

Maptalk

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Treason Trial

Life Imprisonment for Pétain

The man who saved France at Verdun in 1916 was condemned to die for nearly destroying France at Vichy in 1940, but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by General Charles de Gaulle.



Pétain

After a jury found Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain guilty of treason on Wednesday, 15 August, the court passed the death sentence on the fallen hero but "hoped" it would not be carried out. The sentence included confiscation of his property. Pétain was the twelfth marshal of France to be condemned by a French court since 1440. Eight of them were executed.

As a young officer, de Gaulle had been one of Pétain's greatest admirers and had sought a transfer to the regiment headed by the "Hero of Verdun." Thereafter, the famous Marshal took such an interest in him that de Gaulle referred to Pétain as his "military father."

Specifically Pétain was charged with secretly attacking the foundations of the French state and having intelligence with the enemy previous to the fall of France in 1940.

In rebuttal, on the 20th and last day of the trial, the defense attacked the prosecution for using disreputable witnesses; despite the fact that the accusers included four ex-premiers and one ex-president of France. The defense also reiterated that, unlike Laval, "Pétain fought the Germans as hard as he could from 14 June 1940 until the end." It argued that Pétain, while appearing to accept the situation, played a double game to fool the Germans. The defense claimed that while the Nazis demanded two million slave workers, he cut them down to 600,000 and dissuaded the enemy from deporting French women. Swaying the jury in an impassioned plea, his counsel exclaimed: "How many men of the resistance movement died with their lips, 'Vive le Maréchal! Vive la France!'"

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