

CHAPTER 19



The influence of heroic networks: French collaboration with the Nazis

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If the gravediggers that belong to the Republic do not understand that their duty is to disappear, to be forgotten and to give way to the young and true workers of greatest France, we will... put violence at the service of Justice. We will set up the guillotines in the four corners of Paris and we will cut off heads. And we will be careful not to show them to the people, because they are not worth it.'

Marcel Bucard, Verdun veteran, war hero honoured for valour by Philippe Pétain in 1917 and founder of the 'blue-shirt' Francisme party, writing in his journal in January 1934¹

In their thousands, right-wing groups marched towards the legislative chamber to pressure the representatives gathered within. They marched under many different insignia and banners, including far-right, avowedly racist organisations (e.g. Millington 2012). Some believed reports spread through right-wing media of a deep state conspiracy, others sought to show strength that would lead to the fall of the left-wing government that was about to be seated. What gave the demonstration a deeper potential for escalation still was the presence of members of well-organised veterans groups. These veterans included decorated heroes who had sacrificed much in service to their country. But what of their commitment to democratic processes and values when on the losing side of an election?

¹ Quoted in Deniel (1979: 81).

There are obvious parallels between this description and the insurrection in Washington, DC on 6 January 2021. But on 6 February 1934, the French police response to the riot just across the Seine from the Chamber of Deputies was more aggressive than that of the US Capitol Police. The police opened fire. Fourteen demonstrators were killed and 236 wounded. The left viewed the events as an attempted coup, the right as a symbol of government oppression that had created martyrs to freedom. Thus began a ‘civil war’ in France that would severely weaken the country in face of the looming crises to come (Jackson 2001). So much so, that six years later one of the world’s most long-lived democracies would commit suicide – its representatives voting away their own power to a dictatorship headed by ‘*Le Maréchal*’, Philippe Pétain. A hero credited with saving France at the iconic Battle of Verdun in World War I, Pétain would head the authoritarian, racist Vichy regime that would collaborate with Nazi Germany until France’s Liberation in 1944.

France’s crushing military defeat in 1940 was only part of the story. It was arguably in part a symptom of an underlying process that had led to an undermining of democratic values. Unlike other democratic states that had fallen that year to the Nazis, France’s elected representatives in 1940 chose not to set up a legitimate government in exile. Instead, many appeared convinced that dictatorship was a necessary price to pay to facilitate a ‘national renewal’ of France.

A growing body of research points out how the failure of young democracies, such as that of 1930s Germany, often occurs when institutional gatekeepers allow would-be authoritarians to legally assume power in the name of short-term opportunism (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). However, democracies do tend to become more resilient as they survive. Some researchers emphasise the key role of the diffusion of democratic values among citizens in this resilience (Besley and Persson 2019, Acemoglu et al. 2021). But much less is known about how support for democratic values erodes, even in previously durable democracies. We argue that to help prevent the erosion of democratic values and to reduce political polarisation, a key dimension to understand is the importance of the embeddedness in social and economic networks of individuals with the potential for political influence.² And, throughout history, a common environment where such networks may emerge is through shared military heroism.

In Cagé et al. (2022),³ we exploit a natural experiment that created an exogenous network of politically influential individuals in France – a hierarchical network of war heroes generated through the systematic ‘millwheel’ rotation of French regiments through the direct command of Pétain during the iconic World War I Battle of Verdun in 1916. We wed this to data on more than 95,000 individual extreme right-wing supporters and collaborators assembled by Free French army intelligence during the Pétain-led Vichy

2 This chapter builds upon and incorporates some verbatim sections (included with permission) from an earlier Vox column (Cagé et al. 2021).

3 The paper was awarded the Oliver E. Williamson Best Conference Paper in 2020 by the Society for Institutional and Organizational Economics (SIOE).

regime (1940–44). We augment these with data collected by American intelligence on leading Vichy figures in 1944, data on individual French volunteers seeking to serve alongside the German Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, data on participation in the French Resistance, and hand-collected administrative data on pre-war and inter-war voting in each of France's 34,947 municipalities.⁴

AN EXOGENOUS NETWORK OF HEROES: THE ROTATION OF REGIMENTS AT THE BATTLE OF VERDUN

The Battle of Verdun, the longest battle of world history, became the symbol of French fortitude and willingness to resist (Jackson 2001). A total of 305,440 soldiers on both sides were killed, almost a death a minute between February and December 1916.⁵ The profound significance of the simple phrase "*J'ai fait Verdun*" ("I did Verdun"), adopted broadly among its veterans, was understood throughout the country (Ousby 2002).

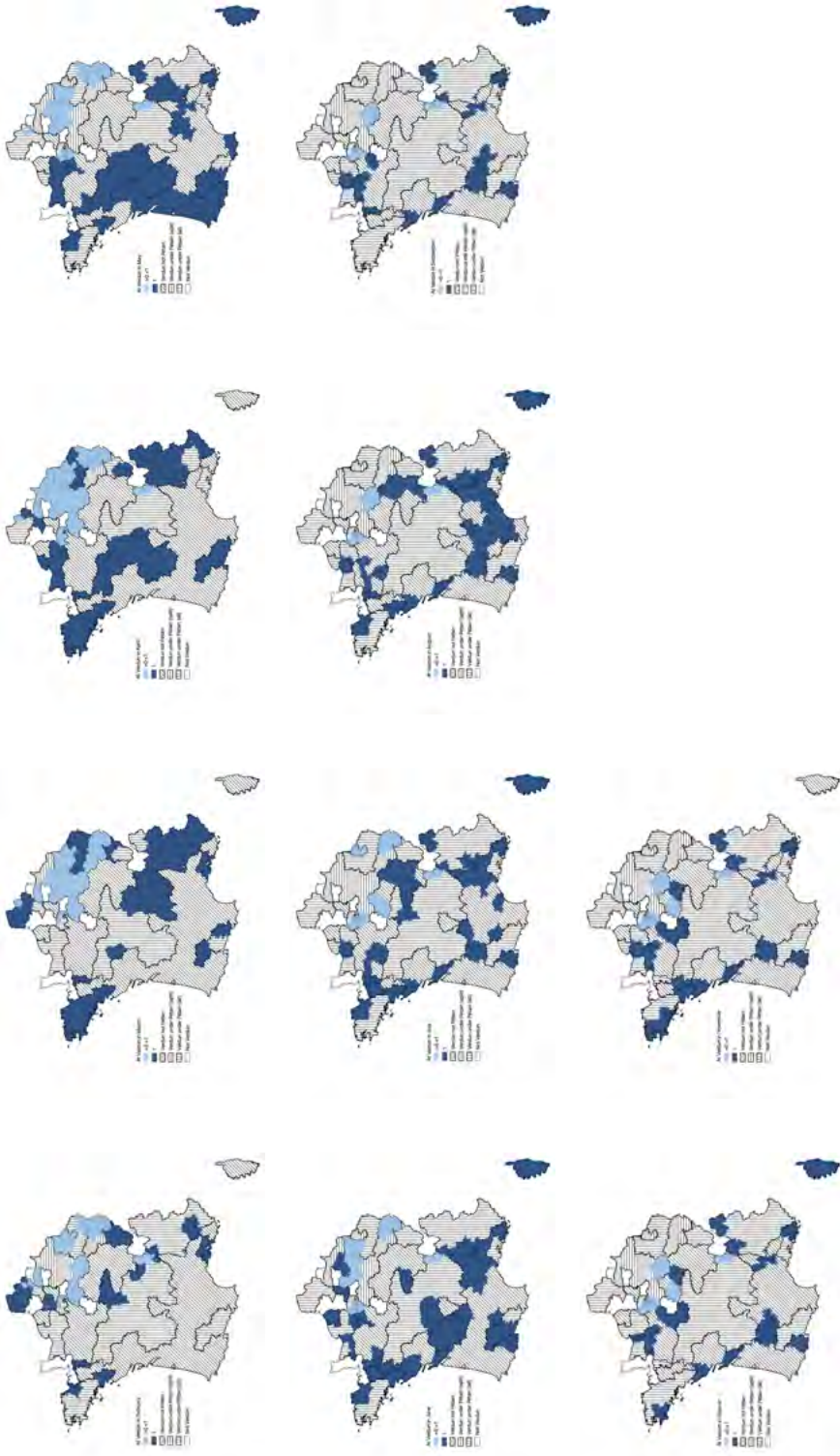
After a secret build-up, the German offensive at Verdun took the French high command by surprise, leading to the sacking of four generals in five days. A 'snap decision', 'hastily made' was made to put Philippe Pétain in command (e.g. Horne 1962: 129, Ousby 2002: 98). At the start of World War I, Pétain was a 58 year-old colonel on the verge of retirement after an undistinguished career. He was assigned to Verdun only because he happened to be available at the time. Assigned command over an arbitrary rotation of regiments drawn from across France (see Figure 1), Pétain strengthened the logistics and slowed the German advance before he was promoted away from direct command in May 1916.⁶ By the time the battle was declared over, 88.7% of France's 34,947 municipalities had raised a regiment rotated through Verdun, with 50.1% having served under Pétain's direct command (which we later refer to as 'Verdun under Pétain' municipalities). Pétain himself was already being fêted as the Hero of Verdun, and was later made Marshal of France.

4 Some important features of the file are summarised in Lormier (2017). Since the file, while declassified, has not been made public, we are grateful to Dominique Lormier for allowing us access to the original documents.

5 These figures can be compared to the 405,399 military deaths the United States suffered during the entire World War II, and the 22,654 soldiers killed on both sides in the bloodiest battle in US history, Antietam.

6 The interchangeability of line regiments was a common feature in other militaries as well, including the British army (Jha and Wilkinson 2012).

FIGURE 1 ROTATION OF REGIMENTS THROUGH VERDUN, BY MONTH, FEBRUARY TO DECEMBER 1916



Notes: From the top left (February) to the bottom right (December), different regiments were dispatched to the Battle of Verdun. Pétain commanded between February and May 1st. The figure display where all (dark blue), some (light blue) or none of the line regiments that had originally been drawn from each municipality in 1914 were rotated through Verdun each month.
 Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

SUPPORT FOR NAZI COLLABORATION AND EXTREME RIGHT PARTIES IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

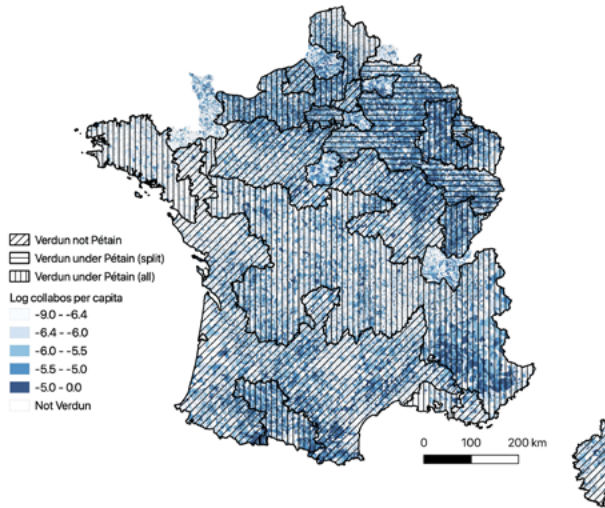
In the hope that he would once more rescue France from Germany, Pétain was called to head France after her crushing defeat in World War I. On 10 July 1940, the two legislative chambers granted the Cabinet the authority to draw a new constitution (Lacroix et al. 2019). Soon, Pétain assumed plenipotentiary powers as Head of State. Upon gaining power, Pétain's regime rapidly dismantled liberal institutions and adopted an authoritarian course. In October 1940, Pétain's collaboration took an overt turn, when a photograph of him shaking hands with Hitler was widely publicised. The regime rapidly took on an extreme right-wing and racist agenda, which became even more repressive after the full military occupation of France by Germany in November 1942, when the Vichy regime sponsored the *Milice* ('militia') to hunt down and kill the French Resistance.

Figure 2 maps the distribution of collaborators recorded in the declassified file to their home municipality in 1945, overlaid with their regimental combat experience in World War I. While there is significant regional variation in the shares of collaborators, these shares are disproportionately higher in 'Verdun under Pétain' municipalities. These raw differences are robust in a regression framework: we show that exposure to 'Verdun under Pétain' significantly increases collaboration rates by 7.4 % compared to otherwise similar municipalities within the same department. These effects appear across the spectrum of collaboration, from joining extreme right-wing organisations and deep economic collaboration to volunteering for Vichy paramilitaries that hunted Jews and the Resistance, and even for the Waffen SS heading to the Eastern Front in 1944, when it was already clear that the Nazis would lose the war. 'Verdun-under Pétain' municipalities were also 8.45% *less* likely to raise civilian members of the French resistance (Figure 3).⁷

Why did some of France's greatest heroes become some of their gravest villains? We hand-collected administrative voting data to show that these extreme acts had their genesis in increasingly pronounced political choices that emerged in the post-World War I period and mimicked Pétain's own views. Widely known as an anti-communist, and with increasingly authoritarian sympathies, Pétain's speeches, which initially focused on veterans' groups, took a more overt political tone during the elections in 1936.

7 See our companion paper, Cagé et al. (in progress).

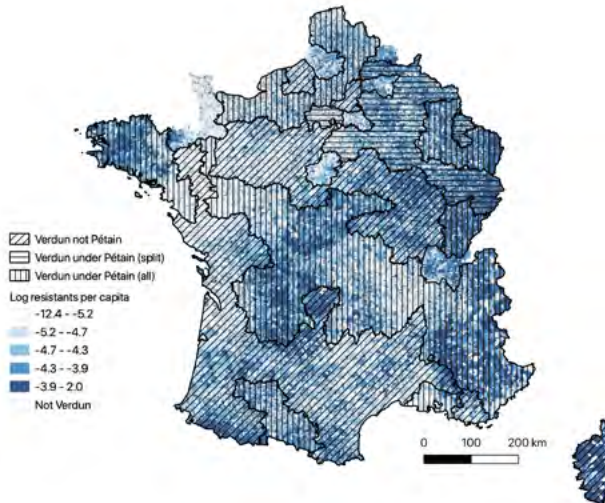
FIGURE 2 QUINTILES OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF NAZI COLLABORATORS PER CAPITA OVERLAID WITH ROTATION AT VERDUN



Notes: The map shows quintiles of the distribution of the logarithm of collaborators per capita across municipalities in 1944/1945, overlaid with the assignment of line regiments raised in a municipality to the Battle of Verdun under the generalship of Philippe Pétain. This map shows information for 85,389 collaborators in the 34,947 municipalities within France's 1914 borders.

Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

FIGURE 3 QUINTILES OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF MEMBERS OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE PER CAPITA OVERLAID WITH ROTATION AT VERDUN

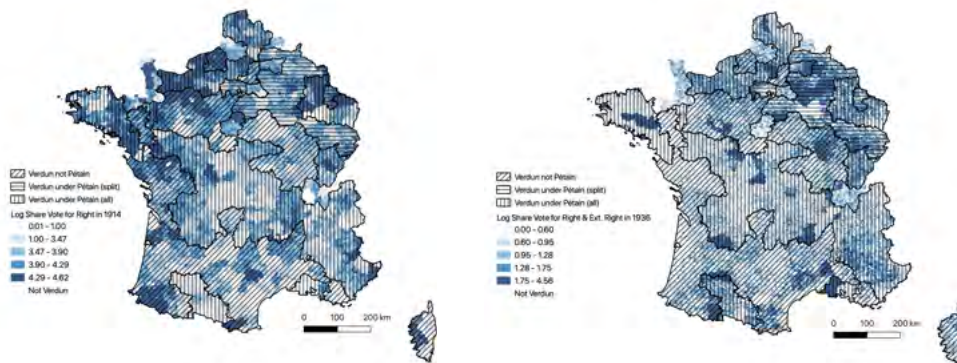


Notes: The map shows quintiles of the distribution of the logarithm of resistants per capita across municipalities in 1944/1945, overlaid with the assignment of line regiments raised in a municipality to the Battle of Verdun under the generalship of Philippe Pétain. This map shows information for 85,389 collaborators in the 34,947 municipalities within France's 1914 borders.

Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

We show that municipalities that served under Pétain at Verdun, although politically similar to other municipalities in 1914 (Figure 4a), begin to diverge after World War I, well before Pétain's ascent to power. And they do so in a manner that mimics Pétain's own views: initially anti-communist, and thereafter increasingly supportive of the right. Further, as extreme-right fascist parties emerged in the deeply polarised 1930s, these would also find more fertile ground in these very places. Founded by Marcel Bucard, a Verdun veteran and war hero honoured for his bravery by Pétain himself, the 'blue-shirts' of the Francisme party garnered a 2.6% higher vote share in the first round of the 1936 elections in 'Verdun under Pétain' municipalities relative to others in the same department (Figure 4b).

FIGURE 4 THE VOTE SHARE FOR THE RIGHT IN FIRST ROUND OF THE FRENCH LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, 1914 AND 1936 IN THE HOME MUNICIPALITIES OF LINE REGIMENTS ASSIGNED TO PÉTAÏN AT VERDUN



Notes: The map shows quintiles of the distribution of the (logarithm of the) vote share for the right in 1914 (left panel; no extreme right party ran for election in the 1914 elections) and for the right and extreme right in 1936 (right panel) across municipalities overlaid with the assignment of line regiments raised in a municipality to the Battle of Verdun under the generalship of Philippe Pétain. This map shows information for 33,709 municipalities within France's 1914 borders for which data on the 1914 elections is available; and 34,211 municipalities for which data on the 1936 elections is available.

Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

Further, 'Verdun under Pétain' municipalities responded more to Pétain's first overt calls for political action. The most dramatic evidence of this took place in the week between the two rounds of the 1936 elections.

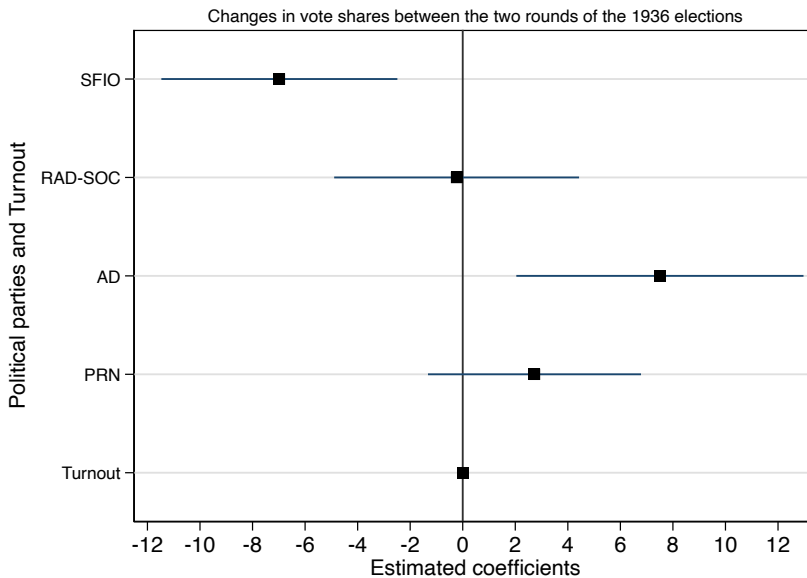
The 1934 insurrection had arguably been successful in one way: the fears it raised did lead, almost immediately, to the fall of the left-wing government. But in the first round of the next elections on 26 April 1936 (Figure 4b), a left-wing coalition received more than 50% of the vote and appeared poised to return. Pétain "immediately broke cover" (Williams 2005: 137).

Pétain gave a highly publicised front-page interview to *Le Journal* on 1 May 1936, just two days before the second round of the elections, calling for a national rally (*rassemblement national*). He declared France "under threat" of socialism. He cited Fascist Italy and Nazi

Germany as examples to follow. He endorsed the actions of the veterans' organisation, the *Croix de Feu*, one of the far-right Leagues that had also marched in 1934, noting how they “occupy themselves with the moral and spiritual improvement of youth”.

And those exposed to his command at Verdun appeared to have answered his call. Though the two rounds were held only one week apart, the vote share for the Socialist party (SFIO) decreased by a dramatic 6.98% in ‘Verdun under Pétain’ municipalities in the second round, largely in favour of the right-wing conservative Alliance Démocratique (AD) (Figure 5). The Alliance Démocratique was headed at the time by Pierre-Étienne Flandin, who would later serve Pétain’s Vichy regime as vice-president and foreign minister.

FIGURE 5 ‘VERDUN UNDER PÉTAİN’ MUNICIPALITIES SWING 7% FROM THE SOCIALISTS TO THE RIGHT IN THE SECOND ROUND OF THE 1936 ELECTIONS JUST AFTER PÉTAİN’S OVERT PRO-RIGHT INTERVIEW



Notes: This figure reports the effect (and 90% confidence interval) of a municipality’s exposure to ‘Verdun under Pétain’ on the difference in vote shares for parties that contested both rounds of the 1936 elections. Ranked from left to right, SFIO stands for the Socialist party; RAD-SOC for the Radicaux Socialistes; AD for the Alliance Démocratique; and PRN for the Parti Républicain National. We find no effect on turnout.

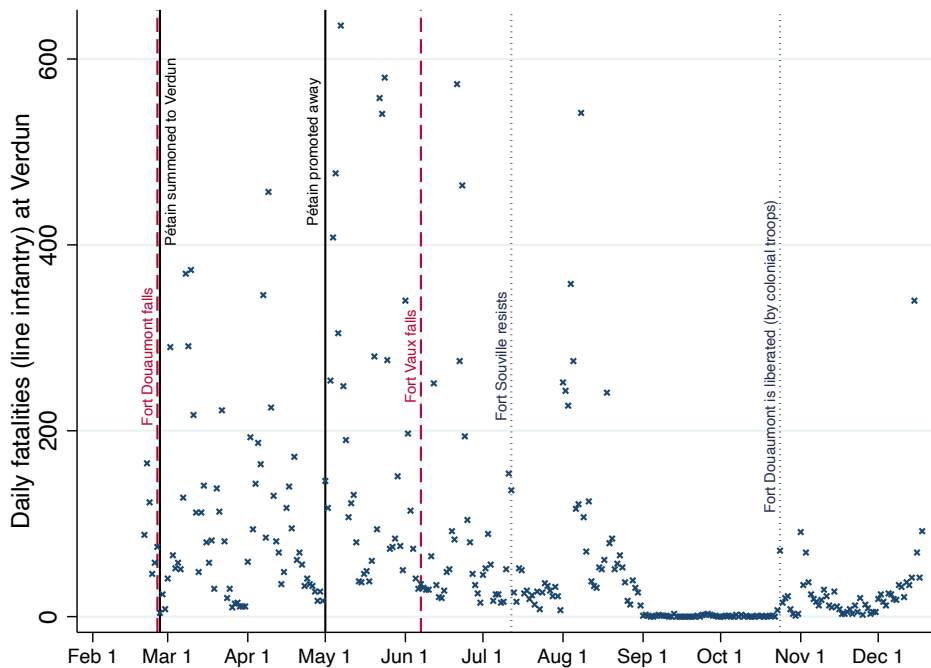
Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

BUILDING TRUST IN A FUTURE AUTOCRAT: HEROISM, MANAGEMENT STYLE AND LOYALTY

Why might the people whose regiments were exposed to Pétain at Verdun be more likely to follow him into collaboration? It helps to return to the battle itself. The Germans did not change their strategy and the intensity of the battle was largely unchanged at

Verdun just before and just after Pétain's promotion away from direct command (Figure 6). But Pétain's management style did differ in ways that were visible to the troops, and arguably demonstrated the greater weight that he put on their welfare. He moved his headquarters (and sleeping quarters) so that they were on the major supply road, the Voie Sacrée itself, "closer to the battle than many generals of his day would have thought necessary, or comfortable", making himself visible to them and visiting them in hospital when his schedule permitted (Ousby 2002: 100). Indeed, we show that soldiers interacted quantifiably more with Pétain than other commanding generals as they rotated through the Verdun sector. Further, under Pétain's command, soldiers were also *more likely to share in the credit*, receiving more medals for heroism under his command. These actions not only helped foster a shared identity of heroism, they also are likely to have evoked greater trust among those under his command, first on the battlefield and later in other domains as well.

FIGURE 6 DAILY FATALITIES AMONG LINE INFANTRY REGIMENTS AT THE BATTLE OF VERDUN



Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

We provide evidence that exposure to Pétain at Verdun does indeed appear to translate into longer-lasting *loyalty* among these veterans that served under his command, as measured by their subsequent willingness to follow Pétain's lead into collaboration. We exploit the individual age and sex information we possess for a subset of 23,566

individual collaborators to distinguish likely line veterans – i.e. those males age-eligible to have been conscripted into the line infantry in World War I, and thus more likely to have experienced Pétain’s direct command. We wed this to biographical data on all of Pétain’s peace-time and war-time assignments. We find evidence consistent with World War I military exposure to Pétain inducing loyalty: municipalities with soldiers that served under Pétain, whether at Verdun or before, subsequently raised 5.7% and 2.2% more collaborators, respectively, among those most likely to have served under him in the line infantry.

COMPLEMENTARITIES AND DIFFUSION BEYOND THE NETWORK

We next examine the propensity to collaborate beyond the line infantry. We show that it is only in ‘Verdun under Pétain’ municipalities that there is evidence of a significant increase (of 7.2%) in collaboration beyond the network, among non-veterans. In other words, while all likely line veterans exposed to Pétain’s direct command were more likely to be loyal and follow him into collaboration, it is only among those who were exposed to Pétain at Verdun that the effects diffuse beyond the veterans themselves to influence the political behaviours of the communities around them.

These patterns are consistent with *complementarity* in political influence within the network: the political influence of Pétain’s heroic credentials was stronger when legitimised and diffused through the network of those that served with him at Verdun, and they in turn became more influential the more their leader was viewed as a hero.

The presence of complementarities can help explain not only why the heroes of Verdun acquiesced in the demise of the Republic for which they had fought, but why some even became the staunchest supporters of the Nazis over time. If others who share heroic credentials are now considered traitors, this will reduce the value to each hero of their own heroic credentials and identity. This is particularly the case for the most public face of the network, Pétain. As a result, the heroes of Verdun had more incentives to support their leader: it was costlier to turn against him than for others who lacked their common group identity. Further, they faced greater incentives to participate in organisations and other reinforcing devices that strengthened the value of their heroic credentials and the network as a whole. And the more individuals that invest, the costlier it becomes to abandon the network.

These reinforcing incentives may explain the patterns of escalating commitment and persistence we observe in the data. Marcel Bucard, already mentioned, and Joseph Darnand provide useful concrete examples. Both were awarded medals for heroism by Pétain himself in World War I, and both were later inducted into the French Legion

of Honor.⁸ Both were active in veterans' organisations. Both followed a trajectory of escalating authoritarian leanings, and participated in extreme-right organisations during the inter-war period. Bucard was present at the riot in February 1934. After contesting the 1936 elections, his extreme-right Francisme party would be banned, only to resurface (under the same name) as a collaborationist party during the Vichy regime. Darnand would become active in the shadowy *Cagoule* (the 'Hood'), so-called because its terrorist and assassination tactics were reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. The *Cagoule* too would go underground in 1936, only to re-emerge as a legal organisation under Vichy as the *Mouvement Social Révolutionnaire* (MSR).

Yet, both men were staunchly anti-German. Both would join the French army in World War II, winning further recognition for heroism *fighting* German forces in 1939–40. But, with the advent of Pétain's Vichy regime, when other military men in the extreme right considered joining the Resistance, they would instead follow Pétain into collaboration.

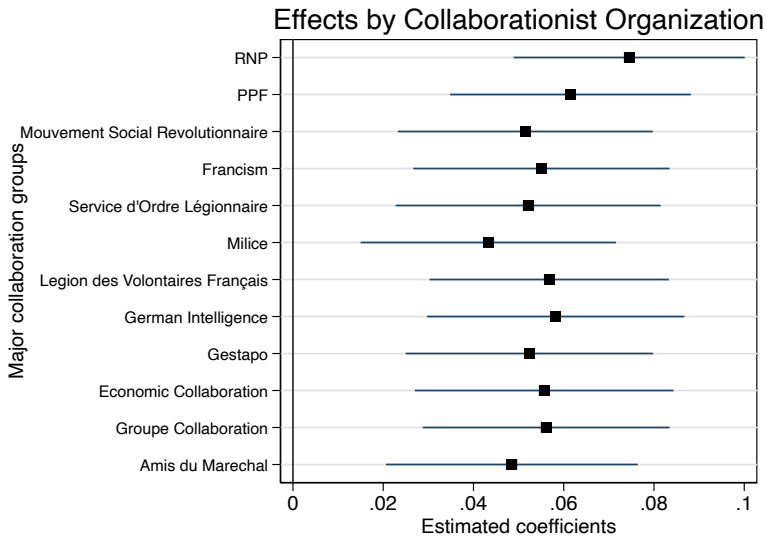
Darnand engaged in active discussions about joining the Resistance, but instead found a splinter group of veterans, the *Service d'Ordre Légionnaire*, that not only stayed loyal to Pétain after his overt collaboration with the Nazis but also provided shock troops for his regime. At Pétain's personal request, he went further, becoming the leader of the main paramilitary organisation, the *Milice*, founded in 1943 to hunt Jews and the Resistance. Despite the fact that the Germans were clearly losing, Darnand then swore personal allegiance to Hitler himself and joined the *Waffen SS*. He was executed for treason in 1945. In a letter to De Gaulle on the eve of his execution, Darnand pleaded that his *Milice* were "authentic Frenchmen, [whose] only mistake was to have been faithful to a great soldier [Pétain]". Bucard co-founded the LVF, a group of military volunteers to assist the Germans. He was executed in 1946.

Darnand and Bucard were not alone. Whether it be extremist groups that emerged during the polarised 1930s (like the *Cagoule*/MSR and Francisme), political parties forged under Vichy itself (like the RNP), direct German collaboration in the Gestapo or other organisations, or paramilitary and military groups that accepted French participants (like the SOL, *Milice* and later the *Waffen SS*), there is a consistent increase of about 5–6% in individuals participating in 'Verdun under Pétain' municipalities (Figure 7).⁹ This is despite the fact that some of these groups only accepted French participants in 1943–1944, when it was clear that the Nazis were losing and participating came with great risk.

8 Darnand enlisted in the army in 1916 was immediately sent to serve at Verdun under Pétain. Though Bucard had not served at Verdun under Pétain, he had served at Verdun (in October–December, as part of the 4e regiment) and he had developed ties with Pétain explicitly related to heroism. When Pétain awarded Bucard the *Croix de Guerre* for valor in 1917, he told him "I know your heroic behaviour and what your men think of you, it will be your greatest reward" (Deniel 1979).

9 It is also worth noting that the correlation between the 1936 vote share, coming from administrative data, and 1940–44 organisation members per capita, coming from the declassified collaborators file, for the one movement, Francisme, which had engaged in both forms of mobilisation, is reassuringly high ($\rho=0.86$).

FIGURE 7 INCREASE IN PER CAPITA PARTICIPATION IN MAJOR COLLABORATIONIST GROUPS IN 'VERDUN UNDER PETAIN' MUNICIPALITIES



Notes: This figure reports the effect (and 90% confidence interval) of a municipality's exposure to Verdun-under-Pétain on the participation in collaborationist groups. RNP stands for People's National Rally, PPF for French Popular Party, and SS for the military wing of the Nazi Schutzstaffel - the Waffen SS.

Source: Cagé et al. (2022).

Such continuation and escalation over time are consistent with the presence of complementarities in the network yielding reinforcing incentives. The complementarities can also explain why these preferences and identities proved durable in France, even after the collaborationist regime would fall, far-right parties were banned, and Pétain himself was convicted of high treason.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

In a different country, at a different time, mobilised by claims of a different rigged election, another armed mob gathered before the gates of a different State House. Concerned that the militia he commanded might themselves be politicised, the commander ascended the steps to talk to the crowd, unarmed and alone. *"Men, you wish to kill me, I hear,"* he said.

¹⁰ Pétain's deputy, Pierre Laval, was executed, along with a number of other high-ranking Vichy ministers. De Gaulle, who had served under Pétain in World War I, commuted Pétain's own sentence of execution to life imprisonment in recognition of Pétain's military contributions in World War I. Pétain's death in prison in 1951 sparked demonstrations in most French cities, orchestrated by veterans of Verdun (Williams 2005: 271). On how complementarities can induce momentum and persistence in technological adoption and organization, see Milgrom et al. (1991) and in political and social institutions, Jha (2018) and elsewhere in this eBook.

Killing is no new thing to me. I have offered myself to be killed many times, when I no more deserved it than I do now. Some of you, I think, have been with me in those days... I am here to preserve the peace and honour of this State, until the rightful government is seated—whichever it may be, it is not for me to say. But it is for me to see that the laws of this State are put into effect, without fraud, without force, but with calm thought and sincere purpose. I am here for that, and I shall do it. If anybody wants to kill for it, here I am. Let him kill!

Pullen (1999)

The commander who then threw open his coat to the mob in front of the Maine State House in 1880 was Joshua Chamberlain, who had commanded the 20th Maine Regiment that saved the Union line from being flanked at the Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg. In a made-for-Hollywood moment, a veteran in the crowd then jostled through to the front, saying: “By God, old General, the first man that dares to lay a hand on you, I’ll kill him on the spot”. The crowd then melted away (Pullen 1999).¹¹

Having demonstrated through (often immensely) costly sacrifice their willingness to give up their private wellbeing for the good of the country, it is not surprising that heroes, whether demonstrating sacrifice through war or through nonviolent civil disobedience, are sought after to represent the people in politics, and are trusted when they endorse a political position.¹² This source of legitimacy can and has been used to sway opinion and strengthen democracy. Heroes’ credentials for courage can also help them reach out and make peace.¹³ When embedded in networks of others with such shared identities, this can lead to a potent group of politically engaged and organised individuals who can support one another in diffusing democratic values and pro-social behaviour.¹⁴

But those whose patriotism is hard to question may also use these credentials to legitimise views that would otherwise be proscribed and beyond the pale of public discourse. As France’s experience shows, such networks can also be manipulated and lead to reinforcing incentives that can entrench extreme positions over time and make even those who do change their minds subject to sanctions and pressure from others within the network. This makes it harder for individuals to reverse course. Indeed, substantial evidence has emerged that numerous prominent Republicans, while expressing grave concern in private about the storming of the Capitol, subsequently refused to take such positions in

11 On the effects of leadership on unit cohesion in the civil war, including under Chamberlain’s command, see also Dippel and Ferrara (2020).

12 On the role of punishment for nonviolent actions acting as a screening device for political leadership, see Bhavnani and Jha (2012).

13 It is a common observation in international relations that politicians from relatively hawkish parties are, ironically, often better positioned to make politically risky overtures for peace with long-standing adversaries than their dovish counterparts. One example is Nixon’s famous rapprochement with China. However, our interpretation resonates with the greater set of options available to war heroes to shape politics regardless of party. For example, Yitzhak Rabin, a commando in Israel’s war of independence who rose to be the Army chief during Israel’s victory in the 6 Day War, was also able to pursue the Oslo Peace Accords as head of the centre-left Israeli Labour party.

14 For example, French veterans of the American War of Independence played an important role in spreading and defending democratic values in the constitutional phase of the French Revolution (Jha and Wilkinson 2019, and Jha and Wilkinson in progress).

public.¹⁵ History teaches us the power of leveraging the legitimacy of networks of heroes. These can have great destructive force. But they can also support democratic values and peace.

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15 See, for example, the “Then and Now: GOP lawmakers’ evolution on the Capitol riot”, Associated Press, 8 June 2022.

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