

The Paxton Revolution.

Introduction.

The transfer of Jean Moulin's remains to the Pantheon was a culminating moment of the myth histories characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s, once what Rousso calls the period of 'unfinished mourning' was past. But even in that period, when the desire to build the future rather than interrogate the past was uppermost, the past kept seeping in (e.g. the trial of the Alsatian SS officers, the contradictions of the French posture during the Algerian War – repressing the 'resistance', etc.). French responses to the Occupation and the Vichy regime itself were too complex and divisive to be so easily contained by Resistance histories, whether Gaullist, Communist or any other, that failed to capture the major experiences of the French during the Second World War (captivity, deportation) or which simply left too much out.

Nonetheless, it is important to recall what the implications of the Communist and Gaullist (and other) myth-histories of the Resistance were for the understanding of Vichy and collaboration. In both cases, they reduced Vichy's significance by reducing collaboration to the actions of a minority (e.g. the '200 families' for the PCF, a coterie of 'traitors' around Pétain for Gaullists). In the case of the Gaullists, the myth went even further and suggested that Pétain was not really to blame for a 'miscalculation' and that in some sense Pétain and de Gaulle were complementary, or the equivalent 'two strings [of the bow]' argument used by Colonel Rémy, a Resistance hero and Gaullist, in a 1950 interview). De Gaulle remarked that it was still possible to honor Pétain as the hero of Verdun (1916) but never personally endorsed the 'two strings' theory, and he refused to agree to Pétain being reburied at Douaumont (Verdun), that is, with honour and a degree of re-habilitation.

Not surprisingly, a current of populist history sympathetic to Pétain was evident in the 1950s and 1960s. It is best represented by Robert Aron's commercially successful *The Vichy Regime, 1940-1944* (1954, English trans. 1958), which in France sold 53,000 hardback copies between 1954 and 1981 (1,892 p.a.) - and far more in paperback. Aron was strongly pro-de Gaulle but provided a relatively understanding portrait of Pétain. A corollary of the idea of a duality between Pétain and de Gaulle was that the 'épuration' - the purges of the Libération - were the real crime, with the Communists fomenting civil war and engaging in a massive blood-letting - 30,000-40,000 according to Aron. Henri Michel likewise concluded his 1950 book on the Resistance that the latter's unity with de Gaulle had prevented a real civil war in 1944. In fact, de Gaulle writing to Aron to congratulate him on his book pointed out that he had massively overstated those killed by the purges. He, de Gaulle, knew from secret reports by officials at the time that the true total was closer to 10,000. Historians have now confirmed this - but for 1940-44, with only half the deaths occurring at or after the Liberation. But the point is that to create a rapprochement between Pétain and de Gaulle's wartime roles, the internal Resistance, especially the Left, had to be vilified.

Overt supporters of Vichy sought to rehabilitate themselves by minimizing Vichy's import and adopting an extreme version of the 'two strings' argument, viz. the 'shield and the sword' - already used by the defence at the trials of both Laval and Pétain in 1945. E.g. Sisley Huddleston, *Pétain, Patriot or Traitor?* (1951). Huddleston, a former American diplomat at Vichy, saw Pétain as a self-conscious barrier against the Germans, with the meeting with Hitler at Montoire (at which he declared his policy of 'collaboration') considered a manoeuvre to maximize French autonomy: 'I am not prepared to affirm that Pétain was conscious of all the implications of the Montoire meeting, but it turned out to be a very clever move.'¹ For all the awkward intrusions of the Vichy syndrome during this period, this benign view of Pétain gained support. In a 1966 opinion poll, when asked if Pétain and de Gaulle had done some good or some harm, the response on Pétain was: 51% did some good, 17% did some harm and 32% don't know, and for de Gaulle: 80% some good, 5% some harm and 15% don't know.²

1. May 1968 and the changing context.

All this was to change quite significantly over the following fifteen years in what Henry Rousso, in a striking image, calls the 'broken mirror' (i.e. the shattering of the myth histories). For us, that corresponds to what I have chosen to call the 'Paxton' revolution. But as we have already seen, professional historians only in part determine the production of historical awareness. Literature and film (both at the cinema and on television) also contributed. Above all, politics and the changing historical context combined to 'break the mirror' in the form of the 'events' of May 1968 and their aftermath.

Generational conflict in the 1960s was strong across Europe but especially so in France. Those in their teens and twenties wished, among other things, to know more about what had really happened a quarter century earlier to the older generation. No less important was anti-authoritarianism, with a tilting at the oppressive paternalism of de Gaulle. But the same libertarian revolt also attacked the 'Stalinism' of the PCF – source of the other major Resistance myth-history of the Second World War, especially since August 1968 saw Soviet tanks crush that other 'Maytime' of Europe, the Prague spring. The 'new left' was as deeply hostile to old-style Communism as to de Gaulle.

Part of the challenge to the government and the older generation was to take the 'myth histories' and turn them against their founders. E.g. in May 1968 demonstrators chanted against the tough riot police (the Corps Républicain de Sécurité, or CRS) – 'CRS-SS', and 'Nous sommes tous de juifs allemands!' (We are all German Jews) in a double reference to the French student leader, Danny Cohen-Bendit (who was a Jewish and German) and the silence of the myth-histories on the specific catastrophe of European Jews in the war.

A documentary film made over nine months in 1968-9 and released in the latter year, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (The Sorrow and the Pity), expressed this irreverence for established truths. And in 1972, a youngish American historian, Robert Paxton, published his study, *Vichy France*, which both switched the focus in studies of France during World War Two from the Resistance to Vichy and also destroyed the benign interpretation of the latter. I shall look at each in turn.

2. 'The Sorrow and the Pity'

Marcel Ophuls, who directed *The Sorrow and the Pity* for ORTF, the French state television, was the son of Max Ophuls, one of the great inter-war film producers who had sought refuge in France from Nazi Germany. Both Marcel Ophuls and the film's two producers, André Harris and Alain de Sédouy, were all in their thirties in the late 1960s but very much identified with the values of the 'generation of 68'. In 1966, they had made a film for French TV on the Munich crisis, and *The Sorrow and the Pity* was a sequel. But what the ORTF continued to think of as a history of the Resistance became increasingly a film about the Occupation, with the result that the state network refused to screen the completed documentary until the Socialists came to power twelve years later, in 1981. As the head of the ORTF (a former resister) stated in 1971, the problem with film was that it 'destroys myths that the people of France still need.'³

The approach adopted by Ophuls was the opposite of the standard documentary histories of the period, with their master narrative and heavy use of contemporary news reel footage. Not only was *The Sorrow* based principally on interviews (i.e. oral history), but the interviews (and hence the interviewees) were placed firmly in the present (e.g. Helmut Tausend, a former Wehrmacht captain at the reception for his own daughter's wedding, Christian de la Mazière, a real French fascist who fought with the Waffen SS Charlemagne Division on the eastern front, in the castle of Sigmaringen in Germany, Pétain's last redoubt, amidst a group of 1960s German tourists, or the Grave family, peasants and socialists who had resisted and been denounced by fellow Frenchmen, on their family farm. The film is therefore explicitly about memory - about the relationship of the present in which it is set to the past. As the three film makers replied to a criticism that their film had more to do with the 1960s than the 1940s:

'If you had invented a time-machine and offered to rent it to us, I'm not sure that we would have accepted. For us, in fact, the interesting thing was to compare the historical reality - and all its attendant ambiguity - with the memory of people today.'⁴

The structure of the second part of the documentary ('The Choice') - the first having been about the defeat - is structured in four parts. The first presents the occupation through the long interview with the Wehrmacht captain, Tausend, who spent from 1942 to 1944 in Clermont Ferrand, where the film is mostly set. He makes the point that relations were good

with most of the inhabitants. There follows a section on the Resistance, mixing the FFI and the Free French, but with little emphasis given to de Gaulle. By focusing on individuals (some national, some local) and on their motives, the heroic inevitability of the myth histories of the Resistance is broken, and the difficulty, danger and sheer contingency of resisting are skilfully suggested (even if nothing like a balanced picture of all tendencies can be given). Then, a long section on collaboration, including René de Chambrun, Laval's son-in-law, René Bousquet, the chief of police at Vichy, various witnesses on Vichy's anti-Semitism, and de la Mazière, the French fascist, make the point that Vichy was not some bland foil to de Gaulle's Free French, but a regime which was connected to committed fascist ideologues, which engaged in lethal persecution of its own citizens or those who had sought refuge in France, and that many French people (such as the elderly woman hairdresser interviewed in the film) continued to believe that Pétain, not the Resistance, represented the right choice. The final section, on the Libération shows the shaving of women's heads and two speeches by a leading resister, Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie, one in 1945 calling for justice against collaborators, and a contemporary interview (just before his death in 1969) advocating leniency and reconciliation. It poses clearly the question of what the right punishment (and therefore historical judgment) for collaboration should be. It quite consciously reversed the benign view of Vichy that blamed the Resistance for the 'civil war' of 1944-5. *The Sorrow and the Pity* ends on a note of embarrassed ambiguity with the stumbling excuses of the popular singer and film star, Maurice Chevalier, for having kept performing during the Occupation.

It is not that *The Sorrow* presents the only true view of a divisive past, for it rejects any such positivist message. What it does do is to disinter fragments of truth by insistent interviewing about what really happened or by confronting individuals in 1968 who had forgotten or rearranged the past with reminders about what they actually said or did a quarter of a century earlier. In this way, the film deliberately demolishes the myth-histories and (however imperfectly) shows a period so bitterly divisive that its memory could not possibly be transmitted (and resolved) by such simple means.

3. Robert Paxton's *Vichy France*.

It was perhaps inevitable that the iconoclastic mood apparent by the late 1960s would be first translated into a scholarly revision of the French war experience from outside. Quite apart from the cultural and political impediments within France, the continued closure of the archives remained a major problem. A domestic conference on Vichy, held in 1970 by the National Foundation of Political Science, conveyed no sense that this had been an exceptional regime.⁵ Foreign historians were more likely to be inventive regarding access to the archives – notably using those of West Germany, which were entirely open for the Nazi period. This was the case with the German scholar, Erberhard Jaeckel, *France in Hitler's Europe*, translated from German into French in 1968, which was able to show from German sources just how

devastating for France the relationship with Nazi Germany had been (thus negating the 'shield' argument). But the book was largely ignored in France and never made available in English.

It was the book of Robert Paxton, an American historian who had previously written a little-discussed study of the army in Vichy (*Parades and Politics*, 1966) that made the breakthrough to a new scholarly understanding of the French war experience in terms of Vichy rather than the Resistance. Paxton's Vichy was anything but benign or simply misguided, and far from being a 'shield'. It made its own bargain with Nazi Germany because it wished to pursue its own internal political agenda. Overall, Paxton's case can be summarized as follows.

Paxton starts with the 'shield' argument and stresses the importance of continuity between Vichy and post-war France in terms of personnel (thereby playing down the 'purges' citing the accurate figure of c.4,500 dead). By asserting the importance of Vichy and collaboration, he diminishes the importance of the Resistance and its impact on post-war politics. In effect he argues that many had a lot riding on the rehabilitation or minimizing of Vichy and thus on the 'shield' argument. The book is thus precisely located in terms of the current (1960s) myth histories. They may not be Paxton's subject but they are his target.

Pétain and those around him did not exercise power to mitigate the effects of defeat and occupation. They wished to remake France against their own political enemies in order to recover from defeat. 'Collaboration' with the Germans (as defined by Pétain in the Montoire meeting with Hitler in 1940 and implemented by the first Laval premiership and Darlan's 'grand design') was the condition for carrying out this programme. Hence Vichy solicited the Germans for collaboration not the reverse.

A new 'moral order' was the goal, based on a purge of the Republican educational system, xenophobia, anti-Semitism ('France for the French'), authoritarian government and a return to the land. Several elements in French politics and society backed this programme – the enemies of the Third Republic (the 'revenge of the excluded'), reactionaries, but also modernizing technocrats who felt that Vichy gave them unfettered power to introduced reforms. There were also some leftists, often anti-Communists, and bureaucrats and army officers who believed deeply in the continuity of the state.

Resistance emerged in order to oppose this new French state, not just the Germans, hence the spiral of violence in order to preserve Vichy's independence of action carried out by French police (and later the Milice, or militia, under Darnand) against internal enemies.

The price paid for the latitude to implement these programmes and to preserve this apparent margin of independence was high. Especially economically, France was ransacked

and ultimately compulsory labour service in Germany was imposed (from 1943). Compared to other occupations, the exploitation of France was more severe, possibly even as bad as that of Poland. The French had to aid the Germans in the implementation of their priorities, notably rounding up foreigners – and foreign Jews – in France.

Hence the ‘shield’ argument was merely the cover of desperate men once their enterprise was clearly doomed to fail and they were liable to be called to account. In a trenchant conclusion (‘Was Vichy a lesser evil?’), Paxton stated:

In the last analysis, the sovereignty of Vichy was a negotiating liability rather than a negotiating asset. The Vichy leaders had asked for an armistice in the summer of 1940 to prevent revolution and to remake France along different lines. The continued existence of the Vichy regime had to be defended as the price of fulfilling those aims. It was something for which the Vichy leaders made concessions, rather than something for which Germany made concessions. A gauleiter [German governor] would have made many Frenchmen suffer; in the end he might have gotten less.⁶

Reactions to Paxton’s book were initially hostile or dismissive. It offended many Resistance veterans by marginalizing their achievements. It upset those who favoured a benign interpretation of Pétain and Vichy. Many French commentators asked how a foreigner could possibly understand a French ‘civil war’ (being from the American South, Paxton retorted that he fully understand civil wars and their legacies). But Paxton’s impeccable scholarship and irrefutable nature of his data on economic exploitation, along with his evidence from German sources that Vichy had been the one to seek out collaboration, proved irresistible. Together with the change in public attitudes already under way, and the generational shift encapsulated by *The Sorrow and the Pity*, his book transformed the way that French historians came to look at their own country’s experience in the Second World War.

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Both Ophuls’ film and Paxton’s book were strong indictments of the Vichy regime. Perhaps they were too strong in two regards. First, they marginalized the Resistance. Though inevitable, this arguably went too far. As we have seen, it was only in the 1990s that the French became receptive again to a more scholarly and critical history of Resistance, mainly conducted by foreign historians (Roderick Kedward, John Sweets). The second was the reversal of the myth histories with the implicit accusation that far from most French people had resisted, they had collaborated or at least sympathized with collaboration (‘functional collaboration’). Only slowly, as we shall see, was a more nuanced view of the ambiguities of daily life and survival in wartime France provided. But in the 1970s and 1980s, what dominated – in literature and film as well as in historiography – was the consequences of the attack on the myth histories and the implications of the collaboration of the French state with Nazi Germany.

John Horne, November 2014

1Sisley Huddleston, *Pétain, Patriot or Traitor* (1951), p. 80.

2Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome. History and Memory in France since 1944* (1987; English trans. 1991), p. 288.

3Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*.

4Qu. *ibid.*, p. 112.

5 *Le Gouvernement de Vichy 1940-1942: institutions et politiques* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP); Stanley Hoffmann, 'Vichy Studies in France. Before and After Paxton,' in Sarah Fishman et al (eds.), *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford and New York, 2000), pp. 49-57 (54). The FNSP volume is available in the TCD library.

6 Robert Paxton, *Vichy France* (London, 1972), p. 374.