

Pétain's Last Trump

*Maxime Weygrand's New Roll
Is Far More Important Than
His Personality, Which is
Today Widely Over-Rated*



by HEINZ POL

IT WAS at the time of the *Cagoulard* affair, a military revolutionary plot which was exposed in the fall of 1937. A few of us foreign journalists in Paris had gone to interview General Maxime Weygand, then retired on a pension from his post as commander-in-chief of the French Army.

Small and delicate, with sly foxy eyes, his fragile body attired in immaculate black civilian clothes, Weygand glanced with studied contempt over the table at which we sat.

"The *Cagoullards*, gentlemen," he said softly, in a sharp, high-pitched voice that betrayed years of issuing orders,—“oh, yes, the *Cagoullards*. I learned of their existence only through the newspapers and the radio. Since the Popular Front Government came into power, even innocent Frenchmen are suspected of mysterious political activities. As for myself, gentlemen, I play my daily game of tennis, I ride, I fence, I read books, and for the rest devote myself to my family. *Voilà tout*. I can tell you nothing further.”

Weygrand

We journalists looked at each other, sadly pocketing our notebooks. The big Swede who represented a string of Scandinavian newspapers muttered: "The man hasn't said a single word that's true."

Maxime Weygand, then 70 and today 74, not only looked and still looks like a man in his fifties, but lives the life of a man in his fifties. For decades he had been tennis champion of the French officers' corps, and in later years it was his burning ambition to play a match with King Gustaf of Sweden, who was his senior. But such pleasant preoccupations by no means have fully pre-empted Weygand's time. Another hobby, never discussed publicly is his interest in high affairs of state. It is this interest, coupled with his ambition and an almost grotesque sensitivity, that accounts for his position today as the most mysterious figure in a World War not lacking in eccentric characters.

ITALIAN FASCISM gave tremendous impetus to Weygand. In 1927 he charged Colonel de la Rocque, then still unknown, with the task of forming an exclusive league of front-line veterans—the *Croix de Feu*, which was to become the germ-cell of French Fascism. The *Croix de Feu* was entirely Weygand's own, original creation. True, he himself managed to stay in the background. But in 1935, when he attained the age limit for retirement, the wave of popular opinion had swept so far to the left in France that even Laval and Flandin, who were then at the helm, did not dare to extend Weygand's term of office over the protests of the left.

Weygand never forgave the decision to allow him to retire, though he was far too shrewd to believe that it was made because his military qualities went unappreciated. He knew that the real reason was that his political intentions were distrusted. The forces opposed to democracy, quick to utilize his hate and disappointment, drew him deeper and deeper into their circles. When the Popular Front Government was

Weygrand

swept into power in 1936, there was no question at all that men like Weygand were the logical organizers of a counter-movement.

There were stacks of files under the heading of "Cagoulard Affair" at police headquarters and the Ministry of the Interior. The evidence shows that Marshal Pétain sanctioned the *Cagoulard* movement, promising his wholehearted support in the event it succeeded, while Weygand actually played an active part—as instructor of those officers who were ready to join the Government and direct it along military lines.

The fact that Pétain and Weygand, immediately after the armistice, arrested Daladier, Gamelin, Blum and Mandel resulted not merely from a search for scapegoats for the collapse. It was desirable to silence men who knew too much about the *Cagoulards* and their backers.

Thus, eventually, when the *Cagoulard* affair petered out, Weygand went untouched. There were very practical reasons for leaving him his aura. Except for Gamelin, about whose purely military capacity there was always a certain doubt, there was not a single senior officer in the French Army to whom a leading position could have been entrusted in the event of war. Thus Weygand was kept in reserve, even though it was known he had turned pessimist. To anyone who cared to listen he declared: "Democracies can no longer wage war against authoritarian states. Before we can undertake anything, we must first drive out the parliament."

At the outbreak of the war, Weygand went to Syria in supreme command even of the British forces led by General Wavell. The step involved more than purely military considerations. Weygand was to try to impress the Italians. In January 1940 he flew to Paris for a council of war. At the same time Pétain, then ambassador to Madrid, arrived in Paris, and the two generals both pressed the Government to conclude a negotiated peace. Wey-

Weygand

gand spoke contemptuously of the British forces in Syria and the "utterly incompetent Wavell" who had dared to submit proposals to him, Weygand. Paris was unable to arrive at any decisions, but in May both men had to be hurriedly recalled, for the Germans stood deep in northern France. Now the situation was changed. The Ministers lost their heads and pleaded with Weygand to attempt the impossible. Two weeks later Weygand declared to Reynaud, who was on the verge of collapse: "It is too late to change the inner structure of France and continue the war. We must conclude peace and free France of what has hurled it to destruction." It was the way to Compiègne and Vichy.

WEYGAND did not long remain in Vichy. His hatred of all politicians out of uniform is genuine and knows no bounds. He went to Africa to save the military resources of the colonial empire. With their help Pétain was to be made strong enough to maintain a military dictatorship of monarchist and clerical complexion.

This rôle of Weygand's is of far greater importance than his personality, which is widely overrated today. Twenty-five years ago he was an agile chief of staff, capable of clear, mathematical thought. But so far as politics is concerned, Weygand, today, is a hopeless dilettante. Moreover, despite his riding and tennis-playing, his one-time energy has vanished. If Weygand had had a strategic plan, he would have struck six months ago from Morocco.

A French friend of mine, who until recently worked directly under Weygand, reported his last impressions of the man to me.

"Weygand? A broken man, though he carries himself well and seems as elastic as ever. He is tireless, without ever accomplishing anything. He inspects the troops, holds conferences with the civilian authorities, and for the rest waits for reports from Vichy and his daily telephone conversation with Marshal Pétain. Yes, quite true,

Weygrand

he holds the key position; but at the same time, he has been shunted to a siding. What will happen to him, if anything, depends on Berlin, or Rome, or Madrid—indeed, on Vichy rather than on himself.”

Surely it is part of the tragedy of France that with all its misfortunes it is cursed with politicians and generals who are old men—old men always lacking in wisdom and utterly lacking in strength. As for Weygand, his only strength always did lie in playing second fiddle. “The shadow of Foch,” Clemenceau contemptuously called him twenty-five years ago. Today he is the shadow of Pétain — himself but a shadow.

Heinz Pol, born 40 years ago in Berlin, was one of the editors there of the liberal newspaper, Vossische Zeitung. Arrested by the Nazis on the night of the Reichstag fire, he escaped to Czecho-Slovakia and then to France. In Paris, as editor of a news agency, he became acquainted with all the chief figures of the French Republic. His escape from France was effected only a few days before her collapse. Author of several books burned by the Nazis, his first American book, Suicide of a Democracy, reveals the inside story of France's fall.

—Suggestions for further reading:

ALL GAUL IS DIVIDED

Anonymous

\$1.00

The Greystone Press, Inc., New York

FRANCE, MY COUNTRY

by J. Maritain

\$1.25

Longmans, Green & Co., New York

TRAGEDY IN FRANCE

by André Maurois

\$2.00

Harper & Brothers, New York



Coronet

May, 1941 * p. 66