Occupied France Remembered

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Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains – In Search of the German Occupation, 1940–1945* (Henry Holt: New York, 2002) 524 pp., £20.00 (hb), ISBN 0-33-378230-5.

Michael Curtis, *Verdict on Vichy: Power and Prejudice in the Vichy France Regime* (Arcade Publishing: New York, 2003) 419 pp., $27.95 (hb), ISBN: 1-55-970689-9.

Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 690 pp., £12.99 (pb), ISBN 0-19-925457-5.

Andrew Shennan, *The Fall of France, 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 181 pp., $22.99 (pb), ISBN 0-582-29081-3.

Henry Rousso, *The Haunting Past. History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 136 pp., $29.95 (hb), ISBN 0-8122-3645-9.

In *The Haunting Past*, written as a series of interviews between Philippe Petit and Henry Rousso, Rousso addresses the obsessive culture of memory that since the 1980s has so shaped French and Western society's understanding of its immediate past. It is part, he argues, of a growing ideology of the 'duty to remember' (p. 10). The irony, as he points out, is that, until recently, historians had been critical of society's failure to remember key elements and events of its past. In the case of France, it was evident in the way in which Vichy was treated as a parenthesis in French history, to use Charles de Gaulle's words. It was not until the seminal works of such historians as Robert Paxton that the true nature of the Vichy regime was revealed.[1] Now, there is a growing fear among historians that the new duty to remember and this obsession with memory is resulting in some equally distorting excesses, with potentially just as harmful consequences for our understanding of our past (p. 11).

The notions of collective memory, collective remembrance and their relationship to history are not unique to the study of France during the Second World War. While, as a field, the study of memory and commemoration probably first came into its own with the First World War as its focus, it has come to encompass the study of the Second World War and its aftermath as well, if more problematically. Collective memory, created by the overlapping and melding of individual memories, is something decidedly different from historical memory or, more accurately, historical

[1] Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

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knowledge. In the process of its formation, collective memory necessarily selects from among the various individual memories available to create a coherent, single common memory for a group, people or country. This process necessitates both the selection of those parts of the individual memories that will be enshrined and those parts which will not be remembered. It is then the process of collective remembrance, the retelling of the 'story', through the artefacts, rituals and acts of commemoration created for this purpose, that collective memory is reinforced. In its repeated telling, the events determined to be the salient ones are recalled and cemented into the public consciousness. For the public, then, those memories become 'the story' or 'the history'. And it is in here that the danger lies, when the 'the story' is conflated with 'the history'. These narratives have their own internal logic and discourse, which may only be a partial reflection of historical reality. For Rousso, this memory, enshrined through collective remembrance, is about identity rather than historical reality. In order to construct that identity, history is selectively remembered and generally either idealised or demonised (p. 7). It is used as a means of bridging gaps, mending wounds and healing rifts or, alternatively, of denying a past, breaking with the unacceptable and divorcing the repulsive. It is not about understanding the past in all its complexities. It is about selective remembering because it serves the needs of the present. By way of example, one such powerful selective memory was the Gaullist myth constructed after Liberation, that the real France had never surrendered to the Germans, that the true France was a nation of resisters who had never stopped fighting and that the Republic had never ceased to exist. It was crucial to de Gaulle's mission to restore national unity in France, but a serious distortion of the reality of the occupation experience.

Historical memory or knowledge is a very different thing. Unlike collective memory and remembrance, this is about the scholarly reconstruction of the past, an effort that focuses on exploring the complexities, contradictions and paradoxes of the past, on how we got from 'there' to 'here' and on understanding the changes wrought in that transition. Rather than making the past immediate, as memory does by incorporating it as a part of our present lives, history puts the past at a distance. Its purpose is to recreate and help us understand the weight and complexity of past events (p. 16). Rousso warns that the historian must not fall into the trap of selective memories, but instead must seek to construct the most complete and most nuanced picture possible, whether it is a comforting one or not. It also has another essential dimension. It 'underscores – and on occasion uncovers – individuals, facts, practices, and deep-rooted tendencies that contemporaries perhaps neither perceived nor understood' (p. 8). To confuse the two, memory and history, is to fail to recognise the fact that we remember and forget only what we have known and lived, not what we never knew (p. 9). In so doing, the purpose of 'doing' history is fatally undermined.

For a similar reason, Rousso vehemently objects to what he terms the 'judicialization of the past'. By this, he refers to the use of the judicial system, by means of the trials of war criminals, to judge indirectly a government and an ideology. This is a part and parcel of the 'age of memory', he argues, with the domains of

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the judge and the historian crossing and crossing up each other. Unable to target abstract historical entities, the courts must instead resort to trying them through individuals. The judges explicitly justify their actions in the name of memory and the victims who have otherwise found no justice – an implicit condemnation of history's apparent failure to bring them justice. These courts, both judicial and the court of public opinion, operate under the illusion that the verdict delivered will take the place of history 'as the world's court of judgment'. The courts, however, are unable to do this successfully, since they are restricted by the law to determining the guilt or innocence of specific individuals for specific crimes defined by specific legal texts and procedures. They can go no further, with the result that there is an unfinished, vaguely unsatisfactory feeling at the end of any trial, if the expectation is that the trial will put a regime, an ideology or a movement on the stand (pp. 49–50, 57). Thus the trial of Maurice Papon could never achieve all that was expected of it. Papon, a minor Vichy official, was tried in 1997–8 for crimes against humanity. The process required that he be proved, to the exacting standards of the court, to have known and understood the consequences, in their entirety, of the deportations of Jews that he had arranged and in which, as a functionary of the regime, he had the option of refusing to participate. The French public expected Papon to be tried as an embodiment and symbol of the Vichy regime, but the court had to try him as an individual with an individual's culpability, and had to demand a level of proof and clarity to which historians are not and cannot be held – thus seriously restricting what could and could not be argued in court. For this reason, the public was doomed to disappointment, in spite of the fact that Papon was ultimately found guilty. The fundamental difference, according to Rousso, is that the work of historians is about understanding, not judging, and even less about absolution or condemnation (p. 53). Only history, which can take into account the complexities, ambiguities and imprecision of the past, can grapple successfully with the issues being put in front of the courts.

Rousso is at his most provocative when discussing the implications of this for the study of the Holocaust, which he fears has been hijacked by the imperious 'duty to remember'. The purpose of remembering has become, among other things, about teaching moral and civic lessons to the general public, something that does not mix well with historical truth, he argues. Originally, the call to remember was a call to survivors to bear witness in order that we not forget. With the passing of generations it has now become a moral injunction that younger generations, who did not live the experience, 'pass on the memory'. This is effective when it serves to ensure the remembrance of the dead, for it restores their identity and grants them a symbolic grave. When it becomes a moral code, a lay religion, that imposes a permanent 'imprescriptible' consciousness of the crime, it creates an impasse, since it forbids anyone to break with the orthodoxy and it paralyses historical inquiry (pp. 21–3).

It is this argument of Rousso's which Michael Curtis challenges in *Verdict on Vichy: Power and Prejudice in the Vichy France Regime*. In his comprehensive review of Vichy France's attack on its resident Jewish population, Curtis is vehement that Vichy's complicity in the persecution of the Jews must be central to the debate about the

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regime. In response to Rousso's and others' concern that too much emphasis is being put on Vichy's part in the Shoah at the expense of understanding other aspects of the regime, he argues it is not 'excusable to argue that too much emphasis can be put on a nation's complicity in mass murder of its own citizens' (p. 9). For Curtis, the purpose of studying the history of Vichy, and by implication the purpose of studying history in general, is 'to make judgments on the behaviour of people and institutions' (p. 12). He has taken to heart Jacques Chirac's call to 'pursue the duty of memory to its conclusion . . . [and] to ensure that the role of Vichy and its representatives is fully brought to light' (p. 17).

Curtis's work purports to do that. It is a detailed analysis of Vichy's calculated effort to identify, isolate, discriminate against, exclude, persecute, 'Aryanise' the assets of, and arrest and intern Jews, French and foreign. It is also a condemnation of that effort, and of the French population's participation and co-operation in it. Most of what Curtis relates is not new, the book being based largely on secondary sources, although he does hammer home effectively Vichy's autonomy in matters of both policy and implementation. He is given to rhetorical flourishes, a dramatic way of posing what he terms 'haunting questions' about what might have been done differently and whether or not anyone had any choice in whether to participate in the persecution of the Jews. The reality is that, indeed, individuals did have choices and many chose to co-operate – again not a revelation. He is less generous in acknowledging that there were those who chose not to participate. They did exist, as he does admit. There were those who hid Jews; lawyers who undermined the process of Aryanisation of Jewish businesses and properties in a variety of ways; those who took over ownership of Jewish properties on behalf of Jews about to have them confiscated; and so on. However, we are given no indication of how common this was or how rare, which raises doubts about the strength of his condemnation. Surely demonstrating its rarity or frequency would only bolster his argument that the French population was also complicit? For those who did participate, he offers only speculation as to why they might have done so, again making his argument less satisfactory or informative than it might be (p. 109).

His anger with Vichy's 'squalid behaviour' (p. 173) is palpable throughout the work, as is his anger with the French people for allowing Vichy to behave as it did. It is given free rein in his conclusion, when he condemns Vichy for having betrayed the 'legitimate' Third Republic; the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity; the democratic and social system based on, among other things, legal equality; national sovereignty and national interest (pp. 353–4). It is a bit of a 'straw man', however, since Vichy came to power with the explicit mission of turning its and France's back on those republican values. And, at least initially, it is generally accepted that the French population agreed to this. Nor does he recognise that France was never, in practice, the bastion of equality, tolerance and democracy that Curtis implies, no matter what it claimed for a national motto. His condemnation does not help us better understand why Vichy turned its back on these principles, why the French people at least initially accepted its decision to do so, or what the consequences of this choice were.

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Curtis's final statement is a revealing one. '[U]nderstanding does not necessitate forgiveness' (p. 354). In that simple phrase, Curtis exemplifies what Rousso warns against. Curtis's work is about the judgement and condemnation of Vichy. Rousso would argue that that is not the responsibility of the historian. Instead, the historian's task is the pursuit of historical knowledge, period. Rousso is not nave and recognises that even while historians are seeking to answer definite questions, their questions are shaped and dictated by the present – our present intellectual interests, as well as our present moral and social needs (p. ix). Nonetheless, there is a fine line that I suspect that Rousso would argue Curtis has crossed.

Interestingly, the selectivity of collective memory has had at least one important impact on the shape of historical research into the period in question. A quick survey of the literature on France between the years of 1940 and 1945 reveals that the vast majority of it deals with Vichy France – just one of the several zones into which France was carved and which only covered approximately 45 per cent of the territory of France and held approximately one-third of the population (Jackson, p. 246). In much of this literature, Vichy France has come to mean France, consciously or not. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it seems that, at least during this period, France has shrunk to the borders of Vichy. Although many acknowledge that France was divided into various occupation zones, that fact is soon forgotten and Vichy is treated as if it represents all of France. One exception might be Paris, which is treated as an island outpost. It is a serious hole in our understanding of the occupation experience in France as a whole, since the occupations of each zone were very different in nature, with quite different consequences for their residents. Furthermore, focusing on Vichy and its counterpart, the Resistance (which has been generally treated, until very recently, as either confined to the territory of Vichy or as an ageographical political entity), in this way, has caused us to see what should be one seamless story, the story of the French experience in all its corners and from all its perspectives, as a set of interrelated stories – the story of Vichy, the story of the Jews, the story of the Resistance, the story of the Germans and of the Italians, the story of the Communists, the story of the ordinary person, whatever the zone. For whatever reason, historians' focus has become rather myopic in using Vichy and its counterpoints as emblematic of the French experience as a whole. It is only recently that efforts have been made to break free of these blinkers. The final three books reviewed here are about doing that.

Robert Gildea's *Marianne in Chains* is an exciting and accessible study of the Loire valley under the German occupation. This part of France was in the Occupied Zone and, as such, the book is a refreshing break from the twin tendencies to equate the Parisian experience with the experience of the Occupied Zone as a whole and to focus on the zone that was Vichy. Gildea has attempted to write a history from the perspective of the ordinary person and evocatively explains the constraints facing the general population, as well as their creativity and ingenuity in dealing with and circumventing those constraints. He also does a superb job of explaining the German and French authorities' reliance on the local notables for the successful and smooth administration of the region. This imbued the local notables with a degree

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of both power and security that might otherwise have been unexpected. Given that the Germans were content to rule indirectly, through the French administration, the French administration then provided the petty bureaucrat with the opportunity to influence policy through its successful or unsuccessful implementation. Gildea describes the relationship as something similar to the 'system of indirect rule between colonisers and indigenous elites' found in the British Empire, one based on a more complex set of personal relationships than simple 'command and obey' (p. 33). It operated on the principle of negotiations, facilitated by good personal relations established within a common cultural framework of a common sense of military honour, of a shared European civilisation and, often, the Christian religion (p. 31). In this situation, the French and Germans, he argues, learned to live together, with the French as active in determining the rules of cohabitation as the Germans. This lasted until the war turned against the Germans, at which point the relationship changed from a collaboration based on negotiation to one based on *diktat* (p. 405).

What is less well handled in the book is the relationship between the French in the Loire valley and Vichy. Gildea argues at several points throughout the book that Vichy had little influence in the occupied zone (see e.g., pp. 15, 122, 406). This meant that local French authorities and the local notables administered the region for the Germans. However, it is unclear whether the divide was truly this clear-cut. Although Vichy was supposedly isolated, Gildea refers repeatedly to its influence in the region. For example, in chapter 4, dealing with the food shortages, he writes of the inadequacy of Vichy's systems put in place to control prices and supply, because of circumstances outside Vichy's control, such as the British blockade and German confiscation (pp. 92–3). In the same chapter, however, he writes of Vichy's sympathy for the problem of low wages and that its flexibility on the issue of wages won over a number of workers to its Labour Charter (pp. 102–3). He goes on to describe the battery of officials and the measures created by Vichy to bring the peasantry under control, and how these ultimately failed to bring the peasantry and the burgeoning black market to heel, because it had to to come to terms with vested interests and because it was riddled with corruption itself (pp. 108, 111, 113–14). In chapter 5, entitled 'Circuses', Gildea describes how the French population was able to exploit the different priorities of the German authorities and Vichy and seize space in which to recreate an associative life for itself. In spite of his repeated assertion that Vichy was isolated from this zone, then, his evidence seems to belie that conclusion. A clearer sense of the jurisdictional boundaries and their permeability would have been helpful. For example, when local notables were appointed to the *conseils généraux* – which were a creation of Vichy – but were responsible to the prefect, how involved were Vichy, the German authorities and the local prefect in their selection? How much communication was there between Vichy and the prefects? How much direction was given and how much taken? In fairness, this is not the central theme of the work, but Gildea raises the issue often enough to give rise to the question. What this tells us is that we do not yet fully understand the nature of Vichy's reach outside its formal territorial boundaries into the occupied zones, and that it is a complicated story. The demarcation lines were important barriers, and until we have a better understanding

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of those jurisdictional boundaries, their nature and their permeability, we will not understand the history of the occupation of France as a whole.[2]

Andrew Shennan's *The Fall of France, 1940* is another fascinating and provocative attempt to break free of the myopia into which historians of occupied France have inadvertently fallen. His is an exercise in the study of collective memory, or perhaps, more accurately, a study of collective amnesia. His work focuses on those fateful summer months of 1940 when France fell, the politicisation of that defeat and its ultimate descent into historical oblivion, superseded by the occupation experience as the key historical memory of the period. Shennan challenges several fictions that have emerged as part of the explanation of the defeat. First, he argues convincingly that, while the French government and people were shocked by the rapidity of the French military collapse, they were not completely unprepared for defeat. The paradox of the years before defeat was simple, but profound. While no one expected defeat, having sufficient confidence in the French ability to defeat the Germans in a war expected to repeat the tactics of the First World War that many were busily preparing for the postwar settlement even before the war had begun, even fewer found defeat unimaginable. An underlying suspicion of deep-seated French weakness, stemming from the experiences of the First World War and the 'steady pessimism of the 1930s', also led many from all parts of the political spectrum to predict the likelihood of defeat (pp. 27–8). It was that predictability that explains why the political vacuum created with the collapse of the Third Republic was filled almost instantaneously by a relatively coherent alternative, and that a viable opposition to that alternative was able to emerge almost as rapidly. The debates had been rehearsed before. It only took the collapse of the Republic to allow them to come into their own and move from the salons to the political arena writ large. Defeat seemed strange, but also after the fact, strangely natural. And those who emerged as major actors on the political stage after defeat were able to politicise it to suit their own needs and purposes (p. 28). In the case of both Vichy and de Gaulle, the defeat was used to bolster their claim to be the legitimate government of France and to represent 'the continuing autonomy and sovereignty for the state they purported to embody' (p. 48). Shennan makes an important point when he stresses that a primary concern of both Vichy and de Gaulle was to ensure the continued sovereignty and autonomy of France in the face of potential German annexation – a threat considered very real by the French in June 1940, although in hindsight one not ever seriously considered by the Germans, with the exception of the special case of Alsace-Lorraine.

Another fiction tackled is that defeat resulted in a collective national awakening which exposed the nation's fundamental problems to scrutiny and clarified the right way in which to resolve them. The reality was that the lessons of the defeat were anything but clear and they became, instead, tools in the hands of the various political

[2] There are studies of the other occupied zones, but they are few. See e.g., Lynne Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France, 1940–45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Charles Béné, *L'Alsace dans les Griffes Nazies* (Raon: Fetzer S.A., 1971); and Bernard Larec, *L'Alsace dans la Guerre 1939–1945* (Le Couteau: Editions Horvath, 1988).

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forces vying for the heart and mind of France. Each of the main elements had different and distinct opinions about what had gone wrong and how to correct it (p. 64). The result was the politicisation of defeat. And 1940 became, for everyone, a transformative moment, even if the nature of the transformation was up for debate.

With Liberation, interest in 1940 waned markedly. Focus shifted to the experience of the occupation and 1940 was depoliticised. Instead, political leaders who emerged after the war preferred to base their self-identity and France's identity on the lessons of the Resistance and the occupation experience. For all, it was easier to ignore 1940. Thus 1945, rather than 1940, became the transformative moment. For the communists, who had to address their curious and compromised position in the first year of German occupation, it was easier to look back from 1945 and trumpet their impressive participation in the Resistance by the war's end than to try to explain their rather complicated entry into the Resistance. For Charles de Gaulle, keen to reunite the nation, it was important to argue that France had never truly been defeated and had continued the fight, if clandestinely rather than overtly. Rather, in the context of the larger, European civil war that had begun in 1914 and only ended in 1945, the defeat of 1940 was seen as only one of many battles in a war France and its allies were ultimately certain to win. In that sense, then, 1940 was a minor setback only compromised further by Vichy's crime of accepting a premature armistice (pp. 95–6). When put in the context of France's modernisation over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the brief war of 1939–1940 now seemed irrelevant. The issue of how to regard the defeat has been further complicated by a more practical problem of how to commemorate something that was essentially unheroic, and marked by incompetence and cowardice. In the words of Saint-Exupéry, 'sacrifice loses all nobility if it is nothing but a parody or suicide' (quoted on p. 159). Thus the defeat has lost its centrality to the French experience and has been eclipsed as a defining moment in the French collective memory by the occupation and by the Resistance. *The Fall of France, 1940* is a superb exercise in tracking the evolution of an event in a nation's collective memory, especially intriguing because of the way in which it traces the 'shelf-life' of the memory, to borrow a phrase from Jay Winter and E. Sivan.[3]

Julian Jackson's sweeping study of France during the period of occupation, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944*, is a tour de force. In over six hundred pages, Jackson provides a comprehensive survey of the history of the period as well as the raging historiographical debate. He touches on all the key issues – from the defeat, its roots and consequences, the nature of the Vichy regime, both practical and ideological, the relationships between Vichy, the Germans and the French people, the nature, politics and evolution of the Resistance, as well as its relationship with the French people and with Vichy, to the complex stories of Liberation and its immediate aftermath, and how the Occupation has been remembered since. His command of the literature

[3] Jay Winter and E. Sivan, 'Setting the Framework', in Jay Winter and E. Sivan. ed., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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is impressive and the book is a carefully weighed consideration of the complex and divisive issues.

In addition, Jackson addresses not only Vichy, but also the other occupation zones of what he terms accurately a balkanised France (p. 246). Unfortunately, in spite of this goal, much of the book perforce must concentrate on Vichy – in part because that is where the bulk of the secondary literature itself has focused. Thus it is less a reflection on Jackson than a reflection on the state of the literature. We simply do not have the wealth of studies for the other occupation zones as we do for Vichy, leaving us with only a hint of what life was like in these zones. However, he does an admirable job of incorporating information about the other zones where possible, highlighting both the similarities and differences between the various occupation experiences. If nothing else, it is an effective appeal for a broader vision of this period of French history.

In the final chapters Jackson turns to the issue of memory and the role of history in its construction. He, too, is disturbed by Rousso's frustration with the growing centrality of the persecution of the Jews, although not for the reasons that Curtis offers. Rather, Jackson is concerned that 'the line between nuance and apologetics is delicate', and that Rousso might be giving ammunition to revisionists with their own political agendas (pp. 619, 621). Jackson fears that an effort to restore balance might become an apology for the regime; that the history might be hijacked for non-historical purposes. It is a concern not unique to the study of the Holocaust, and has also plagued the study of other atrocities and crises in history – such as slavery in antebellum America. And yet, ironically, Jackson has done exactly what Rousso has called for. In the midst of this superb overview of the history of the period is a cogent, thoughtful chapter that deals with the Jewish question and Vichy. That discussion is placed squarely in the context of the complex set of relationships that emerged between Vichy, the Germans and the French people – where it should be placed, for it is in this historical context that it can best be understood. Further, without the greater historical context provided by the rest of the work, this chapter would lose much of its potency and force, and our understanding of the Jewish question would be much less rich.

As Jackson points out in his Epilogue, 'historians alone will never be able to resolve these quarrels of memory which are, at their most fundamental level, debates about national identity' (p. 632). Nor is that the task of historians, or so Rousso would argue. History has always been mobilised (or appropriated) on behalf of various versions of national identities – in their construction, their manipulation, their modification, their contestation. More exactly, perhaps, selected versions of history have been so mobilised. It is not a reason for historians to begin to self-select for themselves. The best that historians can do, as Jackson himself has done with this work, is to recognise and to explore that history in all its complexity and contradictions, and to continue to point out when the versions of that history selected by the builders of identities or memories stray too far.

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