

## Children and Vichy France: Pawns of Propaganda

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In July 1940, Philippe Pétain's authoritarian government took control of part of France until August 1944. Through those 4 years, many social, political and economic changes were made that affected the daily lives of people living in Vichy France, this impact weighed heavily on the lives of children as they often are the most vulnerable. Pétain, heading the government, was the one who was responsible for these changes, he began to change cultural symbols to help fit the new policies that were being implemented. Pétain used many different aspects of everyday life, including children and their education, to socially alter Vichy France. Their government used: propaganda, schools, social groups, the church, political policies, play and toys, and even Pétain himself to alter children's lives to fit the Vichy's new societal goals. This essay will investigate how Pétain and the Vichy regime influenced and altered every aspect of children's lives for National gain.

Many political and cultural policies had been enacted since the dawn of the third republic, such as policies incentivizing reproduction and large families,<sup>1</sup> but deciding who was qualified as a French citizen was largely controversial. Vichy France only allowed a child born of a French father to be a member of a ministerial cabinet, but this law was later expanded to include public servants, including teachers.<sup>2</sup> In October 1940, the teacher's union in Vichy, the Syndicate National des Instituteurs, was abolished. This was later replaced by state-run teacher's associations as well as a special teacher's training college that followed Vichy's education

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<sup>1</sup> Nimisha Barton, 2020, *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France, 1880-1945*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1126368427>, np.

<sup>2</sup> Joel E. Vessels, 2010, *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>, 74.

curriculum.<sup>3</sup> The Syndicate National was politically powerful before the war, but the Vichy regime desired further control over education and used teachers to assert that control.<sup>4</sup> By ensuring that only those born of a French father could be teachers and controlling France's teachers' organizations, the Vichy government was setting the political and social stage for an ideological shift. Pétain was used as a political puppet by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government; as a result, Pétain's used many of Hitler's policies and even Mussolini's policies. One of the important points in Hitler, Mussolini, and Pétain's educational policies was binding schools and the military closely together, although Pétain was not as successful as his political counterparts.<sup>5</sup> One interesting cultural shift that was enacted by the Vichy government was the presentation of female national symbols of Marianne and Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc), presented by Eric Jennings in the *Journal of Contemporary History*. Before the war, these symbols were perceived as bitter rivals, with one adopted by republican or left-wing nationalists and the other by integral nationalists. Jeanne d'Arc was abandoned by the Third Republic as they believed she represented and evoked sentiments of patriotism, anti-clericalism, mysticism, Anglophobia, anti-Semitism, imperialism and anti-feminism. In the third republic, Marianne was the primary figurehead, but once the Vichy regime came to power, they brought back Jeanne d'Arc as a figurehead, particularly in the French school curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Notably, Jeanne d'Arc was featured as a political figure in the creation of propaganda that was specially designed for children.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Atkin, "The Challenge to Laïcité: Church, State and Schools in Vichy France, 1940-1944," *The Historical Journal* 35, no. 1 (1992): 151–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639483>, 158.

<sup>4</sup> Atkin, "The Challenge to Laïcité: Church, State and Schools in Vichy France, 1940-1944," *The Historical Journal* 35, no. 1 (1992): 151–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639483>, 157.

<sup>5</sup> I. L. Kandel "The Vichy Government and Education in France," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (1915-1955) 27, no. 1 (1941): 88–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40219184>, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Jennings, "'Reinventing Jeanne': The Iconology of Joan of Arc in Vichy Schoolbooks, 1940-44," *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 711–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260683>, 711.

Although there was no minister of propaganda in Pétain's government, children were nevertheless subjected to vigorous propaganda which recognized children's importance to the National Resolution ideologies.<sup>7</sup> Lebovics uses the term "Fascist Realism" to describe much of the artwork produced in the first two years of the regime and said it was a "purification and Frenchification of art."<sup>8</sup> Along with the "purification" of art, many Children's storybooks were altered to adhere to the Vichy narratives of gender, family and society. Judith Proud detailed the effect that this wary and cynical atmosphere had on the illustrated children's storybook, with the fairy-tale genre warped to fit the characters and desires of Vichy's National Revolution."<sup>9</sup> Young children living under the Vichy regime began to see Vichy politics affecting all aspects of their lives, from political policies affecting their schools to the books and media they were consuming. Interestingly, children were even part of the propaganda themselves. A photo taken in 1944 depicts a group of children staring up with admiration in their eyes as a gloved hand reaches into the frame, getting ready to shake the child's hand. The gloved hand is none other than Pétain wearing his signature gloves, giving his signature handshakes. This photo was circulated throughout 1944 to demonstrate the trust and admiration children had for their leader.<sup>10</sup> It is common to use children in propaganda photographs to demonstrate the trustworthiness of an individual. This propaganda is attempting to show Pétain as a person who not just loves children, but is someone who is loved by children. The photograph was circulated in newspapers, meaning

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<sup>7</sup> Joel E. Vessels. 2010. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>. 73; Lindsey Dodd. "Children's Citizenly Participation in the National Revolution: The Instrumentalization of Children in Vichy France." *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 24, no. 5 (2017): 759–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2017.1282433>. 1

<sup>8</sup> Vessels, "Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic," 73.

<sup>9</sup> Vessels, "Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic," 83.

<sup>10</sup> Judith K. Proud. *Pétain and school children, 1944, Children and Propaganda* (London Road, Oxford: Intellect books, 1995). 6.

it was accessible to children of almost all ages as it does not require any amount of literacy.<sup>11</sup>

Through this photograph, children were able to see themselves represented in media and began to see Pétain as a positive figure in their lives. Although propaganda was found in almost all areas of society at the time, school was one of the most critical areas.

Joel Vessels argues, “While Pétain... believed the schools were to blame for corrupting France's youth under the Third Republic, the government's intention was to make schools into a place that carried the tenants of the national revolution to the youngest, most impressionable, members of the French nation.”<sup>12</sup> Pétain and his government saw the importance youth had in the Vichy regime, along with the impact that schools had on a child’s perspective of government and society. To this end, Pétain altered the existing 36-year ban on religious education.<sup>13</sup> By lifting this ban, it allowed for both religious education to be taught and allowed for religious encroachment on public education, as the church had a strong interest in children and the youth as a means to incorporate religion into everyday life.<sup>14</sup> Cardinal Shuard saw his task as preventing the future dechristianization of France and believed that the key to that success lay in the Christian education of the young,” with Pétain agreeing with Shuard that Christian beliefs should be at the heart of teaching.<sup>15</sup> Along with religious encroachment on public education, Pétain attempted to follow in the footsteps of his political counterparts in Europe, Mussolini and Hitler, by binding the schools and the army closer together, though he is generally considered to have failed.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that primary schools only accounted for children aged 6 to

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<sup>11</sup> Proud, “Petain and school children, 1944, Children and Propaganda,” 6.

<sup>12</sup> Vessels, “Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic,” 79.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Atkin. “The Challenge to Laïcité: Church, State and Schools in Vichy France, 1940-1944,” *The Historical Journal* 35, no. 1 (1992): 151–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639483>, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Atkin, “The Challenge to Laïcité: Church, State and Schools in Vichy France, 1940-1944,” 151.

<sup>15</sup> Atkin, “The Challenge to Laïcité: Church, State and Schools in Vichy France, 1940-1944,” 155.

<sup>16</sup> Kandel “The Vichy Government and Education in France,” 89.

14, as only a fraction continued past mandated education into secondary education.<sup>17</sup> The government only had a small amount of time to indoctrinate the youth through education, resulting in the expansion of indoctrination techniques. The limitation of who could be a teacher, the new impact the church had on schools, and changes to the curriculum that is taught in schools, all allowed for the integration of Vichy propaganda into the education system and classes. However, it was not just educational settings that Pétain's government intervened in as the Vichy regime infiltrated children's free time and their social lives.

In 1943, a booklet was published describing how schools and youth organizations were places where children were in danger of falling under Jewish and or Masonic spells.<sup>18</sup> Resulting in the creation of youth groups to further expand governmental involvement in children's lives. Youth groups were used to censor further and control children living under the Vichy regime and perpetuate Vichy narratives. Their intention was to create a place that carried the tenants of the national revolution to its youngest and most impressionable members of the French nation.<sup>19</sup> The Vichy regime "Never missed an opportunity to use children to embed the regime firmly into French society, the propagandists also saw the fundraising potential of harnessing children's love for Pétain which they so assiduously cultivated."<sup>20</sup> As described above, the regime capitalized and used children's love for Pétain not just for social gain, but also for economic profit. Youth groups such as the Compagnons de France would sell calendars, and other tchotchkes

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<sup>17</sup> Joel E. Vessels. 2010. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Vessels, "Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic," 82.

<sup>19</sup> Vessels, "Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic," 79.

<sup>20</sup> Lindsey Dodd. "Children and Charity in Vichy France ." *University of Leeds Agents of the Future Promise: Children's Burden of Benefit*, May 6, 2015. <https://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk/tag/france/.np>

emblazoned with images of Pétain, his speeches and other Vichy slogans.<sup>21</sup> The drive to not just create organizations for unification with the Vichy regime, but also as a means to create profit for the Vichy regime demonstrates the drive Pétain and his government had to not just indoctrinate but to use the youth as a means of social change. This system of propaganda instilled a patriotic love for France and its leader in these children and influenced their subsequent desire to participate in the renewal of France.<sup>22</sup> One example is the Secretariat General à la Jeunesse. Pétain created the Secretariat General à la Jeunesse organization as a means to unify youth ages 14-21, stating, “youth is the essential and principal agent of any national restoration.”<sup>23</sup> This explicitly states Pétain’s perception of the political and social purpose of children in the short and long-term existence of a nation. Understanding that Pétain saw the shortcomings in solely relying on the system of education to indoctrinate the youth, the creation of a youth organization was seen as a reasonable next step within the Vichy Regime.

Furthermore, Pétain played a very important role in incorporating youth into the Vichy regime. Pétain, similar to many politicians, was known for their speeches. In one of his speeches said, “France is proud of its children who are heroically accomplishing [in] a land far away, a soldier’s duty,”<sup>24</sup> it is telling that he uses children to describe the men who were off fighting. The use of the word children in reference to soldiers indicates that being a soldier is something children were capable of being for the regime. Furthering the children's belief, there was something they could and should do for their country. The photo mentioned above, with Pétain

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<sup>21</sup> Joel E. Vessels. 2010. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>. 73

<sup>22</sup> “Tag Archive: France.” France: Agents of Future Promise. Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk/tag/france/>. np

<sup>23</sup> Joel E. Vessels. 2010. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>. 78

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Claude Barbas. “Philippe Pétain, la Guerre Racontée Aux Français 17 Juin 1940 - 20 Août 1944.” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, no. 184 (1996): 129–44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25732383>. 140

reaching out his hand to greet a group of youth living under the Vichy regime,<sup>25</sup> is a great message of how Pétain aspired to be viewed by youth. This photo was chosen to be circulated to reinforce to Pétain and the citizens in Vichy, France, how he viewed himself in relation to the nation. Also, as mentioned above, in relation to social groups, many of the social groups would sell items with Pétain's slogans or pictures on them,<sup>26</sup> further instilling Pétain's importance in the regime as these items were sold for economic profit, insinuating to children Pétain's image will save their nation. Children were also involved in essay and letter-writing campaigns to Pétain, although some children wrote to Pétain of their own volition, and every child who wrote a letter received a reply from Pétain.<sup>27</sup> This harnessed a child's love for Pétain, which he and his propagandists so carefully cultivated.<sup>28</sup> The children were encouraged to draw a picture in their letters of a little corner of France that they love the most. Interestingly, Pétain received two million drawings from children in the 'Free Zone' of France.<sup>29</sup> Further, illustrates the long-reaching effects these campaigns had on the youth, not just in Vichy but all throughout France, demonstrating children's "patriotic love for their country and their leader Marshal Pétain and their desire to participate in the renewal of France."<sup>30</sup> It was not just organized activities for children that were becoming militarized or impacted by the politics of the time, children were being encouraged to interact with Pétain through letters and Pétain's assistance where replying to the letters while Pétain himself was interacting with the youth of the nation through speeches.

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<sup>25</sup> P Judith K. Proud. Pétain and school children, 1944, *Children and Propaganda* (London Road, Oxford: Intellect books, 1995). 6

<sup>26</sup> Joel E. Vessels. 2010. *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/642205568>. 73

<sup>27</sup> Tag Archive: France." France: Agents of Future Promise. Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk/tag/france/>. np

<sup>28</sup> Lindsey Dodd. "Children and Charity in Vichy France ." University of Leeds Agents of the Future Promise: Children's Burden of Benefit, May 6, 2015. <https://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk/tag/france/.np>

<sup>29</sup> "Tag Archive: France." France: Agents of Future Promise. np

<sup>30</sup> "Tag Archive: France." France: Agents of Future Promise. np

A Child's play often revolves around a child's life: the things they see, experience, and hear in day-to-day life. Knowing what effects would the Vichy regime have on the children's play is telling of a child's perspectives of their life and relation to the regime. The Vichy Regime reached into children's schools, social lives and events, and clearly affected most aspects of children's lives. At the beginning of the occupation of France, the Comity National de L'Enfant released a Dr Schreiber's "Snakes and Ladders" game. This game was devised to give the population living under the regime an overall view of the Vichy government's family policies and familiarise female players with the tasks they would accomplish later in life as mothers. With main themes such as personal hygiene, morals, education and the care of babies. Featuring text on the board such as "I'm putting clothes on my dolly; when I grow up i'll dress my children myself."<sup>31</sup> These heavily gendered games were designed to be a pastime for children while instilling the Vichy Regime's morals on children, often without them even realizing it. While the older kids were writing letters to Pétain the younger children were interacting with games such as the young girls and their "Snakes and Ladders" game.<sup>32</sup> Unsurprisingly, gendered roles also existed for children, the December 1939 Bon Marche department store listed in its Christmas catalogue a Maginot Line kit that included toy army trucks, and officer costumes, as well as the following year's catalogue included weapons, tanks, uniforms, and toy soldiers.<sup>33</sup> These toys were gendered towards boys, demonstrating at the time how boys were expected to be more aggressive and masculine and expected to have the aspiration to serve the Vichy Regime when they got older. That same catalogue also featured an advertisement showing a line of tin soldiers

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<sup>31</sup> Lindsey Dodd, and David Lees. 2018. *Vichy France and Everyday Life: Confronting the Challenges of Wartime, 1939-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1032070736>. 21

<sup>32</sup> Tag Archive: France." France: Agents of Future Promise. Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk/tag/france/>. np

<sup>33</sup> Lindsey Dodd, and David Lees. 2018. *Vichy France and Everyday Life: Confronting the Challenges of Wartime, 1939-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1032070736>. 22



behind a doll who is knitting with the caption 'we knit for them.'<sup>34</sup> With many other examples of toys connected to military and war themes, It is essential to keep in mind many families could not afford to buy new toys during the Second World War. So, it is likely that these advertisements were just another form of propaganda. Although militarized toys were inaccessible there is documentation of children's play connecting to the war. As seen by a Marseille School inspector, two girls playing 'queue' waiting for food rations describe having to go home with no food to their children with no rations.<sup>35</sup> With Vichy France struggling with malnutrition and deficiency diseases at the time, this is a very telling account.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most disturbing part of this propaganda is the fact that children's play connected to the Social and political climate of Vichy France was that children did not know the implications of their play.

In conclusion, Pétain's government undoubtedly had a wide-reaching effect on the lives of Children in Vichy. Petain laid the foundation for his subversion of children by limiting who could become a teacher and by including military and religious elements in education. In addition, despite Vichy not having a designated minister of propaganda, many different kinds of propaganda influenced every aspect of children's lives, from toys to letter-writing campaigns. The government began to use schools, and social groups as tenants of the national revolution. Furthermore, Pétain used himself as a symbol or a father figure for children, which Vichy France exploited for financial and social gain throughout the regime. The impact these policies had on the children is visible through their play, and their games, store-bought or organic play, depicts

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<sup>34</sup> Lindsey Dodd, and David Lees. 2018. *Vichy France and Everyday Life: Confronting the Challenges of Wartime, 1939-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://unb.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1032070736>. 23

<sup>35</sup> Lindsey Dodd, and David Lees. 2018. *Vichy France and Everyday Life*. 27

<sup>36</sup> Harold C. Stuart. "Review of the Evidence as to the Nutritional State of Children in France." *American Journal of Public Health and the Nations Health* 35, no. 4 (1945): 299-307. 300

how children and their lives were influenced by the Vichy regime, culminating in every aspect of children's lives being influenced and manipulated by the Vichy Regime.

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