

Should Petain Road be renamed?

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IN SINGAPORE, unlike many newly independent countries, we do not have a policy of de-colonising the names of streets and places. As a result, our streets have kept the names given to them by the British colonial administration. I approve of this policy because we should not deny the past and wipe out part of our history.

There is a road in the Jalan Besar area called Petain Road. The French community has been campaigning for many years to change the name of the road. I support the campaign and would like to explain why the Street and Building Names Board, under the Ministry of National Development, should consider the request favourably.

Britain was an ally of France during the First World War. In the Jalan Besar area, there are several roads which bear the names of famous generals, such as Petain and Beatty, or famous sites of battles, such as Verdun, Marne, Jutland and Flanders. In 1928, the Municipal Government of Singapore decided to name one of the roads after the great French war hero, Field Marshal Henri Philippe Petain.

Petain was born in 1856. His father was a farmer. Young Petain joined the French army in 1876 and attended the St Cyr Military Academy and the Army College. In 1911, he was a colonel and commander of the 33rd Infantry Regiment of Arras. His young lieutenant was Charles de Gaulle. His career took off in 1914, when he was already 58 years old. He was promoted to the rank of brigadier-general. In 1915, he was given command of the Second Army and participated in the Battle of Verdun in the following year.

At the end of the First World War, Petain was regarded as one of France's greatest military heroes. In 1918, he was made a Marshal of France. In 1922, he was appointed as the Inspector-General of the Army. The decision by the Municipal Government of Singapore to name a road after him, in 1928, was perfectly understandable.

No one in 1928 could have foreseen what Petain would do during the Second World War. The French Army had been progressively degraded after the First World War, no thanks to budgetary cuts. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the French Army was no match for the German Army.

In May 1940, Petain, who had become the Prime Minister of France, regarded the military situation as hopeless. On the 20th of June, France signed an armistice with Germany, giving the latter control of the north and west of France, including Paris. The seat of the French government was moved to Vichy, a town located about 400km south of Paris.

On July 10, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate ratified the armistice, abolished the Third Republic, and adopted a new Constitution under which Petain, as the head of state, had near-absolute powers. The Petain government oppressed the French people and collaborated with Germany in suppressing the French resistance and arresting the Jews. In November 1942, Germany occupied the whole of France and Petain became a puppet of the Germans.

In 1945, de Gaulle's provisional government placed Petain on trial for treason. The three judges were in favour of acquitting him. The jury, however, disagreed and convicted him of treason and sentenced him to death. De Gaulle, who had served under Petain in 1911, commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment, on account of his age and taking into account his contributions in the First World War. Petain was stripped of all his military ranks and honours, except for the title of Marshal. He died in ignominy, in 1951, at the age of 95.

In the light of these historical facts, we must agree with the French community that it is inappropriate to continue to honour Petain by naming a road after him. The question is whether there is a precedent for changing the road's name.

I think I have found a good precedent. Chulia Street was originally named Kling Street. The word, 'kling' is derived from the word, 'kalinga', the name of a powerful South Indian kingdom. In the beginning, the Malays referred to all South Indians as 'orang kling'. However, over time, the word acquired a pejorative connotation and was used to refer to the Indian coolies.

In 1918, Rev J A B Coach petitioned the municipal commissioners to change the name of the street, but his appeal was rejected. Three years later, in 1921, the commissioners acceded to the request of Dr H S Moonshi, who spoke on behalf of the Indian community.

I hope that the Street and Building Names Board will kindly consider the request of the French community to rename Petain Road. I propose calling it 'de Gaulle Road', to recognise the historic contributions made by the indomitable French leader in the country's history.

The writer is the Honorary Chairman of the National Heritage Board. He would be speaking today at the Malraux Seminar, which will bring together French and Singapore culture and heritage professionals in dialogue.