The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 379
“How Green Is My Ally”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the dark of midnight, November 8, 1942, an Anglo-American naval force, at that time one of the largest armadas ever assembled, was slipping through the waves toward French North Africa. Aboard the ships, soldiers prepared for action. In Germany, Adolf Hitler fumed at his inability to stop them. In Algiers, the US consul was mobilizing an unlikely alliance of Jewish resistance fighters and disgruntled French Army officers, whom he hoped could clear the way for the coming invasion.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 379. How Green Is My Ally.

When we left off last time, just after midnight on November 8, 1942, the US consul in Algiers, Robert Murphy, had just heard a code message broadcast over the BBC Overseas Service that was directed to him: “Hello, Robert. Franklin is coming.”

That meant Operation Torch was a “go” and the landings would begin at dawn. Murphy reached out to the network he had built, and about 400 Jewish Resistance fighters moved across Algiers, quickly securing the local French Army headquarters, the radio station, the telephone exchange, and the Villa des Oliviers, the residence of General Alphonse Juin, commander of French Army forces in North Africa.

Murphy joined the Resistance fighters at the Villa, where they awakened the sleeping Juin, informed him that they had seized control of Algiers and that American soldiers would be landing at dawn, and invited the sleepy and bewildered general to switch sides and join the fight against the Axis. So far so good. Everything was going according to plan. Then Juin threw them a curve ball. He announced that he could make no decision without first consulting with his superior, Admiral Darlan, who was here in Algiers.

Say what?

Allow me to remind you that we've met Darlan several times before. He was commander-in-chief of the French Navy, and in that role instrumental in the quasi-military coup that led to the resignation of French prime minister Paul Reynaud and the appointment of Philippe Pétain as his successor, who immediately asked the Germans for an armistice.

After the armistice, Darlan became commander-in-chief of the whole of the French military. He answered to no one but Pétain himself and was one of the most powerful figures in the Vichy government; arguably the most powerful after Marshal Pétain himself. He served for a time as the Vichy government's foreign minister, and in that capacity had negotiated the deal that allowed Germany and Italy to use airfields in Syria in 1941.

Coincidentally, Darlan was in Algiers when Operation Torch began. He was there to visit his son, Alain, who had contracted polio. Murphy sent a car to collect Darlan and bring him to the Villa. The admiral was a short man with a prominent chin who always had a pipe in his mouth. These characteristics, plus his naval background, inspired the Americans to refer to him as "Popeye" behind his back.

Murphy tried to persuade Admiral Darlan and General Juin that the American invasion was looming, resistance was futile (to coin a phrase), and he might as well accept the inevitable and order the French military in North Africa not to resist.

Then the other Resistance group turned up; the one made up of disgruntled Army officers. They decided to take Darlan and Juin into custody, which muddied the waters a bit, but then a short time after that, the police arrived. They freed Darlan and Juin and arrested the Resistance members. They also took into custody Robert Murphy, the American consul, which was a violation of diplomatic protocol, though at this point I think it would be fair to say he was guilty of actions inconsistent with his diplomatic status.

British and American soldiers landed at dawn on beaches east and west of Algiers. The landings were a bit chaotic, with some units landing in the wrong places, but the French put up little resistance, thanks in part to those disgruntled Army officers Murphy had recruited. The toughest fighting was at the port, where a British destroyer flying a US flag rushed the harbor, braving enemy fire, and was able to land 250 US Army Rangers who seized the port facilities.

French forces in Algiers surrendered at 6:00 that evening.

You could summarize the landings at Algiers by saying they were haphazard, but ultimately successful, since the will to resist of the French forces standing against them ranged from feeble to nonexistent. As for the other two landings, you can only say they were haphazard. The invasion forces landed without the shore bombardment that usually precedes an amphibious invasion, because the Allies didn't want to antagonize the French. They hoped the French would not resist. These hopes were soon dashed.

At Oran, a similar attempt by British destroyers to rush the port failed. The beach landings were complicated when the offshore waters proved to be shallower than expected. Royal Navy ships shelled the French defenders, but they held out against the invaders.

The assault on Oran is notable because it was the first time the United States Army attempted an airborne assault. A battalion of the 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment flew from Cornwall, in England, across Spain, toward its goals: two airfields south of Oran. The operation was marred by mistakes. Most of the 39 C-47 Dakota transports involved in the drop got lost. Thirty of them landed in the desert some distance from their objectives. One landed at Gibraltar. Three landed in Spanish Morocco; the Spanish interned the flight crews and paratroopers for a few months.

Casablanca was the main French naval base on the Atlantic Ocean. Pro-Allied French military in Casablanca attempted to seize control of the city, but failed. Now warned that an Allied invasion was imminent, the commander at Casablanca had the shore guns at the ready and French naval vessels sortied to intercept the Allied invasion fleet, led by the US Navy battleship USS *Massachusetts*. The smaller French naval force was defeated and the troops landed on the coast above and below Casablanca, but as at Oran, French forces in the city resisted.

I told you last week that Free French commander Charles de Gaulle had been kept in the dark about Operation Torch. They finally told him about the landings when he awoke that morning. His initial response to the news was to exclaim, "I hope the Vichy people will throw them into the sea. You don't get France by burglary!" But by that evening, de Gaulle was on board with the invasion. He made a radio broadcast calling on the French in North Africa to lay down their arms. So did US President Franklin Roosevelt, who spoke fluent French.

Like de Gaulle, General Henri Giraud, at Gibraltar, had swallowed his pride and agreed to support the Americans. He flew to Algiers the next day, November 9, and made his own radio broadcast calling on French forces to lay down their arms. The French defenders at Oran and Casablanca ignored him, as they had ignored de Gaulle and Roosevelt.

Also on the ninth, in Munich, Adolf Hitler met with Italian foreign minister Count Ciano. Recall that Hitler had been relatively generous in the armistice terms he'd offered France in 1940 because he'd wanted to deny the Allies the use of French colonial territories. A portion of France had been left unoccupied and a French government permitted to function precisely so it could command the loyalty of French military forces in the colonies and order them to remain neutral in the war against Britain. Now that the British had occupied Syria and Lebanon and the Americans were in North Africa, Germany no longer benefitted from the arrangement. Hitler and the count agreed that Germany would occupy the previously unoccupied zone of France, Italy would take control of Corsica, and together their two nations would land soldiers in Tunis to hold off the Anglo-American force to the west.

In French North Africa, it became increasingly clear that the only person who could plausibly order the French military to cease combat and accept Allied occupation was Darlan. Admiral

Darlan was the commander-in-chief of the French military and therefore had the formal authority to issue such an order. The price he demanded for defecting to the Allies was the title of High Commissioner of France in Africa. In other words, he would be the supreme civilian authority in both French North Africa and French West Africa, in addition to being the supreme military authority in both places.

It was either that or send green American soldiers into the streets of Oran and Casablanca to engage in Stalingrad-style urban combat against an enemy far more familiar with those towns than they were. On November 10, Darlan issued the order; all French military forces in North and West Africa were to end hostilities and co-operate fully with the Americans and the British.

French prime minister Pierre Laval had been summoned to Munich on the 10th to discuss the situation with Hitler and Ciano. By the time he arrived, the news of the Allied deal with Darlan had already been announced, and the two Axis leaders were suspicious that Pétain and his government had made a secret deal with the Americans. Hitler told Laval there was only one way the French government could prove its integrity: declare war on Britain and the United States, which was the duty of any neutral nation subjected to an unprovoked attack by a belligerent.

This Laval refused to do. Marshal Pétain would declare Darlan a traitor, and the Vichy government was prepared to break diplomatic relations with the United States and allow Axis soldiers to enter French North Africa, but that was as far as Laval was willing to go.

That was tantamount to siding with the enemy, as far as Hitler was concerned. Since the French government in Vichy could not or would not exercise control over its colonial forces, its further existence served no German purpose. Also, the Western Allies were in the Mediterranean now, and the French had just demonstrated they would not resist them. That meant France's Mediterranean coast was wide open to an Allied invasion.

The German and Italian militaries already had a plan drawn up and ready to go to occupy France, Plan Anton, which was put into motion the next day, November 11. Hitler wrote a letter to Pétain, explaining that the occupation was not intended as an expression of hostility to either Pétain personally or to the French nation, but merely an expedient to protect French soil from an Anglo-American invasion. Germany would continue to recognize the government in Vichy and Pétain as its leader.

Despite these assurances, when the Wehrmacht entered unoccupied France, the French military was swiftly disarmed. The French government in Vichy was still the recognized government, officially, and Pétain was the recognized chief of the French state, officially, but in reality neither mattered much anymore.

The German move into unoccupied France gave Darlan an opening in Algiers. He could now declare that the French Chief of State was in the power of the German military and susceptible to

German pressure, and that for this reason Darlan, as commander-in-chief of the French military, had no alternative but to declare Pétain incapacitated and assume the leadership of the French government himself.

The French in North Africa had ended their resistance, but American military leaders were still concerned about neighboring powers and how they might regard Operation Torch. Franklin Roosevelt sent personal letters to the Sultan of Morocco, Muhammad V, the Bey of Tunis, Ahmad II, the President of Portugal, Óscar Carmona, and the *Caudillo* of Spain, Francisco Franco, assuring each of them that the presence of US military forces in North Africa was in no way intended as a threat to any of them, nor was it a precursor to military action against any of their nations. Roosevelt pledged that the United States would withdraw its forces from North Africa immediately upon the end of the conflict with Germany.

It was Spain that worried the Americans the most, but Franklin Roosevelt had kept the United States neutral during the Spanish Civil War, a policy that was not popular at home, even within his own political party. Surely Franco owed him one. The *Caudillo's* reply eased their concerns. He wrote, "I can assure you that Spain knows the value of peace and sincerely desires peace for itself and all other peoples." That's diplomacy-speak for "There is no way in hell I'm going to get mixed up in another war."

Roosevelt was not happy with the Darlan Deal, as it came to be known. He cabled General Eisenhower and told him:

I want you to know that I appreciate fully the difficulties of your military situation. I am therefore not disposed to in any way question the action you have taken…However, I think you should know and have in mind the following policies of this government:

1) *That we do not trust Darlan.*
2) *That it is impossible to keep a collaborator of Hitler and the one whom we believe to be a fascist in civil power longer than is absolutely necessary.*
3) *His movements should be watched carefully and his communications supervised.*

Meanwhile, in Libya, the Axis retreat continued. On November 13, Montgomery's Eighth Army recaptured Tobruk. Remember when the fall of Tobruk to the Axis had been seen as an Allied disaster? What a difference four months can make.

The occupation of what used to be unoccupied France, while it had serious repercussions for the people who lived there, meant little to the overall strategic situation, with one clear exception: the French naval forces based at Toulon.

French naval units stationed at Toulon represented a significant naval force: three battleships, four heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, 28 destroyers, 20 submarines, and a number of smaller

craft. The Germans and Italians very much wanted one of three things: either that the French Navy join the Axis and battle the Allies in the Mediterranean, or failing that, that German forces could take control of the ships, assign German or Italian crews to them and use them against the Allies themselves. Or, if neither of these were possible, then the fleet must be scuttled rather than allow it to survive and defect to the Allies.

The Allied calculation was much the same. Allied naval commanders would have been ecstatic had the French Navy treated the entry of German soldiers into unoccupied France as a breach of the armistice—which it was—and left Toulon for North Africa to reenter the war. The day after the Allies agreed to the Darlan Deal, Admiral Darlan issued an order to the fleet at Toulon to do exactly that, but the fleet disregarded it. Marshal Pétain declared Darlan a traitor and replaced him as commander-in-chief of the French military. More important, the commander of the fleet at Toulon, Admiral Jean de Laborde, was loyal to the Vichy government and a longtime rival of Admiral Darlan. He keep his fleet docked at Toulon; his orders from Pétain were to deny any foreign military permission to enter the naval base or access French ships, and in the event anyone attempted to force their way into the base, to scuttle the fleet.

When German forces occupied Vichy territory, they were careful not to enter the city of Toulon. Instead, German naval officials began talks with the French Navy over the status of the fleet, but the French were unwilling to cooperate and the talks went nowhere. The French used the time to prepare the fleet for scuttling and place demolition charges aboard their ships; the Germans used the time to mine the waters outside the harbor to prevent a French escape. They also prepared a plan to seize the base and the ships.

The Germans finally made their move before dawn on November 27. German military units entered Toulon at 4:00 AM, which caught the French authorities in the city by surprise, but they did manage to signal the French fleet that the Germans were on the way. At the naval base, Laborde gave orders to fire on any German soldiers who attempted to approach and to prepare to scuttle the fleet.

The approaching German soldiers lost their way in Toulon's winding streets, which delayed their arrival at the base and gained the French precious time. When the German troops finally did arrive, the French sentries, understanding these were Germans they were dealing with, demanded to see their paperwork. That bought a little more time, but at 5:30, with German tanks now rolling into the naval base, Laborde gave the order to scuttle.

Although German soldiers managed to board some of the ships, virtually every crew was able either to scuttle their ship or set off the demolition charges, or both. Some of the larger ships were on fire for days, while the waters of the harbor were covered with diesel fuel. Four submarines disobeyed the order to scuttle and were able to escape Toulon for French North Africa. The Germans captured a few smaller ships, which were damaged. The big ships, the battleships and cruisers, were all destroyed.

The Allies were disappointed that the fleet had not chosen to defect, but at least the French Navy made good on the pledge Admiral Darlan had given Winston Churchill back in 1940, that France would not permit its fleet to fall into German hands.

Speaking of Admiral Darlan, when news of the Darlan Deal went out, the public reaction in the UK and the US was widespread revulsion. For more than two years, every ugly and craven act of collaboration between the Vichy government and the Nazis had Darlan's fingerprints on it. Why are we suddenly cozying up to this guy? CBS radio correspondent Edward R. Murrow asked was America fighting the Nazis or sleeping with them? A British newspaper wondered if the Allies planned to overthrow Hitler by doing a deal with Hermann Göring.

Darlan's first weeks as ruler of French North Africa were not reassuring. He agreed to appoint Henri Giraud as military commander in North Africa, which helped mend fences between the two of them, although Charles de Gaulle and the Free French remained furious at being cut out of the Darlan Deal. But Darlan refused to reinstate the decree the Vichy government had repealed, the one that made Jewish people in North Africa French citizens. Political prisoners in North African prisons remained right were they were.

Darlan remained a difficult problem for the Allied leadership until Christmas Eve 1942, when a 20-year-old right-wing monarchist anti-Vichy man named Bonnier de la Chapelle went to Darlan's office in Algiers and shot him dead. De la Chapelle was arrested, tried and convicted of the murder before a military court held on Christmas Day, and was executed early in the morning of Boxing Day.

Darlan's death cleared the way for Henri Giraud to take control of French military forces in North Africa and got the Allies out of an embarrassing predicament. In fact, Darlan's death was so convenient, few believe that de la Chapelle acted without at least some assistance, or at least encouragement, from the Allies. The unseemly haste in which he was tried, convicted and executed has to be regarded as suspicious.

Overall, the Allies lost about 1,500 killed in Operation Torch. French losses were comparable. The operation had been plagued by mistakes and organizational failures that created chaos. Senior American commanders like Mark Clark and George Patton shook their heads while they read the after-action reports. The Americans could only be thankful they had fought a poorly-armed and not-especially-motivated French Army. Try to imagine what would have happened if George Marshall had had his way and this had been a European invasion opposed by the Wehrmacht. One shudders to imagine it.

British commanders were also disappointed. They remarked rather cheekily of the Americans, "How green is our ally!"

But as far as the rank-and-file American soldiers were concerned, their mettle had been tested and they had proven their ability. "Bring on the panzers!" was a common refrain.

All I can say is, be careful what you wish for.

[music: Sousa, "The United States Field Artillery."]

On one occasion during the planning stage of Operation Torch, George Marshall met with President Roosevelt to brief him on how things were going. When the discussion turned to the timing of the invasion, Roosevelt put his hands together as if in prayer and said, "Please make it before Election Day."

In the event, Marshall later had to report to him that the date chosen was four days after the US mid-term elections. Roosevelt made no objection, but he must have been disappointed. He had every reason to dread the coming mid-terms. It's a well-known pattern in American elections that the President's party loses seats in Congress during the mid-terms, and by 1942, after nearly ten years as President, Roosevelt was worried that the American public was getting tired of him. On the other hand, this would be a war-time election. Would that help the President and his Party? Would it hurt?

The election results might be summed up, from a Democrat's point of view, as "It could have been worse." Their losses were high, but the Democrats held such large majorities after the 1940 election that they were able to retain control of both houses. In the Senate, the Democrats lost eight seats, leaving them with 57 to the Republicans' 38, plus one Progressive, Wisconsin's Robert La Follette, Jr. In the House, the Democrats lost 45 seats, leaving them with a scant 222 seats versus the Republicans' 209. There were also a total of five Members elected representing three minor parties. Here's a fun fact: The House of Representatives elected in 1942 was the last one to include Members from five different political parties, at least as of the date I recorded this podcast.

Here's a not-fun fact: the turnout in the 1942 mid-term election was a scant 33.9%, the lowest recorded turnout in a national election in US history. How embarrassing. Now, you might try to explain this disappointing number by pointing out that the nation was at war. Many young men had been drafted and were away from home and likely had other things on their minds than voting for Congress. Many civilians had relocated to take new jobs in war-related industries and may not have had time to get settled in their new communities and participate in the election.

On the other hand, Australia held a federal election just nine months later. Prime Minister John Curtin, who had been leading a Labor Party minority government since October 1941, got a resounding vote of approval from the Australian public in August 1943. Labor gained 17 seats in the House of Representatives, giving it 49 seats out of 74, and 22 out of 36 in the Australian Senate. Turnout in that election, also held in wartime, was 95.1%. For shame, America.

I do feel obligated to point out that voting has been compulsory in Australia since 1924—an excellent policy, by the way—so that no doubt contributed to the high turnout figure, but you'd also have to credit the very sensible Australian practice of conducting elections on Saturdays, as

opposed to Tuesdays, as it is done in the United States, which has to be the worst idea since Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne had one too many glasses of port and said, “Let’s all march south to Albany and put an end to this accursed rebellion once and for all!”

But I digress.

The ultimate goal of Operation Torch was to drive east as far as Tunis, and there link up with Bernard Montgomery’s Eighth Army and drive the Germans and Italians out of North Africa once and for all. This drive would be overland, as Axis air superiority in the central Mediterranean made naval landings too risky. The best approach to Tunis from Algeria is along two roads that run near to and parallel to the coast; farther south lie the Atlas Mountains, which also run parallel to the coast all the way to the Tunisian border and beyond, creating a natural obstacle. Since the Allied plan was to rush Tunis before the Axis had time to react, picking their way through those mountains was out of the question. The Run for Tunis would have to be along the coastal roads.

The Allies began landing suitable vehicles for this operation at the port of Algiers beginning November 12. The next day, they got the good news that Montgomery’s forces had retaken Tobruk. By November 15, Allied forces in Algeria were ready to begin their own drive eastward. In two days, they reached the border and crossed into Tunisia without encountering any resistance.

But that was not to last. On November 17, they encountered German tanks and artillery at the town of Beja, about 80 kilometers west of Tunis.

The Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica had begun flying warplanes to airfields in Tunisia even before the Darlan Deal had been struck. French officials in Tunisia had received no instructions from Vichy and didn’t know what to do about all these Axis planes landing in their territory, so they opted to do nothing. This was very bad for the advancing Allied force, because they were drawing ever nearer to Axis air bases and ever more distant from their own air forces in Algeria.

And it wasn’t only air forces. Allied commanders had badly underestimated the capability and willingness of the Axis to reinforce Tunisia. The Luftwaffe had begun airlifting German soldiers there just days after the Operation Torch landings, and the Italian Navy had little difficulty in delivering vehicles and supplies to Tunis, which is close enough to Sicily that the entire crossing can be made in one night, unseen by British ships or planes; that proximity plus Axis air superiority meant the Italian convoys were quite safe. The Italians also laid extensive minefields to keep the Royal Navy at bay.

In a matter of days, the Axis had succeeded in delivering one German panzer division, two German infantry divisions and two Italian infantry divisions to Tunisia, and these were the forces now opposing the Allied advance from the west.

That may have felt discouraging, but Allied forces got some good news on November 20: Montgomery's Eighth Army had reached Benghazi. Rommel's forces had withdrawn from the town after demolishing its port facilities, a clear sign he didn't expect to be returning anytime soon. Three days later, Montgomery's forces halted their advance just short of El Agheila, the town that lies midway between Egypt and Tripoli. The British supply line was very long now, and Montgomery wisely decided to wait three weeks for his supplies to catch up. You'll remember the British had made it this far twice before, and twice before Rommel had surprised them with a new offensive that drove them back to Egypt.

But Erwin Rommel did not have a third rabbit in his hat. His own supply situation was worse than theirs, and his superiors had been concentrating their efforts on reinforcing the western frontier of Tunisia. The best he could manage was to lay large numbers of mines to slow the British advance; the Germans even resorted to burying their helmets, which would read like mines on British metal detectors.

Rommel's retreat had been so rapid and their fuel situation so desperate that the Germans were forced to leave hundreds of aircraft behind, to be captured by the British. The problem of supplying fuel to the RAF's new forward bases was solved by American C-47 Dakota transport planes that delivered half a million liters of aviation fuel to keep the British planes flying. From these forward airfields, RAF bombers could now reach Tripoli.

Back in Tunisia, Allied forces, which were getting bigger every day, thanks to a steady flow of reinforcements, battled their way east toward Tunis throughout the end of December, but their advance bogged down and finally stalled, 60 kilometers short of their goal. The Germans and Italians were also sending in large numbers of reinforcements. By the end of 1942, there were 135,000 Allied soldiers in Tunisia—mostly American and British, along with a few thousand French. Against them stood an Axis force, mostly Italian and comparable in numbers.

The Run for Tunis had failed. There would be no quick seizure of that port, no rapid eviction of the Germans and Italians. Adolf Hitler had no reservations about deploying large numbers of soldiers to North Africa, because he believed the supply line from Italy to Tunis was perfectly safe, and judged the Wehrmacht and its Italian allies capable of holding the British and Americans at bay in North Africa indefinitely.

Dwight Eisenhower was the Allied commander whose job it was now to find a way to prove Hitler wrong, and as if that wasn't enough pressure, news came at the end of the year that his bosses were coming to North Africa. Soon and he would find himself in the uncomfortable position of meeting Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill face to face and having to explain exactly what he intended to do to break this stalemate.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Matthias and Joanna for their kind donations, and thank you to Keith for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Matthias and Joanna and Keith help cover the costs of

making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the Eastern Front, where Generals Vasilevsky and Zhukov spent two months laying a trap for the German Sixth Army; now they are about to spring it. If the Germans thought Operation Torch was a setback, wait until they see Operation Uranus, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I'm beginning to think I should turn these final remarks into pop culture footnotes for each episode, since Western, and especially American, popular culture are only going to grow ever more influential from now to the end of the century.

I'd guess most Americans have heard of Popeye; I'm not sure about my foreign listeners. I mentioned Popeye when I talked about comic strips and animated film shorts in episodes 287 and 288. Popeye first appeared in 1929, in a comic strip called *Thimble Theatre*, which had begun in 1919. I got those dates a little mixed up before, so consider this a correction.

The character quickly became popular, and his role in the comic strip grew until he became the main protagonist. Eventually the strip itself was renamed after the character who was now its central figure.

By the 1930s, Popeye was second only to Little Orphan Annie in terms of comic strip popularity. In 1932, Fleischer Studios began producing a series of Popeye animated shorts for Paramount Pictures, and these became among the most popular cartoons of the period. It was these cartoon shorts, by the way, that introduced the recurring plot device of Popeye saving the day after eating a can of spinach, which seemed to give him superhuman strength. After the Pearl Harbor attack, Popeye, like many other cartoon characters of the time, began facing off against Nazis or the Japanese in his cartoons.

In 1942, the character was at his peak of popularity and cultural influence, which explains why the Americans were so quick to compare Admiral Darlan to him.

Here’s a tougher pop culture reference: when British Army officers quipped, “How green is my ally,” they were riffing on the title of a popular novel, *How Green Was My Valley*, by British author Richard Llewellyn, published in 1939.

How Green Was My Valley was adapted as an American motion picture starring Walter Pidgeon and Maureen O’Hara, and featuring a thirteen-year-old Roddy McDowell. The film was directed by John Ford and released in 1941 through Twentieth Century Fox. The film was critically acclaimed and very popular. (It was one of my mother’s favorite movies.) It was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won five, including the big one, Best Picture, beating out both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Citizen Kane*, with is a bit of a headscratcher.

But in 1942, everyone would have gotten the reference.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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