

Repressed Memory: Vichy France and the Jews.

As the master-narratives unravelled, one theme heard with increasing intensity was that of the fate of Jews in wartime France. Initially, the tales of the returning deportees were drowned out by the Resistance myth-making of the immediate post-war period. The memory of the tiny number of Jewish survivors within that cohort was doubly marginalized. Of course, many Jews were not deported, and survived in occupied France, a number of them (like Marc Bloch) joining the Resistance. But their narratives, too, were subsumed into the mainstream. The real nature of Jewish persecution during the war only emerged from the 1970s. At the same time, Vichy anti-Semitism and its relationship with the Nazi genocide of European Jews became a central issue in Vichy history - beginning with *The Sorrow and the Pity* (which insisted on asking about the targeting of Jews) and Robert Paxton's *Vichy France*, of whose concluding 'balance sheet' it was an important aspect. By the end of the century, it had become the most prominent feature of Vichy France, with President Chirac formally apologizing on behalf of the French state in July 2002 (60th anniversary of the notorious round-up of Jews in the Paris Vél'd'Hive (Vélodrome d'Hiver, or Indoors Cycling Arena) for the complicity of the state.

In this lecture, I want to examine some of the ways in which the historical focus shifted to the fate of the Jews and why this was so.

1. The Jews in Vichy France.

First, though, a few key facts about the Jewish community in France and French anti-Semitism before the war, without which the history of Vichy's actions is incomprehensible.¹ In 1919, there were some 150,000 Jews in France (half the number in Germany). By 1939, this had

risen to 325,000, so that half the community was composed of new arrivals. Of the 150,000 French Jews, many were deeply assimilated, belonging to Ashkenazim communities present in the Rhine valley for a thousand years or to Sephardim communities in the south, often expelled from Spain at the end of the Middle Ages. Others were of comparatively recent origin, having come at the end of the 19th century from the western marches of Tsarist Russia (i.e. post World War I Poland, Lithuania, etc.), the region with the largest concentration of Jews in Europe. These Jews had assimilated relatively easily into the French economy and political system. Overall, Jews were concentrated particularly in Paris, the east and the south, but were represented in towns and cities across the country. The 175,000 new arrivals after 1918 were either economic migrants or refugees who had been forced out of Bolshevik Russia in the 1920s or Germany, Austria and elsewhere in eastern Europe by Nazi persecution in the 1930s.

French anti-Semitism had deep roots. France had played a key role in the development of a modern, secular anti-Semitism in the late 19th century with the emergence of a new nationalist and xenophobic right. However, the dominant political culture of Republicanism overtly opposed anti-Semitism and other forms of racial discrimination since it was based on a concept of political citizenship and a universal idea of humanity. The Revolution had liberated Jews (and Protestants) by conferring full civic rights on them. French Jews therefore identified strongly with the Republic. Marc Bloch is an excellent example of an assimilated French Jew.

France bore the brunt of the refugee crisis of the 1930s. Its Republican values and tradition of acting as a refuge for asylum-seekers made it much more open to the flood of Jewish (and other) refugees from central Europe than most other countries. To this was added a further 400,000 refugees at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Yet the France into which the

refugees came was one that suffered longer than other European countries from the Great Depression and which was divided by internal political dissent and a crisis of social and economic orientation. This culminated in the Popular Front government of Léon Blum (the first French Jew to become prime minister), with fierce opposition by the nationalist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic Right. While the strength of Republican values held the Right in check and prevented the emergence of a serious French Fascism, the conflict shook the faith of some Jews in the ability of the state to protect them. In particular, 'non-French' Jews (i.e. without French nationality) felt isolated and vulnerable, an impression reinforced by a state that established camps for illegal immigrants in 1938 and increased police powers to deport them.

When Pétain came to power in July 1940, he (and those around him) represented the triumph of the overtly anti-Semitic and xenophobic tradition in France, in circumstances (military collapse) that invited scape-goating. The Statut des Juifs of October 1940 overthrew Republican values by targeting French Jews, who suffered various restrictions. Vichy also treated foreign Jews (and other refugees) as particularly undesirable, interning them and readily handing them over to the Germans when asked. From 1941, Vichy collaborated with the gathering Nazi extermination of European Jews, especially as regarding 'foreign Jews' on French soil. In the course of the war, the Germans deported 75,700 Jews, many to Auschwitz, in convoys of goods wagons averaging a thousand people each. Only 2,564 survived the war. But the fact that this represented a survival rate of some 75% of the total pre-war Jewish population - which was far higher than in countries such as Holland, let alone Poland - allowed Vichy and its retrospective supporters to claim that the protection of the Jews, especially the French Jews, was a prime example of Vichy's 'shield' in operation.

2. Paxton and Marrus, *Vichy France and the Jews* (1983).

It was thus quite consistent with the approach adopted in *Vichy France* that Robert Paxton should tackle the issue of *Vichy France and the Jews*. This he did in a work with that title, published in 1983, which he wrote jointly with the Canadian historian, Michael Marrus. The approach adopted was an extension of that used in the earlier book, and similarly forensic. Having drawn attention to the continuities between the last years of the Third Republic (with growing anti-Semitism and hostility to refugees), Paxton and Marrus again used German as well as French sources to piece together the precise relationship between Vichy and the occupying power. They concluded that while the two anti-Semitic projects were quite different, they meshed in a number of ways, and especially (though not solely) in the issue of the foreign Jews on French soil. The entire machinery of the Vichy state (in both zones) was placed at the service of the Germans, and indeed often enthusiastically anticipated them in handing over foreign Jews. The Vichy organization responsible for the anti-Jewish measures, the Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives (CGQJ), was especially enthusiastic, especially after 1942 under the rabid antisemite Darquier de Pellepoix.

Yet the Vichy government (including Laval) was reluctant to hand over French Jews to the Germans - however much it might assign them a subordinate and socially ostracized position in its own new order. The reason for this was unwillingness to infringe what it sought to defend - French sovereignty, or at least a margin of French autonomy. In the conclusion on 'The Holocaust in France', Paxton and Marrus once again draw up a balance sheet. They insist that the historian must reconstruct Vichy's views at the time, not its subsequent self-justification (Xavier Vallat, the first head of the CGQJ, argued later that although Vichy dirtied its hands by sacrificing many foreign Jews, it had deliberately shielded French Jews).² They

argue that it was not so much that Vichy's leaders had no knowledge of the Holocaust (as they later claimed), since plenty of information was circulating in government circles from mid-1942 about the 'Final Solution' in the east and the destination of the rail convoys the Vichy police were helping to load up in France. Rather, it was a question of not being interested, and so of not bothering to find out. Since the Germans were transgressing moral norms on a vast scale, it defied belief unless one really wanted to think about it. If the Jewish 'question' was an irksome irritant, it made sense to accept the bland German explanations and look no further.

Paxton and Marrus then adopt the comparative method, as Paxton had done in *Vichy France*, and insist on the need to compare like with like. They dismiss the argument that geography played a key role (e.g. compared to substantially rural France, the bulk of Holland's Jews in a highly-urbanized setting were killed) by pointing out that in heavily mountainous Yugoslavia, the Jewish community also perished. The key factor, they argue, was the presence and strength of the Germans. Where this was overwhelming (as in Poland), it was almost impossible to escape. But German-occupied Europe was vast and diverse. As the only defeated country to maintain a nominally autonomous regime, the real comparison is with German allies, such as Hungary and Romania. The question is whether Vichy used its autonomy to frustrate German plans. All three states had indigenous anti-Semitic projects of a less lethal kind than the Nazis; all three tried in some measure to protect their 'own' Jews; all three were accused by the Germans of 'obstruction'. But both Hungary and Romania turned over fewer Jews than Vichy France, until the Fascist Arrow Cross came to power in Hungary and the *Wehrmacht* retreated across the country in 1944.

France had no such massive German presence. Hence Paxton and Marrus conclude

that the regime willingly gave up foreign Jews, assigned a low priority to protecting its own Jews, and would have been powerless to stop the Germans seizing the latter if they had occupied the country in force. Vichy's policies had already made French Jews vulnerable to just such an eventuality. In short, just as Vichy collaborated with the Germans in order to preserve its autonomy and implement its own projects, so it sacrificed foreign Jews but sought to keep control of its indigenous anti-Semitism as part of that same project. René Bousquet, the Vichy chief of police, reluctantly used French police to round up foreign Jews for Adolf Eichmann in 1942 rather than let German forces do it themselves.³ Paxton and Marrus conclude that had it wished, Vichy could have shown firmer resistance (as did the Romanians), which only strong German forces could have overcome. Conversely, had the Germans used force, they could have made France *Judenrein* (free of Jews) had the war lasted another year.

Paxton and Marrus's book is an important study not just of a key aspect of Vichy politics but also of the interaction between Nazi Germany and a major European state as the Holocaust unfolded. Yet the experience of the Jewish victims is almost entirely absent. Significantly, the book is dedicated to 'The French men and women who assisted persecuted Jews' - and who thus embodied the alternative to Vichy - rather than to the Jews themselves. What the authors do provide, in chapter 5, is a discussion of the extent and limits of popular antisemitism, and as in Paxton's *Vichy France*, the conclusion is essentially that while active minorities protested against Vichy policies and helped Jews, the majority was 'indifferent'.

3. Individual memories, individual stories, individual responsibilities.

As the master-narratives weakened, not only did multiple stories re-emerge but along with them, a new sense of the moral and political complexities created by the occupation, not just

for the regime but for ordinary people. Raul Hilberg provided one formulation of this in his 1967 study of *The Destruction of the European Jews* in terms of three categories - perpetrators (with varying levels of responsibility), victims and bystanders or witnesses. Novelists and filmmakers explored the dilemmas of these groups, which Paxton and Marrus had sketched out in their history. The creative arts became key vehicles for the resurgence of repressed memories and unbidden complexities - those motors of what Henry Rousso defined as the 'Vichy syndrome.'

I want briefly to allude to a pair of films by the French director, Louis Malle, which focus on the relationship between all three categories – perpetrators, victims and bystanders: *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) and *Au Revoir les Enfants* (1987). *Lacombe, Lucien*, tells the tale of a young peasant boy in rural France, in the middle of the war, who having tried to join the Resistance and been patronizingly dismissed by the local school teacher and Resistance organizer, joins the Gestapo instead. This act is portrayed as circumstantial and personal, not political. But promoted to a position of local power, Lucien uses this to tyrannize and humiliate a wealthy Parisian Jew, Albert Horn, who is trying to reach Spain and safety with his beautiful daughter, France. The brutal Lucien and refined France are attracted to each other despite (or because of) the difference between them. Lucien's menacing dominance adds to the erotic charge, as does France's betrayal of her father in allowing herself to be seduced by a man whom she should loathe and who threatens their very survival. In the end, catastrophe befalls all three, with Lucien suffering his inevitable fate at the hands of the Resistance.

The film inverts all the categories of the myth-histories. Joining the Resistance or the Gestapo are acts devoid of ideology, almost accidents, the two characters who should hate each other are attracted to each other, and so on. It was bitterly criticised when it came out,

condemned by many on the left for being part of the *mode retro* (making the Second World War Two past fashionable in a non-political way), which was accused of diminishing the history of the war. This criticism was linked to attacks on the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, elected the same year and the first post-Gaullist president of the Fifth Republic. He not only had no connection with the Resistance but his father had been a Vichy notable, and he made the foolish mistake of trying to abolish V.E. Day as a public holiday. Malle was accused of trying to dispense with the war for a 'bourgeoisie' that wanted to see it as being merely about surface events and to move on, having replaced the 'myth' with entertainment.

Malle and his co-writer, Patrick Modiano (2014 Nobel Prize for Literature, whose own Jewish father had been persecuted during the war and who has written a number of novels on the Occupation) were in fact grappling with precisely the ambiguities and complexities of individual stories, though doing so in a way that aimed deliberately to provoke. Richard Golsan (*Vichy's Afterlife*) has suggested on the basis of autobiographical comments by Louis Malle in 1978 that he was trying to disturb the hypocrisy with which the complexities of the war period were smoothed over by well-off families like his own - and that something of Malle's own adolescent self during the war is transposed onto the figure of Lucien.⁴

'My family, like many French people, [wrote Malle] 'had confidence in Pétain at least until 1942. Pétain was the great warrior, the hero of 1914, a person the bourgeoisie respected. When I was with the Jesuits in Paris in 1941, they made us sell [...] portraits of the Marshal ... When I recall this episode, I anger my family.'⁵

If that is so, Malle exorcised his own memory - and his own implicit guilt as a bystander - in the second film, *Au Revoir les Enfants*, made in 1987 without any adverse criticism. Here Malle recounts his most troubling memory of the war, the arrest by the Gestapo of a Jewish boy hiding in the Jesuit school that Malle attended, who was denounced on a whim. In different

ways, both films address the question of personal motivation and responsibility in relation to the persecution of Jews, as well as to Resistance and Collaboration. As *Au Revoir les Enfants*, indicates, it is the response to persecution of the outcast - of the Jew - that lies at the heart of that complex of moral issues and which makes it the key question in the memory of the war.

Of course, Malle is concerned most with the bystander - who may (for whatever motive) turn into the collaborator. But the question remains of how to address the status of the victim, and thus his or her history, since this had been for so long ignored. One of the most significant enterprises in this regard is the commemorative volume by Serge Klarsfeld, *French Children of the Holocaust* (English translation, 1996). The kind of history produced by Klarsfeld and his wife, Beate, is quite different from that of Paxton and Marrus. We noted that the logical conclusion of the disaggregation of the myth histories was the (of course impossible) construction of 38 million individual histories. But in a way this is exactly what the Klarsfeld's try to produce in the form of a book-memorial.

There had long been a memorial to the deportees in general (on the tip of the Ile-Saint-Louis in the heart of Paris) but not to Jewish deportees in particular. The Holocaust Memorial Museum was only inaugurated in January 2005, for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Serge and Beate Klarsfeld produced a Memorial to the Deportation of Jews of France in the form of a book, published in 1979, containing the names of all 76,000 Jews deported from France, with place of birth, nationality (or lack of one where Vichy had revoked their French citizenship) and number convoy. The memorial was a monument, a basis for legal action against the perpetrators, and also a historical record. In 1996, the Klarsfelds produced another such memorial - this time to the children deported and killed, all 11,400 of them (15%

of the total). The volume provides a brief overall history, including descriptions of particular actions such as that by Klaus Barbie on 6 April 1944 against the children's home at Izieu, east of Lyons, where a number of Jewish children whose parents had already been deported were being hidden. Forty-four children were arrested and sent to Auschwitz (many in convoy 71 on 13 April), from where none returned. The memorial lists all the Jewish children from France killed by the Germans with family details and over 2,000 photographs.

This restoration of individual faces and stories to the ultimate victims of Vichy anti-Semitism and Nazi genocide stands at the opposite pole to the myth-histories with which we began. But the question of individual roles and responsibilities also brings us back to our point of departure with Marc Bloch. We have seen that at each stage, the historians' interrogation of the past as well as the ways in which a variety of agents (politicians, film-makers, writers, journalists and public opinion) constructed knowledge about that same past has turned on categories which, if not legal in themselves, coincide with those used by lawyers and by legal proceedings. Marc Bloch was a 'witness' for the prosecution, which he himself conducted, not sparing himself in the process. Trials were held after the war (Pétain, Laval) as part of a broader settling of accounts and reordering of memory following the Liberation – our next topic. Paxton and Marrus used an almost forensic approach to establish the responsibilities of the men of Vichy and thus their moral guilt. The Klarsfelds conducted the twin business of commemorating the victims while also hunting down perpetrators and bringing them to justice - it was they who tracked down Barbie in his South American exile and extradited him to face trial for, amongst other things, the murder of the children of Izieu.

It is not surprising, therefore, if the reevaluation of the role of Vichy in the Final Solution

should lead to trials in the 1990s in which the French public sought not just legal redress for the victims but some closure of the Vichy syndrome by judicial decision. René Bousquet, the Vichy police chief who had collaborated with Eichmann's deportation programme, was about to be tried for 'crimes against humanity', having already been and very lightly sentenced in 1949, when he was assassinated by a mentally deranged man. Paul Touvier, the head of Vichy's militia, who in that capacity had played a key role in hunting down foreign and French Jews, was finally arrested in 1989 after being hid for 45 years and tried and condemned in 1994 by a Versailles court for crimes against humanity for having ordered the murder of seven Jewish hostages in 1944. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he died in 1996. The large crowd of sympathizers at his funeral suggested to many that the Vichy syndrome was far from over. Some lawyers also condemned the notion of 'crimes against humanity' as retrospective law. Finally, in October 1997, Maurice Papon, a former senior civil servant in the prefecture of the Gironde (Bordeaux) was tried for complicity with the Final Solution (and thus crimes against humanity) for having helped deport many Jews to Auschwitz between 1942 and 1944. He was found guilty of the main charge, but innocent of knowingly sending the victims to their deaths, and given ten years' prison (not the twenty demanded by the state prosecutor). After fleeing to Switzerland, he was finally incarcerated in 1999.

These trials, especially that of Papon, turned on historical evidence - and thus on the evidence of historians. Figures such as Robert Paxton found themselves subject to the artful cross-examination of defence counsels. Henry Rousso refused to appear as an expert witness on the grounds that legal and historical truth were incompatible.

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In many respects, therefore, the trials failed to bring closure of the Vichy syndrome, though they did incarcerate two French perpetrators. But they perhaps underscore the point - or at least the question - of what the roles and responsibilities should be for professional history-writing towards a deeply divisive period of recent history in which the moral implications of individual actions are still of fundamental concern. In all of this, the scholarly history of the victims' experience, of the Jews in France (of whatever origin) during the Second World War, remained unwritten until the work of a French-Israeli historian, Renée Poznanski, reframed the issue in terms of a much more complex inter-action of Jews and the French population than either the myth histories of the Resistance or the implicit accusations of large-scale passive collaboration allowed.⁶ Here, too, ambiguity has become the dominant note, but one that suggests also how in a variety of ways, the French did not in their majority share the anti-Semitic sentiments of the Vichy regime.

John Horne

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¹ Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (1998), pp. 137-59.

² Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, *Vichy France and the Jews* (1983), p. 344.

³ *ibid.*, p. 344.

⁴ Richard Golsan, 'Collaboration and Context. Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* and the *Mode Retro*', in *id.*, *Vichy's Afterlife* (1996), pp. 57-87 (here 62-3).

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 63.

⁶ Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War Two* (1999; transl. from the French, 2002)