The Legacy of Historical Memory: The Holocaust, Identity, and the Question of Belonging in France

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For many historians, including Pierre Nora, history and memory are contradictory modes of study. Memory is viewed as a living, breathing phenomenon that can manifest itself in religious or sacred planes, whereas history is a secular, scholarly and theoretical reconstruction that leads to a new body of knowledge. Others, however, regard memory as an important analytical tool for historians. A proponent of this view, Henry Rousso, defines the history of memory as “…the study of the evolution of various social practices…[and] of the form and content of social practices whose purpose or effect is the representation of the past and perpetuation of its memory within a particular group or the society as a whole.” If history is to be used as an interpretive lens, the way in which people remember the past must be examined. The importance of examining historical memory is evident in France’s failed memorialization of the Holocaust, and the implications of this failure for France today.

In the wake of the Holocaust, France has failed to address its memory of the event in a meaningful way. This failure is exemplified in the resurgence of French Republican ideals, the attacks on Jewish life, and the crimes against humanity trials of Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon. The examination of France’s inability to properly confront its past is significant not only to understand how and why France deflected confrontations with its past, but also to understand current tensions in France and how they are, in some ways, parallel to the past.

Key events in France’s history characterize the coping mechanisms of French non-Jews and the government after the Holocaust. While these events are rooted in a particular historical context, they are not thoroughly contextualized here in order to avoid deviating from the topic. Furthermore, although the events discuss the Jewish communities in France, their reactions to the
events are not included. It should be noted that much tension exists between the “dominant memory” and that of the Jewish community (or other religious or ethnic minority).

France’s official role in World War II began with the invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939. France was bound by an agreement with Great Britain to defend Poland. Both nations formally declared war on Germany on September 3rd, but France remained fairly inactive. Although there were a few clashes on the border between French and German soldiers, the war for France did not truly begin until May 1940 with the invasion of German troops into France. The German army entered France through Belgium from the north and south. The French had anticipated a single attack through the north, and consequently stationed their best forces there. On May 12th, German soldiers entered France through southern Belgium and, by May 20th, extended their forces to the English Channel. However, instead of the French government fleeing into exile, as had happened in the previously invaded Dutch and Norwegian nations, it remained in France and signed an Armistice Agreement on June 22nd, 1940. The agreement divided France into an occupied zone and an unoccupied zone. The North was under German control, while the French government relocated to Vichy, France, from which they governed the unoccupied zone.

The head of the Vichy state, Marshal Henri Phillippe Petain (1856-1951), was a highly decorated World War I hero. His supporters, known as Petainists, came to symbolize French collaboration with Nazi Germany. The Petain regime was elected by the National Assembly of the Third Republic, and was supported by the French population in accordance with the constitutional procedures of the 1st Republic. Therefore, the Vichy government was a legal and legitimate regime that was established by French agency. This regime, spurred by opportunism, supported Nazi Germany both ideologically and politically. In June of 1944 the Allies landed in
Normandy to assist the Free French of North France, lead by Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970). This collaboration with the Allies contributed to the opening up of the Western Front. By fall 1944, they had driven most of the German troops out of French territory, allowing the Free French forces and the Resistance movement to contribute to the Allies victory.

The military history of the Free French and the Vichy regimes is still a delicate issue. The Vichy regime and those who collaborated with the Nazis were responsible for the deaths of 135,000 people, the detainment of 70,000 suspects, and the dismissal of 35,000 civil servants. Furthermore the Vichy government ratified exclusionary laws causing the investigation and harassment of 60,000 Freemasons, the deportation of 76,000 French and foreign Jews (where less than 3% survived), and the discharge of 650,000 workers to Germany to contribute to the war effort. The sordid history of Vichy France is further complicated by the civil war that broke out between the Free French Forces, lead by de Gaulle, and the French State, under the governance of Petain, in which 80,000 French soldiers died. The French also experienced great loss of life in the battles of West Africa and Syria. Evidently France had its own domestic situation to deconstruct in addition to its experience of World War II in the subsequent decades.

The complexities in deconstructing the military history of France during World War II were further complicated by a regime change. The Allied forces officially recognized the de Gaulle government on October 23, 1944, reestablishing France as an independent, self-governing nation.

De Gaulle’s regime consisted of his supporters during his exile in London and members of the Resistance. Many of these supporters were not experienced in cabinet politics. As such, de Gaulle’s government was composed of many Vichy supporters. This included officials who were part of the state apparatus as well as public servants such as lawyers, doctors, the police,
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educators, and workers in national industries. Due to public demand, there was an effort to “purge” the nation’s institutions of former Vichy collaborators and sympathizers, leading to key public figures stepping down from their positions for a one to two year period, only to be readmitted later on. The complex military history of France during World War II and the subsequent regime change were difficult transitions, causing the initial post-war memory to be separated from the Vichy regime, when in reality the break from the past was a purposeful illusion.

After de Gaulle’s election, his immediate task was to reunify the nation. In order to do this, de Gaulle decided to extend the “great myth” of French resistance against the Nazi regime, to the whole of French society. His cabinet of advisors agreed that the Free French forces, the colonists, and fellow de Gaulle exiles were not an adequate foundation on which to rebuild a nation. Thus, a narrative that emphasized French resistance, struggle, and suffering against the traitorous Vichy regime was developed. This vision not only served to support de Gaulle’s power, but also gave France a positive self-image.

De Gaulle’s first address to the people of Paris after liberation conveys the homogenous view of history that de Gaulle was trying to instill:

Paris! Paris outrage! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and help of France in its entirety, of the France that does battle, of the only France, of the true France, of the eternal France.
In this quotation, de Gaulle makes a clear distinction between the defeated “French State” and the free and resistant French Republic. An essential part of the national myth was the distinction between the State of France and the True France. The State of France was seen as a traitorous for collaborating with Nazi Germany, while the Resistance exemplified the true France by remaining loyal to the founding values of France: liberty, equality, and fraternity. De Gaulle perpetuated this notion by refusing to “reinstate” the Republic following liberation; rather, he argued that the “…Republic had never ceased to live…Vichy was always and remains null and void”. In ignoring France’s widespread collaboration with the Nazi regime, a foundation was built for the creation of the Resistance myth.

The Resistance myth is commonly referred to as the “Gaullist myth”, named after Charles de Gaulle. He reinstated the quasi-universal ideology of the Republican values that drew on traditional notions of citizenship where the citizen is presumed to have an unmediated relationship with the state. The de Gaulle myth claimed that the Vichy regime was reducible to parenthesis in the history of France; that the people overwhelmingly supported the Resistance, and that only a small amount of traitors collaborated with Vichy and the Nazis. This postwar myth repressed the history of collaboration with Nazi Germany, and homogenized their suffering during World War II. It excluded any kind of hierarchical suffering, and ignored the particularly horrific experience of Jewish victims. The primary function of the Gaullist myth, to unite the nation, coincided with the assumption that France was an entirely universalistic nation, and thereby delegitimized the victims of anti-Semitism, colonialism, and racism. Joan Wolf contends, “The Resistance was to France as the Republic was to France”. The Gaullist myth was the dominant national narrative from 1944 until 1971.
The release of the documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* by filmmaker Marcel Ophul was a catalyst for deconstructing the Gaullist myth of Resistance. The film presented a counterhistory to the narrative of France as a nation of resisters by interviewing government officials and citizens who lived during World War II. The film revealed a number of alarming trends: a high level of support for France’s defeat in 1940, the idealist attitude of pro-Nazi supporters, the horrors of state sponsored anti-Semitism, the widespread awareness of the Final Solution, and the prevailing anti-Semitism in present-day France. Although there was also a brief portrayal of individuals involved in the Resistance, the obvious widespread compliancy with the Vichy regime subverted the Gaullist myth and revealed the repressed memory of France’s ambivalent past. Many outside France praised the film; however, resurrecting the “demons of the past” created a strong backlash within France. Ophul was accused of having an anti-French agenda and was condemned for his lack of patriotism. Nevertheless, the *Sorrow and the Pity* undermined the Gaullist myth and exposed the tensions buried deep within France’s unacknowledged history.

As the second generation after World War II began to question the role of their parents during the war, an effort was made to denounce the validity of the film by politicians, government institutions, and the church. However, as the opportunity arose to deconstruct the resistance myth, the nation did not reconcile its past. This is evident in the terrorist attacks on Jewish life during the mid 1980s and the appropriation of Jewish suffering within the rhetoric of national suffering that accompanied those attacks.

In France the first terrorist attack on Jews that occurred during the 1980s was the Rue Copernic bombing. On October 3, 1980, a bomb exploded outside of a Jewish synagogue on Rue Copernic in Paris. The bomb was slated to explode as the congregation left Friday service, but detonated early. Though the targeted audience was spared, four civilians were killed in the
explosion. Throughout France thousands of people marched in protest of the bombing, while the media and people alike denounced the attack. This event, however, did not mean that France had confronted her role in perpetuating Jewish suffering, and should not be mistaken for reconciling its past with the Jews. Although 100,000 marched in solidarity with the Jews, the protest was meant to resonate with the suffering of all corners of French society. While many representatives from the various Jewish communities were present, so were other political and ideological groups from the League of the Rights of Man, to the environmental group “Friends of the Earth”, to the Centre for Anti-Imperialist Studies, and even to the Federation of Councils of Parents of Public School Children. The Jewish community’s cries concerning the particularity of the attack were drowned out by the national discourse of victimization and oppression. Thus, the Holocaust was utilized as a universal metaphor for all who suffer. The victim was not the Jew, but rather France; it was an anti-Semitic attack that was subsumed into the discourse of racism. The French public related the intended Jewish victims to the Holocaust by metaphoric extension, while advocating for their own agenda consisting of political oppression, racism, sexism, nationalism, and colonialism. Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust were not central to the discourse surrounding the attack; they were merely serving as an introduction to discussions about other ideological struggles. Therefore the protests and commentary surrounding the Copernic bombings neglected the particularity of the Jewish experience in France, and was focused on the struggles of humanity.

A second attack in May of 1990 again was fused into a discussion of universal suffering, and demonstrated that the national discourse had not shifted in the ten years following the Rue Copernic bombing. This attack involved the desecration of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras in which over thirty gravestones were pillaged and the body of a recently buried man was mutilated.
and displayed\textsuperscript{30}. Again, thousands of people protested, only this time the dominant rhetoric was a denouncement of fascism. This event occurred after conservative politician Jean-Marie Le Pen’s said that the gas chambers were merely “a detail in the history of World War II,” and implied his doubt of their existence on a national radio program\textsuperscript{31}. Le Pen’s remarks represent the ideology of The Front National party, which is largely comprised of former Nazi German collaborationists and other members of Vichy France, including neo-Nazis and Catholic fundamentalists.

Although the public condemned Le Pen’s comments in 1990, his Front National party won over four million votes in the 1988 presidential elections on the basis of its anti-Semitism, racism, revisionism, and general impudence towards the Holocaust\textsuperscript{32}. The bombing on Rue Copernic had lifted the forbidden act of anti-Jewish violence, while the popularity and allowance of Le Pen’s comments demonstrated a level of comfort with political anti-Semitism\textsuperscript{33}. Le Pen lost public support in the years that followed (the 1990 terrorist attack), and his association with the Vichy regime was used to separate true France from the collaborators. At the time, the FN was considered to be the present day embodiment of the Vichy regime. Le Pen’s comments and his rhetoric of Holocaust denial served to delegitimize the FN and emphasized the separation of the true France from the Petainist-Vichy regime. By focusing on Le Pen’s impudence towards the Holocaust, the public could discredit Le Pen and the Vichy ideology central to his political identity\textsuperscript{34}.

However, the pillage of Carpretas and the discourse surrounding Le Pen allowed France to undermine its past without directly facing it. France failed to accept its collaboration with the Nazis and atoning for its treatment of the Jew, thus the gap between the “true French Nation” and France’s involvement in the deportation of Jews was once again widened. France’s inability to contextualize the attacks on the Jewish community or to adequately confront the neo-fascist
ideologies of the FN are rooted in a failure to confront the past or to cope with it in a meaningful manner. Despite the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in the national dialogue of France, the persecution of Jews and other victimized groups, collaboration with Nazi Germany, and the French civil war were not critically confronted.

The crimes against humanities trials, particularly those of Touvier and Papon, indicate that France did not meaningfully cope with its past. Between 1944 and 1953, de Gaulle’s government was charged with the definitive task of reinstating the rule of law. This task involved the condemnation of Vichy officials and collaborators. The courts became the primary arena to negotiate memory, especially following the emergence of “crimes against humanity” laws passed by the newly formed international court system in 1945. The French courts played a fairly mundane role in ensuring the criminal prosecution of collaborators up until June 1972 when the newspaper *L’Express* discovered that on November 23, 1971, the leader of the French State’s intelligence under Vichy, Paul Touvier, was pardoned for his collaboration role.

It was from this point onwards that the criminal justice system would become a central focus in the nation’s discourse of deconstructing the history surrounding the Vichy regime. Touvier’s pardoning lead to public outcry and in 1973 he was tried for the first charge of crimes against humanity in France. The charge was exacerbated when it was discovered that he had been in hiding since 1944, protected by various members of the Catholic clergy.

When Touvier was finally tried in 1989, the media’s rhetoric included phrases such as “history accused”, “lessons of history” and “history before its judges” when describing Touvier’s trial. This language indicates the media’s attempt to distance France from the past by using Touvier’s trial as a vindication of the past. The trial was also used as an opportunity to educate the younger generation on the lessons of the past. However, the trial itself was full of tensions
between law, memory, and history as he was being tried for French complacency in the Holocaust and for collaboration with Nazi Germany\textsuperscript{38}. He was specifically tried for ordering the murder of 7 Jews. This indicates a compromise in which the integrity of history and the law were traded for the resoundingly popular memory of France renouncing the Vichy regime\textsuperscript{39}. The Touvier trial came to personify the betrayal of France by the Vichy regime. On April 20, 1995 Paul Touvier was condemned for committing crimes against humanity for his role as head of the French Militia.

Similarly, Maurice Papon was condemned for crimes against humanity in 1998 for his role as head of the Jewish Questions Service in the prefecture of Bordeaux. His trial lasted 20 years, and had more rhetoric attached to it than Touvier’s trial did due to the fact that Papon had worked in the de Gaulle government and the subsequent government as the chief of police. He was also central in the mistreatment of the natives in Algeria and inflicted a strict curfew on them. When they protested the curfew, many Algerians were than attacked, wounded, and even killed by police under Papon’s orders\textsuperscript{40}. Papon’s past was also controversial, he was presented to the media as a Resistance member from the beginning of the Occupation in 1944, as prefect of Paris police in October 1961, to his crime of complacency in the illegal arrest of 37 people and the arbitrary detention of 57 more people of the trains leaving Bordeaux between July 1942 and January 1994\textsuperscript{41}.

These two trials are particularly important since they were used by the public to condemn the Vichy state and its government officials rather than simply convict the two men on trial\textsuperscript{42}. Although the French used the trials to further distance the true France from that of the Vichy collaborators, it is clear that a common pattern has emerged that defines French memory of its involvement in the Holocaust.
On the one hand, vindicating France meant dismissing the depth of collaboration and complacency with Nazi Germany and their role in the Holocaust, but to admit their guilt denounces the Resistance and legitimizes Petain. Thus, the acquittal of France with the condemnation of France is a paradox that is central to its inability to attribute its historical memory in a meaningful way. This inability also puts the French state in an exposed, vulnerable position -- to question the state can serve to delegitimize its moral authority. Thus, the Holocaust ultimately differed in meaning for France (French general public) than for the Jews (in France). It was used as a means to address issues that in actuality did not have to do with the Holocaust itself. The Holocaust was used as the lens to expose relevant issues to the whole of France about France’s national identity. Jewish suffering was seen as a pretext, rather than an object for national debate. France continues to blame the Vichy regime for collaboration with the Nazis and negates (largely ignores) the complex dynamics that surround it. It is evident that France has had trouble integrating the past into its national narrative, directly hindering the nation’s self-understanding; that is, what it means to be French (after the Holocaust/ WWII). In the wake of the expansion of the European Union, globalization, worldwide migration and increased immigration, the Republican notion of citizenship that was intrinsic to France’s identity as a nation of universalism has not held up to the past, nor will it in the future.

France has failed to confront its historical memory of the Holocaust in a meaningful way. This was evidenced by the examination of key events that were rooted in France’s Republican ideals, terrorist attacks on Jewish life, and the crimes against humanity trials. The reinstallation of Republican ideals after World War II lead to the Gaullist myth of national resistance. The Gaullist myth neglected to commemorate Jewish suffering by homogenizing the suffering of World War II; this commodified the experience of those who suffered under Nazi German rule.
but also under Vichy’s rule. The perpetuation of the myth of unity that was based on universalism repressed France’s Holocaust history, while simultaneously constructing a false narrative of how liberty, equality, and fraternity prevailed. Secondly, we see how the protests of the attacks on Jewish life at Rue Copernic and Carpentras, and the rejection of Le Pen’s politics enabled many French to denounce anti-Semitism and the Holocaust without specifically addressing either issue. Instead, the attacks were absorbed into numerous struggles of racism and marginalization without any discussion of anti-Semitism, Vichy collaboration, or the French collaboration with Nazi Germany. By associating Le Pen with Vichy the public allowed for the separation between themselves and any institutional collaboration with Nazi Germany. As the trials of Touvier and Papon have shown, the separation between France and Vichy France allowed the nation to distinguish itself from the perpetrators of the past. Thus, the Holocaust now represented the victimization of the entire French population under the Vichy government.

The examination of France’s inability to properly confront its past is significant not only in understanding the mechanisms used to deflect its historical past and how they persisted, but to use historical memory rooted in conflict as a means to draw parallels between past and current tensions in France. In the wake of the establishment of the European Union, and with the role of the state steadily decreasing in its symbolic function, France continues to sidestep the darker elements of her historical memory and bases her historical memory on a fabricated understanding. As the question of what it means to be French persists, and who is included in this imagined community, the failure to confront France’s history in regards to its treatment of the Jews leads to the question of how new immigrants, particularly those coming from North Africa, will be treated. The unresolved issues of the Holocaust should serve as a reminder that collaboration with bigotry cannot stay buried in the past; but will instead manifest in other forms.
in the future. France’s neglect to confront its historical memory should serve as a warning to nations who have similarly participated in the genocide, colonization, and exploitation, and of a group minority. The failure to reconcile one’s role in oppression can only serve to perpetuate it.
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3 *Ibid.*, 139
4 *Ibid.*, 139
5 *Ibid.*, 140
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7 Ibid., 4
8 Ibid., 5
9 Ibid., 5
10 Rousso, The Vichy Syndrome, 7
11 Ibid., 7
12 Kelly, The Rebuilding of France, 80
13 Ibid., 7
14 Ibid., 8
15 Ibid., 8
19 Wiedmer, The Claims of Memory, 33
20 Kelly, The Rebuilding of France, 90
21 Wolf, Harnessing the Holocaust, 21
22 Ibid., 126
24 Ibid., 74
25 Ibid., 76
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27 Ibid., 93
28 Ibid., 92
29 Ibid., 93
30 Ibid., 137
31 Ibid., 132
32 Ibid., 132
33 Ibid., 133
34 Ibid., 134
36 Ibid., 75
37 Golsan, The Papon Affair, 255
38 Wolf, Harnessing the Holocaust, 153
39 Ibid., 154
41 Ibid., 265
42 Wolf, Harnessing the Holocaust, 183
43 Ibid., 183
44 Ibid., 191
45 Ibid., 155
46 Ibid., 157