist Russia. When Hitler signed a non-aggression pact with Russia in 1939, France banned the PCF.

Following the creation of Vichy, PCF members—already pushed into hiding—were told by party leaders not to openly fight the new regime. After all, Communist Russia was a Nazi ally, and the Nazis were a Vichy ally. This changed when Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941. PCF members swarmed to the Resistance, likely becoming its single-largest contingent.

Later, when Charles de Gaulle set up the Free French government in Algiers, he gave PCF members a seat at the table. Some conservatives were enraged. However, this kept with de Gaulle's desire to bring together people from diverse political beliefs in the name of liberating France. It also kept with the liberal democratic tradition of incorporating a broad spectrum of views into decision-making.

democracy. It also further drove political polarisation.

France's fascist and extreme-right movements appeared to reach a peak on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1934. That evening, several of these groups protested in the streets, converging upon Place de la Concorde. This is the square across from France's parliament. Many wanted to storm the building and replace the government with a dictatorship. Fortunately, they lacked central planning. Police were given orders to fight back: 15 protesters and one police officer were killed.

One consequence of the riot was that it sparked France's left-wing political groups to put aside their differences and unite against their extremist rivals. An umbrella group called *Front populaire* (Popular Front) formed, and went on to win France's 1936 election.

*Front populaire's* electoral victory did not spell the end for fascism in France. But it did keep the fascists away from the levers of political power. This new government set to work building social programs, enhancing worker rights, and further

preparing France's defences for a possible German invasion.

Unfortunately, fascism never completely lost its appeal. Many historians believe that the fascist parties were poised to do well in France's 1940 election. However, that election never came. Germany invaded, France was defeated, and then—backed by public opinion—France's legislators created a far-right, authoritarian, and perhaps fascist state: Vichy France. 🇫🇷

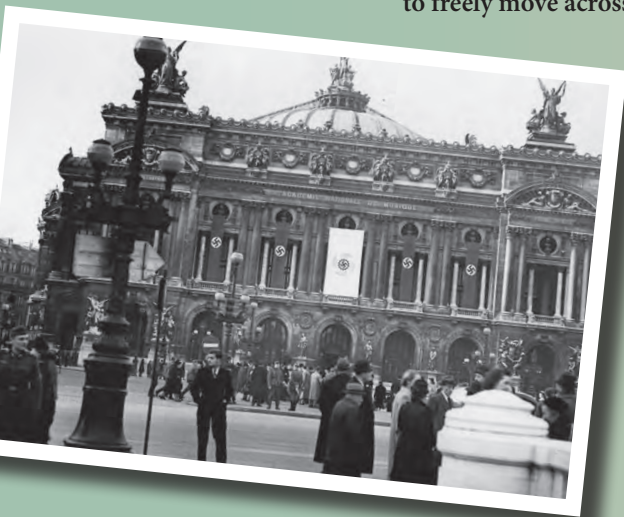
### DISCUSS

1. When France banned *Croix-de-Feu* in 1936, its leader created *Parti social français*. According to historian Robert Soucy, its leader “simply changed the name of his movement and claimed that it was now thoroughly democratic.”<sup>5</sup>
  - a) Can an idea truly be destroyed by banning it?
  - b) If banning an idea cannot destroy it, what does the banishment accomplish?
2. French right-wing and fascist newspapers often promoted the fact that their supporters were assaulted by left-wing antifascists, to gain sympathy for their movement.
  - a) How does violence beget violence?
  - b) Does this tell us anything about the weakness of violence as a means of change?



# SNAPSHOTS

France's division into two zones left citizens unable to freely move across the demarcation line. § ROSTISLAV BOTEV



The arts were promoted to preserve Paris's artistic reputation. Here the Paris Opera is decorated with swastikas for a German music festival. † PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



German soldiers integrated themselves into life in France. It was a crime to harm them and retribution was swift and lopsided. Sometimes dozens of French people would be killed in response. † LANGHAUS



Underground pamphlets and newspapers like *Combat* skirted censorship laws and helped keep the Resistance connected. † PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

**Combat**  
 Dans la guerre comme dans la paix le dernier mot est à ceux qui ne se rendent jamais. Clemenceau.  
 ORGANE DES MOUVEMENTS DE RÉSISTANCE UNIS  
**LA RÉSISTANCE TOTALE**

Vous la connaissez, mes camarades, la chienne terrorisée qui, depuis trois ans, paille son agrobile détreasé et supplie les Français d'attendre sans rien faire que la guerre se termine.  
 Vous connaissez cette incaille qui crie : « Si vous agissez, vous augmenterez notre misère ! ». Et vous savez mieux que quiconque par quel « NON », la Résistance ne cesse de leur répondre. L'édifice tumulte des liches est sans cesse démantelé par les explosions de nos bombes qui détruisent les installations de Terreneuf, par le bruit de nos balles qui ébranlent les traités, et aussi par l'appel inébranlable de nos martyrs qui succombent et nous disent de ne pas abandonner le combat.  
 Mais voici, relevant au-dessus de toutes les voix et de tous les tumultes, ce nous parvenant de l'extrémité de ce que nous appelons chaque seconde celle de la Victoire. Cependant, exhortations au calme, et de leurs



Young Resisters like Simone Segouin smuggled messages, blew up trains, and captured German soldiers. France awarded her the *Croix de guerre* for her heroism. † NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT COLLEGE PARK



1.5 million French soldiers were shipped to Germany as prisoners of war. Germany would sometimes exchange sickly POWs for healthy young French workers. † WEBER, ROBERT



Allies bombed 1,570 French towns and cities, causing almost 70,000 civilian deaths. † CONSEIL RÉGIONAL DE BASSE-NORMANDIE / NATIONAL ARCHIVES USA

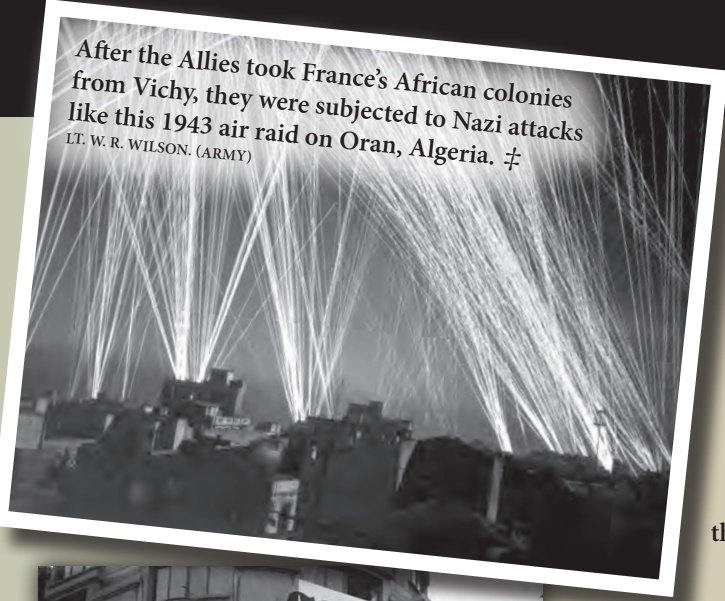


OF

# VICHY

After the Allies took France's African colonies from Vichy, they were subjected to Nazi attacks like this 1943 air raid on Oran, Algeria. ‡

Lt. W. R. WILSON. (ARMY)



Jewish-owned businesses were required to post the owner's religion on the window. ‡

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



Hateful exhibitions were held on "The Jew and France." †

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



French communists, like this unidentified man arrested by German officers, were often tried in Vichy's *sections spéciales* courts. The only sentences these courts could give were life imprisonment, hard labour, or death. †

KRIEGSBERICHTER KOLL

Britain sank France's navy in July 1940 out of fears of it getting into German hands. §

JACQUES MULARD

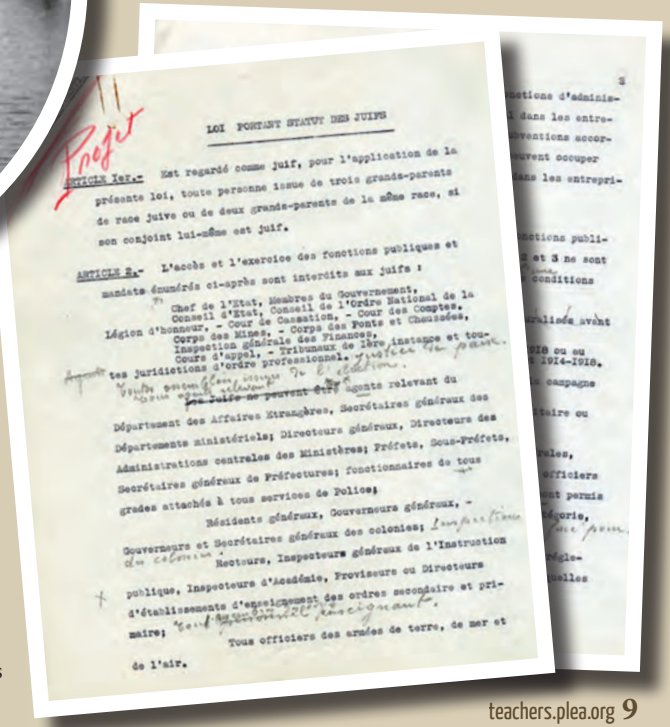


*Statut des Juifs* (Jewish Law) stripped many Jews of citizenship and property, barred them from working in professions, and banned them from some public places. 75,000 Jews in France were ultimately deported to Nazi extermination camps. §

ÉTAT FRANÇAIS

Germany confiscated much of France's production of basic goods, creating shortages. This led to rationing cards and farmers selling food on the black market. §

DANIEL D





# The Shadow of Vichy

History does not change. But our perspectives on it do.

**J**une 5<sup>th</sup>, 1944 was the beginning of the end of Vichy. That day, BBC broadcast instructions to the Resistance to begin a sabotage campaign. The next morning Allied troops landed on the beaches of Normandy in northern France. A second front opened on August 15<sup>th</sup>, when Allies—including Charles de Gaulle’s Free French army—landed on France’s Mediterranean shores.

The combined efforts of the Allies and the Resistance brought Paris and by extension all of France into the hands of de Gaulle’s Free French on August 25<sup>th</sup>. The French provisional government in Algiers officially relocated to Paris on September 9<sup>th</sup>.

To rid itself of Vichy, the provisional government passed an order that stated the French Third Republic never ceased to exist. The true and only France had always been de Gaulle’s government-in-exile, that first took refuge in London then moved to Algiers.

All Vichy laws contrary to the French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were declared void *ab initio*, meaning they were never valid. Meanwhile, a narrative was advanced that collaborators

**CALLS WERE GROWING WITHIN FRANCE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PAST WRONGS.**



Marshal Pétain with France’s future president François Mitterrand (right) in 1942. Like many, Mitterrand was a collaborator before joining the Resistance, illustrating the complicated relationship that the French had with Vichy. ‡  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

had never been more than a small minority.

For fifty years, the official line was that Vichy’s actions were abhorrent, but the Republic held no responsibility for Vichy. This position was repeated by French President François Mitterrand as late as 1994. Speaking about

the notorious 1942 Vél d’Hiv roundup, when French police rounded up 13,000 Jews and sent them to German death camps, Mitterrand said “The Republic had nothing to do with this.”<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, calls were growing within France to take responsibility for past wrongs. A watershed moment came in 1995. In a speech commemorating the Vél d’Hiv roundup, newly-elected president Jacques Chirac said:



*France, land of the Enlightenment and of Human Rights, land of hospitality and asylum, France, on that day, committed an irreparable act. It failed to keep its word and delivered those under its protection to their executioners.*

He added that “Our debt to [the victims] is inalienable.”<sup>7</sup>

The weight of these words cannot be understated. This was the first time that a French president acknowledged France’s responsibility for a Vichy crime.

As legal scholar Rémi Rouquette has pointed out, Chirac “acknowledged the continuity of the State, even when the most horrible

government is in power.”<sup>8</sup> Since then, two French presidents have been even more forceful in acknowledging that Vichy crimes were France’s crimes.

For all the importance these speeches hold, speeches are not acts of law. It took a court ruling to establish legal responsibility. In 2009, France’s highest

administrative court ruled that the French Republic was legally responsible for Vichy’s arrest and deportation of Jews. The ruling satisfied many, including Serge Klarsfeld, France’s leading Holocaust historian. He said “France is showing now that she is at the forefront of countries which are confronting their past, which was not the case even in the 1990s.”<sup>9</sup>

In France, some controversy still remains over whether or not the French Republic is responsible for the actions of Vichy. The words of three of its past four presidents, along with a ruling by the country’s highest administrative court, say

otherwise. The French Republic cannot absolve itself of its Vichy history, and the willingness of its leaders

to take responsibility for past mistakes should be admired.

Vichy set out on an authoritarian path, contrary to French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. These ideals never fully died, but it took the weight and work of many brave people—both “great” people and average people—to bring these ideals back to France. 🇫🇷

**FRANCE’S HIGHEST ADMINISTRATIVE COURT RULED THAT THE FRENCH REPUBLIC WAS LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE.**

## DISCUSS

1. What lessons from France can we take as Canadians for grappling with our country’s historical treatment of Indigenous people and other minorities?
2. What lessons could we offer to France as Canadians take steps to reconcile for our country’s past?

## PRESERVING DEMOCRACY

The events that led to Vichy’s creation are complicated. France’s sudden defeat in World War II was traumatic for the nation. Nonetheless, people also are willing to understand that Vichy was not just a Nazi puppet state, created by Nazi collaborators and foisted upon France. Vichy was France’s government, created in France, by France’s legislators with, at that time, broad public support. Public opinion in France did not turn against Vichy until late 1942.

France’s descent into Vichy should serve as a warning for us all. In a perfect storm of circumstance, our rights and freedoms could be swept away in a matter of days. The choices we make about our governments matter, and the support we either give or withhold from our governments matter. Liberal democracy and its embrace of free expression and minority rights should never be taken for granted.

# Further Resources



## 70 YEARS OF THE BOMB

Learn about the weapon that ended World War II.



## THE NAZI SATIRE PROJECT

Learn how Nazis used satire to cast fellow citizens as “others.”



## DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Learn about our powers to create laws and governments.



## ALBERT CAMUS' THE PLAGUE: THE LEARNING RESOURCE

Learn how Camus' classic novel is an allegory for the French fight against Nazis and Vichy.

**MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TO  
THE PLEA AND REQUEST FREE CLASS SETS  
AT [TEACHERS.PLEA.ORG](http://TEACHERS.PLEA.ORG)**

## SOURCES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert O. Paxton. *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. Alfred A Knopf, 1972, p. 30.
- <sup>2</sup> Vivian Grosswald Curran. “The Legalization of Racism in a Constitutional State: Democracy’s Suicide in Vichy France,” *Hastings Law Journal*, vol. 50, 1998, p. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> quoted in Tenorio, Rich. “Teenagers helped launch the WWII French Resistance; many paid with their lives.” *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert O. Paxton. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Vintage Books, 2005, p. 70.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Soucy. *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*. Yale University Press, 1995, p. 112.
- <sup>6</sup> quoted in Simons, Marlise. “Chirac Affirms France’s Guilt In Fate of Jews.” *The New York Times*, 17 July 1995, p. A1.
- <sup>7</sup> quoted in “Speech of President Jacques Chirac, on July 16, 1995, during the commemoration of the Vel d’Hiv roundup.” [www.levendel.com/En/html/chirac-s\\_speech.html](http://www.levendel.com/En/html/chirac-s_speech.html)
- <sup>8</sup> Rouquette, Rémi. “The French Administrative Court’s Rulings on Compensation Claims Brought by Jewish Survivors of World War II.” *Maryland Journal of International Law*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2010, p. 307.
- <sup>9</sup> quoted in Davies, Lizzy. “France faces its guilt for deporting Jews in war.” *Brisbane Times*, 18 February 2009.

FREE CLASS SETS  
[PLEA.ORG](http://PLEA.ORG)

PLEA   
Legal Information for Everyone

© 41.2 2021-10

ISSN 0715-4224 (Print)  
ISSN 1918-1116 (Online)