As has just been noted one of the key tasks asked of the Police under Vichy was defending the State. Perhaps nowhere was this mission more explicit than during the visit to Marseille of Vichy head of State Marshal Pétain. For Pétain’s visit on 3 and 4 December 1940, security arrangements were at a maximum. The Service des Voyages Officiels, responsible for the visit’s organisation, noted ‘a lot of communist activity’ in the run-up to the visit and promised that ‘communists, Popular Front sympathisers and Jews will be the subject of particular surveillance from the Police’.

Memories of the assassination of Alexander I of Yugoslavia and French foreign Minister Louis Barthou on the Canebière thoroughfare in October 1934 were fresh enough for the authorities to assure that no risks were taken this time. Police round-ups followed. It has been estimated that some 20,000 individuals were imprisoned not only in the regular jails but also in four boats, four barracks and three cinemas specially commissioned for the purpose, living off a diet of stale bread and uncooked meat whilst the Head of State sat down to a seven course lunch.

Eyewitness accounts of these Police activities are provided by Varian Fry, Daniel Bénédite and Jean Gemähling of the Emergency Rescue Committee, an American organisation which established itself in the city in 1940 to help in the emigration of refugees. The spacious villa in the Quartier de la Pomme suburb which these three shared with a group of intellectuals, including the revolutionary Victor Serge and the surrealist André Breton, was singled out for a Police search prior to the Marshal’s visit owing to the political tendencies of its occupants and its position next to the railway line along which Pétain’s train would pass. He gives us a particularly vivid picture of the bullying, nose-picking and seemingly drunken Commissaire in charge of this search, whose
very presence accompanying Inspecteurs de la Sûreté in the sort of operation they would usually carry out alone underlines the importance given to this search. Fry portrays this Commissaire as particularly zealous, pointing to the ‘evident pleasure’ at the incriminating material discovered in this villa. He immediately filed a number of documents in a foreign language as ‘revolutionary propaganda’. His delight was even more obvious upon finding a surrealist drawing containing a Gallic cock and the words ‘the terrible cretin Pétain’. Remaining unimpressed by Breton’s argument that it was debatable whether the cock really represented France and his insistence that the word in the inscription was ‘putain’ (‘whore’) rather than ‘Pétain’, the Commissaire announced simply that it was ‘revolutionary propaganda as clear as the nose on your face’. The Inspecteurs accompanying him are portrayed as completely unprofessional. They were taken in by ‘the old trick’ of Fry asking to go up to his office to get a handkerchief, an excuse the American had invented in order to dispose of a false passport lying on his desk. They also allowed themselves to be engaged in conversation as a distraction, whilst Fry and his secretary disposed of incriminating evidence in a fire.

After this search, the occupants of the villa were interned with others on a boat, the Sinaïa, moored in President Wilson Dock. Fry’s account, confirmed by Bénédite and Gemähling, of their fellow internees provides interesting insights into the nature of these Police round-ups. Since the origin of this operation was supposedly a security measure, it is no surprise to find amongst the interned those classified as ‘suspect’ who happened to live along the route marked out for Pétain’s visit. Thus, two English friends of Fry’s who had made the ‘mistake’ of living in a room next to the quai de Belges where Pétain was scheduled to pass now found themselves on the Sinaïa. Equally predictable was the presence of the owner of a book-shop in the rue Saint-Ferréol whose window display for the preceding few days had featured two large portraits, one of Laval, the other of Pétain, surrounded by piles of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables.

Other cases were notable for their apparent arbitrariness. A correspondent of a Swiss newspaper, who, out of gallantry, had offered to accompany his French girlfriend to the commissariat where she was required to explain the fact that she had no identity card, found himself detained while she was immediately released. Two Syrians whose identity had been checked in a café and

6 V. Fry, Surrender on Demand, New York, 1945, pp 133-141.
7 V. Fry, Surrender on Demand, New York, 1945, p 137.
8 V. Fry, Surrender on Demand, New York, 1945, p 145.