

# FRANCE: WWII

From WWII Student Campaign  
By William L. O'Neil

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## SEE ALSO

King, Ernest J.; Knox, William Franklin

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## FURTHER READING

Forrestal, James. *The Forrestal Diaries*. New York: Viking, 1951.  
Hoopes, Townsend, and Douglas Brinkley. *Driven Patriot: The Life and Times of James Forrestal*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

## France



When war broke out in 1939, France was one of the world's great powers and a leading industrial state. It still retained a vast colonial empire, with particularly large holdings in Africa and Southeast Asia. It was also a fully functioning democracy with a greatly admired high culture.

In the late 1930s, France had spent heavily on defense, with the result that it had large, well-equipped armed forces, including the world's fourth-largest fleet and a 5-million-man army. Its frontier with Germany was defended by the Maginot Line, a chain of modern, linked underground forts of unequal size and strength. The Maginot Line was at the time believed to be impossible to break. Further, France was allied with Britain, an even richer and more powerful state with a larger empire and the world's biggest navy. Unlike the situation in 1914, when it had few troops, Britain was raising a large army.

But France had great liabilities, too. France's population of 41 million was smaller than Britain's and barely half that of Germany. Its empire, like Britain's, was too large to defend—especially French Indochina.

Furthermore, French morale was poor. Unlike Germany, which under Hitler regained its nerve, France had never



recovered psychologically from its enormous losses in World War I. The attitude of the French Army reflected this loss of spirit. It thought only in defensive terms, although the best defense is the ability to deliver an effective counterattack. The French Army had done this in 1914, flanking a German host on the Marne River and saving France from defeat.

But there would be no "Miracle of the Marne" in World War II. When the German blitzkrieg (lightning war) struck in May 1940, France and Britain were defeated by an enemy inferior in numbers of men and tanks to the Allied force but superior in just about everything else.

As the western front collapsed, defeatists in the French cabinet refused Prime Minister Winston Churchill's request that the seat of government be moved to North Africa. From there, protected by its own fleet as well as the Royal Navy, and with an empire to draw on for men and material, France could have fought on.

Instead, France abandoned all resistance and signed a humiliating armistice with Germany. Most of France was annexed or occupied by the Germans, and Italy received a small occupation zone in the French Riviera. On July 10, 1940, the French National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to give control of

*Troops in an American armored car parade victoriously past the Arc de Triomphe during the liberation of France.*

French honor now resided in the tiny forces of Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, who escaped to Britain. There he set up a government in exile that was recognized by only a handful of small French colonies.

Pétain's government was called Vichy France, because of its location in the small resort city of Vichy, in the center of the country, where it had been forced to move when Paris became the seat of the German military government. Pétain and his followers regarded collaboration as the only course for France to take, because they assumed that Germany would win the war. In this spirit they faithfully obeyed German directives, passed anti-Semitic laws, and cooperated with the Gestapo (the police department of the SS) in rounding up Jewish refugees and shipping them to death camps. The Vichy government also consented to having 1.6 million French prisoners of war kept in Germany as workers. This amounted to slave labor and was a violation of the rules of war established by the Geneva Convention. And, when French resistance became active, the Vichy state assisted Germany's efforts to suppress it.

The Vichy government, together with French collaborators in the occupied zones, was of immense value to the German war effort, chiefly for economic reasons. By 1943 some 40 percent of France's economic output was going directly to the Germans. At least 55 percent of Vichy revenue went to Germany as payment for occupation costs.

Because of its prewar wealth and industry, France became by far Germany's most important supplier of raw materials, manufactured goods, and services.

put also went to the Germans. All told, France's contribution was equal to about one-quarter of the German gross national product. Without French cooperation on this massive scale, Germany would have been defeated much sooner.

Had the French authorities refused to collaborate, or had done so as little as possible, Germany would still have exploited the French economy, but much less effectively. This was demonstrated late in the war when the Vichy government began to collapse.

Despite its initial popularity, Vichy began to lose support as huge transfers of wealth to Germany drove down France's standard of living. The resistance movement grew in spite of savage German punishments. Low-level officials began refusing to obey orders, or in various ways undermined them. By June 1944, when the Allies invaded Normandy, Vichy was all but dead and the Germans were losing their grip on the French economy.

Germany never had the means to govern France directly and had to depend on collaborators for this. But when collaboration became a dirty word, Germany could maintain effective control only over the services essential to its army in France. And once the Allied invasion began, even this became difficult.

After D-Day, June 6, 1944, Charles de Gaulle established a temporary government manned by members of his Free French movement and leaders of the resistance organizations. Although de Gaulle remained firmly in charge, his government was broadly based and widely accepted. Fears that the conservative and high-handed de Gaulle would prevent the return of democracy proved unfounded.

Local elections were held in April and May 1944, a national election in October. De Gaulle accepted the results, even though more than 80 percent of the seats in France's new legislature went to left-wing parties, which opposed him.

At the time of France's liberation, one French army had been fighting with distinction in Italy for the better part of two years. After liberation de Gaulle formed a second army in France, basing it on the resistance fighters of the Maquis, an underground army that had fought the Germans in occupied France. As the First French Army it too fought with distinction as part of the U.S. 6th Army Group.

When the war ended, the French Army had a total of 18 divisions, a respectable force under the circumstances, though small compared to what France had fielded in 1939-40. Still, the French contribution to victory was sufficient for de Gaulle to demand, and be granted, an occupation zone in Germany alongside those of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. He was not invited to the critical Yalta conference in 1945, because France was still more of a dependent state than an equal ally. But in the years after the war France would rise again, thanks largely to de Gaulle, the Free French, and the resistance.

France lost more people in the war than either Britain or the United States, despite their larger populations. All told, including some resistance fighters and and 160,000 people were deported from France for political or racial reasons. The total French deaths, the majority of them civilians, came to some 600,000.

#### SEE ALSO

De Gaulle, Charles; France, Battle of; France, fall of

#### FURTHER READING

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- Tunis, John R. *His Enemy, His Friend*. New York: Morrow, 1967.