

## VICHY PROPAGANDA

John Fletcher (University of East Anglia)

My subject is the propaganda put out in France by the Vichy government, between the establishment of that regime following the armistice in 1940 and its collapse in 1944 when the allies drove out the forces of the Third Reich.

This propaganda represented of course only a fraction of the total output of the many belligerents during World War II. In particular the agents of Goebbels's *Propagandastaffel* were active in France as in every other occupied country, enforcing the drearily familiar routines of totalitarianism: the censorship of periodicals, the banning of books (the index in France was known as the 'Otto list' from the first name of the German ambassador Otto Abetz), the close regulation of the film and advertising industries, and the manipulation of press and radio in the service of the controlling power. Goebbels's people also arranged for the printing and distribution of leaflets, for poster campaigns and for the organisation of public 'meetings of solidarity' at which Franco-German cooperation in the war effort was celebrated.

But the work of the *Propagandastaffel* is a separate issue from the homemade and homegrown variety produced by the Vichy regime. However, that too was 'official' propaganda: arguably more so, indeed, than the use made by the Free French in London of the resources of the BBC to beam their own anti-Vichy propaganda into occupied territory, or the increasingly significant underground press, the most famous of whose clandestine publications was Vercors's novel *Le Silence de la mer*. For it cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the Vichy regime - so named after the spa town in central France which was chosen as the provisional seat of government pending the postwar peace settlement - was the legitimate authority, a fully legal entity in international law. The head of state, the World War I hero Marshal Philippe Pétain, had been installed by due constitutional process in the terminal crisis of the Third Republic, during the closing skirmishes of the Battle of France. Pétain led a regime which was undemocratic, authoritarian, paternalistic, and, before long, deeply unpopular as well, but at no time - except perhaps at the very end, when the retreating occupiers forcibly transferred it to the Disneyland castle of Sigmaringen in southern Germany, an episode hallucinatingly recalled by Céline, who fled there, in his novel *D'un château l'autre* - was it a puppet government, even less a fascist regime modelled on the invader's as Croatia was.<sup>1</sup> In practice, of course, Pétain and his ministers had, largely, to do what the conqueror required of them; but they retained, at least for a while, some room for manoeuvre, and they made sure that they exercised to the fullest possible extent such

circumscribed powers as they possessed.

Had they been puppets, indeed, they might have escaped blame for some of the most callously criminal of their actions, such as the round-up, in July 1942, of Paris Jews, the fiftieth anniversary of which was recently celebrated - if that is the word - by the few survivors and their descendants. This round-up, known ever since as the *rafle du Vel d'Hiv*, was carried out by the French police on the orders of the French authorities, largely acting on their own initiative: 'no German was observed to be playing a part'.<sup>2</sup> In the end, it has been estimated, around 75,000 Jews from France were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers. That far more than this number survived was no thanks to Vichy, but rather to the decency and courage of individuals, notably the Protestants and some (though by no means all) Catholics. Today's head of the hierarchy, Cardinal Lustiger, for instance, was born a Jew but was, like many other such children, baptised by sympathetic clergy to forestall any attempt at deportation. In his case, baptism was followed by conversion, though this was not its primary purpose; nevertheless, Cardinal Lustiger is living proof that not all French Catholics were prepared to condone Vichy's racist policies.

Had the Vichy authorities been puppets, moreover, they would have produced no homegrown propaganda: they would not have needed to, nor indeed been allowed to. But, once again, they were the recognised legal authority, and they made it their business to have their own propaganda machine. It produced specifically French propaganda, targeted at their own population; for this reason it is a particularly interesting example of official exploitation of the media.

Propaganda presupposes a message which the authorities are anxious to put across.<sup>3</sup> Usually this message is straightforward enough. In the context of a beleaguered fortress-island in which food had to be strictly rationed, for example, 'Dig for Victory', the theme of a major British poster campaign in World War II, was clear and unambiguous. Vichy France did not lack for a message, either, but it was inevitably more complex than the simple British exhortation to go out and plant potatoes. It was summed up in the slogan 'Révolution nationale dans le cadre du nouvel ordre européen'.

What this meant (put simply) was that if France was to take her rightful place in the new Nazi order in Europe, she had to carry out a revolution to clear away the vestiges of the discredited Third Republic, and build a new state and a new society whose values would be very different. For instance, the state motto 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité', with its republican, democratic and egalitarian connotations, was replaced by the very different associations of 'Travail, Famille, Patrie'. The shift was fundamental. For a present-day parallel, we need look no further than the programme

adopted by the Republican Party in the United States. According to *Le Monde* this bases itself on the same tenets: 'l'assiduité au travail' at work, the exaltation of family values in the home, and the daily 'salut aux couleurs' at school.<sup>4</sup> Like Mr Bush's party, but unencumbered by the constraints of the democratic process, Vichy aimed at nothing short of changing hearts and minds, and making a clean sweep of the past. Or, more precisely, of the relatively recent past. As Michèle Cointet-Labrousse points out, what Pétain and his ministers wanted was 'un régime organique donnant le pouvoir aux élites', to be enshrined in a constitution 'qui rappelle le second Empire'.<sup>5</sup> By thus erasing the entire episode of the Third Republic from history, the regime 'entreprind de réformer la société, de transformer le pays, comme si la France était seule au monde et le temps arrêté'.<sup>6</sup> It pursued a 'rêve nostalgique de construire un système... fondé sur un modèle militaire inspiré par une perception d'un passé imaginé'.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, insofar as they had a contemporary model in mind, that model was not Nazi Germany or fascist Italy but the conservative authoritarian regime of Dr Salazar in Portugal and, to a lesser extent, the clerico-military state built by Franco in Spain.<sup>8</sup> As many specialists of the period have pointed out, Vichy's programme was at once utopian (looking back to a mythical golden age which it aimed to restore in France) and modernist (giving the younger technocrats their head now that tiresome party political activity had been swept aside), even if this meant they had to 'forcer le réel [et] nier la situation objective'.<sup>9</sup>

The fundamental unreality of their project can only be explained by the tendency which George Orwell astutely noted for 'people under totalitarian control [to] rationalise and justify what they are being forced to do'.<sup>10</sup> And it can only be fully understood in the light of the initial mistake made by France's rulers in June 1940, and of the belief which they held to the bitter end: they assumed that Germany was invincible and that the Nazi conquest of Europe was irreversible. Fifty years later, it is hard to credit sane men with such a crass misreading of the world situation. After all, an obscure tank commander named Charles de Gaulle was able to interpret the initial successes of the Wehrmacht correctly. He saw, as his superiors woefully failed to do, that the Battle of France was merely the opening skirmish of a world-wide conflict, and that once the Soviet Union and United States became involved, the Axis powers were bound to be defeated. Lest we imagine that De Gaulle was uniquely clairvoyant, we need only remind ourselves that the wily General Franco kept Spain neutral, resisting considerable pressure from his ally Hitler, and no doubt too from some of his own advisers, to take advantage of Britain's weakness by annexing Gibraltar. Franco would have been driven from power in 1945 if he had made that mistake; as it was, he ruled unchallenged until his death. Pétain's punishment was national disgrace and life imprisonment. Had he led his government into exile in 1942, when the Germans broke the armistice agreement and invaded the hitherto

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unoccupied zone of southern France, he would now no doubt, like Charles de Gaulle, have avenues and universities named after him: such are the rewards for getting it right - and such are the penalties for getting it wrong - in human affairs.

The propaganda effort put into selling Vichy's collaboration to the French people took all the familiar forms. Television, of course, was still only at the experimental stage, but posters, radio, newspapers and magazines, advertising, movies and film newsreel, children's literature, newspaper cartoons, photography, painting and sculpture, were all brought under government control and made to serve the cause. Or at least not to hinder it: the fiction film, for instance, like the stage play, was fairly lightly censored, and provided that nothing in the script or film print alluded to the current situation, the project was allowed to go ahead. Indeed, partly because there was so little else to brighten the life of hardship and shortages which everyone experienced, and partly because the film and theatre establishments had been purged of Jews, freemasons and left-wing activists, leaving the way clear for younger talents to develop unhindered, this was paradoxically something of a golden age for French cinema and theatre (in the case of cinema, the absence of competition from Hollywood was an additional, even crucial, stimulus). Similarly, notwithstanding the constraints of paper rationing, book production did not cease: Albert Camus's masterpiece *L'Etranger* was published in 1942, for instance, despite its 'negative' tone. It comes as something of a surprise, too, that jazz continued to flourish in Paris, whereas in Germany it was banned as 'Negermusik', and that Django Rheinardt's racial origins - he was a gipsy - could be so conveniently overlooked. Pending a final decision about France's position, which we now know from German archives would have been extremely harsh, the Nazis seem to have been happy to keep Paris as a leading cultural centre where their troops, especially the officers, could rest and recuperate from the rigours of the front.

These were instances of what might be called Vichy's 'negative control'. Other media or art forms were managed more positively. Children's literature, for instance, was made to serve the regime, especially the personality cult of the dictator, which rapidly became a feature of this totalitarian state as it has of so many others, past and present. As is all too usual in such circumstances, the leader was portrayed to children as having been a model child himself. Few children's comics were however overtly collaborationist (the chief exception was *Le Téméraire*, which ran for the last year and a half of the occupation), being content for the most part to project the values of the regime by stressing team spirit, bravery, sport and outdoor activities such as scouting, and by featuring - in the absence of American competitors and their heroes - the great men and women who had served France at key moments in her history.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly with product advertising: 'travail et frugalité, ces deux mots résonnent au coeur de la propagande de Vichy'<sup>12</sup>, stressing the need for sacrifice by insinuating that shortages were a kind of divine punishment for the nation's past failings. Similarly, too, with postage stamp design: artists were commissioned to engrave wholesome scenes of hand sowing and reaping, banishing *la semeuse* of republican philatelic iconography, and to draw idealised portraits of smiling young women in provincial costume, again with not a hint of Marianne's austere neoclassical features.<sup>13</sup>

As for radio, Radio Paris was in the hands of the Germans and so lies outside the scope of this essay. In news bulletins and current affairs programmes, of course, Vichy-controlled radio was expected to disseminate the regime's propaganda, but it also broadcast light entertainment and cultural features which were not themselves overtly propagandist. Nevertheless, like children's weeklies, even here 'la radio n'échappe pas à ce climat d'exaltation du "génie français", des héros exemplaires, du bon sens paysan et du travail bien fait cher à la Révolution nationale'.<sup>14</sup> Towards the end, in any case, the tone became shriller, especially after 'the other Philippe', Philippe Henriot, a man whom even his enemies - especially his enemies - recognised to be a brilliant performer at the microphone, began broadcasting regularly on the issues of the day. In these talks Henriot 'gave stark definition to the war between Vichy and the Resistance' and provided Vichy's collaboration with 'a clear justification and a pre-history with which huge numbers of French people could identify' by the skill with which he set collaboration 'firmly within the history of political struggle against Communism which half of France's electorate had...endorsed over the previous thirty years'.<sup>15</sup> So effective was his use of radio that the Free French, alarmed that sympathy and support for the Allied cause was being seriously eroded, ordered his execution on 28 June 1944. Rarely can political murder have been as morally justified as this assassination was. Henriot transformed Vichy radio virtually single-handedly from a conservative and *bien pensant* network into a pro-Nazi instrument, thereby making certain that Vichy would be indissolubly associated at the Liberation with the hated and feared paramilitary French *milice* rather than with the grandfatherly old gentleman in the képi who, a mere four years before but what now seemed like aeons ago, had made his fellow-countryman 'the gift of his person' and promised to protect them from the big bad German wolf.

Britain's Lord Haw-Haw was small beer in comparison, although he was executed too (after due legal process in his case). In the television age it is hard for people under sixty to appreciate the power of radio propaganda in the heyday of the wireless. As Goebbels knew, and as Hitler demonstrated, the disembodied voice could rouse populations to commit or to condone great evil; equally, it could stir them to acts of almost insane heroism, something Churchill was to achieve in radio harangues of the 'we shall never

surrender' variety. By the same token, television cuts political leaders down to size: had Hitler been obliged to face the cameras, he would have looked as ridiculous as Chaplin's impersonation of him in *The Great Dictator*, and even Churchill would have been vulnerable to visual mockery by *Spitting Image*.

That said, Vichy's most characteristic - and to my mind its most effective - propaganda medium was the poster. Its effectiveness was due in large part to the fact that for practical reasons, the government chose to commission posters from a number of artists and agencies rather than employ its own labour force. Once approved, designs (invariably in colour) were run off in very large numbers and distributed widely. Visitors to a major exhibition of these posters - the first to be mounted since the war - were both surprised and impressed at the range and quality of items on display, whatever reservations they had about the message, and a 288-page catalogue reproduced many of the most typical designs. This book is an indispensable guide to the field, and since it is not possible to reproduce its illustrations here, I refer the reader to it.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say that while many posters are of historical interest only, some are of high quality. Two in particular - both designed by Philippe Noyer of the Equipe Alain-Fournier - are masterpieces. The first, dating from 1940 and widely distributed - even getting quoted in other media - is 'Révolution nationale'. It shows Pétain full face, wearing his Marshal's képi, against the background of the national flag, above the words REVOLUTION NATIONALE in full block. The message is clear: the head of state is an honourable old soldier who holds the highest rank in the French army; he is a devoted servant of his country, a person of complete integrity. The sober capitals of the slogan hold out no threat. The whole tone, indeed, is one of reassurance: the poster is saying, in effect, 'you and the destinies of our country are safe in my hands: trust me'. The same message was tirelessly pumped out by all the media, which enables the poster to dispense with overt statement and make its impact by purely visual means. The fact that in the name of 'national revolution' Jews and freemasons were being hounded from public office and the professions at the very time the posters were going up all over the country, makes the power of the design all the more disturbing in retrospect.<sup>17</sup>

Noyer's other poster is darker in every sense. It was issued in 1943, when the tide of war had turned against the Nazis and the heady early days of the regime seemed very distant. Two bowler-hatted figures stand side by side, and are viewed from the back to conceal their faces. They are dressed in dark overcoats and one passes a banknote to the other, who in exchange holds out a *baguette*. A yellow hangman's noose, the same colour as the loaf, is shown poised between the behatted heads. The slogan 'Marché noir: crime contre la communauté' is as explicit and menacing as the Pétain poster's motto was discreet and reassuring. The subtext is equally clear: 'hunger stalks the land, and some people will sell

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their honour for bread while others risk death for profit'.<sup>18</sup> The poster acquires added meaning for those looking at it today: Samuel Beckett, who was hiding from the Gestapo at the time, would have seen the image, and probably recalled it unconsciously when he created two bowler-hatted characters who talk of hanging themselves in *En attendant Godot*, a play written only six years after the poster was published.

So much, briefly, for the media Vichy used in its propaganda. The style for the most part was consensual rather than divisive. Antisemitism and the unequal nature of collaboration (such as the massive and unpaid transfer of French material and labour to support the German war effort) were played down, for instance. Unifying symbols were always preferred to factual statements or aggressive assertions. Only Bolshevism was attacked directly and openly; until Stalingrad, it was a fairly safe target, and after Stalingrad, the regime was too radicalised to care. In the early years, as far as possible, the government sought to preserve the *union sacrée* of 1914-18 which Pétain personified, so it stressed interconnected symbols of a timeless rather than a topical nature, such as the soil, manual labour, folklore and regional customs, motherhood, hearth and home, and sport portrayed as latter-day chivalry.

The message - or rather the cluster of messages - stressed similarly interrelated ideas. The overriding theme was love of the Marshal, and it was expressed in posters (as we have just seen), in tracts, in public lectures, and in artefacts such as busts, vases and lamp standards which were sold in the 1940s' equivalent of today's Oxfam shops (no doubt in most cases requisitioned Jewish premises). As with all personality cults, that of Pétain plumbed depths of sycophancy which ought to have sickened people. The reasons why not are obvious enough. The French were traumatised by their catastrophic defeat and, quite understandably, grasped at the straw Pétain held out to them. It is easy for us to forget what a charismatic figure he was: credited with having snatched victory from the jaws of defeat at Verdun where, at the enormous cost to be read on the war memorial of every single village in France, the German armies were thwarted of the breakthrough they had to achieve if they were to defeat France in the previous war, Pétain was someone every French person felt they could trust, a thorough patriot, a father-figure, a saviour indeed. Even in 1944, loyalty to him hardly wavered: his ministers, especially the despised Laval, were blamed for the failure of collaboration, not the *chef* himself. Pétain cultivated this image carefully: his speeches were constructed in a sequence of simple, quotable phrases, like the moral of a folk tale, and these lapidary utterances were widely used in Vichy's propaganda output.

Another major propaganda theme was the empire, which Vichy had been allowed to keep under the terms of the armistice, although it is clear today that the Reich would have seized that too if it had

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won the war. But as things stood, France's overseas possessions provided consolation and hope, the reassurance that, in spite of its defeat, France remained a world power. In our post-imperialist age this theme is offensive, since its expression is invariably paternalistic and condescending to the peoples whose colour is stressed (the brown Arabs, the yellow Indochinese and the black Africans) and who are portrayed as childlike in their devotion to France in her hour of affliction. It did not occur to Vichy that its defeat might, on the contrary, give its colonial subjects ideas; certainly all hint of future independence struggles is light years away from Vichy's complacent attitude to the empire.

Another theme was youth, seen as the hope of the future, and the idealisation of sporting activities and the open-air life - *mens sana in corpore sano*, and all that - was used to buttress the youth movements which, like many totalitarian regimes, Vichy fostered and attempted to control. Youth was urged, too, to join the navy (with posters stressing the fleet's links with empire and holding out in consequence the prospect of a life of adventure), or to enlist in the small armistice army. Much effort was put into persuading young people to volunteer for work in Germany (on the grounds that it would then be possible for the Germans to release French POWs in exchange) or, if they had already done so, to be sure to return to their factories in the Reich after home leave. One who did respond to the appeal was Alain Robbe-Grillet, then aged twenty, but many others did not: there was little reluctance to work for the Germans in France, but ever-increasing unwillingness - understandably - to go to work in Germany itself.<sup>19</sup> In this field as in others, the propaganda failed spectacularly; indeed, one cannot help but marvel at the naivety of the propagandists. Any advertising executive could have told them that even the most sophisticated campaign will not persuade people who dislike tomatoes to eat them; and Vichy's campaigns were hardly sophisticated.

This was particularly true of the propaganda aimed at women. In accordance with its profound social conservatism, Vichy saw woman's place as being in the home, and official propaganda exalted motherhood and family values (indeed, as we saw, *famille* was one of the mottoes of the new state). But in this sphere as in others it could not alter facts. Many women had to work (POWs' wives, for instance), and increasingly, as men were called up for STO (the compulsory labour scheme in Germany), the economy required women to take their place in any case. Thus *femme au foyer* legislation enacted in the early months of the regime had progressively to be abandoned in the face of harsh realities, which themselves placed women in a better position than men to see through the hypocrisy of Vichy's 'maukish moralising'.<sup>20</sup> It was the women who had to juggle the necessity of earning a living with the demands of housework, queueing endlessly for food, and trying to bring up children with their father in a distant *Stalag*. In other words, many Frenchwomen were for most of the war single parents trying to cope at the same



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time with chronic shortages of basic necessities. Posters showing mother receiving gifts on Mother's Day from her numerous but immaculately neat, clean and well-fed progeny, with father at her side casting a benign smile over the happy scene, were a sick joke to women struggling to keep the family together at all. No wonder that it was 'sur le terrain du quotidien que Vichy perd la confiance des Français'<sup>21</sup> More honest, more realistic campaigns might have retained that confidence longer, but again, as any competent media person could have told the Vichy propagandists, no hard sell is hard enough to persuade people that two and two make five.

A similar credibility gap vitiated the propaganda against the Bolshevik threat. Although a major exhibition was mounted in Paris to bring home to the French how important it was for the Wehrmacht, the spearhead of the Reich's crusade against communism, to win the war in the east, and how terrible would be the consequences for France if the Russians prevailed, the Red menace seemed remote compared with the proximate reality of the regular execution of hostages or the nightly dread of the Gestapo's knock at the door.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of real if often misguided efforts, then, Vichy propaganda had only limited success and failed to assuage people's doubts about the wisdom and validity of the whole collaboration exercise. As politicians frequently find, it is not so much a matter of getting your message across as getting your message right. In any case, and unfortunately for Pétain and his ministers, their regime did not operate in a vacuum, for although the themes mentioned above were unique to Vichy, there were others which they shared with the opposition. Both Pétainists and Gaullists invoked Joan of Arc in support of their cause, for instance, the former stressing her struggle against the English, the latter her triumph over the invaders of her country.<sup>23</sup> Both sides, too, exalted 'la terre' and turned it into an image of security and permanence,<sup>24</sup> and for both parties to the conflict 'la France éternelle' and 'patrie' were focalising symbols. Indeed, it was of great psychological importance that this should be so; otherwise, at the liberation, the values themselves would have been contaminated. Instead, a smooth transition was effected which ensured that 'ces mots et ces valeurs, qui appartiennent aussi au vocabulaire gaulliste et résistant' would not be 'déconsidérés' by their use in Vichy's propaganda.<sup>25</sup> Had there not been a number of such values, bearing the same names, shared by both sides, and dominating their propaganda effort, the healing of wounds after the French civil war of 1940-1944 would have been much harder to accomplish than it was, and the consequences for the peace, stability, development and integration of postwar Europe would have been incalculable.

1. See *Le Nouvel Ordre européen nazi* by Yves Durand (Brussels: Complexe, 1990).

2. *Collaboration in France*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Patrick Marsh (Oxford: Berg, 1989), p.25; henceforth abbreviated as *Collaboration*.
3. I use Paul J. Kingston's definition of propaganda as a 'manipulative social tool' (*French Cultural Studies*, I (1990), p.183). Excluded from the present study is the semi-official propaganda of the 'ultras' of the Parisian collaboration, tolerated and, to some extent, encouraged by the occupying power. This non-Vichy French propaganda is well covered in BDIC (see note 11 below), pp.96-109. Vichy's *Propagande Paysanne*, which, in order to ensure maximum rural cooperation in the feeding of the urban population, flattered the peasantry by extolling the soundness of their virtues and traditions, is touched upon in a major work which appeared too late to be considered in the present study, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* by H.R. Kedward (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.144.
4. *Le Monde*, 16-17 August 1992, p.4, col.4.
5. *Vichy et les Français*, ed. Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (Paris: Fayard, 1992), p.254; henceforth abbreviated as *Vichy*.
6. *Vichy*, p.18.
7. *Vichy*, p.283.
8. *Vichy*, pp.662-688.
9. *Vichy*, p.261.
10. *Collaboration*, p.18.
11. *La Propagande sous Vichy 1940-1944*, ed. Laurent Gervereau and Denis Peschanski (Paris: BDIC, 1990), p.185; henceforth abbreviated as BDIC.
12. BDIC, p.210.
13. See *Le Projet culturel de Vichy* by Christian Faure (Lyon: Presses Universitaires; Paris: CNRS, 1989).
14. BDIC, p.192.
15. *Collaboration*, pp.37-38.
16. Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, Paris 1990.

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- 17. BDIC, p.145 and, for the quotation in a children's comic, p.183.
- 18. BDIC, p.237.
- 19. *Collaboration*, p.13.
- 20. *Vichy*, p.638.
- 21. *Vichy*, p.641.
- 22. *Collaboration*, p.46.
- 23. *Collaboration*, pp.92-102, and BDIC, p.147. For Vichy and Gaullist posters both claiming Joan of Arc as a figurehead for their side, see *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* by Marina Warner (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), f.p.101.
- 24. *Vichy*, pp.567-8.
- 25. BDIC, p.58.