

Charlie Hebdo and the specter of Vichy: From Laval to Hollande

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16 January 2015

The past week's events in France—the systematic promotion of racist propaganda by the state, President François Hollande's invitation to fascistic National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen to the Elysée Palace, and the resurgence of the FN in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo*—have a troubling resonance with an earlier era of French history: the period of the Vichy regime.

In June 1940, less than two months after it invaded France, Nazi Germany defeated the French military forces and successfully entered an undefended Paris. On June 22, France and Germany signed an armistice and divided the country in two between the Nazi-occupied north and west, centered in Paris, and a formally unoccupied but collaborationist regime in the south, centered in Vichy.

The very rapid capitulation of the representatives of French business and the military to the Nazi onslaught was the outcome of a decision—mirroring one made 70 years earlier during the Franco-Prussian War—that the occupation of France was the best means of dealing with social opposition at home. Both the Nazi occupiers and their French collaborators carried out a brutal war against the working class. In addition to a vicious campaign that particularly targeted socialist opponents of social reaction and imperialist war, the Vichy regime participated fully in the racist and anti-Semitic propaganda of the German fascists, and helped deport tens of thousands of Jews to concentration camps.

The two principal figures in the Vichy Regime were Marshal Philippe Pétain, the “chief of state,” and Pierre Laval, who served first as vice president of the Council of Ministers, and later as head of government. Pétain embodied the reactionary, anti-Republican traditions of the French ruling class and military. Hailed for leading French troops at the battle of Verdun and crushing anti-

war mutinies during World War I, he was an ardent anti-Semite, tied to the regime of Spain's fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

Laval personified the corruption of the French “left,” a man whose political career easily transitioned from the Socialist Party to collaboration with the Nazis. Laval joined the 1920s “Cartel of the Left” government, before emerging in conservative governments during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He left parliament and shifted far to the right amidst an upsurge of working-class struggle, eventually positioning himself as a chief fascist collaborator. It was noted at the time that Laval's name was spelled the same backwards and forwards—a suitable expression of his spineless opportunism.

Following the war, Laval was put on trial and shot. Pétain was sentenced to death, but the sentence was suspended due to his old age. As a matter of fact, only a small number of the Nazi collaborators were held to account for their role in the Vichy government, for the simple reason that so much of the French political apparatus was implicated.

The example of Laval sheds light on the reactionary maneuvers of Hollande, another unprincipled manoeuvrer trained in the aftermath of the 1968 general strike by the ex-Vichy regime official, François Mitterrand. The Socialist Party had been reconstituted in the 1970s as an electoral vehicle for Mitterrand, now promoted as a candidate of the left.

For the past 35 years, what is erroneously called the French left has undergone a long downward spiral, culminating in the current President François Hollande and his prime minister, Manuel Valls, a man known above all for his mass deportation campaign against the Roma. For his right-wing policies, Hollande has justly become the most hated president in post-war French

history. Support for Hollande plunged to 12 percent in the polls last November—lower even than the current 16 percent approval rating in France for the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

While there are still many unanswered questions about the terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, it is absolutely clear that the French government is determined to utilize the atrocity to shift French politics even further to the right, implementing far-reaching attacks on democratic rights while ensuring that the French ruling class has a stake in the imperialist re-division of the world.

To create the political framework for this shift, the most reactionary social and political elements are again being mobilized—though, at least for the time being, the attack on Muslims has replaced the anti-Semitic propaganda of Vichy. *Charlie Hebdo* is being used as a tool in this project. In particular, the cartoons that the magazine has published, and that it published yet again in a state-financed issue released on Wednesday, are part of the deliberate whipping up of anti-Muslim racism.

Among the direct participants in this rotten political operation is that particularly sordid conglomeration of middle class philistines and self-satisfied opportunists that today passes for the “left” in France, including the New Anti-capitalist Party, which has long buttressed the Socialist Party, promoted Hollande, and had close relations with *Charlie Hebdo* itself.

The most direct political beneficiary is the fascistic National Front (FN) and Marine Le Pen, who was invited by Hollande to the Elysée Palace last week under the banner of “national unity.” Le Pen’s father and the founder of the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen, has repeatedly hailed the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, calling the Holocaust a mere “detail” of history.

Changing what needs to be changed, the union of Hollande and Le Pen reproduces that of Laval and Pétain. More than political opportunism is involved in this new alliance. The essential character of the French ruling class is re-emerging. In a period of deepening political crisis, it is recreating in new forms all the filthy practices in which it engaged when it stood side-by-side with Nazi Germany. The stench of Vichy hangs over the Elysée Palace.



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