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Charles Williams, *Pétain: How the Hero of France became a Convicted Traitor and Changed the Course of History*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xi + 298 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-4039-7011-4.

Review by Gearóid Barry, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Charles Williams sets out to show how Philippe Pétain wound up on the “wrong side of history” (p. 1). This is a work of classic biography, taking a narrative rather than a thematic approach. This review will look firstly at the technical aspects of Williams’ study—scope, sources and place in the historical literature—before assessing his treatment of what I consider to be the half-dozen issues of crucial importance in any biography of Pétain. These are: Pétain’s military thinking and leadership in the First World War; his interwar politics; his role in the political and military crisis of 1940; his role as Head of French State at Vichy; and, finally, Pétain the private man. Williams uses some original sources such as British diplomatic material but there is little earth-shattering here in terms of primary sources. He also cites the recollections of the British military liaison officer, E. L. Spears. These come in fact from published primary sources which he deploys well. At times, though, the range of primary sources is a bit narrow. Williams acknowledges his debt to previous biographers such as Griffiths and Atkins, implying that his book will complement rather than compete with the existing scholarly literature.[1]

While this book lacks some of the insights present in the classic French study by Marc Ferro (or indeed in Guy Pedroncini’s account), Williams is still to be heartily congratulated for writing a good piece of popular history, a genre some professionals are too quick to deride.[2] Arguably, Atkins brought off the balance between the narrative and the thematic better, for instance in the manner he integrated assessments of the Catholic Church’s and the peasantry’s attitude to Pétainism into his biography.[3] Nevertheless, I judge this to be a competent and judicious biography that is generally accessible. In conjunction with others, this book will make a good teaching text for undergraduate students familiarising themselves with two key moments of national crisis for France, Verdun and Vichy. Whereas Williams generally negotiates the labyrinthine politics of the Vichy court well, his earlier excursions into pre-1918 military tactical debates and battles would certainly be much more accessible if illustrated with a table and, of course, maps.

A lecturer at the *Ecole de Guerre* between 1908 and 1911, Pétain was part of the consensus of the time that “only the offensive could lead to victory” (p. 38). A colonel in 1913, Pétain felt, with retirement looming, that he had risen as far as he could. The interruption of the war utterly altered his career and his place in French history. In the early months of the war, Pétain proved to be a competent but not brilliant commander, lucky enough to survive Joffre’s purge of apparently failing commanders in the autumn of 1914. In view of this, his rate of promotion was astonishing. Within a year, the brigade commander had come to command the whole Second Army. 1915—the bloodiest year of the war for France—made Pétain come to terms with the “war of attrition”, writing that “there is no longer a decisive battle,” but rather that victory would go to the side with the last man standing (p. 60). In February 1916, the German offensive at Verdun plunged the French army into a grave crisis. Williams gives a good narrative account of how Pétain was given charge of the defence of Verdun. His assumption of command on 25 February was marred by a bout of double pneumonia, obliging him to run the battle from his sickbed for the next five days. Yet his performance under pressure was impressive. “The tactical appraisal of the situation shows Pétain at his analytical best” (p. 68). His solution of the problem of reinforcements and supplies by means of a ‘millwheel’ or constant system of

replacement was also impressive, involving nearly half the entire French Army (p. 69-70). France was allowed to draw its breath, even if the situation remained critical. The obscure general was no more; a media personality was born. However, Williams is a little sceptical about the title “Victor of Verdun,” not least because Pétain spent only two months of the battle’s ten in direct command. Opposed to the disastrous Nivelle offensive of April 1917, Pétain replaced the same General Robert Nivelle as Commander-in-chief of the armies of the north and north-east shortly after. Pétain reacted to the subsequent wave of indiscipline in the French army—the “mutinies”—with a mixture of coercion and conciliation, using both military justice and improvements in men’s conditions, such as leave. His exhaustive visits to the troops repeated the message that *poilus’* lives would not be wantonly wasted and that “they had one general on their side” (p. 86). The armistice of November 1918 ended his cherished plan for a French offensive in Lorraine and he later claimed to have begged Foch, Supreme Allied Commander since March, to allow it (p. 106). Williams’ overall assessment of Pétain’s war is that he was “the most accomplished defensive tactician of any army,” who gave the support needed for more inspiring and enthusiastic men to actually win the war (p. 107).

Pétain’s last active military command, in Morocco in 1925-6, pitted the French and the Spanish against the rebel Rifs. Williams highlights the respect that Pétain developed for Primo de Rivera and his authoritarian, military government of Spain, “a political system that answered to his instinctive—if as yet incoherent—political views” (p. 121). Marxism he detested. In the crisis following the right-wing riots in Paris on 6 February 1934, Pétain became Minister of War in a short-lived government of national unity. Not for the last time, Pétain was sent for in a crisis and had his ego inflated (p. 132). He was only an average minister, however. Out of office, his reputation as a sage meant he was championed by the right, and even fleetingly on the left (by Pierre Cot, former Air Minister), as a potential national saviour (pp. 136-37).

The question of where Pétain stood in relation to the right-wing leagues of the 1930s is carefully examined by Williams. Though he shared some of their ideas, he generally kept a canny distance between himself and their bully-boy tactics. Williams dismisses the claims at his trial in 1945 that he was a hardcore anti-Republican conspirator; he was no more and no less than an “interested bystander” (p. 140). Even if he greatly disliked the new Popular Front government of 1936, his military training of service to the legitimate government meant he would not countenance a coup d’état (p. 139). He was an awkward presence for Léon Blum, who felt obliged to censor his jeremiad about “social disequilibrium” at the twentieth-anniversary ceremonies at Verdun (p. 139). He supported the Munich accords, as did many others, as they staved off national defeat.

What of his role in 1940 when he was summoned back to cabinet? Premier Paul Reynaud’s subsequent self-portrayal as a victim of Pétain’s defeatist guile gets short shrift from Williams who asserts Reynaud was well aware of Pétain’s lack of enthusiasm for the war (p. 154). Williams’ account of the sorry month of June 1940 shows Pétain as a brooding, pessimistic presence who made a series of crucial interventions that convinced his colleagues that the battle was lost (p. 163). Williams’ account of this confusing month is fine, but not as stimulating as Ferro’s which manages to see a bigger picture. The assumptions lying behind Pétain’s defeatism included, according to Ferro, the “lessons” of 1918. Germany, having sought an early armistice, had managed to rebuild her strength and thereby win the peace. [4]

Pétain lent his moral authority to Pierre Laval and the new constitutional arrangements of Vichy. The anti-liberal academic Raphaël Alibert was a key ideological influence at this juncture (p. 171). Williams shows well the continual drift away from republican legality with oaths of personal loyalty extracted from senior civil servants and ultimately from the army, “a personal Rubicon” for Pétain (p. 191). The “surrogate monarch” headed an administration at Vichy intent on national renovation and obsessed with state sovereignty in the face of the Germans. Over time, though, this was exposed as increasingly chimerical. Williams rejects the idea that Pétain was playing a clever double-game in 1940. Contacts

with Churchill were ultimately peripheral to the main event--the handshake at Montoire in October 1940 (p. 180). The subsequent dismissal of Premier Laval in December 1940 was part of Pétain's attempt at damage control, even if Pétain and Admiral Darlan merely wanted to wring more out of the policy of co-operation than Laval seemed to be able to achieve (p. 185).

Williams acknowledges Pétain's genuine concern for 1.5 million French POWs even if he achieved little in practice for them (p. 189). His compassion extended only a very little to Jews. For him, there were Jews you knew and those you didn't, especially foreign ones. The prior, especially those who had distinguished themselves in the Great War, merited protection. The rest were dispensable (p. 174). Williams argues that Pétain deserves very little moral credit for gibing at Laval's maximum co-operation with the round-up of foreign Jews in August 1942. Rather, Pétain feared his image as father of the nation would be tarnished (p. 208). All in all, though, I agree with other reviewers of this book that the Jewish question merited more space. At times, Pétain seemed to want integration into the new (German) Europe, even proposing military collaboration after the Allied raid on Dieppe in August 1942. Yet Williams then cites the American chargé d'affaires' report that Pétain was secretly pleased with the US invasion of North Africa in November 1942 (p. 212). Clearly, unlike Laval, back as premier from April 1942, Pétain would not countenance formally declaring war on the Allies. Did a private message sent to the born-again rebel Admiral Darlan in Algiers encourage the latter to ignore official instructions to resist the Allies? Williams shows admirable scholarly scepticism about the credibility of the Marshal's physician Dr. Ménétrel's later account of a double role (p. 214).

There is nothing original in stating that the full occupation of France from November 1942 both exposed the lie of Vichy sovereignty and precipitated a catastrophic decline in its remaining authority. Not that it lost the capacity to bite: the victims of the Milice and state terror could attest to that. Pétain's feeble protests to Laval about these came very late in the day (p. 233). Williams narrates an improbable attempt by Pétain to go over to the Allies in the summer of 1943, apparently scotched by the British Minister to Gaullist Algiers, Harold Macmillan (pp. 222-24). But how could Pétain have single-handedly given Laval and the Germans the slip, 'abandoning' France like De Gaulle? Complete with a German personal minder, Pétain retained a 'mystique,' seen when he came to Paris in April 1944. Pétain's broadcast on D-Day set out a policy of neutrality for France (p. 232). Yet Ferro states it was pre-recorded three months earlier, after negotiations. [5] Either way, the eclipse of Pétain's actual power was now complete. The Parisian collaborationists who had derided him joined him for the autumn pantomime at Sigmaringen. With De Gaulle's provisional government establishing a highly politicised commission to try him, Pétain was nonetheless determined to face the charge of treason in person. Williams grasps what was essential to the Pétain trial and to the process of "épuration" more generally. Pétain was indicted for an act of treason and the very fact of Vichy. There was little or no play made of the obscene race laws, forced labour or the Milice (p. 3). A convicted traitor, Pétain's old age meant paradoxically that he was condemned to live until 1951.

Any biographer is obliged to portray the personal as well as the political side of their subject. Williams weaves these elements very well into the narrative. Pétain's modest farm family in the Pas-de-Calais taught him financial prudence. His real mentors were at boarding school, his two priest uncles and, of course, the army. He scraped into Saint-Cyr in 1876, ninth from the bottom out of a class of 412 (p. 17). As an adult, his attachment to Catholicism was phoney; he valued it as a pillar of order and respectability, little more. Both before and after his eventual civil marriage in 1920 to the coquettish divorcée Eugénie Hardon, Pétain had a notoriously roving eye. The couple had odd domestic arrangements with "Nini" acting literally as "the wife next door", while Pétain retained a bachelor's independence. At dinners, Mme. Colette de Gaulle acted as his hostess (p. 113). Pétain, advocate of the family, was himself childless, was cool to his step-son and distant from his own sisters and their families. The solemnization of his marriage with a Catholic ceremony in 1941 was carried out by proxy, characteristic of his own distance from wife and faith. His personal relationship with De Gaulle was by

turns close, then fraught. Regrettably, though, Williams tells us little about how Pétain engaged with his own cult, with no mention of the anthem *Maréchal, nous voilà!*

In conclusion, there is no doubt Pétain wound up on the wrong side of history. Naturally, like Williams, we may speculate on his possible reputation if he had died earlier than 1940. However, in that year, he took the view that he had to make peace with the Germans as they would master Europe. In making this calculation, Williams asserts that “he loved his country...he was not, and had never been, a traitor” (p. 4). On his own terms, perhaps not. But the judgement of history, if indeed there is such a thing, must surely be that his sins of omission and commission betrayed the interests of many of France’s citizens, especially the most vulnerable.

NOTES

[1] Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1970); Nicholas Atkins, *Pétain* (London & New York: Longman, 1998).

[2] Marc Ferro, *Pétain* (Paris: Fayard, 1977); Guy Pedroncini, *Pétain. Le soldat de la gloire, 1856-1918* (Paris: Perrin, 1989); idem, *Pétain. La victoire perdue, novembre 1918-juin 1940* (Paris: Perrin, 1995).

[3] Nicholas Atkins, *Pétain* (London & New York: Longman, 1998), 112-16.

[4] Ferro, 109-12.

[5] Ferro, 562.

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