Art in the Service of Propaganda: The Poster War in France during World War II[1]

Margaret Collins Weitz
Suffolk University

Art in the service of propaganda has a long history. Since the invention of printing, billboards and walls have marked the vicissitudes of history. In France the first use of political posters dates to 1539. Posters of the French Revolution were of small format, with the image prominent. The power of the image was acknowledged in an 1835 law that, while allowing Frenchmen to circulate their opinions in published form, held that complete liberty was not possible with "drawings," for they could "incite to action" (Wilkins 425) The nineteenth century with its many technical innovations inaugurated the poster of today. During recent wars, posters have played an important political role in efforts to secure a hold over the population.

All observers agree: from 1940 to 1945 there was a campaign of competing propaganda in France without precedent. One can read part of the history of the Dark Years of the German occupation of France from the posters put up on French walls. In a study of French propaganda from 1940 to 1944 Dominique Rossignol maintains that "war with images extends war with arms" (Rossignol 63). Posters conveyed visual messages at a time when television did not exist and newsreels were censored (as was the press). Their importance was such that those who took down posters risked heavy sanctions; tearing or defacing posters of the occupation authority were considered acts of sabotage (as, ironically, *posters* proclaimed).

From the nineteenth century on, Paris walls were covered with commercial publicity, but now these promotions largely gave way to duly approved propaganda posters. In addition to exercising censorship, the Germans allocated paper, ink, printers and workshops, and distribution. The exceptional number of propaganda posters produced (for example, over three million to mark Labor Day, May 1, 1941) during a period of acute shortages – especially paper – testifies to the importance accorded them.

In this massive poster propaganda campaign during the Occupation, religious themes were exploited. For example, both the Germans and the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain linked anti-British (and later anti-

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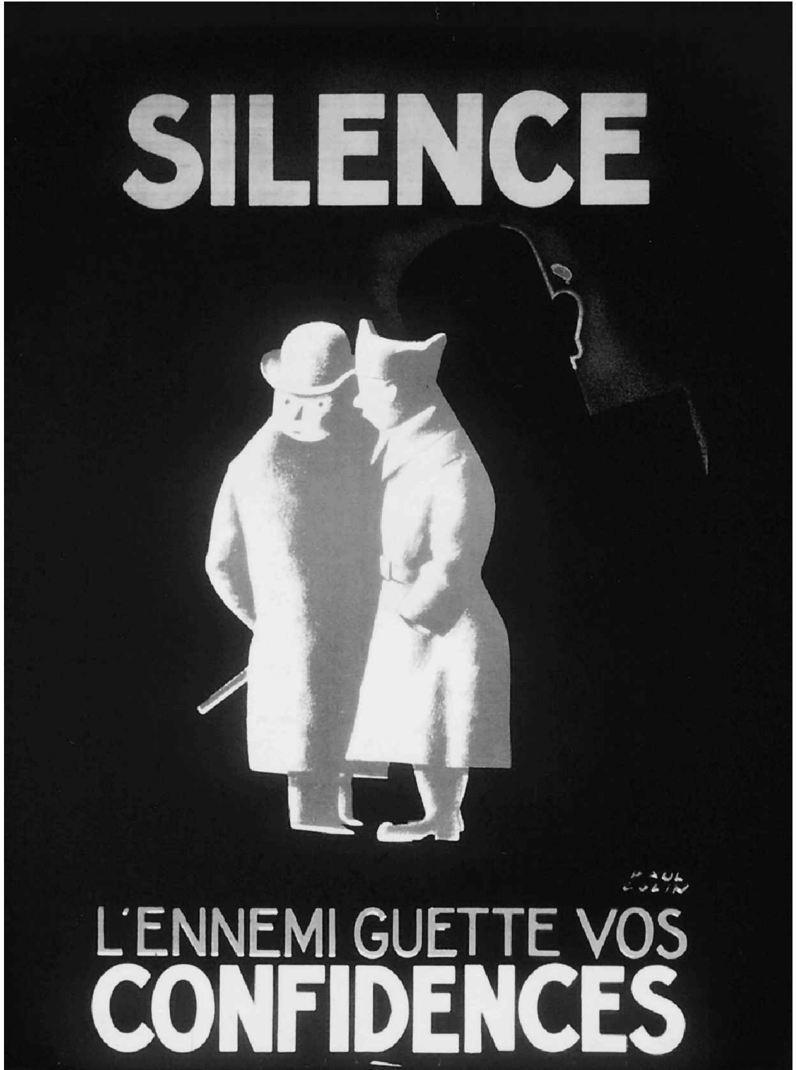
American) themes to Joan of Arc; scenes of churches destroyed in the deadly Allied bombings were frequently depicted. Graphic anti-Semitic art linked Jews (depicted as international capitalists or terrorists) to both the Allies and the Communists. Vichy privileged Pétain's image as the Savior of France, restoring the country's virtues and leading a crusade to save it from anti-Christian elements: Freemasons, Communists and Jews.

Religious themes in posters put up in France during the Second World War need to be set in the larger context of the poster war between different groups seeking to gain the population's loyalty. Before defeat, Third Republic posters urged the French to support their forces and subscribe to victory loans; later, with the Liberation, the provisional government sought help in the reconstruction of their country. With the armistice and occupation, the occupying forces put up their propaganda posters, as did the Vichy regime and more politically extremist groups. The French Resistance, the provisional government of Charles de Gaulle, and even the Allies participated to some extent in the poster campaign.

We know little about the genesis of a poster – the specific instructions given to the artist, the effect sought or the restrictions imposed (Gervereau 13). Frequently the artist is unknown. Like all the French of this period, poster artists made a choice. While some went to the United States, others either worked little, or not at all. Apparently there was scant pressure on them to work if they chose not to. There were also those like Michel Jacquot who designed inflammatory posters for both Vichy and the Germans. Before their departure the German authorities destroyed most documentation, including that pertaining to the Vichy government that it had come to control. Consequently there are few documents detailing the production of posters in France during World War II.

Throughout these years there were many official announcements: notices, decrees, appeals or warnings posted in public places with text only. In the period known as the "Phoney War," prior to the armistice of July 1940, the French War Ministry undertook a massive Passive Defense campaign that featured over 50 posters. After the defeat and the installation of Marshal Pétain's government (France was the only country to set up a new government under German occupation), the text of Pétain's frequent radio addresses were among the many posters the Vichy regime issued. The German occupation forces put up bilingual notices, with hours for curfew, closing of public places, the métro and other institutions, as well as notices of the penalties for offenses against the Germans. Lists of executions soon followed.

Taken together, these poster texts provide graphic examples of the



1. Paul Colin: *Silence. The enemy is listening for your secrets*, 1940. Poster.

oppressive, menacing climate that soon developed. Writer Jean Galtier-Boissière notes in his diary on August 24, 1940: "The walls of Paris are covered with official announcements: the notice of Admiral Bard, Prefect of Police, offering a million (francs) to those who denounce saboteurs; the

2. L. Daniel: *We will conquer because we are strongest*, 1940. Poster.

red poster announcing the shooting of two patriots, by way of example; the poster stating that all French prisoners will serve as hostages and be shot if there are new incidents" (Galtier-Boissière 55-56). Journalist Jacques Biélinky's diary is filled with descriptions of Paris streets – until it became too dangerous for a Jew to stroll about. He observed the transformation of the city, with growing anti-Semitism evidenced in German and Vichy posters; what might be termed a "publicity" of exclusion. He notes the first of many announcements excluding Jews from food stores except during the late afternoon when most stocks had disappeared, from all public places such as restaurants, cafés, cinemas, parks, etc.

Posters with images issued by the Third Republic during the first year of the war included Paul Colin's "Silence" (fig. 1), the French equivalent of the famed series of British posters by Fougasse, "Careless Talk Costs Lives." There were also posters trying to reassure the populace that: "We *will* conquer because we are the strongest" (fig. 2). More emphasis and urgency should have been placed on the true nature of their opponent.

As soon as the Germans occupied the northern two-thirds of the country, including Paris, in late spring 1940 they embarked upon a vast propaganda effort to gain the population's allegiance. Initial propaganda attacks focussed on the British and their Gaullist allies, as they sought to create or

3. Theo Matijeko: *Abandoned peoples, place your confidence in the German soldier*, 1940. Poster.

intensify French anglophobia and reassure the population of their benevolent protection. "Populations Abandonnées" (fig. 3) was conceived in 1940

4. *Roosevelt assassin*, 1942. Poster.

by Theo Matijeko, a German illustrator who worked for the *Berliner Illustrierte*. When the Allies invaded North Africa in November 1942, the hatred of German authorities was unleashed against the Americans, the

new aggressors; Roosevelt is the assassin (fig. 4). Roosevelt and Churchill are often shown dividing up France's colonial empire. This aggression was financed by the Jews, it was alleged. De Gaulle is depicted, literally, as merely their mouthpiece. Jews are "behind everything," manipulating world leaders like puppets; controlling the press, the movie industry, etc. (fig. 5). The famous "Red Poster," "Des Libérateurs?" (fig. 6) asking if these are really liberators, was produced by the Germans to accompany the January 1944 trial of a group of foreign, largely Jewish opponents of the Reich, the M.O.I. (*Main d oeuvre immigré*). The photos were chosen to incite xenophobia and anti-Semitism: red dominates, the color of the Red Army, of blood. In Nazi logic, every foreigner was Jewish.

"Finis les Mauvais Jours" (fig. 7) urges French workers to volunteer to work in German factories so that the "bad days will end." The artist, Mjolnir (pseudonym of Hans Schweitzer) was one of the most celebrated Nazi designers, known in particular for his violent anti-Semitic posters. As a top civil servant in the Propaganda Ministry, he helped organize the 1937 German exhibition on "degenerate" art. Because it is unsigned, this poster offers an example of the *ambiguity* found in posters of the period. There was a gradual overlapping of propaganda services working against common enemies, with the Germans assuming increasing control over Vichy projects.

Ambiguity is particularly true in the case of anti-Semitic posters. Some posters sponsored by Vichy's Institute for the Study of Jewish Questions (Institut d'Étude des Questions Juives) were the work of German artists, presumably produced under German direction. In this graphic poster, "Français! Au Secours!" (fig. 8), the cry is for the French to rescue their country, portrayed as a female victim ravished by a Jewish bird of prey. It was designed by Michel Jacquot, who joined a collaborationist group and, thanks to a lucrative contract, agreed to go to work in Germany. Jacquot also helped design the posters for the very successful 1941 exhibition on "The Jew and France" held in Paris and other major cities (fig. 9).[2] The general ideological theme of German propaganda was that of the superman battling the Jew and his allies in the defense of Christianity. While the Germans did not use Christian iconography as extensively as did Vichy, already in 1940 they produced a poster of Joan of Arc being burned at the stake behind a French soldier carrying a cross, like Christ (fig. 10). Anti-Semitism was the dominant theme in German propaganda in France.[3]

Marshal Pétain's government made an exceptional effort to influence French opinion using posters with illustrations that occupied almost the entire surface; texts tended to be serious and short. The purpose of the image was to simplify the viewer's reasoning, following Goebbels's theories

5. *Jews behind everything.* Poster.

on propaganda. Vichy favored posters and radio broadcasts to communicate with the public. A recent study of "images of a certain France," divides French posters of the time into three general categories: official announcements signed by the responsible authorities; appeals to civic virtue such as

6. *Liberators? Liberation by an army of criminals,* 1944. Poster.

Pétain exhorting the French to honor family unity, return to the land, and partake of the "joys" of work in Germany. Finally, openly political posters supported the Marshal, his policies and projects (Marchetti 5).

7. Mjolnir (Hans Schweitzer): *Bad days are over, Papa is making money in Germany!* Poster.

8. Michel Jacquot: *Frenchmen! Help!* Poster.

Although the policies, personnel and resources of the French state varied, certain propaganda themes remained constant. The cult of Pétain held an exceptional place. The Marshal saw propaganda as a means of establishing his power and his image; icon and cement of the nation, according to historian Françoise Bertrand Dorléac (Dorléac 110-111). Pétain was the incarnation of Eternal France. One could say his portrait became a publicity logo; it was used on a wide range of objects, from china to cigarette lighters.[4] The French were urged to purchase the Marshal's many official portraits (required in public buildings; prominent elsewhere). Pétain was also the father figure of the country. In particular, the Marshal was both Messiah and expiatory victim – like Christ – who had given himself to the nation in order to save it. His entourage frequently described the large crowds who attended his appearances as assisting at "a Mass of the faithful."[5]

Pétain's domestic policy was very conservative, accompanied by a strong sense of moral order. An example of the emphasis on self-sacrifice was Vichy's replacing the motto of the Republic – *LibertØ galitØ FraternitØ* – with *Travail*, *Famille*, *Patrie*; long-held bourgeois values. Mother's Day, Worker's Day, and the Feast of Joan of Arc were three major Vichy celebrations held during the month of May. Using posters alone one could

9. *The Jew and France*, 1941. Poster.

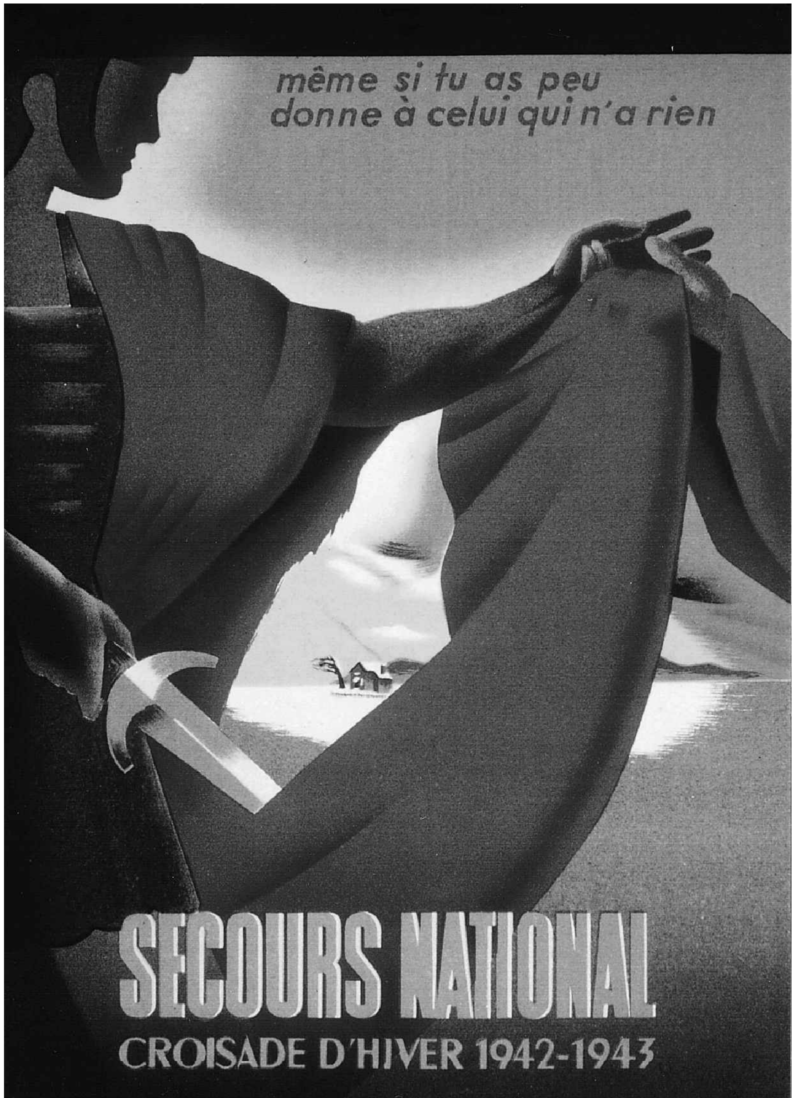
10. *Our Way of the Cross (Thanks to the British)*, 1940. Poster.

present Vichy's views on women and their place in French society; ideally, the home. Social order, it held, was dependent upon a stable and prolific family. Gender was central to Vichy policy that emphasized the "eternal feminine." In Vichy iconography, women are primarily housewives and

11. *Union of Prisoners Wives.* Poster.

mothers. This poster, "Union des Femmes de Prisonniers" (fig. 11), promoting the over 800,000 strong Union of Prisoners' Wives shows these women literally in the shadow of their husbands, even though they ran

12. Phili: *Mother s Day*, Sunday, May 30, 1943. Poster.



13. Raoul Eric Castel: *Secours National: Winter Crusade, 1942-43. Even if you have little, give to those who have nothing.* Poster.

households alone, under extremely difficult conditions, for five years and more. Posters promoting the natality program of the regime depicted

adorable babies, the *true* source of happiness. Pétain (who had no children and, although a womanizer, did not marry until age 62), held women partially responsible for France's defeat. There had been "too few babies, too few arms, too few Allies," he claimed in a radio broadcast on June 20, 1940. Through selfishness French women had not produced enough children.

Vichy propaganda sometimes used artwork similar to that of children's books in addressing young people (and no doubt their parents), with images in the style of the popular nineteenth-century Épinal prints, such as those for the 1943 "Journée des Mères" (Mother's Day) poster (fig. 12). All family groups feature at least three children. It has been suggested that use of French traditions and indigenous French style endeavored to address the ideological void of the Vichy government's National Revolution program.

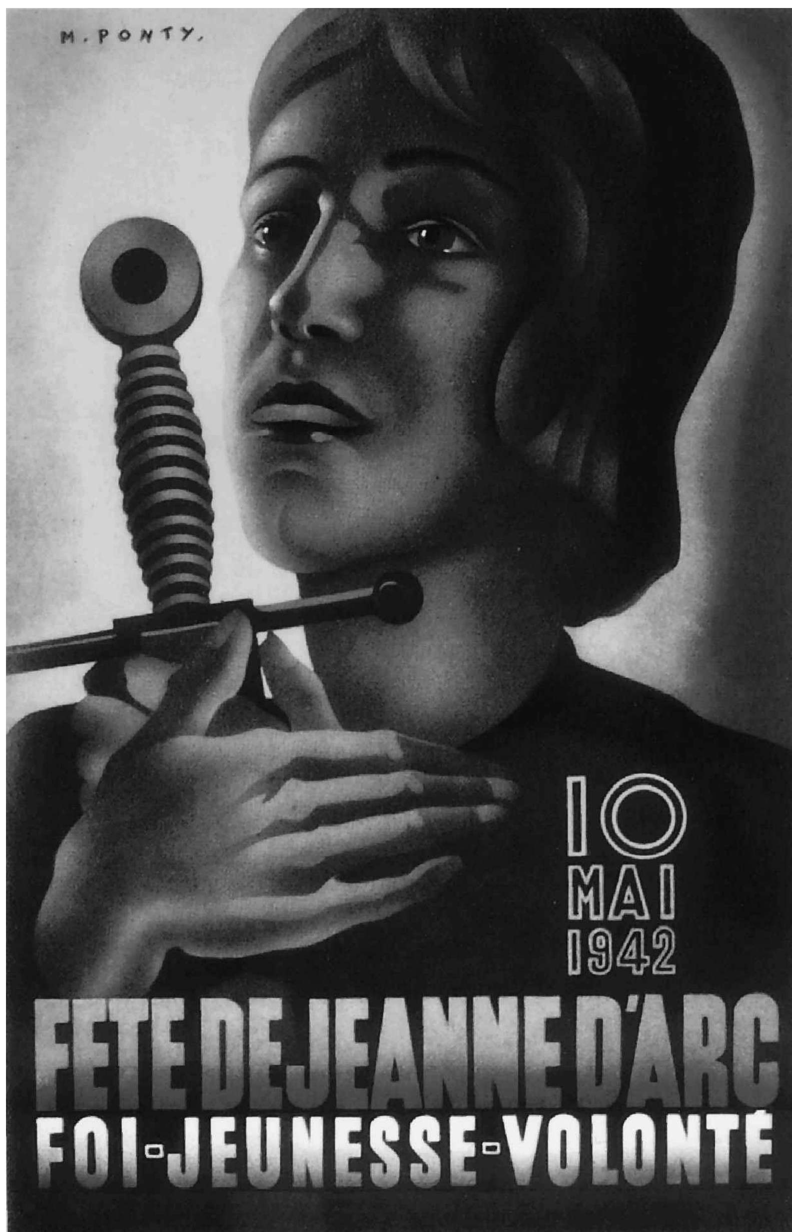
Vichy made frequent appeals to the public to help families in need. The 1943 winter campaign for Secours National, the national social services, featured a series of posters by Raoul Eric Castel, the artist with the largest known number of Vichy commissions. The visual reference is to Saint Martin, sharing his cloak with the less favored (fig. 13). Here, as in other examples, the appeal is to France's heroic Christian past, not that of the Revolution or the hated Third Republic.

The Marshal also sought to be perceived as the friend of workers; principally artisans and peasants. Pétain, son and grandson of peasants, proclaimed *la terre* does not lie. The sacredness of French soil was a theme exploited by both French camps: Vichy and the Gaullists in London. In Vichy's National Revolution folklore, the earth was security, the plough, freedom. Given the grave food shortages that steadily increased under German exactions, return to the land was an absolute necessity. The occupying Germans, on the other hand, never saw the mythical qualities of the land as a wartime theme.

When the German campaign to end the "bad days" by having French workers go to Germany and help the Reich's war effort proved unsuccessful, a Relief scheme was devised by Pierre Laval, Pétain's prime minister. The *Rel ve* supposedly brought back a POW for every three skilled French workers who left for Germany. This gave them "the keys to the camps" (fig. 14). Today the reference is ironic. (During the "dark years" of occupation, references to *camps* meant POW camps and *deportation* was used for the transport of those sent to Germany under the compulsory labor laws, the STO).

Joan of Arc, symbol of the wounded nation and its revenge, was invoked by all sides (as today, by the extreme right of Jean Le Pen). Vichy glorified Saint Joan, defender of the faith and the virtues it represented:

14. *You have the the Key to the Camps. French workers you can free the prisoners by going to work in Germany.* Poster.



15. *Feast of Joan of Arc May 10, 1942: Faith-Youth-Determination*. Poster.

16. *I would rather render my soul to God, than to be in the hands of the English. Joan of Arc.* Poster.

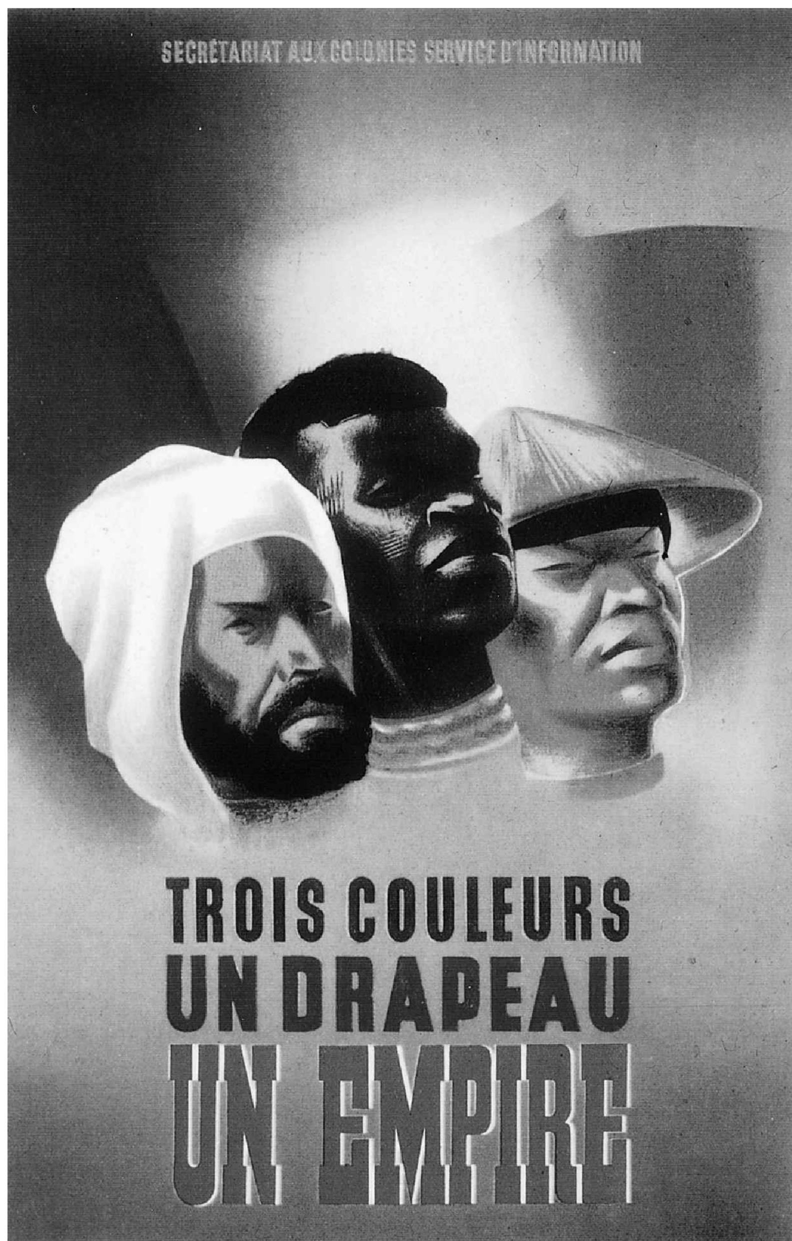
those of a regenerated France (fig. 15). The object of an exceptional cult, she came to symbolize eternal French resistance to the British. To mark her feast day in 1943, Vichy doubled the budget from the previous year and printed many posters. Invocations of Joan were also appeals to France's glorious history, the sacred Middle Ages, and to Pétain, who identified himself frequently with her, as well as with other famed figures of the past. References to Saint Joan emphasize that France is a Christian country. This black and white poster deliberately evokes the pious images of prayer books (fig. 16).

Other Vichy posters vaunt the Empire, the last vestige of power for a conquered France. The 1941 poster, "Three Colors" (fig. 17), offers a paradoxical image given France's treatment of indigenous troops and natives in its colonies. Here, as in its treatment of Jews, the country under Vichy betrayed its commitment to the Rights of Man.

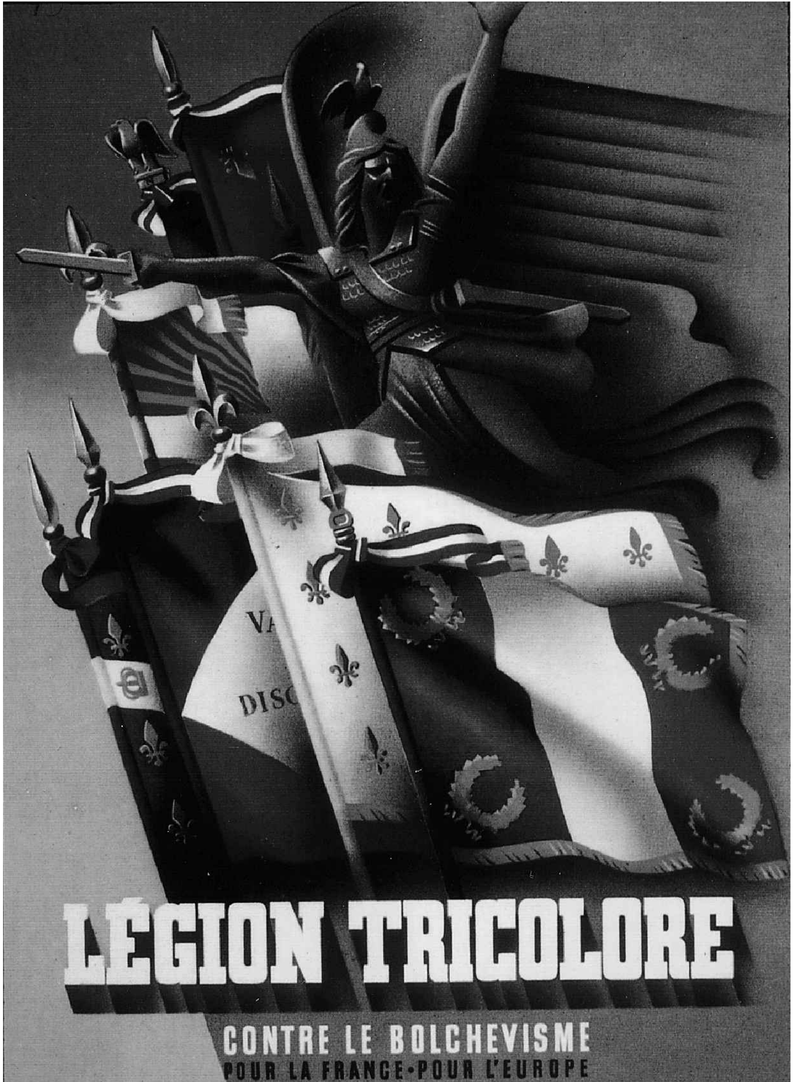
Jews, Communists, and Freemasons (Freemasonry was held to be of Jewish origin), along with political refugees and resisters were victims of Vichy's policies of exclusion and persecution. Vichy's longest campaign during the Occupation was devoted to the "Crusade against Bolshevism," indicative of both its importance, and the quasi-religious nature of the struggle; atheistic Bolshevism against Christian France. The accompanying propaganda made many visual references to Christian chivalry. "French Volunteers against Bolshevism" incorporated diverse groups in this new crusade. Propaganda also focused on the legend of Napoleon, here with reference to Rude's relief sculpture from the Arc de Triomphe (fig. 18). Another poster vaunts their heroic exploits during three long winters (fig. 19). Communist, as noted, implies Jew; the terms Communism and Bolshevism were confused. The Militia, Vichy's political police and counterinsurgency unit, also sought recruits. Their oath explicitly charged them with tracking down resisters and Jews and "placing themselves without reserve alongside the German Reich." Here young Frenchmen wishing to join their European "comrades" in this crusade are encouraged to enlist in the Charlemagne division of the Waffen S.S. (fig. 20).

The anti-Bolshevist campaign got underway after the German invasion of the USSR in summer 1941. "Ils assassinent!" (fig. 21), a fall 1941 poster by Eric Castel (the designer with the largest number of Vichy commissions) introduces a theme repeated incessantly in the following four years. The Communists were assassins, terrorists, bandits, who would take over French land and holdings, rape women and murder children. They carried out atrocities under cover of the French flag.

Collaborationist groups put up quickly printed and inexpensive texts

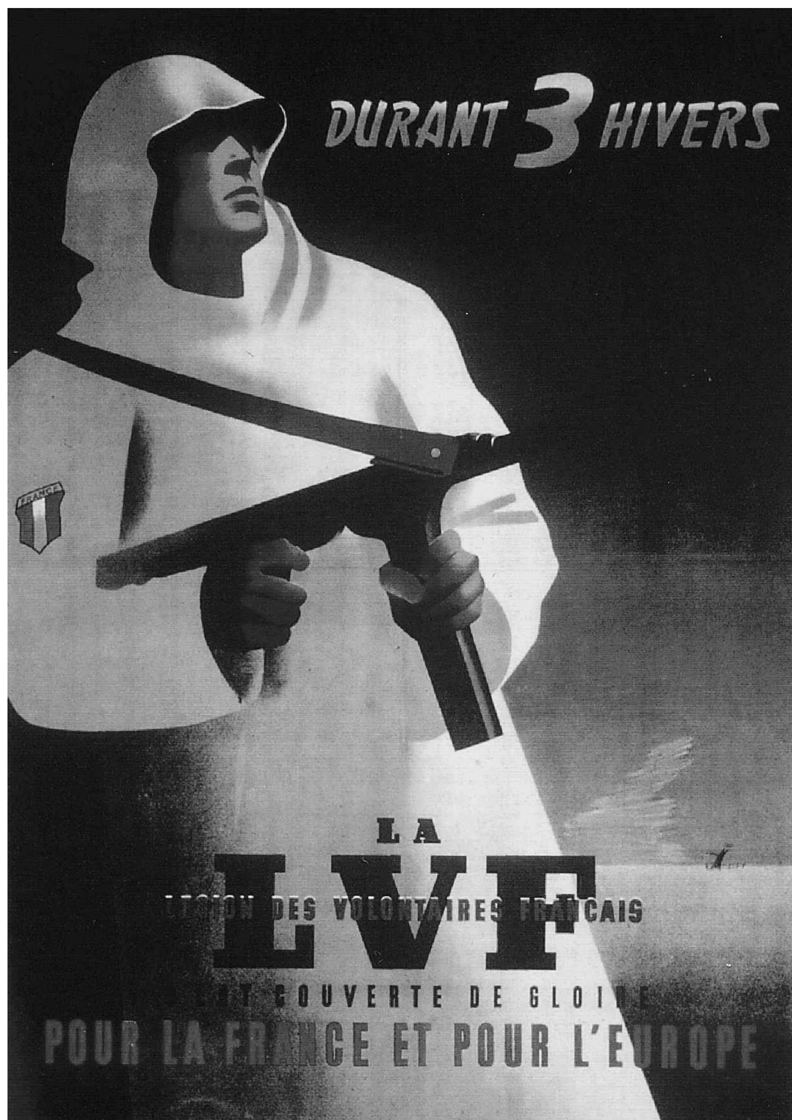


17. *Three Colors - One Flag - One Empire, 1941*. Poster.



18. *Crusade against Bolshevism*. Poster.

announcing meetings and demonstrations, recruiting appeals and related concerns. They produced fewer, more costly lithographs. Collaborationist posters feature confused political imagery, as British scholar Michael Moody has observed. Traditional emblems of Republican France and those



19. *For three long winters the Legion of French Volunteers has covered itself with glory for France and for Europe.* Poster.

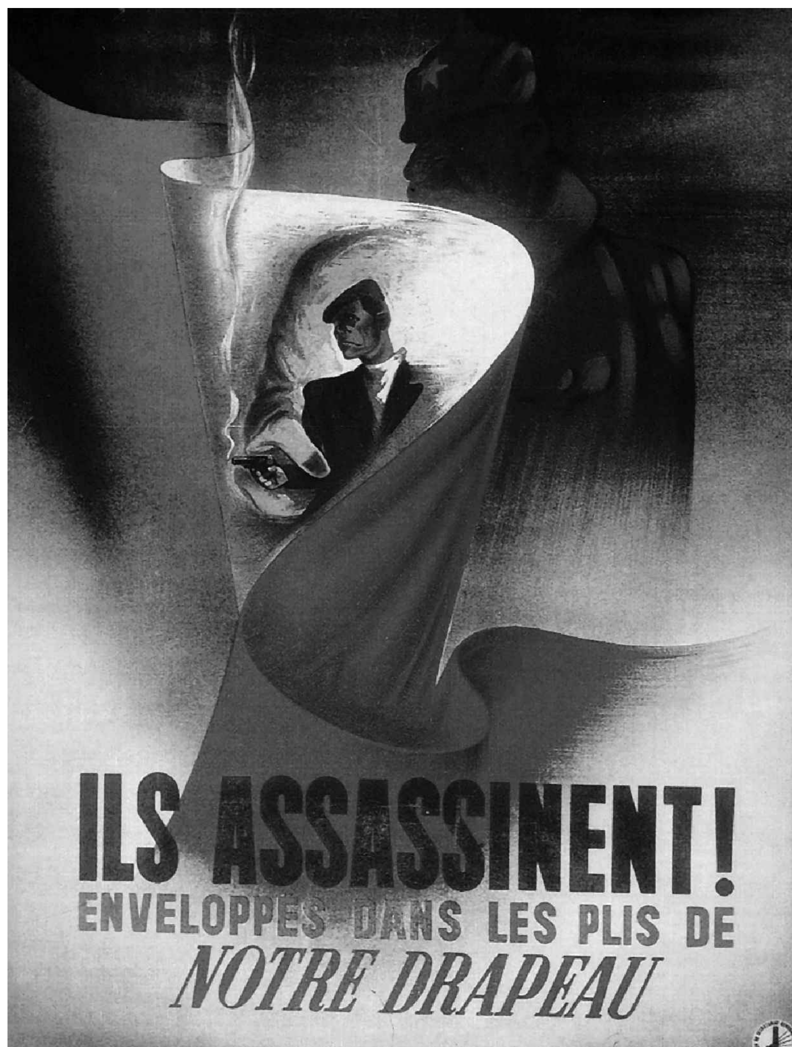
recalling Napoleonic grandeurs were juxtaposed with an authoritarian and often fascist iconography. Portraits of Marshal Pétain were shown against

20. *With your European Comrades under the sign of the S.S. you will conquer.* S.S. Recruiting Poster.

the French Tricolor, symbol of the nation's Revolutionary legacy. Today their political messages voice now discredited ideologies, while their visual content reflects the confusion of the period (Moody 59).

"Laissez-Nous Tranquilles!" ("Let Us Be," fig. 22) was the product of the Ligue Française, a Parisian collaborationist movement. There was a large printing for this poster which brings together several major themes. A couple plant the sacred soil of France in 1941, while defending themselves from the wild beasts of Freemasonry, the Jew, de Gaulle and the three-headed viper, Lies. The stress on the sacred soil of France – as noted, a frequent theme – had ominous undertones for those Vichy had retroactively deprived of citizenship; principally non-French-born Jews. By implication the sacred soil excluded exterior elements like Jews, viewed as perennial outsiders and opportunists, incapable of integrating into the national community of "true France."

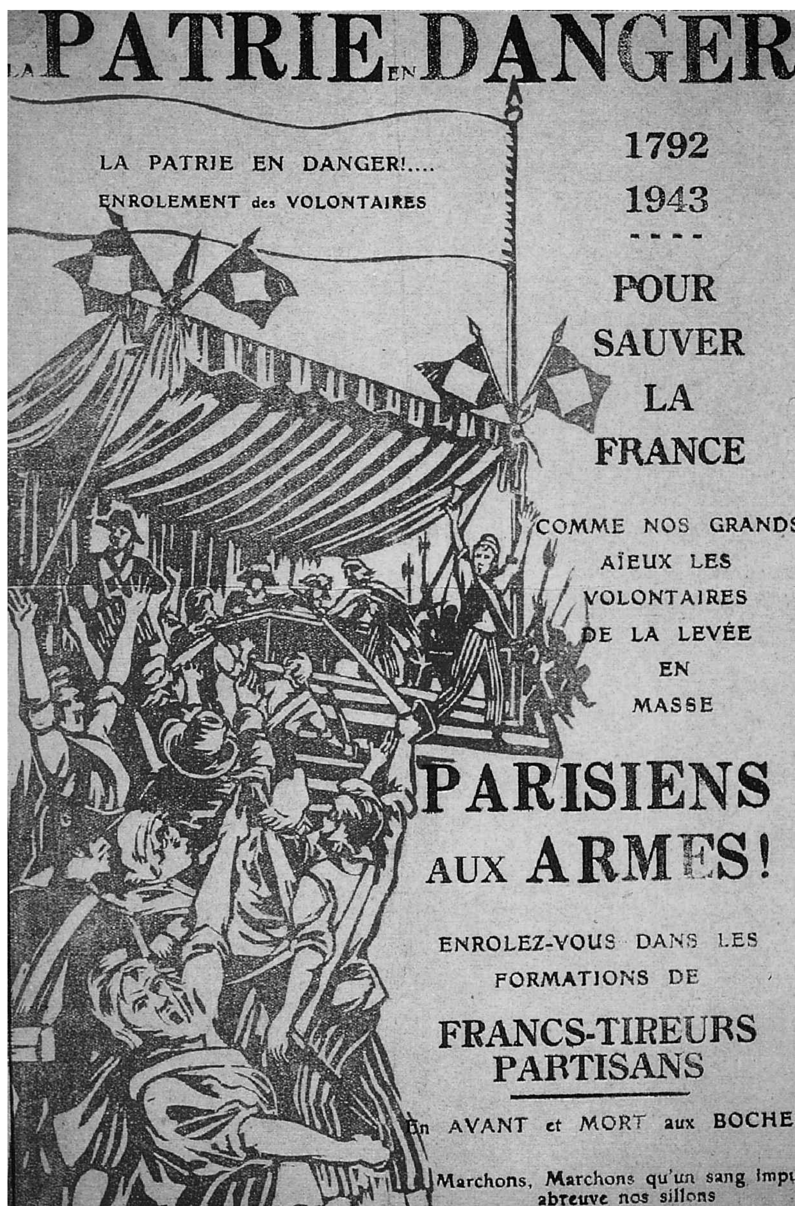
The French Resistance developed from extremely modest beginnings; it needed to prove its existence and legitimacy. But, in the face of the graphic arsenal of collective persuasion of its adversaries – both German and Vichy – it was difficult to respond. The risks were too great. From 1942 on, the Resistance increased its efforts to thwart enemy propaganda efforts. Until the Allied landings, however, there were few resistance posters.



21. Raoul Eric Castel: *They Assassinate, hidden in the folds of our flag!* 1941. Poster.

Efforts were limited to tearing down the enemy's posters, ridiculing their messages with concise comments, or changing them to convey the opposite meaning – grave infractions as these were. During the night of September 19-20, 1943, several hundred posters warning "La Patrie en

22. *Let us be!* 1941. Poster.

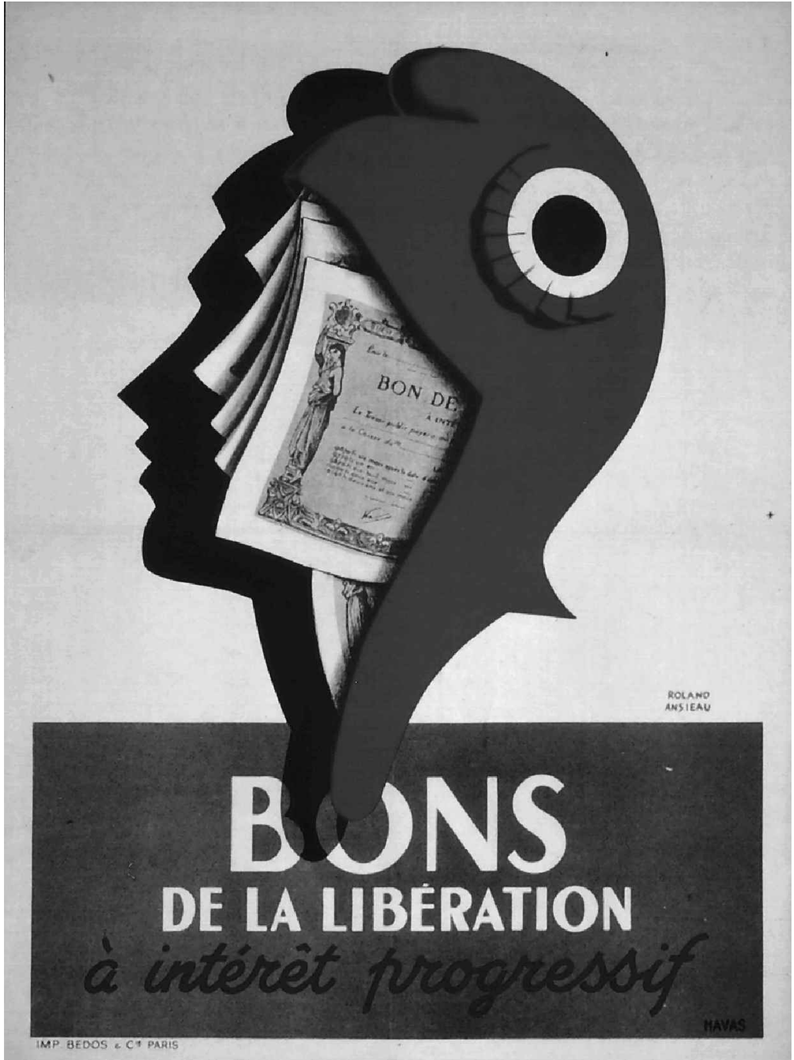


23. *The Country is in Danger,* 1943. Put out by the Communist dominated Franc-Tireurs et Partisans. Poster.

24. *Natacha Carlu: Liberty, Precious Liberty*. Poster.

Danger" ("The Country is in Danger"; fig. 23), produced by the resistance group Francs-Tireurs et Partisans, appeared on Paris walls. The date marked the French victory over the Prussians at Valmy in 1792. In general, the Resistance was limited to distributing mimeographed tracts with text and few illustrations.

French posters were created outside of the country, but they were not seen in Paris until after the liberation of the capital in August 1944. Some were designed and printed in the United States by the Free French Press and Information Service in New York. They were destined for the American public, as well as those places in Europe where it was possible to post them. Marianne, symbol of the French Republic, now replaced Saint Joan whom the discredited Vichy regime had portrayed so frequently. (Rossignol holds that Vichy did not use the image of Marianne because it was Pétain who had come to symbolize France). "Liberté, liberté chérie" (fig. 24) features the head of Marianne in front of that of the Statue of Liberty. The artist, Natacha Carlu, was one of few women poster designers of this time. "Bons de Libération" outlines Marianne's profile in freedom bonds



25. *Freedom bonds.* Poster.

(fig. 25). Jean Colin's 1943 depiction of Marianne bearing the stigmata carries no message. The powerful image suffices.

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It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the poster war. No retrospective survey was undertaken, as there was for the impact of radio propaganda, and that, 30 years later. The potential errors in *a posteriori* assessments are well known. Yet virtually all the diaries and memoirs from this period that I have read describe posters in detail and often the writer's reactions. Certain posters are frequently mentioned with derision, such as the German ones appealing to the "Abandoned Populations." In an unpublished manuscript a British woman who remained in Paris throughout the Occupation (with considerable difficulty) observes: "the War of Notices went on, from the walls of Paris. The Germans began . . . to put up anti-British posters and the fun became furious and fast. Almost as soon as they went up, the Parisians tore them down." She adds that in some spots sentinels were posted to guard them (Isambard-Owen 115). The diary of writer Jean Guéhenno, *Journal des annØs noires*, cites many of the notices that regulated lives. Although we can never fully assess the collective response to these extraordinary efforts to influence a population that was largely passive in the early period, the overwhelming use of propaganda posters during the German occupation merits attention. The French population could hardly disregard them. Consider the possible impact on a young person of the several-story high caricature of a Jew. Their public space was invaded, literally, during the poster war. In this battle for the minds and hearts of the French, religious themes were used extensively by the Vichy regime. The repeated use of Christian iconography contrasted with the negative presentation of non-Christians, especially Jewish figures.

NOTES

1 The posters reproduced come from the archives of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, with the exception of nos. 9 and 23, Ministère des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de la Guerre; and no. 20, from a private collection.

2 The *Illustration* of May 20, 1941, notes that close to 20,000 viewed the Paris show in the first five days. The explanation the paper offered was that the "Jewish question has assumed a current importance for the French people that it never had before" (cited by Rossignol 225).

3 The first poster depiction of the Jew (with the stereotypical prominent nose, money bag in hand, and top hat and suit of the capitalist banker) appears as early as 1940 (Marchetti 60).

4 According to Rossignol (87) because Pétain held the rights, he realized extraordinary financial gains from the operation. Even renowned firms such as Christolfe and Baccarat produced *l art marØhal*; deluxe items for Pétain to offer as gifts. Art historian Michelle Cone comments on the irony of the many plates offered during a period when food was in such short supply (Cone 76).

5 After the war Pétain was tried and sentenced to death. De Gaulle commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. At his death in 1951, an organization was founded to defend the memory of "Saint Pétain."

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