

# **The Postwar Debate over Collaboration in Vichy**

By

Antoine Devroede

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies  
in conformity with the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Final (QSpace) submission February, 2022

Copyright © Antoine Devroede, 2022

# Abstract

This thesis is about two histories, the history of the Vichy regime in France between 1940 and 1944, and the evolution of postwar memory and scholarship about Vichy until today. The objective of this research is to investigate the evolving conceptual interpretation of collaboration as it happened in France during the Second World War. This historiography primarily examines the perspectives of scholars, historians, and French civil society in the postwar era with the aim of investigating how they responded to the memory of the Occupation, particularly on the topic of collaboration. I chose to focus on three periods, and three books which were particularly impactful at the moment of their publication: 1945-1965 through the work of Robert Aron, 1954-1970s through the work of Robert Paxton, and the 1980s through the work of Pierre Laborie. The postwar debate over Vichy continues to follow familiar political fault lines between the left and the right, with some far-right factions continuing their attempt at defending the actions of those who chose to collaborate. For some conservatives, particularly in the late 1940s and 1950s, condemning Vichy could only be done in so far as it didn't compromise their postwar agenda. Additionally, this condemnation couldn't be at the benefit of communists and the left. I also argue that while there is still much to learn on the history of Vichy, the major debates have been settled by historians. Today, when some wish to instrumentalize the memory of Vichy to further their political agendas, we ought to differentiate historical revisionism from what constitutes an honest debate over the history of this difficult period.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to first thank my supervisor, Professor David Pugh, for his exceptional support in the completion of this thesis. This work would not have come to fruition without his help and guidance. I'm very grateful for his patience and for being so adaptable to my evolving needs and circumstances throughout the past two years. The period in which this thesis was written was tumultuous. I spent several months deliberating on the direction of this work with David, slowly narrowing the focus of my work. At multiple points, I veered off the path of thesis work to pursue other opportunities. In January 2020, I was contracted at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade where I worked until the summer. Then, I was hired for another contract at the Department of Industry, and I then interned at the Cabinet of the Director General of UNESCO in Paris, experiences which opened many doors for me. Much of this happened during the highly disruptive COVID-19 pandemic which presented additional challenges. There again, the faculty and my supervisor showed a great deal of flexibility. Despite the numerous times when my research was sidelined for the benefit of other career opportunities presented to me, David always encouraged me to pursue them and for this I am very grateful. I would also like to thank Johanne B nard, the second reader, who also gave me very valuable guidance and support in the completion of this work. Johanne expanded my approach to research and helped me overcome several obstacles in the beginning of this work.

# Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Contents .....	iv
Introduction.....	1
An overview of Vichy and the Occupation (1940-1944).....	5
Chapter 1: 1945-1965: Robert Aron, the Gaullist myth and Vichy as a benevolent regime .....	7
1.1 Introduction to Chapter 1 .....	7
1.2 Postwar France: The liberation, de Gaulle, and the immediate aftermath after Vichy .....	9
1.3 Aron’s reading of the Occupation – <i>Histoire de Vichy</i> .....	15
1.3.1 The methodology of <i>Histoire de Vichy</i> and the historical context .....	17
1.3.2 The issues with Aron’s history of Vichy: The <i>diktat</i> and the shield .....	21
1.3.3. The reception of Aron’s book and public perception on Vichy in the postwar period	28
1.4 Conclusion – Is it fair to accuse Aron of being "soft" on Vichy?.....	32
Chapter 2: 1954-1970s: The Paxtonian revolution .....	37
2.1 Introduction to chapter 2 .....	37
2.2 France between 1954 and 1980 – Historical background .....	40
2.3 Vichy France – Old Guard and New Order (1940-1944). Robert Paxton and the Paxtonian revolution .....	46
2.3.1 Paxton’s unmaking of the Gaullist and Aronian myths.....	49
2.3.2 The place of the National Revolution in the political legitimacy of Vichy according to Paxton .....	53
2.3.3 Paxton’s assessment of Vichy: “A Balance Sheet”, refuting the shield argument and the matter of Jewish persecution .....	56
2.3.4 Reception of Paxton book in the 1970s and 1980s.....	60
2.4 Conclusion – The threat to social order .....	62
Chapter 3: 1980s onward: Pierre Laborie, Public opinion, and the “obsession” of Vichy.....	65
3.1 Introduction to chapter 3 .....	65
3.2 French contemporary history since the 1980s and Vichy .....	69

3.3 Pierre Laborie’s book, <i>L’opinion française sous Vichy– Les Français et la crise d’identité nationale (1936-1944)</i> .....	76
3.3.1 The debate over public opinion during the Occupation by Vichy historians .....	76
3.3.2 Reflections on the theory of political opinion, sources, their associated challenges and France during the pre-war years .....	81
3.3.3. The dominant opinions and attitudes during the Occupation according to Pierre Laborie.....	89
3.4 Conclusion – On the importance of remembering, and moving on .....	94
4. Conclusion – Vichy in French contemporary politics: the return of the shield theory and exploiting postwar memory for political ends .....	98
Bibliography .....	108

# Introduction

This research is about two histories, the history of the Vichy regime in France between 1940 and 1944, and the evolution of postwar memory and scholarship about Vichy until the 1990s. The objective of my research is to investigate the evolving conceptual interpretation of collaboration as it happened in France during the Second World War. This is a historiography in which I will primarily examine the perspectives of scholars, historians, and French civil society in the postwar era with the aim of investigating how they responded to the memory of the Occupation. I shall examine the shifting perspectives on this subject by analyzing three periods of this intellectual history; these three periods are: 1945 to 1965, the 1970s to 1980s and the 1980s to 1990s. In doing so, I wish to highlight three major stages of evolution, examined through three books and three authors, with regards to Vichy and collaboration. In the final section of this work, I will examine the ways in which the history of the Occupation still impacts political debates today.

For each of these three periods studied, I chose to focus on a single author and a book which I considered to be most impactful for Vichy history and the historiography. These works were chosen based on their pertinence, impact and contribution to the evolution of the debate over Vichy history. For the period of 1945 to 1965, I shall present *Histoire de Vichy* by Robert Aron, published in 1954. This was one of the first significant history book about Vichy and is representative of a prevalent postwar narrative in the first two decades after the war. That is, the notion that the collaborationist regime acted as a shield against the Occupation and protected French interests. This narrative has been debunked and is considered to be revisionist by the vast majority of historians today. Yet it is important to highlight as it was one of the most prevalent postwar narratives and is still promoted by some today, especially in non-academic circles. For the

second period between 1970 and 1980, I chose to focus on *Vichy France Old Guard New Order 1940-1944* by Robert Paxton. This book is notable for its “revolutionary” take on Vichy as it challenged many of the conventional notions that had been established until the early 1970s. Paxton argued that Vichy was not a shield against the Occupation and went beyond the demands of Nazi Germany. He posited a new narrative, which has now created a consensus, that Vichy leaders were collaborating in anticipation of a German victory, and that they were aiming at a voluntary association in an effort to secure a full partnership in Germany’s Europe after the war. Finally, for the final period concerning the 1980s-1990s, I chose to examine the book *L’Opinion Française sous Vichy Les Français et la crise d’identité nationale (1936-1944)*, published in 1990, by Pierre Laborie. This book was notable for its contribution to the understanding of opinions and attitudes of the French population during the Occupation. In particular, Laborie challenged the notion (initially established by Paxton) that French public opinion had been supportive of collaboration in the first two years of the Occupation. Laborie argues that there was considerably more hostility towards collaboration and the Occupation than initially thought, even in the early days of the war. Additionally, Laborie highlights that support for Pétain, who was perceived as a hero of the Great War, should not so easily be equated with support for collaboration.

In addition to these three authors and three books, I shall also occasionally refer to other reliable sources to support my research. This includes Henry Rousso’s *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, written in 1987. Rousso’s book is famous for first establishing a history of the fallout and consequences of the Occupation on French society, which he coined a “Syndrome”. I will also occasionally refer to Julian Jackson’s *France The Dark Years (1940-1944)*. Published in 2001, this work is among the most up-to-date and thorough history book on Vichy I was able to find. I also occasionally refer to *La France de 1848 à nos jours* by Maurice Agulhon and others which

provides a very good survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century French history. Finally, I also occasionally refer to the book *France at War Vichy and the Historians*, edited by Sarah Fishman, a collection of essays by many of the most eminent Vichy historians.

One of the central inquiries of this work is into the postwar attempts at a political justification of Vichy. The justification of a regime born out of defeat is a thorny issue, and certainly, the perception of Vichy shifted over time within French society, as we shall see. Ultimately, I believe the question of Vichy's justified, or unjustified existence and motives rests on whether it had done any good, or anything to protect the nation, and there are several ways to interpret such a question. One of the first ways to conceptualize the "good" of Vichy is in its ultimate result (material, moral, or political,) what Paxton called in his book "the balance sheet". We can assess, for instance, whether the policies and actions of Vichy did anything to limit or deflect the damage on French society from the Occupation. Typical arguments include, for instance, that Vichy may have averted civil war, that it lessened the damage inflicted on France by choosing not to fight, or that it limited the deportations of Jews. These ideas have been largely debunked, and their merits will be discussed further, especially in chapter two with Robert Paxton's work and the 1970s.

The justification of Vichy in the political sphere was a very divisive subject after the war. From one point of view, Vichy was indefensible since it was the product of defeat. Yet, for conservatives, it was more complicated. Conservatives had been harsh critics of the Third Republic, that is, the French political system before the war, and were particularly hostile to communists and the left, something they had in common with Vichy. Thus, conservatives would have argued that Vichy and the ideological project of the National Revolution, despite its



unfortunate beginnings, was actually a restoration of the true line in French culture, and hence was closer to their politics than the Republic that it replaced. This is in part why, even after the war, conservative forces made an effort to justify the actions of Vichy. The regime reflected on their political projects, to an extent, and it was in their best interest to frame the legacy of the regime in a way that would not compromise their postwar agenda, or give credence to their critics on the left. For conservatives, Vichy could only be condemned up to a point, and with certain qualifications, which is why I argue that the postwar reconciliation of Vichy was largely predicated on a conservative compromise, especially in the case of Robert Aron as we shall see in the next chapter.

The Second World War and the Vichy regime are enormous subjects of study. In order to avoid overextending the scope of my research, I established certain boundaries and research topics to which I chose not to give too much attention. First, I made an effort to keep my analysis broad and as generic as possible in order to stay in the spirit of a postwar historiographical analysis, with a focus on what happened between 1945 and the 1990s. Thus, I do not go into the details of what happened during the Occupation itself, between 1940 and 1944, focusing instead on the postwar debates. For instance, I won't go into the internal politics of Vichy during the Occupation, or the question of economic exploitation, or policing or any of the major events which happened during the Occupation. Secondly, other than a few mentions regarding the crimes of collaborators against the Jewish community, I do not give much space to the subject of the Holocaust and the larger persecution of Jews during the Occupation. Indeed, this subject is mostly addressed tangentially. This is because collaboration with Nazi Germany was at the center of the debate over Vichy in the postwar era while the crimes committed against the Jewish community were subordinated under the umbrella of the larger matter of collaboration in France. The crimes committed against Jews

would certainly become a point of focus later, beginning in the 1970s and increasingly thereafter. Yet, apart from antisemitic or revisionist narratives which are at times prevalent throughout Vichy historiography, the crimes committed against Jews are not debated to the same extent as other issues related to Vichy or collaboration, and their persecution is not questioned by any serious academic. Thus, I mostly mention the Holocaust at the margins of, or as a corollary to, the question of collaboration.

## An overview of Vichy and the Occupation (1940-1944)

Before moving to the historiography, I wish to present a brief historical overview of the Occupation between 1940 and 1944. In May 1940 – in the early years of the Second World War – Germany invaded France through the Ardennes, circumventing the heavily defended Maginot Line and precipitating a shocking and decisive end to France’s military participation in the war. Under the new armistice agreement, signed June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, the government of the Third Republic declined the opportunity to go into exile and handed over its power to Maréchal Philippe Pétain by legitimate constitutional procedure. Therefore, no peace treaty was signed and the French government continued to operate under the armistice agreement. The government would continue to function in most of its capacities in a provisional manner and pending the end of the war. Several high-ranking officials of the French government subsequently established a collaborationist government – the Vichy regime – which marked an end to the Third Republic. This regime – headed by Maréchal Philippe Pétain and Pierre Laval, Chief of Government – collaborated closely with Nazi Germany while also promoting a new ideological program based on the promotion of anti-parliamentarism and traditional values, the *Révolution Nationale*. At the height of

collaboration, the Vichy government mobilized French labour, industrial infrastructure and other resources for the benefit of the German war effort, while also proceeding with the discrimination and deportation of Jews. On the resistance front, Général Charles de Gaulle, the emblematic figure of the Resistance, fled to England and became a leader of this French Resistance. Few other nations, with the exception of the Norwegian Quisling regime, collaborated with Nazi Germany to the extent of the Vichy regime during the Second World War.

# Chapter 1: 1945-1965: Robert Aron, the Gaullist myth and Vichy as a benevolent regime

## 1.1 Introduction to Chapter 1

In this chapter, I shall examine the question of Vichy's political justification during the 1945 to 1965 period as addressed by the work of Robert Aron and his book *Histoire de Vichy*, published in 1954. We begin by examining the historical context of the years after the end of the war, notably, the influence of de Gaulle, the political narrative around resistance, collaboration, and the Purge. Then, with Aron, we will examine his perspective on Vichy in the immediate years after the Occupation. While Aron is the primary focus of this chapter for having written *Histoire de Vichy* in the midst of the period which concerns us, we will also refer to other prominent contemporary historians such as Henry Rousso, Stanley Hoffmann, Robert Paxton and Julian Jackson, who help us put Aron into perspective with more recent scholarship. This will also shed light on the most common critiques aimed at Aron by contemporary scholars, especially with Paxton. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the years after the war were too early to engage in a proper examination of Vichy. In the words of Jackson, "Resistance wrote its own history" during this period.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the history of Vichy was guided by those who had fought the German Occupation, but also by the broader narrative of *resistancialisme Gaullien*, that is, the notion that all of France had resisted the German Occupation. Aron's book allows for a greater understanding of where a segment of the intellectual elite stood after the war and also reveals the projection or "wishful" effects resistance had on this history. Despite the imperfect analysis of intellectuals such

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian Jackson, *France The Dark Years*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) p.6

as Aron, examining their early research on Vichy allows for a greater understanding of the post-war sentiment in France. Thus, we will focus on the following questions: What can Aron and his approach to Vichy history tell us about the political justification of Vichy, and how did other historians later respond to him? To what extent is Aron's book representative of French opinion in the 1950s and is it fair to accuse him of being "soft" on Vichy? As we shall see, Aron's middle of the road approach led to a selective condemnation of Vichy, specifically of Pierre Laval whom he considered to be the villain, in contrast to Philippe Pétain, whom he regarded as the hero of this story. Aron's book aimed at national reconciliation but on a conservative basis, telling a story of Vichy which would influence the political debate of the post-war period. As a conservative from the days of the Third Republic, Aron had similar goals to de Gaulle: namely, to condemn Vichy but only up to a point. To go too far in that direction would have meant opening the door to a resurgent Left. I believe Aron's intention was to encourage France to put the Vichy episode behind it and to move on as fast as possible so that the country could return to stable conservative rule.

## 1.2 Postwar France: The liberation, de Gaulle, and the immediate aftermath after Vichy

The Vichy regime officially ended in 1944 soon after the Allied invasion of Normandy, and was followed by the establishment of the short-lived Provisional Government of the French Republic led by General Charles de Gaulle, which lasted until 1946. The mood in France in the immediate aftermath after the war was one of celebration of the Allied victory and the end of the Occupation. Four years of German Occupation and the following Allied invasion had wrecked the country's economy and infrastructure, leaving a devastating mark on the French nation.<sup>2</sup> With the country liberated under General Charles de Gaulle – hero of the Resistance movement – the country recovered under his brand of leadership, with a national focus on unity and a strong condemnation of Vichy. But this period was also marked by instability over the questions of post-war recovery, the creation of a new republic, and the roles of various forms of collaborationism. The instability of this period meant that the question of political justification of collaboration and Vichy was an especially sensitive one. Shortly after the end of the war, de Gaulle's primary concern was maintaining a sense of national self-esteem and national pride to counteract the shameful impact of the early defeat and the subsequent Occupation. Indeed, Gaullist partisans characterized Vichy as “quatre années à effacer”. De Gaulle sought to invalidate the legacy of Vichy by promoting republican legitimacy and to undo any semblance of credibility for the actions taken under the regime.

The influence of de Gaulle in putting resistance at the forefront of post-war memory, his dismissal of Vichy's legitimacy as a governing body, and his characterization of resistance as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Agulhon, André Nouschi, Antoine Olivesi and Ralph Schor. *La France de 1848 à nos jours*, (Paris : Armand Colin, 2008) p.568

unified front during the Occupation all had critical effects on the question of Vichy's *raison d'être*. It colored much of the ensuing debate until the 1970s over the role of collaborators and resisters among the French population. Briefly, the question was who had the right to dictate the terms under which French politics should resume: those who had risked their lives to resist a harsh and often brutal foreign Occupation, or those who had – less heroically but perhaps more realistically – struggled to mitigate the hardships and to maintain the necessities of life. Despite this patriotic attempt at unification and healing, deep divisions existed, especially on the question of resistance over which the country was effectively split in two factions.<sup>3</sup> The first faction, part of what was described by Henry Rousso as *résistancialisme gaulien*, was promoted by General de Gaulle. It posited that, with few exceptions, all of France was part of the Resistance in one form or the other. More importantly, de Gaulle set forth a narrative which conceptualized resistance as an abstraction rather than associating it with very clear examples of organized guerrilla and clandestine operations.<sup>4</sup> Detaching the concept of resistance from the concrete actions of the most active Resistance fighters in Metropolitan France contributed to the generalization of resistance across all segments of French society. This narrative, that all of France resisted, was arguably the most widely adopted one and consequently established a national interpretation of Vichy that implicitly denied the existence of systemic or widespread forms of collaboration. It also enabled de Gaulle to position himself as the embodiment of resistance in French society, conceptually speaking. By rendering the question of resistance abstract, the more controversial actions of specific Resistance groups and the internal disputes that existed within these movements were sidelined. This glorious and heroic direction in the narrative of resistance eased the post-war transition and made moving

---

<sup>3</sup> Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy De 1944 à nos jours*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris : Seuil, 1987) p.31-32

<sup>4</sup> Rousso, p.30

on from the war easier. On the other hand, this desire to turn the page turned into a tendency to oversimplify certain events of Vichy history as well as its evaluation after the war. One of these oversimplifications was a tendency to see Vichy as a homogenous “bloc,” the notion that every collaborator had the same goals and motivation. Thoughtful and nuanced perception of Vichy after years of Occupation was difficult, and it was thus too soon to engage in this form of balanced reflection. The nuances and complicated truths of the Vichy years were erased, for a time, to the benefit of other, more expedient political narratives. These were a convenient way of avoiding more sensitive questions some would rather not talk about, preferring instead to focus on post-war reconstruction. A second faction, “Les vrais résistants”, were Resistance fighters who felt sidelined by de Gaulle’s take on resistance, according to which leadership had come, not from Metropolitan France, but from London.<sup>5</sup> These divisions were primarily the product of internal conflicts between resistance factions. In many cases, there were accusations of appropriation of the label “Résistance”. The Occupation was a common enemy, but the question of resistance was not a unifying element between these factions. There were strong ideological differences between them, notably between communists and right-wing elements, which permeated French politics before and after the war.<sup>6</sup> On this point, Julian Jackson comments that the Resistance Myth itself was orchestrated separately, with the Communists on one side and de Gaulle on the other. Both factions agreed on one crucial element: that the Resistance had represented the “real” France and its true feelings. Yet, they did so for different reasons “For the Communists it was important to prevent the Resistance generation claiming superiority over those leaders who had been in place before 1939 [...] De Gaulle’s problem was slightly different. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he had

---

<sup>5</sup> Rousso, p.32-33

<sup>6</sup> Rousso, p.19



adopted an increasingly right-wing political stance at the head of the violently anti-Communist movement the RPF. Inevitably many members of this movement were Pétainists and de Gaulle did not want to alienate them by harping endlessly on the past.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, de Gaulle’s myth of resistance achieved two things. First, he gave most middle-ranking collaborators a free pass, enabling them to continue their careers undisturbed and preserving an experienced government workforce. Second, he avoided giving any legitimacy to the idea that the Left deserved to inherit power because of their heroic leadership of the Resistance. Ultimately, writing the history of Vichy during the post-war era was not merely an academic exercise, but an undertaking with critical consequences for the politics of the time, of which there were many.

Political divisions during this postwar period were not limited to the question of Vichy; at stake was also the creation of a new republic and the new postwar political direction of France. In January 1946, de Gaulle resigned from the provisional government following a dispute with opposing political parties over the formation of a new constitution which favored a parliamentary system, while de Gaulle preferred a presidential one. Although the negotiations over the creation of this new republic were difficult, the Fourth Republic came to fruition in 1946 under the leadership of Félix Gouin of the socialist party (SFIO). The Fourth Republic was, in many ways, a recreation of the Third Republic and the result of constitutional compromise.<sup>8</sup> This new republic would see over twenty-two different governments instituted over a twelve-year period. Their electoral support was often tenuous, and until 1949 the economic situation in France was very precarious. With that said, the European integration through the implementation of economic

---

<sup>7</sup> Jackson p.603

<sup>8</sup> Agulhon p.578

organizations like European Economic Community (EEC) and the Marshall Plan would ultimately result in a return of economic stability.

The postwar years were also, of course, a time of reckoning for those who had been accused of collaborating with Germany. Collaboration, during this period, was largely seen as a fringe and shameful subsection of French society. It was seen as a distinct group of people with similar political motivations and objectives, one that, according to many who adhered to de Gaulle's vision of unified national resistance, did not represent the average French citizen during the Occupation. National perception towards collaboration was particularly vengeful after the war, as demonstrated by what came to be known as *Épuration* (purge), also sometimes divided between *Épuration légale*, which took place in courts and commissions, and *Épuration sauvage* for extra-judicial sanctions. The purge was a period of approximately five years where thousands of French citizens were put on trial and, in some cases, executed for their role in the collaboration. At the time, it was also a challenge to de Gaulle's narrative of unity and healing of the nation. The purge had a lasting impact on France's post-war recovery with many debates surrounding the moral and ethical objections to punishments for treason, war crimes and collaboration, which endured for a long time. The death of Pétain in 1951, three years before the publication of Aron's book, for instance, had the effect of recentering the legacy of Vichy into public space and reignited the debate around his role during the Occupation. Pétain still enjoyed support and sympathy from a portion of the population even after the purge. As we shall see, competing information as well as the historical context of the era muddied the water for many, both intellectuals and the general public. Additionally, it should be noted that the narrative around the notion of *Épuration sauvage* and the way extra-judicial sanctions were presented in French society during the postwar period is perceived by some today as a constructed idea and a gross exaggeration of the acts of violence and

punishment that took place. Specifically, the work of historians like François Rouquet and Fabrice Virgili argues that this narrative was primarily meant to attack communists and minimize the effects of collaboration.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the history of Vichy was initially seen, for the most part, through the lens of Resistance, that is, as a vision of France as a nation which had unilaterally resisted. Additionally, the ties between conservatives and collaboration also coloured the French political landscape for years. Conservatives saw an erosion of their political support for a time. But this would fade eventually. As the years went by after the liberation, the mood began to change. The continued strength of communism and Pétain's death, among other events, gave France's conservative right new motivations and greater legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> The story of Vichy during this period was coloured by conservative rhetoric, as is the case of Aron's history of Vichy. In spite of this, the notion of Vichy as a collaborationist government to the extent we typically think about today would only begin to take shape later, in the 1970s as we shall see in Chapter 2.

---

<sup>9</sup> Chloé Leprince, "Non, l'épuration n'a pas été « sauvage » après la Seconde guerre mondiale" France Culture, Consulted January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021. <https://www.franceculture.fr/histoire/non-lepuration-na-pas-ete-sauvage-apres-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale>

<sup>10</sup> Rousso, p.58-70

### 1.3 Aron's reading of the Occupation – *Histoire de Vichy*

No other work published during this postwar period reflects this troubled vision of Vichy better than Robert Aron's book *Histoire de Vichy*. Published in 1954, Aron's book was the first serious publication to provide an exposé of Vichy history. It is a comprehensive chronology of the events surrounding the Vichy regime, and a study of the highest levels of the collaborationist government. Aron gave close attention to the inner workings of Vichy and to the conflicts between the most senior figures of the regime: Maréchal Pétain and Pierre Laval specifically but also others like Admiral Darlan, who served as premier from 1941 to 1942. Aron's telling of the inner disputes of Vichy was among the first challenges to the notion of collaboration as a homogenous bloc. Aron also traces the origins of the ideological project of *Révolution Nationale* and describes it in terms of both doctrine and realizations. For its time, Aron's book introduced some novel ideas, and proposed a balanced approach to the question of Vichy which was rather absent immediately after the war. However, Aron's seemingly balanced proposal - one where collaboration was a form of necessary evil that protected France from the Occupiers – was in reality an apologetic discourse that favored a positive image of collaboration. The context of the period in which Aron published his book also provided additional difficulty, as we shall see.

Robert Aron was born in 1898 in a bourgeois Jewish family in eastern France. He studied literature at the Sorbonne and later became a writer. Although not a historian by training academically speaking, he wrote extensively about history and politics. In the 1930s, before the beginning of the war, Aron was of part of a trend of intellectuals who were particularly hostile and

critical of the Third Republic.<sup>11</sup> His writings were a critique of liberalism, individualism, international finance, parliamentarism, and the “decadence of the regime,” all of which were leading to a “crise de la démocratie” according to him.<sup>12</sup> This political commentary was, above all, a critique of liberal expression in politics. It emanated from a larger spiritual movement called *Personalisme* and also a group named *L’Ordre nouveau*.<sup>13</sup> Aron was particularly involved in the latter, with journal collaborators such as Jean Jardin who would later become Director of Cabinet for Pierre Laval during the Occupation. Aron’s writing then included *Décadence de la nation française* (1931), *Le Cancer américain* (1931) and *La Révolution nécessaire* (1933). In a 1933 publication of *Ordre Nouveau*, he writes “Qu’a donc le parlementarisme, et qu’a donc la démocratie pour diminuer tout ce qu’ils touchent et pour châtrer tous les mouvements ?”.<sup>14</sup> Aron’s pre-war critique of liberalism of the 1930s demonstrates that his ideological positions were partially aligned with that of the National Revolution, especially in its anti-parliamentarian character. Thus, Aron’s later writing about Vichy seem to be considerably influenced by his stance in 1930s politics as well. His pre-war association with people like Jean Jardin, who also contributed to *L’Ordre Nouveau*, and later helped Aron hide from the Germans, also raises other salient questions about Aron’s connexions with collaborators.<sup>15</sup>

With eighty years separating the war and our analysis, what can Aron and his approach to Vichy history tell us about the political justification of Vichy, and how did other historians later

---

<sup>11</sup> Jackson p.9 ; Mariette Thom, “Robert Aron. Itinéraire d’un non-conformiste, de l’avant-garde à l’Ordre Nouveau (1921-1939)” (Master’s thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2017)

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Troude-Chastenet, “La critique de la démocratie dans les écrits personnalistes des années 1930 : Esprit et Ordre nouveau”, *Cités*, vol. 16, no.4, (2003) : p.161-176. doi : 10.3917/cite.016.0161 <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-cites-2003-4-page-161.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>13</sup> Troude-Chastenet, p.161-176

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Jackson p.9 ; Émilie Lanez et al “Jean Jardin, un lavaliste convaincu qui aidait ses amis”, *Le Point*, January 6th 2011, [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/robert-o-paxton-jean-jardin-un-lavaliste-convaincu-qui-aidait-ses-amis-06-01-2011-127359\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/robert-o-paxton-jean-jardin-un-lavaliste-convaincu-qui-aidait-ses-amis-06-01-2011-127359_23.php) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

respond to him? I have chosen to focus on three elements: first, Aron's methodological approach to writing the history of Vichy and the effect it had on his writing of history, second, the tenets of Aron's history, its problems, and the reception by later historians. Finally, we will reflect on whether or not Aron had been too soft on Vichy and if his perception is typical of the average French opinion in the 1950s.

### 1.3.1 The methodology of *Histoire de Vichy* and the historical context

The early timing of Aron's publication, his methodology (now widely seen as flawed) and the complex socio-political context of postwar French society considerably influenced his interpretation of Vichy. Aron, like all writers, was a product of his time, but it must be highlighted that he was writing in an especially unique and troubled period of French history. Among the many events which were taking place, the purge trials certainly stand amongst the most important.<sup>16</sup> These trials concerned members of the government at various levels, including all cabinet members who received the most attention, and were Aron's primary focus for his book.<sup>17</sup> The high-profile nature of the trials of Laval and Pétain, more specifically, were divisive, controversial and had received considerable public attention at the time. While the purge trials are an important source of information in understanding Vichy, Aron's overreliance on their records led to an unbalanced understanding of the motives of the collaborationists, both here and in his subsequent history of the purge itself.

These trials were an open display of the divisions between both the partisans and enemies of Vichy. For the partisans of Vichy, these trials were an opportunity to defend its legacy. Stanley

---

<sup>16</sup> Paxton p.393-394

<sup>17</sup> Aron p.691

Hoffmann a prominent historian of Vichy, describes these attempts in the following way: “There are the Pétainistes, led by Maîtres Jacques Isorni and several former ministers, such as Admiral Gabriel Auphan, eager to propagate the notion that Pétain had been France’s shield, and that the sword of de Gaulle and the Resistance was little more than a small and a blunt kitchen knife. And then, there was the attempt by those close to Laval to present their man as the genuine defender of French interests against German demands and of the Republican heritage against Vichy reactionaries.”<sup>18</sup> The complex deliberations of the trials over the role of collaborationists during the war had the effect of further complicating the debate over the defense of Vichy’s actions for French society. These trials were an opportunity for partisans of Pétain to make their case and defend the legacy of Vichy. From the point of view of the prosecution, these trials were meant to assess whether the accused had been in contact with foreign occupiers.<sup>19</sup> Because the questions of the Magistrat were centered on the existence or non-existence of treason, in the specific sense of collaboration with a foreign enemy, every question in the trial sought to find a German origin to the activities of the Vichyites. This led Aron to biased assumptions with regards to what constituted actions which originated from Vichy or from the occupiers, a question which was left for him to interpret.<sup>20</sup> Because Aron seemingly believed in the good faith of the witnesses and of Vichyites, their testimonies are reflected in his book without any real challenge. Aron presents the case of occupied France through the testimony of these Vichy leaders, leading to a version where French officials had no real leverage or hope of negotiating their way out of collaboration, with no agency over what happened in French territory. As Paxton and other historians would later explain, Aron’s

---

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Hoffmann, “Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton” in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p.49-57

<sup>19</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.xv

<sup>20</sup> Paxton, p.xi

interpretation of events, which relied heavily on the trials, has elements of truth regarding the year 1944, that is, closer to the time of liberation, a more glorious period. Yet, this selective memory of the Occupation was not so representative of the earlier period, between 1940 and 1942, when Vichy had actively sought to collaborate.<sup>21</sup> The early years of the Vichy regime are critical to understanding the extent to which Vichy thought of collaboration as a larger political project, and not simply something imposed onto France. This is missing from Aron's analysis primarily because of this overreliance of the purge trials as the primary source material. Relying solely on them had the effect of parroting many of the arguments from the defenders of Pétain and collaborationists. Indeed, the purge trials are useful when put in combination with other sources, but are misleading if one does not balance this perspective with other material.

One of the most important sources of information which historians after Aron use to understand Vichy was the government archives which were opened progressively, but most of which had not been released to the public or academics at the time of Aron's writing. These archives contained troves of documents from the Occupation, and at the time were not accessible. Over time, the progressive opening of these archives did not shed a friendly light on the sole reliance of the purge trials, and consequently, on Aron's interpretation of Vichy. It was not until Eberhard Jäckel and Robert Paxton in the 1970s that we would begin to see historical work that relied on more diverse forms of documentation. As the archives opened over the years, better and more accurate information allowed for a greater understanding of the Vichy period, as we shall see in the next chapter with Paxton. The early timing and limited availability of reliable sources during this period is important since the public was, in this regard, in the same situation as Aron

---

<sup>21</sup> Paxton, p.xii



at the time: it was challenging to form a fair and balanced understanding of events before the opening of records, and before serious studies had taken place. Without the distance of time, there was a shortage of accurate, balanced, and factual information for the average Frenchman when it came to make a final judgement of Vichy.

Another major source of information on which Aron drew for his history were personal connections. Aron was well connected in the political world and used many of these personal contacts as sources when recounting the history of Vichy. Yet little information is given as to the nature of these exchanges, and they cannot be verified. This was yet another problematic element of Aron's methodology: the testimonies of his close circle are unknown and could be biased, but since Aron never documented his exchanges, we cannot know for certain. It is not unreasonable to suggest Aron could be telling a history of Vichy that was kind to the political actors he was close to, like Jean Jardin, for instance. Thus, in understanding Aron's perspective, we must be aware of the author's limited methodology and its effect on the telling of this history. The author was interpreting limited evidence, relying almost exclusively on the records of the high courts and personal connections whose motivations or version of events cannot be verified or corroborated. Yet, limited evidence notwithstanding, Aron clearly had certain political biases which, over time, form a pattern. Indeed, it is not the only instance where Aron's credibility came into question for his research on Vichy. In *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, Rousso highlights Aron's careful and apologetic tone towards collaboration in *Histoire de Vichy* while also noting he showed nowhere near the same kind of clemency towards the Resistance movement in one of his subsequent books, *Histoire de la libération*, where he accuses Resistance organizations of mass execution. There were executions, it's true, but Aron grossly exaggerates the numbers and the threat of revolution in the aftermath of the Occupation. In that sense, I find that Aron's perspective echoes the justification

of Vichy officials for collaboration: the threat to social order was perceived to be the greatest concern among others, as we shall see in the Paxton chapter. <sup>22</sup>

### 1.3.2 The issues with Aron's history of Vichy: The *diktat* and the shield

With the larger problems of methodology and sources now established, let us examine how the overreliance on the purge trials and the early writing of Vichy history affected his analysis. Robert Paxton, one of the most widely recognized historians on Vichy history, characterised Aron's reading of Vichy as resting on several "pillars" and I wish to focus on the two I think are the most important.<sup>23</sup> The first, a characterization of France under "a total Nazi *diktat*;" and the second "Vichy's service as a shield against that *diktat*". I wish to revisit the most common criticisms addressed towards Aron and offer some reflection on how Aron perceived Vichy. I believe that later historians' critiques of Aron are completely valid, and I would also like to add that Aron's line of argument, which is centered on the idea that collaboration is a crime limited to a handful of individuals, distracts from the reality of a more widespread form of collaboration. First let's begin with Aron's approach to the question of *diktat*.

Aron characterizes Vichy as a regime under the complete authority of Nazi Germany and uses the word *diktat* to describe the German presence in French territory. Where agency is attributed to the Vichy authorities, the latter are usually said to have miscalculated or committed blunders, a perspective that allows Aron to avoid admitting the uncomfortable truth that these authorities had deliberately pursued policies in line with their own political values. Several Vichyites are depicted (with the exception of the former socialist Laval) as having benevolent

---

<sup>22</sup> Rousso, p.282

<sup>23</sup> Paxton, p.xi

intentions, and the actions of Vichy officials are presented as if every action is an order from German Occupation forces and almost never as initiatives from the collaborationist regime. What Aron never recognizes, however, is that Hitler had very little interest in France and wished to devote as few resources as possible to it. French collaborationists presented a good opportunity for Germany to limit the outflow of their own resources by letting French authorities administer many elements of French society on their behalf. Early during the Occupation, Vichy officials envisioned Germany would eventually be victorious, and they were intent on preparing the geopolitical terrain of France for this eventuality by forming a new form of Franco-German relation. With this objective in mind, Vichy officials took the initiative in collaborating, especially in the early stages of the occupation.<sup>24</sup>

At times, Aron explicitly characterizes the German Occupation as a *diktat*, but it is mostly characterized implicitly. This is best exemplified in the chapter “De l’Assemblée Nationale à Montoire”, a passage dedicated to the negotiations between France and Germany regarding the Armistice. In this chapter, three passages interest us. At page 236, Aron begins by stating that France is put in an impossible situation “[...] le gouvernement français est soumis à une pression économique et politique plus forte qu’en aucun temps de notre histoire. Si Hitler le veut, il nous affame; s’il en a besoin, il nous pille. Jusqu’à quel point dans ces conditions le gouvernement français est-il responsable des décisions qu’il doit prendre ?”<sup>25</sup> At page 240, Aron also presents the case of France as an occupied country that is no different from other nations, referring to a “Diktat comparable à ceux qu’avaient subis les précédentes victimes du Führer [...]”<sup>26</sup>. Yet, when

---

<sup>24</sup> Paxton, p.51

<sup>25</sup> Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy*, (Montréal : Cercle du livre de France, 1954) p.236

<sup>26</sup> Aron, p.240

compared to most other western nations, France went above and beyond what the Germans might have expected from an occupied nation. There are other passages where Aron explicitly uses the term “*diktat*” “En présence d’un tel *diktat*, les ministres sont unanimes pour repousser l’ultimatum”<sup>27</sup>. Thus, in many cases such as this one, Aron suggests that France had no options, and that Germany was forcing their hand. Aron does not hammer this point ad nauseam, but it is enough to cast Vichy officials as victims of German directives. It was often suggested that France had no other option than submit to Germany. Yet, France could have done what other countries like Poland, or the Netherlands did: for their governments to go into exile, rather than collaborate.

Another case of Aron’s implicit approach to the notion of *diktat* is in his characterization of Pétain’s meeting with Hitler at Montoire in October 1940. Aron wrote “Au même moment, Hitler juge qu’il est indispensable de rencontrer Pétain.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Aron suggests that it is Hitler that wanted to meet Pétain at Montoire. The reality however is that Pétain sought to meet Hitler, and not the other way around. There are several cases, such as this one, that demonstrate the subtle case Aron is making, namely that Germany actively sought control over Vichy, and that Vichy was primarily a passive actor in this collaboration; in other words, that they were in no position to resist German demands.

While it is certainly correct to assert that France was in a difficult position and that it had little leverage against Germany during this period, the Vichy regime did not merely try to accommodate the requests of the occupant for the purpose of self-preservation. Vichy *actively* sought to please Nazi Germany, and it would later be revealed that collaboration was very much part of French policy and went beyond German demands. In particular, Laval believed, until very

---

<sup>27</sup> Aron, p.241

<sup>28</sup> Aron, p.262

late in the course of the war, that Germany would triumph, and as a result, believed that the best approach was to prepare France to play a role as loyal ally in a world dominated by Germany. This is something Aron knew, and articulates this idea in his book, but for Aron, the real villain under Vichy was Laval, and not Pétain. “Toujours sûr d’avoir raison envers et contre tous, il [Laval] veut assurer l’avenir de la France dans l’éventualité, qu’il souhaite, d’une victoire allemande : pour cela, il convient que notre pays participe à la lutte contre le communisme.”<sup>29</sup> While Aron does not necessarily whitewash the crimes of Vichy, he limits the quest for collaboration to a handful of characters such as Pierre Laval. Collaboration is not thought a wide or systemic project under the Aronian perspective. This was also the opinion of many others within French society after the war, and its also the reason why the trials had satisfied the sense of justice for some in post-war France.

I would argue that Aron’s characterization of “*diktat*”, which incorrectly frames the intentions of the French government at the time, also leads the reader away from the more serious crimes of collaboration. Aron wrote at length about the internal conflicts between Vichy officials, which feeds into the illusion that the failings of Vichy were not linked to collaboration or treason, but rather were a result of these internal struggles. The notion that Vichy was not a homogenous bloc but rather, the site of many conflicting debates over the best way forward, is not false, and at the time, was a rather novel idea. It introduced a nuance which was not very present in the debate over the role of collaboration. However, it does have the effect of distracting us from the central problem of Vichy politics: collaboration with the Nazis. This is best presented with the conflict between Laval and Pétain over several issues. There, Aron holds Pétain in much higher regard than Laval. On the question of the project of *Révolution Nationale*, Aron describes Laval as malicious

---

<sup>29</sup> Aron, p.561

and arrogant : “Laval ne cache pas à personne son mépris pour la révolution nationale, alors que Pétain, ses ministres et son entourage y attachent une telle importance. Ce sont là élucubrations bourgeoises auxquelles répugnent le sens populaire de Laval et son expérience politique. Même à Pétain, Laval ne témoigne guère plus d’égards. Le Maréchal, pour lui, est un ‘militaire’, ce qui, dans sa bouche est nettement péjoratif.” Aron’s attack on Laval notwithstanding, this quote is further evidence of Aron’s sympathy for the project of National Revolution and is consistent with his political views in the 1930s.

In addition to highlighting the “bourgeois” character of Laval, Aron veers into very unkind characterization, quite unlike the rest of book, which is rather telling of his snobbish feelings towards him: “Laval est souvent déraillé, d’aspect négligé, un mégot traîne toujours au coin de sa bouche. Peut-être par réaction contre la correction guindée de l’entourage de Pétain et de ses ministres, accentue-t-il sa vulgarité apparente”<sup>30</sup> Aron also describes Laval as manipulated by the Germans and naïve, particularly with regards to his relationship with ambassador Abetz : “En fait, quel que soit l’amitié réelle entre les deux hommes, Abetz ne joue pas franc jeu et Pierre Laval est sa dupe. [...] on voit à quel point Pierre Laval est roulé en misant sur la bonne foi de l’ambassadeur.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Aron is suggesting that some of the political gain of Nazi Germany can be explained by Laval’s naiveté, as opposed to any kind of deliberate collaboration. Once again, the explanations Aron provides for the failings of Vichy are often sourced in something which distracts from “the elephant in the room.” Collaboration is not framed as a large project, but merely as the irresponsibility and incompetence of individual characters like Laval.

---

<sup>30</sup> Aron, p.164-165

<sup>31</sup> Aron, p.248-249

The second major assertion made by Aron, while it is mostly said subtly and implicitly, was to characterize the Vichy regime as a “bouclier”. By “bouclier” or “shield”, we mean to say that Aron interpreted the actions and objective of Vichy as a shield against the German Occupation. This asserts that every action taken by the Vichy regime had the ultimate effect of protecting the French nation. While there are multiple passages where Aron hints at the idea of the “bouclier”, implicitly, he is perhaps most explicit at page 87 “Tous deux [Pétain et de Gaulle] étaient également nécessaires à la France. Selon le mot que l’on prêterait successivement à Pétain et à de Gaulle: ‘Le Maréchal était le bouclier, et le Général l’épée.’ Pour l’immédiat, le Maréchal parut avoir raison; pour l’avenir, le général a vu plus juste.”<sup>32</sup> Then, there are other passages where Aron suggests that the Vichy government was working with the intent of protecting French interests above any other concerns. We can find examples of this early in his book, where Aron describes the meeting of high government officials in Bordeaux and their deliberation over the signing of the Armistice. At p.37 Aron writes “En ce débat crucial, l’un et l’autre camp se veut inspiré du seul intérêt de la Nation. Simplement, des deux côtés, règne une conception différente de ce qui peut le mieux servir le pays”<sup>33</sup>. This quote is quite telling. Aron is saying that while there were disagreements over which policy decision may be best, the *intention* of every Vichy official was generally the same, that is, to serve in the best interest of France. As such, we can see that Aron is, from the very beginning, suggesting that Vichy was intent on protecting France; that the alleged motives of the collaborators were to act in the best interest of the country, and were thus in essence no different from the motives of the various Resistance factions. Consequently, we can question whether focusing on the intent – even if it might be a sincere intent – necessarily provides political

---

<sup>32</sup> Aron, p.87

<sup>33</sup> Aron, p.37

justification to collaboration. This is a larger philosophical question. What is clear, however, is that for Aron the intention of the Vichy regime was very much oriented towards the protection of France, even if the ultimate result might not have reached its objective. This is often portrayed in the difficult balance or trade-off between moral imperatives and patriotic principles on the one hand, and on the other, the difficult reality of dealing with an occupying force.

On the other hand, Aron also admitted that the ultimate effects or result of Vichy were an open question. In his conclusion, specifically, Aron admits that it is too early to determine what the ultimate contribution and verdict on Vichy may be. Yet Aron certainly thought that the shield theory was just as valid (if not more so) as an outright condemnation of Vichy. In his conclusion, Aron writes « est-il possible de dresser le bilan du gouvernement de Vichy ? L'entreprise serait tentante, mais, à voir les choses objectivement, elle apparaît difficile et, en tout cas, prématurée. S'agirait-il de dresser un bilan matériel, ou bien un bilan moral ? Dans le premier cas, les partisans de Vichy peuvent alléguer que, grâce à la permanence d'un gouvernement en France, les exactions de l'occupant ont été freinées [...] »<sup>34</sup>. Although he leaves the question open, Aron does suggest that Vichy had some benefits, like slowing the deportation of French workers to Germany, a hypothetical claim which certainly holds little to no credibility. Today, historians agree that Vichy did not act as a shield, or even a brake, and that whatever desire existed for such a strategy was made invalid by Vichy's desire to facilitate German Occupation. Other countries were in a similar position to France at the time and had similar options once they became occupied. Yet there is no evidence suggesting that the action of Vichy shielded its population in any better way than other countries who also suffered under Occupation and who made the decision not to

---

<sup>34</sup> Aron, p.679



collaborate to the extent of Vichy. The mobilization of French industry for the German war effort brought no advantage to the French nation and depleted its workforce. As we shall see in greater detail with Paxton, the evidence tends to suggest collaboration actually facilitated the German Occupation.

By suggesting that Vichy could be a shield against the Occupation, Aron effectively included Vichy as part of the Resistance, in other words, he implied that de Gaulle and Pétain were two sides of the same Resistance, each in his own respective way.<sup>35</sup> In his own unique way, Aron is hinting at the Gaullist notion of unilateral resistance (*resistancialisme gaulien*) by suggesting all of France resisted, *including* Vichy. It is certainly not a conceptualization that was accepted by de Gaulle himself, and probably not a majority of Frenchmen, but it presents an attractive even if somewhat sophisticated take on collaboration which appealed to many in France, especially those who were looking for nuances in the debate between resistance and collaboration at a time when emotions were particularly high. It struck a middle of the road approach that could reconcile many who were trying to make sense of what had happened in the postwar period.

### 1.3.3. The reception of Aron's book and public perception on Vichy in the postwar period

What was the reception of Robert Aron's work and was it representative of French opinion in the 1950s? While we do know how notable critics and important figures felt about Aron's book during this period, determining the opinion of the broader French population is a bigger challenge.

---

<sup>35</sup> Jackson p.9

In this regard, the work of Pierre Laborie, as we shall see in chapter 4, will give us good answers, especially with regards to French public opinion during the Occupation.

One source that has been used in the past to gauge public opinion during the 1940s-1950s is an IFOP survey over the question of the punishment for Pétain. The general opinion of the French population was relatively divided in 1944, with 58% of the surveyed participants affirming that Pétain should be punished.<sup>36</sup> However, this proportion would increase after the war. Generally, we know today that a large segment of the French population was hostile towards Pétain and Vichy officials, especially as the years progressed, although the matter of public opinion is quite contentious as we shall see with Laborie. Thus, this could indicate that Aron's flattering take on Pétain may not have been shared by the general public in France. So while Aron's work received a good reception in some elite spheres and within conservative circles, I suspect this may not have been the case with the general public.

Aron's book was, however, well received by French critics at the time of publication. In a book review published in 1954, Jean Touchard, a French historian, gave praise to Aron for his work on Vichy. A perceptive critic, Touchard mentions that the larger question of France during the Occupation is largely ignored by Aron who solely focuses on the actions of the Vichy Government, but also gives him praise in doing so.<sup>37</sup> Touchard adds that while the central question of Vichy officials had been addressed, every other aspect of French society and French politics had been ignored. Aron's book was also well received within political circles. In 1953, André

---

<sup>36</sup> As quoted in an anonymous source, "The Quarter's Polls." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1944): 567–603. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745313> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>37</sup> Jean Touchard, "Aron (Robert) - Histoire de Vichy, 1940-1944", *Revue française de science politique*, no.1, (1955): p.186-187. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/rfsp\\_0035-2950\\_1955\\_num\\_5\\_1\\_402602\\_t1\\_0186\\_0000\\_002](https://www.persee.fr/doc/rfsp_0035-2950_1955_num_5_1_402602_t1_0186_0000_002) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

François-Poncet, a politician and diplomat, was elected to the seat previously occupied by Maréchal Pétain at the Académie Française. In his acceptance speech, he characterized Pétain using the image of the shield and described de Gaulle as the sword: “ Bien souvent [...] sans méconnaître les intentions de l’homme qui avait voulu couvrir la France d’un bouclier, j’ai rendu hommage en moi-même comme je le fais ici, devant vous à celui qui avait relevé l’épée, tombée de nos mains”.<sup>38</sup> Pierre Benoit, another member of the Academy, followed up by commenting “J’ai l’impression qu’il ne reste plus qu’à nous féliciter l’un et l’autre, que nous avons travaillé de notre mieux à cette union”<sup>39</sup>. This kind of unifying narrative between Pétain and de Gaulle, as both being defenders of France in their own way, is truly characteristic of the Aronian understanding of Vichy (Aron’s book would be published a year after these comments by André François-Poncet), and we can see that it is a narrative that had taken root for individuals in high places, at the time, including high ranking diplomats and intellectuals such as André François-Poncet and Pierre Benoit.

This narrative also demonstrates that as the years of the liberation and the purge had passed, many felt a need to bring together the two sides of Vichy legacy, the conservative elements who still had some praise for Pétain on the one hand, and the partisans of de Gaulle’s Resistance on the other. Once again, Aron’s thesis had the effect of inserting itself as a unifying narrative in the debate over Vichy by appropriating the Gaullist vision of unifying resistance. To think of collaboration and resistance as having both done good in fighting the Occupation in different but complementary ways was a convenient narrative for conservative movements, who were attached to some of the movements within the *Révolution Nationale*, for instance, and who were not interested in a unilateral condemnation of Vichy. Furthermore, the rise and threat of communism

---

<sup>38</sup> Rousso, p.82

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

in the 1950s also coloured much of the French perception on the memory of Vichy. With the narrative of the “sword and the shield” there was an attempt to bring those two sides of France together in unity. For some, it was seen as the narrative which could heal the nation from the divisive decade immediately after the war.

The press also offers clues to help us determine the public reception of Aron at the time of publication of *Histoire de Vichy*. In an article published by *Le Monde* in 1955, it was reported that Robert Aron had expressed a great deal of concern over the political vitriol and the divisive rhetoric within French society over the question of Vichy. Aron reportedly intended for his book to be an impartial, accurate and factual presentation of history : “En second lieu, essayant d'y voir clair sur des faits souvent discutés, déformés, mal interprétés, l'historien peut espérer calmer les passions et travailler à la réconciliation des citoyens. A en croire M. Aron, nous avons grand besoin de cette explication sereine des événements, l'histoire récente de la France apparaissant comme une cascade d'excommunications réciproques, qui ne tiennent guère devant une analyse objective des actes incriminés.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, this article further supports the notion that Aron’s book had reconciliation as a central motivation, to “calm the passion”, to “reconcile the citizenry” and to “explain the events of history”.

---

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in an anonymous source, “M. Robert Aron : les Mémoires du général de Gaulle œuvre d'histoire mais aussi de légende”, *Le Monde*, November 25th, 1959, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1959/11/25/m-robert-aron-les-memoires-du-general-de-gaulle-uvre-d-histoire-mais-aussi-de-legende\\_2166401\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1959/11/25/m-robert-aron-les-memoires-du-general-de-gaulle-uvre-d-histoire-mais-aussi-de-legende_2166401_1819218.html) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

## 1.4 Conclusion – Is it fair to accuse Aron of being "soft" on Vichy?

We may draw several conclusions from this historiographical period of Vichy history. Firstly, the Gaullist perspective of post-war France generally perceived collaboration as the exception. According to de Gaulle, all of France had resisted. This Gaullist myth provided a convenient narrative for most by painting French society in heroic colours; and from the perspective of those who were sympathetic to Vichy, it was easier to blame a handful of individuals than to paint the entire regime as collaborationist. Aron is largely a product of this consolidation of postwar interpretations of Vichy. By taking a middle of the road approach between them, his book satisfied a wide swath of political factions, from the harsher critiques of the regime to the more apologetic.

The period during which Aron wrote his book was one where former Vichyites were attempting to defend their record. Some were defending the Maréchal, and endorsing the shield argument taken up by Aron by saying Pétain had acted with the best interests of the nation in mind. Others defended Laval specifically, for being the “real” defender of France, essentially giving credence to the view that the regime’s actions had been reprehensible but shifting the blame towards others. Because Aron’s history of Vichy is mostly inspired from the purge trials, his story is a reflection of those testimonies which largely cast Vichy as a site of internal conflicts between the figures of Laval, Pétain and others. In doing so, Aron relegated the matter of collaboration to a handful of individuals, and suggested that Vichy was the result of mere incompetence or poor decision making. For many at the time, incompetence or misguided policies, despite being transgressions, did not reach the same level of severity as treason. Interestingly, the same holds true for accusations of antisemitism: treason, in the form of collaboration with an occupying force,

was a much more serious offence between 1945 and 1965 than the deportation of and discrimination against Jews. At issue was also the lack of perspective in interpreting history. Aron's book was published nine years after the war, still too early to accurately assess the results of Vichy. French society was still reeling over postwar reconstruction, as well as political and economic instability, among the many other consequences of the conflict. The early publication of Aron's work also had a direct effect on the quality of his methodology and sources which were not diverse, and in many cases, unreliable.

For these reasons, among others, I believe it is certainly fair to characterize Aron as being "soft" on Vichy. Historians like Julian Jackson have characterised Aron's book as subtly apologetic and this seems to be a consensus among historians today.<sup>41</sup> From my perspective, it seems that Aron may have fallen victim to confirmation bias. In trying to find a conciliatory narrative, he seemed to be seeking an arbitrary point of compromise between two opposite narratives of Vichy: the first, that it was completely innocent and sought to protect France, and the other, that Vichy officials were outright traitors who collaborated fully with the enemy. Aron sought to resolve these two polarizing narratives on the incorrect assumption that there was equal merit in both of those interpretations of Vichy history.

Aron's treatment of Vichy should primarily be interpreted as an attempt to bring national reconciliation, but with a conservative agenda that would influence the political debate of the post-war period. Interestingly, Aron's approach aligned with that of de Gaulle, as explained by Rousso « A leurs manières respectives, de Gaulle et Robert Aron ont donc incité à calmer le jeu des séquelles, l'un en offrant (avec contreparties) un honneur rétrospectif inventé, l'autre en minorant

---

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, p.9

le rôle néfaste de Vichy, et tous deux en égratignant l'auréole de la Résistance, en particulier des communistes et de leurs proches. »<sup>42</sup> In other words, while de Gaulle and Aron had differing views with regards to postwar reconciliation (with Aron defending Vichy and de Gaulle suggesting all of France had resisted), both of their narratives aimed to defend the French nation while simultaneously sidelining the communists who formed a substantial part of the Resistance in metropolitan France.

It is not only *Histoire de Vichy* which informs us on Aron's feeling about the Occupation. From his involvement with *L'Ordre Nouveau* in the 1930s to his later work such as *Histoire de la libération*, and on the purge *Histoire de l'épuration*, we can see Aron's lifework forms an ideological pattern. In *Histoire de la Libération*, which focuses on the events of the liberation and the alleged "crimes" of the Resistance, Rousso generally finds Aron's work not to be a credible source.<sup>43</sup> With regards to the numbers quoted specifically, Rousso finds Aron to be exaggerating the number of executions and for suggesting the liberation was responsible for the ensuing "bloodbath." Aron also accuses the left of being responsible for these executions. Thus, it is worth noting that Aron's narrative in *Histoire de Vichy* was not a one-off. Aron sustained a consistent defense of Vichy in other works as well.

With that said, Aron's work is a notable contribution for revealing the conflicted perspective over collaboration during the postwar period. Aron was among the first to provide a serious study of Vichy history and became known as a pioneer. His reading of the regime became a symbol of what is now perceived to be an archaic and flawed understanding of Vichy history during this postwar period, a perspective blinded by the extent of State collaboration by Vichyites,

---

<sup>42</sup> Rousso, p.283

<sup>43</sup> Rousso, p.282

and which wrongly thought of collaboration as imposed. We may also credit Aron with being aware of some of the limitations highlighted here. In his conclusion, he squarely states that it is premature to properly judge the Vichy regime. He asks what verdict should be drawn of the Vichy years, whether it should be judged on “material results” or “moral results,” indicating he understood the difference between the material and moral outcome of collaboration, but suggesting material results should also be considered in our judgement of collaboration.<sup>44</sup> What is clear however is that Aron grossly overestimated the control Germany exercised over France, and underestimated the initiatives taken by Vichy to collaborate with Germany.

One final reflection: one also must recognize that historical myths, and the memories upon which those myths are built, are subject to all kinds of limitations. Different social groups and different individual experiences shape those memories and myths in ways which may be inconsistent and incoherent. On that point, Jackson also adds that “the idea that there was ever a consensus around the myth [of resistance] is probably a myth itself. Any society’s collective memory is an amalgam of officially constructed memories, specific group memories, individual personal memories and all the other sources upon which people draw for their images of the past (films, fiction, historical writing).”<sup>45</sup> With Paxton, we will see that myths are not immutable, and that the passage of time, in the case of Vichy, corrected many of the misguided ideas which some intellectuals like Aron had fallen for. The story of French Resistance was predicated on the postwar necessities of a nation recovering from war, and the “official” story, as seen by Aron and the former Vichy officials, is one side of this perception. Yet is this perception necessarily reflective of the

---

<sup>44</sup> Aron, p.679

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, p.605



larger perspective of everyday French people at the time? There, Pierre Laborie offers valuable insight, as we shall see in chapter three.

## Chapter 2: 1954-1970s: The Paxtonian revolution

### 2.1 Introduction to chapter 2

In this chapter, I shall examine the period of Vichy historiography between 1954 and 1970 with a focus on the nature of the Vichy regime as examined by Robert Paxton's book: *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, republished twice with a new preface. At the time of first publication, in 1972, Paxton's book had a ground-breaking effect on Vichy history. Based on a diversity of French and German sources, his book is considered by many academics to have been standard-setting for Vichy history, hence the term "Paxtonian revolution." Paxton's work has had a considerable impact among historians for shattering the image established by Robert Aron, among other intellectuals, who had championed the image of Vichy as a "shield," protecting French interests and playing a double game against the German Occupation. While the initial reception to Paxton's work was mixed, especially in France, it grew into what is generally considered to be the most important contribution to Vichy history. Paxton's final assessment of the Vichy regime is quite severe. According to him, not only did it fail at protecting France, but its collaborationist policies made living conditions worse when compared to other occupied countries of western Europe.

As explained by Paxton himself, while no major political groups had any interest in exploring the roots of Vichy policy after the war, the combination of changing political landscape with May '68 along with new research on Vichy sent the perception of political legitimacy for the

Vichy period in a new direction.<sup>46</sup> In the previous chapter, we saw that the story of collaboration in France was perceived to be the sole responsibility of a select few, and that most of France had resisted. Additionally, some felt that the purge, the trials, and rejection of Vichy, signaled a resolution to the story; that the nation had gone through proper closure and that it was now time to move on from the debates of this period. Indeed, Robert Paxton, speaking retrospectively of Aron in the 2001 edition of his book, comments “Robert Aron’s moderate tone synthesis of 1954 satisfied almost everyone: a point of view largely limited to high politics, all initiatives from the German side, well-meaning but inadequate response from the aged Marshall Pétain, self-seeking maneuvers from Laval and a handful of opportunists, and massive resistance from the French people”<sup>47</sup>. The period of the 1970s, on the other hand, truly constitutes a break by going against this preestablished orthodoxy of Vichy history, notably, the “shield” narrative of Robert Aron, and the “double game”, i. e., the idea that Vichy was communicating and cooperating with Allied forces all along. A new narrative on the nature of the regime was introduced, one relying on better documentation, and a more earnest look at what France’s strategy had been during the war.<sup>48</sup> It was also a period where some were less afraid to approach the more personal or localized aspect of the regime, something that was still quite sensitive for many in France; this is exemplified with Marcel Ophuls’s 1969 film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* as we shall see below. Henri Amouroux’s book, *La Grande Histoire des Français sous l’Occupation*, published in 1976, was also among the first books to examine the life of ordinary French people during the war.<sup>49</sup> This trend further developed after the 1980s as we shall see in chapter 4 with Pierre Laborie.

---

<sup>46</sup> Paxton, p.xxxvii

<sup>47</sup> Paxton, p.xxxvi

<sup>48</sup> Paxton, p.xxxvii

<sup>49</sup> Paxton, p.xxxvi

In addition to Paxton's book, I shall continue to refer to the work of Henri Rousso and his book *Le Syndrome de Vichy* to examine how the memory of Vichy evolved within the larger French society. As we move away from the immediate postwar period, the remnants of Vichy and its consequences are still pervasive, as argued by Rousso in his book *Le Syndrome de Vichy*.<sup>50</sup> It is not only new research that makes Vichy resurface but also a string of scandals which bring back these closet skeletons into full view. This is exemplified for instance with the story of Paul Touvier, a collaborator who had escaped punishment and received a pardon by then President Georges Pompidou. As described by Rousso, Vichy becomes a "syndrome" of which the symptoms and trauma reveal themselves years and decades after the end of the regime. "Le syndrome de Vichy est l'ensemble hétérogène des symptômes, des manifestations, en particulier dans la vie politique, sociale et culturelle, qui révèlent l'existence du traumatisme engendré par l'occupation, particulièrement celui lié aux divisions internes, traumatisme qui s'est maintenu, parfois développé, après la fin des événements."<sup>51</sup>

Thus, what does this period, and Robert Paxton's work, tell us about the political perception of Vichy in the 1970s? As we shall see, Paxton's first achievement was the refutation of the narrative set forth by intellectuals like Robert Aron. The narrative of the shield had been shattered, and Paxton offered a much more severe judgement of Vichy. Paxton's book tackled the same core issues as Aron, in particular the policies and decisions of high-level officials within Vichy and the project of National Revolution. Paxton, however, delineates a much more complex intellectual history, and is able to demonstrate a coherence between collaboration and the project of National

---

<sup>50</sup> Rousso, p.18-19

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

Revolution. I shall also show that in spite of the initial controversy and hostile reception from certain circles, Paxton's work came to be highly respected later in history.

## 2.2 France between 1954 and 1980 – Historical background

The period between the late 1950s and late 1970s were a highly dynamic period in French history, and a time of significant change at several level. At the political stage, the establishment of the new Fifth Republic in 1958, primarily led by then President Charles de Gaulle, set forth new constitutional provisions with regards to universal suffrage for men and women and the independence of judicial power, and it strengthened the role of the executive branch.<sup>52</sup> Another important and progressive change was decolonization. France had long associated its prestige and standing on the world stage with its colonial conquests. The Second World War had marked the beginning of the end to France's colonial ambition, with French presence progressively challenged, and decaying during and after the war. In Indochina, this process had truly begun during the war when France was at its weakest, and ended in 1954 with the Geneva accords, completing the independence of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>53</sup> The war of Algeria beginning in 1954 and leading to its independence in 1962, was probably the most significant development of decolonization. Algeria was of considerable importance within the larger sphere of French influence and this conflict was largely responsible for the fall of the Fourth Republic and the return of de Gaulle to power. This loss of Algeria spelt disaster for many, specifically white French colons, and led to considerable internal struggles. The colonial project was a point of great pride

---

<sup>52</sup> Agulhon, p.618

<sup>53</sup> The Avalon Project. "Geneva Agreements - 20-21 July 1954 - Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam", *Yale Law School*, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN\\_540720\\_GenevaAgreements.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

and a symbol of France's power standing in the world. Indeed, the war in Algeria and the colonial struggle had parallels to Vichy with regards to the difficult process of historical memory, French decline and the struggle for national reconciliation. The years between 1959 and 1969 were dominated by the de Gaulle government and Gaullism which culminated with his resignation in 1969. With Algeria now independent, de Gaulle turned his attention to metropolitan France and focused on economic modernization. Yet, de Gaulle, who had until then enjoyed continued success, faced increased opposition to some of his economic and social policies. Having enjoyed political presence in French society for such a long period, de Gaulle's aura began to weaken, and his overall support declined. Nonetheless, he was re-elected in 1965 with Mitterrand closing in as a close second.<sup>54</sup>

As the emblematic figure of French resistance during the war, de Gaulle's passing in 1970 added to the multiple changes France was going through, decidedly marking this transition and further detaching France from the immediate post-war years. Henry Rousso, speaking retrospectively of this period, describes the ways in which these events were foundational for historical representations of French society. "[...] en parallèle à l'histoire de Vichy, se construisait une autre histoire : celle de son souvenir, de sa rémanence, de son devenir, après 1944... Né dix ans après la guerre, j'appartiens à une 'génération' qui a grandi à l'ombre quelque peu encombrante des réminiscences et simulacres de mai 68. Non seulement nous avons été dépourvus d'événement fondateur auquel nous rallier – de ceux qui, comme les engagements de l'Occupation, dans la Résistance ou l'autre bord, de la guerre d'Algérie ou des fièvres de Mai, ont soudé une communauté de pensée et une communauté de souvenirs, mais de surcroît obligés d'assister à

---

<sup>54</sup> Agulhon, p.627-631

l'interminable liquidation des séquelles de ces fractures antérieures, en particulier celle de 1940. ”<sup>55</sup> Here, Rousso claims to belong to a generation who were assisting and grappling with a continued process of mending the harm of the Second World War, but also with many other defining events of this period, such as May ‘68, and the war in Algeria; a generation living in the shadow of history, or the defining events of modern French history, rather than being part of it. Rousso suggests the post-war perception of Vichy molded the perception of new generations and their relationship with the past, something that certainly contributed to the new evolution of Vichy history. Generations of people who had not lived through the Occupation were beginning to influence and question the original discourse of this period of French history, which was perceived to be rather conservative. Among the many impactful events of this period, May ‘68 is likely to figure among the most important. The events of May ‘68 pitted political forces of the right and the left against each other. It was about economic inequalities, but also a larger social movement against conservative forces that had been dominant, and the arrival of new generations who wanted change from the traditional and conservative elements of French society.<sup>56</sup>

These significant changes French society was experiencing affected Vichy scholarship in several ways, a scholarship which was also experiencing a revolution of its own during this period. Firstly, with regards to the memory and scholarship of Vichy, the revolutionary bent of May ‘68, among other events, created fertile ground for the reception of new ideas and especially ones that could disrupt the established order. Rousso felt that the protests of May ‘68 also echoed the history of Vichy: “Pourtant, le souvenir de l'Occupation n'est pas totalement absent. Dans le feu de l'agitation et le foisonnement des mots d'ordre, l'appel à l' ‘antifascisme’ est toujours vivace : les

---

<sup>55</sup> Rousso, p. 9

<sup>56</sup> Rousso, p. 118

cris de ‘CRS = SS ‘ ou ‘Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands’, puis le concept maoïste de ‘Nouvelle Résistance’, sont autant de pont jetés spontanément entre le passé et le présent, même s’ils véhiculent l’idée abstraite et fantasmée d’un danger fasciste. On peut même penser, avec le recul, qu’ils ont constitué, au-delà de l’enflure naturelle du discours idéologique, une forme de provocation suprême. Celle-ci était susceptible de réveiller chez les aînés de vieux complexes, d’autant plus irritants que ces mots d’ordre visaient des gaullistes.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, for Rousso, the revolts of May ‘68 were driven by a younger generation engaged in critically reviewing the time of the Occupation, and aimed at provoking older generations. It was in some ways a revolution against a certain vision of history of Vichy. May ‘68 created conditions which made French society more receptive to new ideas and narratives with the potential of upsetting the established order. Several scholars, including Paxton, benefited from these conditions and it is in this context that Paxton published his work in 1972.<sup>58</sup> In particular, the received narrative about Vichy, embodied best by Aron’s book, which had sustained the national reconciliation of the years since 1945, suddenly looked ripe for demolition.

One famous example of the new climate was the release of the film “Le Chagrin et la Pitié” by Marcel Ophuls in 1969. This film is widely perceived to be one of the first major symptoms of France’s difficult reconciliation with the history of Vichy. It was unique in several ways. De Gaulle, who had been previously omnipresent in the story of Vichy, is completely absent from the movie. It also presented Vichy in its complexities, with a diverse range of characters, from various kinds of collaborators, to resisters, to everyday people.<sup>59</sup> At the time, it had “subverted every aspect

---

<sup>57</sup> Rousso, p. 118

<sup>58</sup> Rousso, p.288

<sup>59</sup> Rousso, p.121



of the myth of the Occupation”<sup>60</sup> according to Julian Jackson. It was among the first works to offer a real examination of everyday activity towards collaboration, and of ambiguous attitudes towards the regime. Although it was not widely released to the French public until around 1981, the movie was still seen by about 600 000 people in Parisian cinemas in 1972, creating quite a controversy. Defending the decision to ban the movie from French television, the head of France’s State broadcasting organization stated “certain myths are necessary for a people’s well-being and tranquility”<sup>61</sup>. This admission by a French official is quite telling as it indirectly indicates that the conventional view of the Occupation for the past twenty-five years was untrue. Thus, Ophuls’s movie was among the first non-scholarly work to expose controversial sides of Vichy history while also further amplifying the core message of Paxton’s work.<sup>62</sup>

The other important shift which began in the 1980s was a “reawakening of Jewish self-consciousness”<sup>63</sup> and an increased attention towards the treatment of the Jews during the Occupation. This, as we shall see in chapter 4, increased towards the 1980s, and by the 1990s the Jewish issue had become central to the history of Vichy, nearly overtaking every other issue.<sup>64</sup> Before the publication of Aron’s book, and throughout the 1960s, conventional wisdom stated that Vichy had largely protected Jews from deportation and the Holocaust. This can be traced back to the work of Léon Poliakov with *Bréviaire de haine* published in 1951, who, despite being a victim himself of Vichy and German persecution, was very forgiving of Vichy by stating that the comparatively small proportion of Jewish deportations could be attributed to the steps taken by the Vichy regime to obstruct these deportations. Other scholars, such as Gerald Reitlinger in 1953,

---

<sup>60</sup> Jackson, p.613

<sup>61</sup> Jackson, p.613

<sup>62</sup> Paxton, p.xxxvii

<sup>63</sup> Jackson, p.613

<sup>64</sup> Paxton, p.xxvii

and Raul Hilberg in 1961 had come to similar conclusions.<sup>65</sup> In his book *Vichy France*, Paxton's assessment of Vichy's role in the Holocaust was more severe than these aforementioned historians, but Paxton would develop the question of the Jewish issue much further in another publication *Vichy and the Jews*, published in 1981 in collaboration with Michael Marrus. Public awareness of the Holocaust was only beginning to make headway in the 1970s. As we shall see further below several new developments brought it into focus: the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, the Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab States and the documentary *Shoah* in 1985 all contributed to develop a consciousness of Jews as a distinct group and awareness of the harm that was done to them during the war.<sup>66</sup> As the crimes of the Holocaust were becoming clearer, the memory of Vichy became punctuated by cases of individuals who, for different reasons, had evaded justice after the immediate end of the war. These were collaborators who had various levels of involvement in the deportation or extermination of Jews. Among the most famous figures was the case of Paul Touvier. He had been sentenced to death, but had managed to evade arrest, remaining in hiding for twenty years. Then, Président Georges Pompidou had made the controversial decision of providing a pardon, which, according to Rousso, only further debunked the myths of Vichy.<sup>67</sup> Julian Jackson comments "by the late 1970s, Vichy was becoming, as Henry Rousso suggests, an obsession. The slightest incident was seized upon and interpreted in the light of Occupation." This new orientation on the issue of Jewish persecution and the role of the perpetrators reinserted the history of Vichy into popular consciousness, raising new and difficult questions. Thus, this

---

<sup>65</sup> Michael Marrus, "Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton" in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p.35-47

<sup>66</sup> Jackson, p.613

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, p.613

dynamic period created fertile conditions for new perspectives and new ideas to emerge. It is the period when professional historians like Paxton began to turn their attention to the Vichy regime.

### 2.3 Vichy France – Old Guard and New Order (1940-1944). Robert Paxton and the Paxtonian revolution

Robert Owen Paxton was born in 1932 in Lexington, Virginia. He studied at Washington University, then Oxford University, after receiving the Rhodes scholarship. He completed a doctorate in history on the French armistice at Harvard university. It was in 1973 that Robert Paxton published his ground-breaking work, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order*, in which he demonstrates the initiatives and proactiveness of the Vichy government in collaborating with Nazi Germany during the Occupation. Paxton has had a long career in academia as a professor at Columbia University and is now retired.

Paxton's initial idea for *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order* began as he was consulting the German archives, specifically, telegrams and notes between Ambassador Abetz, General von Stülpnagel and General Warlimont. This was in 1960, a few years after the publication of Aron's *Histoire de Vichy*. What Paxton found in those transcripts did not fit the narrative Aron had set forth and partly motivated the writing of his book. "The Vichy regime could be properly understood, I came to believe, only within a fundamentally different framework of interpretation"<sup>68</sup> Although disproving the thesis of Aron was not the explicit objective of Paxton's book, that is what it effectively did, and Paxton does respond to this narrative towards the end of his book.<sup>69</sup> Paxton introduced a level of analysis and insight which Aron had not provided in his

---

<sup>68</sup> Paxton, p.x

<sup>69</sup> Paxton, p. 358

telling of Vichy history. Paxton's work was also not limited to a chronology of Vichy, but also supplemented this history with an academic analysis and a clear thesis, whereas Aron's analysis of Vichy was much more tenuous. Paxton's research was wider, more comprehensive and his positions are more explicit. Paxton drew a clearer picture of what the Vichy regime had been, while Aron's book is more implicit, often narrowing on specific figures and events, but without offering the same coherent and wider analysis of the sum of its parts. Aron's book, with all its flaws, read like a chronological study of Vichy, without truly fleshing out a historical analysis. It read as a series of events which provided the impression of objectivity and impartiality, but, upon further examination, it leans towards a subtle defence of the regime. This includes, as stated in the previous chapter, the shield narrative and the notion of Vichy being coerced into collaboration (the *diktat*). Comparatively speaking, the value of Paxton's contribution lay, by and large, in the strength of his sources and the analysis thereof. While the archives of the French government were still closed at the time of Paxton's writing, other kinds of sources were made available, such as German sources from which Paxton's book benefited considerably. Thus, unlike Aron, Paxton did not limit himself to the records of the High Court trials.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the writing and approach of Paxton has more structure and is better sourced. While Aron was an experienced and popular writer, his book is verbose, and he did not have the academic training in history of Paxton. In some ways, Paxton's book reads similarly to Aron's as they focused on many of the same key issues: the high politics of Vichy and the National Revolution, notably. The character studies of Pétain, Laval, Darlan and the meetings at Montoire, among others, were also of special interest in both cases. Aron and Paxton contributed to the same longstanding debate, but Paxton ultimately

---

<sup>70</sup> Paxton p.x ; Paxton, p. xxxvi ; Jean-Pierre Azéma, "*Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton*" in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p.13-20.

prevailed by showing that Vichy had not been the positive force nor the protective shield it had claimed to be. Paxton also shed light on many of Aron's blind spots, or aspects of Vichy which were left ignored. Aron had little to say, for instance, on the role of France's colonial ambitions in the policy motivations of Vichy, which were later perceived to be significant, as Paxton argued. "After the defeat of 1940, such (colonial ambitions) ideas came even more naturally. [...] The colonies had become simultaneously even more precious and even more vulnerable. The colonial realm was also more fluid than it had been for fifty years, holding the possibility of intensified colonial rivalry [...]. Vichy faced the dual challenge of keeping a colonial empire intact after military defeat and of using her colonial leeway to compensate for the losses of 1940."<sup>71</sup> This exemplified Paxton's wider and more comprehensive approach to the history of Vichy. The overall chronology of Paxton's book, his sources and ultimate analysis of the effects of Vichy policies were much more credible than Aron's. Decades later, only certain segments of the work of Paxton have been contested, with his writing on public opinion being amongst the most contested.<sup>72</sup> We will examine this matter again in Chapter 4 in our discussion of Pierre Laborie.

Paxton's work was not the only one which pushed Vichy history in a new direction during this period: the thesis of Eberhard Jäckel, which was published around the same period, though it failed at first to gain attention, had also made great strides in its re-examination of German archives.<sup>73</sup> In the words of Paxton, Eberhard Jäckel "drew unassailable conclusions about Vichy's proposals for collaboration in return for an early peace treaty and territorial guarantees, and Hitler's lack of interest in them. His authoritative book arrived a little too early (two years before Marcel

---

<sup>71</sup> Paxton, p.58

<sup>72</sup> Pierre Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy Les Français et la crise d'identité nationale (1936-1944)*, 2nd ed. (Paris : Seuil, 2001) p.21

<sup>73</sup> Azéma, "France at war – Vichy and the Historians" p.13-20

Ophuls's film) to find a receptive public in France."<sup>74</sup> Other scholars like Yves Durand and Henri Michel were also raising new and salient questions with respect to the fundamental debates of Vichy history. Durand focused on the question of the National Revolution, Michel on the external strategies of Vichy.<sup>75</sup>

### 2.3.1 Paxton's unmaking of the Gaullist and Aronian myths

In the period leading to Paxton, the differentiated picture and "middle of the road" conclusion of Vichy by Robert Aron neither condemned nor whitewashed the regime, but most historians agree it was, at best, "subtly apologetic", to borrow the words from Julian Jackson.<sup>76</sup> Aron's ultimate assessment of Vichy felt opaque, offering no clear answers to the fundamental debates on the nature of collaboration. His take on the high-level figures of the regime like Pétain and Laval was nebulous and, as a fervent critic of the Third Republic, Aron's politics also aligned, in some ways, with the ideological views of the National Revolution, putting his objectivity into question. With that in mind, one of Paxton's major achievements was to assemble the evidence of Vichy's actions comprehensively and place them into a much more definitive narrative. This evidence ultimately debunked many of the myths promulgated by intellectuals like Aron. It's in the 2001 edition of his book that Paxton directly addresses the Aronian arguments which, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, he described as "pillars" of Aron's approach, the first pillar being the *diktat*, the second being the regime acting as a shield against the *diktat*, the third being

---

<sup>74</sup> Paxton, p. xx

<sup>75</sup> Azéma, "France at war – Vichy and the Historians" p.13-20

<sup>76</sup> Jackson, p.9

the existence of a double game with Allied forces and the fourth being an *attentiste* attitude of the French public.<sup>77</sup>

Paxton challenged the Aronian myths on multiple fronts, albeit mostly without referring to him. In the original edition, Paxton only briefly refers to Aron directly towards the very end of his book. First, Paxton demonstrated Vichy's proactive initiative to collaborate, and challenged the notion that France had been strongarmed into a Franco-German partnership. We can recall how Pétain had commented that the enemy had, figuratively, a knife to his throat. While it is true that the motives of Vichy officials varied and evolved throughout the time of the Occupation, the quest to collaborate was a unifying objective within the Vichy administration at the beginning of the Occupation. This idea was outlined in Paxton's second chapter, "The French Quest for Collaboration". Here, Paxton makes his position on French collaboration quite clear: "Collaboration was not a German demand to which some Frenchmen acceded, through sympathy or guile. Collaboration was a French proposal that Hitler ultimately rejected. [...] It was from the Pétain regime, however, that a stream of overtures came for a genuine working together: for a broad Franco-German settlement, for voluntary association as a neutral with Hitler's efforts to keep the Allies out of Europe and the empire, and eventually for full partnership in the new European order."<sup>78</sup> Paxton details these efforts further and shows that Vichy was seeking to maintain its autonomy, to defend its empire against Britain, and to establish a place for itself alongside Germany, which the Vichyites anticipated would win the war. In exchange, France sought to support the German war effort. "The Vichy regime wanted to negotiate a general settlement with French territory intact in exchange for active defense of the French Empire against

---

<sup>77</sup> Paxton, p.xi

<sup>78</sup> Paxton, p.51

the British. Set us free, and we will cooperate with you.”<sup>79</sup> At the time of this publication, no one (with the exception of Eberhard Jäckel) had stated Vichy’s willingness to collaborate in such definitive terms. Paxton also shows that Hitler had no real interest in a true alliance with the French regime. “The first two years after the armistice form a kind of unity. Like Laval before him, Darlan had tried to win an autonomous neutral place in Hitler’s Europe. Both men had tried to interest Hitler in the useful role France could play if given her head: keeping the Allies out of the empire, contributing colonial and maritime weight to a new continental bloc. [...] It is salutary to reflect on Hitler’s blind arrogance. One can speculate on what would have happened if he had been less vengeful, less wedded to forceful solutions, quicker to sense others’ needs and aspirations. If he had given France enough to eat, arms to defend her empire, and the promise of territorial integrity, France might well have become the neutral “west wall” that Pétain was to talk about later in 1942. [...] Hitler’s arrogance of power never gave that speculation a test.”<sup>80</sup>

The next major achievement of Paxton was to show that there had been no “double game” between Vichy and the Allied forces, an idea that had been used by former Vichy officials to retrospectively defend and justify collaboration, but also taken up by intellectuals like Robert Aron. There were, it’s true, some communications and negotiations between Churchill’s Britain and Vichy in 1940. Yet, for Churchill, France’s insistence on neutrality made it irreconcilable with his own aim of bringing the nation back into the war. The archives demonstrate that Vichy was particularly apprehensive of an Allied invasion. The only change of policy towards collaboration occurred after 1943 when Vichy considered brokering peace between Germany and Allied forces. According to Paxton, the motivation for this neutrality stemmed from Vichy’s “obsessive fear of

---

<sup>79</sup> Paxton, p.73

<sup>80</sup> Paxton, p.134-135



social disorder”. The threat of civil war and chaos and the hope of preserving statehood were the central motivations behind Vichy’s actions and its rejection of Allied intervention. Resistance was perceived to be “a step toward social revolution”<sup>81</sup> and an armed liberation force was much more frightening than collaboration with Germany in a new Europe.<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, Paxton shows Germany did suspect France may have been playing a secret “double game” with the Allies. It took some convincing for Hitler to finally see things differently. This explains why this theory had so much merit, as the German themselves suspected the existence of a “double game,” a theory which was then taken up again by Aron. As Paxton writes, “Hitler had long suspected some secret Pétain-de Gaulle deal, he told Mussolini at Florence on October 2, 1940. Yet, following the conversation with Pétain at Montoire, and the French defense at Mers-el-Kebir, Hitler had now come to understand Vichy was sincerely hostile to the British and the Gaullists”<sup>83</sup>

The other matter Paxton refuted was the assessment of French public opinion during the Occupation as being fundamentally pro-Resistance. The question of public opinion figures amongst the more controversial section of Paxton’s book and has evolved considerably since its publication. We will delve into it in further details in Chapter 4 with Pierre Laborie. Paxton claimed French society was not *attentiste* as claimed by Aron. By *attentiste*, Paxton is referring to the idea that French society was thought to be prudent and waiting for an opportunity to act against the Occupation. In other words, *attentiste* attitude suggested a lack of active resistance but did not necessarily indicate an acceptance of the regime, an idea which Paxton refuted. Paxton writes: “Aron’s fourth pillar rested on the tacit agreement of both Gaullists and Communists at the

---

<sup>81</sup> Paxton, p.286

<sup>82</sup> Gordon Wright, “Reviewed Work(s): Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944. by Robert O. Paxton” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (1973): p. 763-765 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2148184> (Consulted on December 20th 2021)

<sup>83</sup> Paxton, p. 69

Liberation to interpret French public opinion under Vichy as fundamentally proresistance from the beginning. According to this view, collaboration was the work of only a small minority of ideological sympathizers [...]”. Paxton had the position that French society was largely favorable to Pétain and the withdrawal from the war. “There is good contemporary evidence that more of the population than postwar memories have been willing to recall acquiesced with relief in Marshal Pétain’s withdrawal from an unpopular war.”<sup>84</sup>. With that said, Paxton does express the difficulty of gauging public opinion during the Occupation “It is hard to measure support for an authoritarian regime. Not only are the usual reflections of public opinion missing: a relatively unfettered press, elections, parliamentary debate, some degree of tolerance for expressions of dissenting opinion. The regime also distorts those measures of opinion one has.”<sup>85</sup> While Paxton’s take on public opinion is relatively measured, the main takeaway from his account is that French society was by and large supportive of Pétain, at least during the first two years of the war.

### 2.3.2 The place of the National Revolution in the political legitimacy of Vichy according to Paxton

Like Robert Aron, Paxton also gave considerable attention to the question of the National Revolution. The intellectual origins of the National Revolution had previously not been adequately fleshed out by academics, including by Aron who almost seemed to analyze the National Revolution as a stand-alone entity, detached from the matter of collaboration. Indeed, Aron attached some degree of legitimacy to the National Revolution. With Paxton, new nuances and details allowed him to uncover information that had been missing in previous publications. He delineates the intellectual, political and religious influences of the National Revolution with great

---

<sup>84</sup> Paxton, p.xviii

<sup>85</sup> Paxton, p. 234

detail. “Vichy was as complex as the various groups that stepped from the wings onto the stage vacated by the Third Republic’s “middlingness.” [...] While any classification of human feelings does some violence to their rich variety, it helps to sort out the Vichy tendencies around several sets of alternatives: integral Catholic moral order – the pagan national moral order of some prewar protofascist leagues; federal state – centralized state; communal economy-capitalist economy; persuasive means – coercive means.”<sup>86</sup> Paxton describes the history of the National Revolution as a progressive convergence between integral Catholicism, Napoleonic centralism, more concentrated capitalism, and coercion.<sup>87</sup> In spite of the great diversity of ideologies and influences, Paxton indicates that this project was able to coalesce around a number of key points: “They fought the same enemies, though for different reasons [...] all sought a more elitist social order [...] none challenged the sanctity of property, and all believed that class harmony was natural when agitation was suppressed [...]”<sup>88</sup>. For Paxton, National Revolution was not merely an opportunistic project designed by the opponents of the Third Republic. There was a direct link between this ideological project and collaboration. Paxton makes clear that the effort behind the deployment of the National Revolution under Pétain had the objective of facilitating collaboration, while also presenting an opportunity to enact profound changes to French society by offering what was thought to be a third way between the left and the right. “The French quest for a settlement with Germany was only one side of collaboration. Collaboration is not seen as a whole without its domestic dimension. Externally, the armistice position rested upon a certainty of German victory and a preference for peace and stability over a last-ditch resistance to the finish. Internally, the armistice position offered a historic opportunity for change such as France had not seen since 1870—indeed, perhaps

---

<sup>86</sup> Paxton, p.139-140

<sup>87</sup> Paxton, p. 142

<sup>88</sup> Paxton, p. 142

not since 1789.”<sup>89</sup> For some historians, like Jean-Pierre Azéma, one of Paxton’s groundbreaking achievements was to show the ways in which Vichy operated as a “coherent entity,” thanks to the National Revolution internally, and externally, with collaboration.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast with Paxton, Aron judged the project of National Revolution mostly on its own, independently of Vichy, the war, and the Occupation. While he admits many of its aims served the German Occupation, he also felt many of its achievements and aims were legitimate, ultimately concluding that the outcome of the project was mixed and tainted by German influence “Il est difficile, au bout des six premiers mois, de tracer un bilan de la Révolution Nationale. L’administration a accompli un énorme travail de remise en ordre du pays. Mais les mesures d’exception, prise à un rythme accéléré, entachent la totalité de l’oeuvre gouvernementale. [...] Ainsi, du fait des pressions allemandes et du sectarisme de certains de ses promoteurs, la Révolution Nationale, dès ses débuts, connaît des déviations.”<sup>91</sup> Paxton, on the other hand, was much more critical. Although the project of National Revolution was not directly dictated by the Occupation of Germany, Paxton highlights the ways in which this initiative had the effect of being of great use to Germans “The French economy was on short rations, and French finance had to support a massive hemorrhage of francs to Germany. Part of the National Revolution, therefore, was simply a particularly stringent war economy.”<sup>92</sup> Paxton also stresses that the National Revolution was undoubtedly a French project, and not a Nazi importation or the result of German pressure, as suggested by some intellectuals after the war: “The National Revolution was not Hitler’s project. It was not ‘imported on German tanks’ in any direct sense. After the war, Vichy

---

<sup>89</sup> Paxton, p. 136

<sup>90</sup> Azéma, “France at war – Vichy and the Historians” p.15

<sup>91</sup> Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy*, (Montréal : Cercle du livre de France, 1954) p. 229

<sup>92</sup> Paxton, p.145

participants tried to shift the blame for their domestic programs to German pressures as it was expedient to do in 1945.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Paxton demonstrates this ideological project was built on a conservative hostility towards the Popular Front and the entire Third Republic during the 1930s. “Vichy’s internal project – replacing the cosmopolitan and libertarian Republic by an authoritarian, homogeneous, corporatist state – was revenge against the Popular Front more than accommodation to some Nazi blueprint. Vichy’s external project- keeping France and the French Empire out of the fighting – was reaction against France’s futile bloodletting of 1914-1918 and the feared post-war revolution more than obedience to some Hitlerian demand for collaboration.”<sup>94</sup> On that note, Paxton adds that the German victories in Europe had also triggered some temptation for the proponents of National Revolution to at least take inspiration from German Nazism. Yet the National Revolution is best understood, above all, as internally generated, that is, as a revolt against the Third Republic and its perceived failures, epitomized above all by France’s defeat by Nazi Germany.

### 2.3.3 Paxton’s assessment of Vichy: “A Balance Sheet”, refuting the shield argument and the matter of Jewish persecution

The critical debate over Vichy has always been about the final outcome of the regime. Did Vichy do any good? And did it protect France from a hypothetical worse outcome? And what about the final judgement of the moral and political legitimacy of the regime? On that note, Paxton elaborates on this matter at the end of his book in the chapter “A Balance Sheet: The Legacy of Vichy”. There, Paxton directly references Aron and the narrative of the shield theory as it was argued by Vichyites and other intellectuals. Specifically, Paxton elaborates on the alleged material

---

<sup>93</sup> Paxton, p.142

<sup>94</sup> Paxton, p. xxxvi

advantage created by the regime, an advantage which had been raised as a defense by high level officials like Pétain, Laval and other collaborationists. Paxton writes “Despite these partisan origins, the material advantage theory has been quite widely accepted. Robert Aron, trying to strike a reasonable balance on the basis of the trial records, the only sources available in 1954, argued that life was easier, statistically speaking, for Frenchmen than for others in occupied Europe. The reproaches against Vichy, he said, are moral rather than material.”<sup>95</sup> Paxton offers a strong rebuttal to these assertions on multiple fronts. It should be noted that while Paxton’s final assessment of Vichy is still largely accurate today, many aspects have since considerably evolved, notably on the Jewish question.

First, Paxton believed the best way to achieve an assessment of the pros and cons of Vichy was to conduct a comparison with fully occupied western countries that did not possess a “quasiautonomous administration” like the French. Paxton concludes “A hard comparative look at the material conditions of life in Western occupied countries fails to show any important advantage for France, either granted by or extorted from Berlin.”<sup>96</sup> On the matter of food security, Paxton notes that despite the rich French agricultural industry, the caloric intake in France was the second lowest in Western Europe, behind that of Italy. He identifies similar patterns in other areas related to economic matters such as inflation and labour. Although all western occupied countries were experiencing inflationary pressures, they could still retain some agency by controlling their markets. The Vichy regime suffered from special inflationary pressures contained in the armistice arrangements, where German authorities siphoned as much of 58% of France’s annual budget.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Paxton, p.358-359

<sup>96</sup> Paxton, p.359

<sup>97</sup> Paxton, p. 361

With respect to forced labour, Paxton's conclusions were not any brighter. "By November 1943, 1 344 000 French males were working in German factories, slightly ahead of the Russian and Polish male contingents [...] The German government spared Frenchmen none of the agonies of forced labor."<sup>98</sup>

Vichy officials also argued their action had offered a strong protection against Jewish persecution. Here, we should note that Paxton's book is a little dated with regards to the Jewish question. Although Paxton was already ahead of its time when compared with other historians of this period, his analysis of the Holocaust and the treatment of Jews by Vichy was still embryonic. The historical understanding of Jewish persecution has evolved more than any other aspect of Vichy since the 1970s. Indeed, the matter of Jewish persecution was undertaking a radical shift right around the time when Paxton wrote *Vichy France*. Thus, it is in this context that Paxton's take on the question of Jewish persecution should be examined. At the time, Paxton wrote a nuanced, yet generally negative assessment of Vichy's effect on Jewish persecution. "It is true that the unoccupied zone of France provided a refuge of sorts for tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe for the first two years."<sup>99</sup> Paxton adds "Although Pétain spared them the yellow star, thousands were waiting behind barbed wire when the Germans came into the unoccupied zone in November 1942. Only those with money had managed to use southern France as a springboard for safer havens. For the rest, the French tradition of refuge made the unoccupied zone a trap."<sup>100</sup> Overall, the matter of Jewish persecution has a very small place in Paxton's book. Speaking retrospectively in the 2001 edition of *Vichy France*, Paxton writes "I did not yet

---

<sup>98</sup> Paxton, p. 366

<sup>99</sup> Paxton, p. 371

<sup>100</sup> Paxton, p. 371

understand in 1970, however, that Vichy's initial anti-Jewish measures actually ran contrary to German preferences in the fall of 1940, and that Vichy chose to participate actively in the deportations of 1942 partly in order to maintain the visible signs of its sovereignty. Indeed, many of the details of the fate of Jews in France under Vichy were known only approximately then. When I was writing in 1968-1970, the period was just coming to an end when the Jewish victims themselves were reluctant to speak about their painful exclusion from the French community [...]. Then in the 1970s, they changed their minds: they wanted to talk about the Holocaust in France before it became too late to pass their memories on to their grandchildren. Important scholarly works on Vichy had been able to ignore the Jewish issue altogether."<sup>101</sup> Still writing in 2001, Paxton adds "Today Vichy policy towards the Jews is very thoroughly known. There is no longer serious debate about the indigenous origin of Vichy's first anti-Jewish measures in 1940 or about Vichy's insistence in 1942 upon helping the Nazis deport foreign Jews to the East."<sup>102</sup> It is with his late publication of *Vichy and the Jews* in 1981, written in collaboration with Michael Marrus, that he developed an even stronger thesis against Vichy's treatment of Jews, something we will come back to in the next chapter.

Although some aspects of Paxton's history of Vichy are now outdated, especially with regards to French society during the Occupation and the Jewish question, his global assessment of the final outcome and the "balance sheet of the regime" is still largely accurate. More importantly, Paxton showed that, contrary to popular belief, establishing policies with the objective of getting on Germany's good side had little benefit: "The armistice and the unoccupied zone seemed at first a cheap way out, but they could have bought some material ease for the French population only if

---

<sup>101</sup> Paxton, p.xxvii

<sup>102</sup> Paxton, p.xxvii



the war had soon ended. As the war dragged on, German authorities asked no less of France than of the totally occupied countries. In the long run, Hitler's victims suffered in proportion to his need for their goods or his ethnic feelings about them not in proportion to their eagerness to please."<sup>103</sup>

### 2.3.4 Reception of Paxton book in the 1970s and 1980s

The overall timing of Paxton's work, when considering where French society was at the time, certainly contributed to its success. As stated previously, the 1970s were a turning point in terms of the overall attitude of the French public towards Vichy. Writing retrospectively in the 2001 edition of his book, Paxton writes: "... the French public, once reluctant to confront this painful experience that had divided villages, workplaces, and families, was beginning to delve avidly into the Occupation years. French journalists and scholars rushed to fill a burgeoning new demand for books and articles about Vichy. Hundreds of such works have been published in the quarter century since 1970. Doctoral and master's theses, hitherto only very rarely devoted to Vichy, began in disproportionate numbers to explore the newly accessible French archive [...]"<sup>104</sup> With the events of May '68 still fresh, the polarizing reception to his work amplified its popularity. In his introduction to the 2001 edition, Paxton writes "Many people in France found the heretical conclusions of these authors and myself very difficult to accept. [...] It was favorably received by some: by those already predisposed to disapprove of Vichy, by those prepared by the social movements of 1968 to question all the older generations values, and by those awakened to the complexities and ambiguities of the Occupation years by Ophuls's film, *The Sorrow and the Pity*." Indeed, the publication of Paxton's book generated controversy in many segments of the French

---

<sup>103</sup> Paxton, p. 372

<sup>104</sup> Paxton, p.xxi-xxii

society including within French academia and the wider political world. Rousso goes further and adds that his book had truly offended the prevalent mentality at the time. On the left, some disliked the notion suggested by Paxton that collaboration was not only limited to the elites. Communists on the other hand applauded Paxton's reading of Vichy as it confirmed their view of the regime with regards to capitalism. While Jews still had a relatively minor place in Paxton's book at the time, the Jewish community also felt validated by Paxton's analysis, as it highlighted much of what they had claimed over the years. Among supporters or former Resistance fighters, there were some frustrations, as Paxton diminished their role to some extent. Without a doubt, however, it is on the right that Paxton had triggered the greatest feelings of condemnation and frustration. Some of the commentary verged on ridicule, with condescending remarks about his value as an historian, and his young age.

Interestingly, Paxton retrospectively admitted that he regretted some of the framing of his book. In some cases, he felt he had a tendency to put all French people in the same basket of collaboration. "Criticism of this book has evolved over the years. The first serious French critics simply found my version too unexpected. They picked up small errors of fact and concluded that I didn't know enough to pronounce judgement on such matters. After subsequent research tended to reinforce my general thesis, later critics accused me of spearheading a too universally negative judgment that has 'entailed the diabolization of everything that, near or far, gravitated around Vichy'. In another formulation I was accused of turning all French people into collaborators. Reading some of my judgements today, I concede that they seem totalizing and unforgiving. They were colored, it must be admitted, by my loathing of the war then being carried on in Vietnam by

my own country.”<sup>105</sup> Also commenting retrospectively about Paxton’s work, Henry Rousso felt Paxton gives the impression of minimizing the role of the German Occupation while inflating the agency of Vichy. “Animé par sa ferveur intellectuelle, Robert Paxton a poussé parfois la logique de sa thèse jusqu’au bout, donnant l’impression de minimiser le poids réel de l’occupant et de la conjoncture. Par sa cohérence comme par son excès, son livre a véritablement heurté les mentalités de l’époque [...]”<sup>106</sup>

## 2.4 Conclusion – The threat to social order

Many scholars consider Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France* to be amongst the most influential contributions to Vichy history. With few exceptions, his narrative has become part of a certain consensus on this period of French history in academia and in French society generally. His dismantling of the post-war myths led the way for research which further elucidated other areas of Vichy history. Since the publication of *Vichy France*, there have been considerable evolutions in many aspects of Vichy history. This includes the question of Jewish persecution and French public opinion, notably. These areas of research evolved from the late 1970s and 1980s onwards with Paxton’s and Marrus’s *Vichy and the Jews* and the work of Pierre Laborie on French public opinion, among many others, as we will see in the next chapter. In a retrospective analysis, Jean-Pierre Azéma, an eminent Vichy historian, commented “And it seems significant that the most fragile aspect of Paxton’s book remains the section on public opinion, underestimating (probably as a result of biases introduced in the Prefects’ reports) the fact that, from the end of 1941 on, the

---

<sup>105</sup> Paxton, p. xxix

<sup>106</sup> Rousso, p. 289

majority of French people were ambivalent in their attitude toward the regime.”<sup>107</sup> Azéma, also suggests that the availability and greater accessibility of sources allowed for the older narratives to change: “Just as the German archives had allowed Paxton to challenge previous orthodoxy, it was the opening up of prefects’ reports, and other contemporary reports on public opinion, which allowed his judgement of the attitudes of the French population to be contested.”<sup>108</sup>

Paxton’s own conclusion lays out what I consider to be the most accurate and fascinating assessment of Vichy’s motivation to collaborate: an unrelenting fear of chaos, anarchy, civil war and unrest if France had chosen to fight.<sup>109</sup> “At bottom, however, lay a more subtle intellectual culprit: fear of social disorder as the highest evil. Some of France’s best skill and talent went into a formidable effort to keep the French state afloat under increasingly questionable circumstances. Who would keep order, they asked, if the state lost authority? By saving the state, however, they were losing the nation. Those who cling to the social order above all may do so by self-interest or merely by inertia. In either case, they know more clearly what they are against than what they are for. So blinded, they perform jobs that may be admirable in themselves but are tinctured with evil by the overall effects of the system.”<sup>110</sup>

As seen in the previous chapter, the Aronian perspective was largely a conservative attempt at reconciliation; to find a way to mend the wounds of the war, but under terms which would not risk compromising the conservative agenda after the war. Post-war France agreed to go easy on the collaborationists and to indulge in the pretence that all of France had engaged in resistance. After all, de Gaulle had prominent ministers who had been heroes of the Resistance but also

---

<sup>107</sup> Azéma, “France at war – Vichy and the Historians” p.18

<sup>108</sup> Julian Jackson, p. 12

<sup>109</sup> Paxton, p.286

<sup>110</sup> Paxton, p.382

allowed many Vichyites to continue in important roles. In this chapter, we can see that the Gaullist compromise blew apart with the trifecta of May '68, Marcel Ophuls's film and Paxton's book, accelerating a change of climate by breaking down the myths on which the national consensus had been based. They were an early warning of the coming social conflict and the shift to the left represented by Mitterrand's presidency, as we shall see in the next chapter with Laborie.

## Chapter 3: 1980s onward: Pierre Laborie, Public opinion, and the “obsession” of Vichy

### 3.1 Introduction to chapter 3

In this chapter, I shall examine the period of 1980-1990 with a focus on Pierre Laborie and his book *L'opinion française sous Vichy – Les Français et la crise d'identité nationale* (1990). Although the years of the Occupation were fading by then, the memory of the Occupation began to expand beyond the previous debates that had been dominant under Aron and Paxton. The question of post-war memory, commemorations, Vichy-related trials and other controversies all contributed in recentering the trauma of the Occupation into the public mind while also continuing to influence present-day politics. The trials against former collaborators and Nazi officers raised new questions with regard to how Vichy should be remembered, while also raising the question of the role of the justice system in the memory and the making of Vichy history. These trials were primarily aimed at former collaborators and Nazi officers responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. These included, for instance, the trials of Paul Touvier, Jean Leguay, Maurice Papon, René Bousquet and Klaus Barbie, among others. Additionally, new evidence on the role of significant political figures during the Vichy period also received considerable scrutiny, especially in the case of François Mitterrand who would become French president in 1981. Amid all of this, the Jewish community was bringing new intense focus on the Holocaust and the role of Vichy therein. The regime's persecution against Jews would gradually become the central issue of Vichy scholarship. Because of the multiple new angles of focus on the years of the Occupation, and with Vichy history attaining a period of maturity, this period was among the most dynamic and

problematic for Vichy history. And yet, the major debates had largely been settled, and enough time had gone by for the historical consensus around Vichy to have crystallized.

The 1980s and 1990s also signaled a new turn with regard to Vichy scholarship. As seen in the previous chapter, perspectives on Vichy were greatly impacted by the revolutionary scholarship of Robert Paxton in the 1970s, but also by non-academic work, such as Marcel Ophuls's film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*. During this period, Paxton succeeded in establishing a new historical consensus on the nature of collaboration at the highest levels of Vichy government. Specifically, there was little doubt left that the Vichy regime had been proactive in collaborating with Germany. While the establishment of this consensus had lifted a veil on the most controversial areas of Vichy history, it was only one among many angles of the Occupation that deserved scrutiny. As Paxton's narrative was taking hold, this new consensus opened the door for new debates and for scholars to reorient their work towards new research inquiries, especially towards the mid to late 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s and 1990s. The focus was no longer limited to the Vichy government and Vichy officials, but on everyday life during the Occupation, the experience of civil society and the role of Vichy in the Holocaust. Pierre Laborie, who wrote on the matter of French public opinion during the Occupation, is part of this new generation of scholars who branched out of the Aronian and Paxtonian debates we saw previously.<sup>111</sup> The debate over public opinion was an important one within the larger debate over the relative legitimacy of collaboration and resistance. Although the judgement on the Vichy government officials had been settled by Paxton and others during the 1970s, the attitudes of the population and its feelings over the direction of the country during the Occupation were still up for debate. More importantly, the

---

<sup>111</sup> Annelise Rodrigo et al. "Pierre Laborie, un historien « trouble-mémoire »" December 3rd 2013, <https://sms.hypotheses.org/1651>, (Consulted on October 18th, 2021).

matter of public attitudes during the Occupation was, in many ways, indirectly putting 1940s French society on trial.

Before Laborie, the question of public opinion had been, for the most part, poorly researched, and sources required to properly assess attitudes and opinions were largely unavailable. Thus, this led to many preconceived notions about the attitudes of the French public during the war. Although the Paxtonian accusation of collaboration was primarily aimed at the Vichy government, it was also reflecting poorly on the larger role of French society. If the Vichy government had acted in the ways we now know, the complicity of the larger public could also be inferred. Thus, what was the nature of their complicity with regards to collaboration and the Holocaust? While Paxton's assessment of French public opinion was, at the time, relatively measured, he did not paint a very flattering image either.<sup>112</sup> When Paxton wrote his book in the 1970s, he claimed that the French public generally approved of the regime, at least for the first two years of the Occupation, only to switch back to support for de Gaulle towards the end of the war. Laborie's work responded to and challenged this original notion of an unstable public opinion. Laborie demonstrates that there was solid support for Pétain as a leader and as a hero from the Great War, but also that that did not translate into consistent support for collaboration. He shows further that there was considerably more hostility towards the occupants than previously thought. Laborie shows the public almost immediately rejected the notion of collaboration, and that this hostility intensified as the war dragged on. In any case, the basic attitude was clear well before the outcome of the war had been settled. Laborie also questions the notion that the national identity crisis of the 1930s necessarily led to an adherence to Vichy. Rather, Laborie suggests that Vichy

---

<sup>112</sup> Paxton p.234-241



presented itself as a paragon of order and stability during a period where fear, doubt, and confusion were at their highest; this was not only because of the defeat in 1940, but also as a product of the identity crisis of the 1930s. Thus, for Laborie, an analysis of Vichy has to begin before the years of the Occupation itself in order to give adequate context for an understanding of France's predicament during the Second World War. Laborie also wrote at length about the theory behind interpreting the history of public opinion. We will examine what the contribution of this theory has been and to what extent it further illuminates our understanding of the Occupation years.

The 1980s period shows that the debate over Vichy shifted towards new inquiries, but also with new consequences. I believe that just as Aron sought to find a compromise between the antithetical judgements of Vichy (they were traitors or they were saviours,) Laborie, among other scholars, also sought to introduce nuances in a debate which he thought had overcorrected by being too accusatory during the Paxton era; in this case, that also meant too accusatory and totalizing towards the French public. While I'm not suggesting Aron and Laborie's approach are the same, there are similarities in the approach to reconciliation. One of the ways in which scholars and the general public have attempted to bring about reconciliation with the history of Vichy is in acknowledging the inadequacy of the sharp antithetical paradigm of resistance versus collaboration, and in insisting on the experiential ambiguities and complexities, the "shades of grey," that existed. While this was done problematically with Aron who was subtly apologetic of the regime, and with incorrect information, I believe this new attempt at reconciliation through new understandings of public opinions and attitudes with regard to collaboration was healthier, albeit not without its share of problems. Thus, for this period, the debate over Vichy was arguably an even more delicate one.

## 3.2 French contemporary history since the 1980s and Vichy

The passage of time did not prevent the subject of Vichy from changing shape and from occupying ever more attention after the 1980s, a period later characterized by Rousso as “obsessive,” with new events and controversies bringing the memory of Vichy back into the present.<sup>113</sup> The rise of the left in French politics signaled a shift in the political landscape previously dominated by the right, with Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Gaullism.<sup>114</sup> This period was first marked by the election of François Mitterrand in 1981, and against the backdrop of an economic crisis.<sup>115</sup> As a long-time member of the Parti socialiste (PS) (The Socialist Party), Mitterrand had a strong and well-established presence in the French political landscape. He had held multiple positions in public office as interior minister under Pierre Mendès France in 1954 and justice minister in 1956, among many other important political roles. Mitterrand became the Socialist Party leader in 1971 and finally president of France with the 1981 election (he would be re-elected in 1988 for a second seven-year term). The memory of the Occupation played an important role in these elections, with Mitterrand’s personal history during the Vichy years incarnating the side of the Resistance on the left side of French politics. Indeed, Mitterrand’s past role with the Resistance brought widespread support, while also reopening some of the old wounds of Vichy. At the time, several former members of the Resistance called for the French public to elect the socialist leader.<sup>116</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Rousso, p.195

<sup>114</sup> Rousso, p.195-196

<sup>115</sup> Agulhon, p.861

<sup>116</sup> Rousso, p.207

Mitterrand was twenty-four years of age at the beginning of the Occupation and his actions during this time have been the source of considerable debate and controversy. To summarize a somewhat obscure sequence of events, after his detention as a prisoner of war, he escaped and temporarily joined the Vichy government. Mitterrand would later join the Resistance. His first role in the Vichy regime was documentarist for the Legion, and then he worked as a press officer for the board of rehabilitation of prisoners of war. His role during the Vichy years received renewed scrutiny and controversy in 1994 with the publication of a biography by Pierre Péan titled *Une Jeunesse française: François Mitterrand 1934-1947*. Péan's book raised new questions as to Mitterrand's involvement with the far-right during and before Vichy, particularly with regards to his association with René Bousquet and Maréchal Pétain.<sup>117</sup> At the time, the news of the allegations against Mitterrand captured significant media and public attention, igniting a controversy which painted Mitterrand in a very negative light. Mitterrand was labelled a "Petainist resister," an anti-Semite, and an opportunist who lacked moral fiber.<sup>118</sup> Mitterrand's case continued to highlight France's lingering difficulty with the memory of Vichy, as captured in the now famous phrase "un passé qui ne passe pas." This was also happening a few years after the publication of Rousso's now famous book, *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, published in 1987, which further highlighted the difficulty of post-war memory.

The 1980s shed light on many cases of resistance fighters who simultaneously refused to collaborate, yet in different cases supported the leadership of Pétain and the *Révolution Nationale*,

---

<sup>117</sup>Johanna Barasz, "De Vichy à la Résistance : les vichysto-résistants 1940-1944", *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, vol. 242, no. 2, (2011) : p. 27-50. <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-guerres-mondiales-et-conflits-contemporains-2011-2-page-27.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>118</sup> John F. Sweets, "Une Jeunesse Française: François Mitterrand, 1934-1947", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 474-477. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2169008> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

for instance.<sup>119</sup> As demonstrated by Mitterrand's case, these new questions made the case for the existence of grey areas between resistance and collaboration in the mind of the French public, causing the introduction of new concepts to describe these controversial and complex dynamics, notably, the concept of "Vichysto-résistants."<sup>120</sup> This new concept essentially suggested that several resistance fighters and Vichy officials had mixed involvements between resistance and collaboration, and that a binary understanding between resistance and collaboration was too reductive. In Mitterrand's case, he was considered to be a "Vichysto-résistant," in that he was a supporter of Pétain, of the National Revolution, but was also against the German Occupation and collaboration. This nuanced notion posed a problem for many, especially on the left, who felt like some on the right may use this concept to rehabilitate the notion that Vichy could have been a shield against the Occupation. While some preferred to keep the question of resistance and collaboration as a strict binary to avoid falling in the trap of being too apologetic to collaboration, some scholars felt it important to differentiate between different forms of collaboration. Mitterrand was not the only case of ambiguous adherence to collaboration and Vichy. In the 2001 edition of Paxton's *Vichy France*, Paxton elaborates on the new nuances of collaboration introduced by historians which include "aiding the Occupation authorities for personal gain; aiding them because of ideological sympathy with Nazism and Fascism (*collaborationisme*); and working with them out of calculation of national interest (*collaboration d'état*)."<sup>121</sup> This was described by Julian Jackson as the "ambiguities" of the period. Jackson cites the example of Henry Frenay, an early

---

<sup>119</sup> Barasz p.27-50

<sup>120</sup> Barasz, p. 27-50

<sup>121</sup> Paxton, p. xxvi

resistance fighter who showed loyalty to Maréchal Pétain while also expressing the wish for Liberation and for Jews to be permitted to serve in the Resistance ranks.<sup>122</sup>

Beyond the matter of resistance and collaboration, the 1980s and 1990s opened the door for a rich new variety of Vichy studies in the field of cinema, art, propaganda, iconographical representations, among other areas.<sup>123</sup> Another one of the critical developments of this period was the increased awareness of the Holocaust and the subsequent response by both the Jewish and international community. By the 1980s and increasingly present in the 1990s, the question of the Holocaust was sidelining every other issue concerning Vichy and dominating the topic of the Second World War as a whole. As mentioned previously, geopolitical developments in the Middle East with the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as new forms of antisemitism had triggered a renewed interest in the Holocaust. Moving towards the 1990s, the Second World War was becoming a classic subject of filmmaking with the debate over resistance and collaboration being somewhat sidelined.<sup>124</sup>

Another major source of debate during this period was the matter of commemorations and the ways of remembering the war. With more distance from the conflict, and the evolving perception of Vichy after the Paxton era, this matter had become increasingly contentious and political. On either side of the political spectrum, some questioned what kind of commemorations should be made for controversial figures like Pétain. What kind of history should these commemorations be telling, and for what purpose? Once again, the political division of France in the present day significantly coloured the attitudes towards memory and commemorations of the

---

<sup>122</sup> Jackson, p.3

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, p.14

<sup>124</sup> Rousso, p. 269-270

Occupation. On this point, Rousso highlights the difficult relationship French leaders sustained with regards to the commemorations of Pétain's memory. Rousso writes “ [...]\_pour le cinquantenaire de l'armistice, le préfet de Vendée va, sur ordre, fleurir la tombe du maréchal Pétain à l'île d'Yeu. Dix ans avant, le général de Gaulle en avait fait autant, tout comme le fera, après lui, le président Mitterrand, le 22 septembre 1984, jour de la poignée de main avec le chancelier Helmut Kohl. [...] Quant à François Mitterrand – quels que soient ses sentiments personnels à l'égard de Pétain–, il lui était difficile d'affirmer la réconciliation définitive avec l'ennemi héréditaire d'hier, sans entreprendre un geste analogue en faveur de celui qui fut leur allié objectif entre 1940 et 1944. ”<sup>125</sup> Despite the negative memories associated with Pétain, French leaders and the public at large would entertain a complex relationship with the memory of the Vichy leader, often differentiating between the hero he was considered to be during the First World War and the collaborator he was accused of being during the Second. This is a recurring debate which still flares up to this day, as we shall see in the last section.<sup>126</sup>

Because the judgement on controversial characters from the Vichy period was often split between modern political factions, some also felt commemorations could risk turning into celebrations, which then could then potentially be seen as promoting a larger political agenda, instead of the mere act of commemorating. In this regard, Pétain was not the only character to provoke controversy. Some on the left accused the right of rehabilitating other intellectuals and political leaders from the time of the Occupation. This was the case for instance with Charles Maurras, a former organizer of the far-right movement, *Action française*, who is still revered by a

---

<sup>125</sup> Rousso, p.198

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Berdah. “Macron crée la polémique en justifiant l'hommage à Pétain”, *Le Figaro*, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2018/11/07/25001-20181107ARTFIG00121-macron-petain-a-ete-un-grand-soldat-pendant-la-premiere-guerre-mondiale.php> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

segment of the right in France. Some intellectuals consider Maurras as “increasingly rehabilitated” by the right in the ways of new publications and various initiatives to popularize his work.<sup>127</sup> The matter of the commemorations with regards to Vichy still, to this day in 2021, elicits significant debate and controversies which continue to follow the familiar division of the right and the left.<sup>128</sup>

Another important element of focus during this period were several new high-profile trials against former collaborators and Nazi officers. While many of the post-war debates about Vichy were centered in the academic realm, the role of the justice system for those who had been the victims of former Nazi officers or collaborators continued decades after the war, and with considerable public scrutiny. In 1964, the French parliament voted to end the Statute of Limitations on crimes against humanity, opening the possibility of pursuing Nazi war criminals or collaborators with this charge. Even those who had been tried after the liberation could face retrials on new grounds. Another important quirk of these trials was the legal distinction given to Jews by the international community in distinguishing war crimes and crimes against humanity, with the latter concerning civilian victims and victims of the Holocaust specifically. Thus, numerous cases of former collaborators or Nazi officers brought public attention, among which figure Paul Touvier, Maurice Papon, René Bousquet, and Klaus Barbie, among many others. For the public, these trials had the effect of causing them to relive, reexperience and reinterpret Vichy. The highly publicized trial of Klaus Barbie is a revealing case of the political implications of post-war memory. A former SS officer, Barbie’s trial had the effect of raising, according to Rousso, new difficult contradictions between justice, memory, and history.<sup>129</sup> Barbie had been on the wanted

---

<sup>127</sup> Le Média. “LE FASCISME FRANÇAIS - ANNIE LACROIX-RIZ”, YouTube, February 26th 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7\\_KzTgM7LM&t=448s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7_KzTgM7LM&t=448s) (Consulted on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> Rousso, p.233

list since 1945 and was first condemned in 1952 and 1954 for crimes against humanity. Barbie had fled to Bolivia in 1957 and was extradited to France in 1983 where he would be sentenced to life in prison in 1987 for crimes against humanity. The rise to power of François Mitterrand and the socialists as a left-leaning political party was said to have accelerated the extradition.<sup>130</sup> For Rousso, the difficulty of this trial had strong symbolism. Although there were few doubts, historically speaking, with regards to Barbie's responsibility, the justice system needed material proofs which were not easy to come by at the time. Additionally, Rousso points out that many of Barbie's crimes against the Resistance and Jean Moulin (a leader of the Resistance movement murdered by the Gestapo) specifically could not be legally considered as they were perceived to be crimes of war, and not crimes against humanity, and the former could no longer be considered because of the twenty years statute of limitations.<sup>131</sup> By not officially (or legally in this case) acknowledging Barbie's crimes against the Resistance, the trial created a larger perception of a failure to properly acknowledge the memory of the Resistance itself and the crimes of which they had been victims. Thus, for supporters of the Resistance, Barbie's trial felt like a missed opportunity to educate the French public about their role during the war as a whole and a failure to highlight their sacrifice. On that point, Rousso adds that polls tended to justify their fears: "Cette inquiétude des résistants était d'ailleurs de leur point de vue justifiée si l'on en croit un sondage réalisé en avril 1987, quelques semaines avant l'ouverture du procès [...] seulement 2% l'ont perçu comme étant 'celui qui a torturé, assassiné Jean Moulin.'"<sup>132</sup> Thus, these trials were not simply about justice, but also about how history and French society would remember the Resistance, and this explains why the trial had taken on a larger and more sensitive character. Rousso further

---

<sup>130</sup> Rousso, p.228-229

<sup>131</sup> Rousso, p. 234

<sup>132</sup> Rousso, p.235



highlights the ways in which the legal system had contributed to the larger memory of resistance and in the popular representations of the Second World War. “A cet égard, le procès Barbie s’inscrit sans nul doute dans un tournant de la mémoire résistante. Il a révélé à quel point elle était désormais un point nodal dans les représentations et le souvenir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. De fait, il faut rappeler que dans les années qui précèdent le procès, cette mémoire a été l’objet d’attaques systématiques, plus ou moins fondées, plus ou moins honnêtes, le facteur idéologique jouant à plein la plupart du temps [...]. De fait, les résistants se trouvaient dans la même posture que les survivants du génocide : celle d’une difficile ‘entrée dans l’Histoire,’ donc d’une mise en perspective et d’une relativisation du mythe [...]”<sup>133</sup> Thus, it’s not only the memory of Vichy that posed a problem, but even the more “positive” aspects of the period, such as the Resistance movement, were being politicized as they were beginning to be part of history. The memory of the Resistance, even decades later, continues to be instrumentalized for political ends, occasionally reshaping or even reinterpreting this memory.

### 3.3 Pierre Laborie’s book, *L’opinion française sous Vichy– Les Français et la crise d’identité nationale (1936-1944)*

#### 3.3.1 The debate over public opinion during the Occupation by Vichy historians

Born in France in 1936, Pierre Laborie was a French historian and writer with a specialization in the field of French public opinion during the Vichy regime. He began his academic career at the department of History of Toulouse University in 1978 where he taught for twenty years. In 1998, he was elected director at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales

---

<sup>133</sup> Rousso, p.245

until his retirement in 2004. He wrote numerous works on the matter of Vichy and the Occupation; he was one of the leading historians of Vichy, especially with regards to the issue of public opinion. Pierre Laborie died in May 2017 in France at the age of 81.<sup>134</sup>

Laborie's book was written towards the end of the 1980s and published in 1990. Until then, the question of public opinion had not been studied extensively by other Vichy historian, although several historians had positioned themselves on the issue. In *Vichy France*, Robert Paxton wrote about French public opinion during the Occupation in the chapter "The Collaborators."<sup>135</sup> He characterized public opinion with some level of nuance, indicating that many of the sources which could be used to measure public opinion were still barred from access (we recall Paxton published his book in the early 1970s and Laborie also highlights the challenge of accessing sources in his book).<sup>136</sup> Yet, this did not prevent Paxton from taking a clear stance on the matter. Paxton writes "A crude graph of French public opinion from 1940 to 1944 would show nearly universal acceptance of Marshal Pétain in June 1940 and nearly universal acceptance of General de Gaulle in August 1944, with the two lines, one declining and the other rising, intersecting some time after the total Occupation of the hitherto 'free zone' of Vichy in November 1942. But the two lines would not be straight lines and a number of refinements are both possible and necessary."<sup>137</sup> Other scholars who also wrote about public opinion during Vichy and who are part of Paxton's generation, such as Henri Michel, essentially mirrored this sentiment.<sup>138</sup> The conventional wisdom

---

<sup>134</sup> Laurent Douzou, *Pierre Laborie (1936-2017), hors des sentiers battus*, Le Mouvement Social, vol. 271, no. 2, 2020, p. 3-14 <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-le-mouvement-social1-2020-2-page-3.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>135</sup> Paxton, p.51

<sup>136</sup> Paxton, p.235

<sup>137</sup> Paxton, p.234-235

<sup>138</sup> Laborie, p.31

at the time generally suggested that the French public was mostly supportive in the early beginnings of the regime and disapproved of it in the last two years of Vichy.

In the original edition of his book, the only section where Laborie directly mentions Paxton is at the very beginning, in the Avant-Propos. He mentions several shortcomings in Paxton's analysis with regards to public opinion while also noting the importance of his contribution to Vichy scholarship. Laborie highlights that Paxton's *Vichy France* and *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* by Marcel Ophuls both made critical contributions to establishing a new understanding of Vichy, but also brought, in his opinion, certain misconceptions with regards to public opinion. Laborie writes "Le livre de Robert Paxton, *La France de Vichy*, et le film de Marcel Ophuls, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, chacun dans son domaine et sa façon, avaient ouvert la bonne voie en mettant fin aux conventions rassurantes des regards complaisants. Quels que soient leurs importances et leurs mérites, ils n'ont pas pu empêcher de nouvelles erreurs d'aiguillage dans l'interprétation des attitudes de l'opinion."<sup>139</sup> Laborie goes on to explain that just as one type of extreme discourse was too complacent about the tragedy of Vichy immediately after the war (we can think of Robert Aron and the others who indulged in the shield theory as seen in chapter 1,) Paxton's and Ophuls's responses triggered, according to Laborie, an overcorrection which brought the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. While Laborie makes clear that the purpose of his book was not to directly address the arguments raised by Paxton and other historians with a similar narrative on public opinion, his work indirectly challenged Paxton's position especially with regards to public attitudes towards collaboration. Laborie argues that Paxton's position was reductive and totalizing: "Les jugements sur l'évolution des attitudes que l'on retrouve, par exemple, chez Henri Michel ou

---

<sup>139</sup> Laborie, p.30

Robert O. Paxton constituent le maillon fragile de leurs analyses. Ils généralisent hâtivement l'idée d'une opinion publique choisissant son camp en fonction de la pression des événements extérieurs et passant opportunément de celui du pétainisme, voire de la collaboration, à celui de la Résistance, du gaullisme et des Alliés victorieux. Interprétation procédant d'une réaction qui se veut lucide, mais qui se révèle en fait, on le verra, exagérément réductrice. [...] De son côté, prenant peut-être un peu trop à la lettre l'idée peu reluisante que Gide semblait se faire de ses compatriotes, Robert O. Paxton suggère que le gros de la population aurait suivi le gouvernement dans la collaboration si l'Allemagne avait fait un geste de bonne volonté."<sup>140</sup>

I believe that, in some ways, Laborie's responses to Paxton and Ophuls was not completely dissimilar to that of Robert Aron's post-war approach to the intellectual debate over the justification of collaboration and resistance. By that, I mean that Laborie's research on public opinion can be summed up as another case for reconciliation, but a more mature one, with more distance from the years of the Occupation. In essence, he made a case against generalizations and reductive judgements on the attitudes of the French public during the Occupation and on the importance of nuances. On that point, Laborie's book insists repeatedly on the complexities of the period, on the risk of missing nuances and on the importance of interpreting the political attitudes of this period carefully. In the case of Laborie, the case is much more compelling and better sourced than Aron, but there are similarities, once again, in the argument that highlights missed complexities and challenges original orthodoxies.

In the preface to the new edition of his book, written in 2001, Laborie expands on his views on Paxton's position with regards to French public opinion and also addresses one of Paxton's

---

<sup>140</sup> Laborie, p. 31 ; André Gide, *Journal, 1939-1949. Souvenirs*, Paris, Gallimard, « La Pléiade », 1954, p.36-37

responses to his research. Laborie first recalls that the accomplishment of historians like Paxton at the time was the puncturing of myths that had been built around Vichy, which, as we saw previously, they had done successfully. However, Laborie criticizes Paxton for his narrow approach to sources. Laborie argues that Paxton relied on limited regional sources, specific political and cultural circles, and explicit discourse from the press, all of which would lead to inaccurate conclusions. Laborie writes “Sans être négligé dans les travaux faisant désormais référence sur les années noires, j’y reviendrai à propos des positions de Robert Paxton, le problème des conduites collectives des français était surtout abordé dans des études régionales, ou limité à des analyses portant sur des milieux sociaux, des cultures politiques, ou des familles spirituelles. Les travaux s’inspiraient en général d’une approche des esprits qui privilégiaient la presse, les formes explicites du discours, le poids des conditionnements socioculturels et les ressorts raisonnés d’une évolution logique des esprits en fonction des compromissions du régime et des événements extérieurs.”<sup>141</sup> While Laborie generally agrees these kinds of source material can be of use, he also warns that such sources, when interpreted too literally or explicitly, can be misleading, as we will see further below. Additionally, Laborie extends the critique of oversimplification and reductive judgements on French public opinion to the effect of Marcel Ophuls’s film as well, which he believes had the effect of exaggerating the implication of French society as complicit in the crimes of Vichy: “Dépassant très largement les intentions qui avaient inspiré le réalisateur Marcel Ophuls, et au nom d’un discours démystificateur, certains tenaient à montrer qu’ils savaient nager encore plus vite que le courant et s’employaient à grossir le trait en dénonçant des Français « tous collabos », antisémites, dénonciateurs, complices de l’infamie.”<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Laborie, p.14

<sup>142</sup> Laborie p.17

In the 2001 edition of *Vichy France*, Robert Paxton notes that the matter of French public opinion was the “most wanting” aspect of his book and directly addresses the work of Pierre Laborie. Paxton concedes that the matter of public opinion in his work is in need of nuances, but stands firm on some elements by saying that he does “not give up all my ground on this issue”.<sup>143</sup> However, Paxton commends Laborie’s work and writes “Pierre Laborie’s careful and nuanced study of police reports and of postal and telephonic surveillance in Toulouse showed that the citizens of Toulouse felt more reservations about Marshal Pétain’s government from the beginning than I had supposed, and that public opinion there became reserved toward Vichy by the end of 1940.” While there is continuous debate over the matter of public opinion between certain circles of historians, there is no doubt that Laborie’s work was a significant contribution, leading to a greater and more nuanced understanding of French public opinion within Vichy scholarship, as we shall see.

### 3.3.2 Reflections on the theory of political opinion, sources, their associated challenges and France during the pre-war years

Pierre Laborie wrote *L’opinion française sous Vichy – Les Français et la crise d’identité nationale (1936-1944)* in three major sections. Interestingly, Laborie’s take on the specific matter of public opinion during the Occupation is limited to the third section, located in the last part of the book (p.213 to p.329). The first two sections concern Laborie’s larger reflection on the field of history, and his theoretical approach to public opinion. More importantly, Laborie writes extensively about the pre-war years in the second section (mostly beginning in 1936 for his research). He argues that to properly make sense of Vichy, an analysis of the years before the

---

<sup>143</sup> Paxton, pp.xxiv-xxv

Occupation must be made, an analysis which he believes is lacking in many Vichy studies. He adds that the exceptional circumstances of the Occupation, and the singular situation of France during this period, led to a myopic approach by historians, the implicit assumption being that everything that happened during the Occupation can be explained within the timeline of 1940 and 1944.<sup>144</sup> Laborie also goes into great detail on the question of methods and the challenges relating to interpreting sources, of interpreting the Vichy period, and of interpreting the 1930s period leading to Vichy. Laborie insists on the complexity of the political motivations of this period and the complexity of the ideological landscape of the pre-war period. These two sections ultimately pave the way for Laborie to share his position on French public opinion during the Occupation in the third and last section. Towards the end of the first section, Laborie explains the reasoning behind his extensive analysis with regards to methodology in the following way “[...] l’intention du propos n’est ni d’infliger la lecture d’un traité de méthodologie sur l’étude des représentations, ni d’en justifier l’intérêt. La réflexion sur l’histoire ne doit pas envahir l’histoire au point de la faire oublier. Elle reste cependant indispensable et sera abordée à l’occasion, au fil des pages, quand la situation fera nécessité, dans ce dialogue entre les faits et les idées, entre l’histoire et le discours de l’histoire, que Tocqueville considérait comme une exigence.”<sup>145</sup> Thus, Laborie’s book is not only about public opinion before and during the Vichy regime, but also a larger reflection on the field of history, of interpreting opinions, political representations, and popular political imagery. Laborie felt that the facts of history ought to be analyzed in conjunction with a discourse on the methods themselves and he is keen on tying these two elements together. I believe that one of the motivations for Laborie’s extensive commentary on methods and theory was his belief that

---

<sup>144</sup> Laborie, p.81

<sup>145</sup> Laborie, p.63

there were missed nuances and complexities, as well as grey areas that many historians had failed to capture. Among the latter were Robert Paxton and the effects of Marcel Ophuls's film, but also other works which had passed judgement on the years of the Occupation in a way that was, according to him, too reductive. While Laborie's theorization of public opinion is certainly valuable, I can't help wondering in exactly what way his extensive reflection on the theories of public opinion truly illuminates questions around the French public's perception of the Occupation. By examining history under a quasi psychological or sociological lens, Laborie seems to be entering a disciplinary realm that he hasn't entirely mastered. I believe Laborie's approach would have been more valuable if he had substantiated his ideas with existing, and well-established theories in the fields of psychology and sociology. Yet instead, Laborie seems intent on creating theories of his own in disciplines that are largely foreign to him. Additionally, Laborie seems to frequently wrap his criticism in the notion that everything is more complicated than other historians make it seem. Of course, our understanding of the world will always be bounded by human limitations, but we have to work with those limitations, and offer clarifications where we can. Yet, it seems that Laborie had not pursued his thoughts to their conclusion but leaves the reader hanging. I was personally not convinced by his theoretical approach to public opinion, and I thought it would have been more appealing had it been better grounded in other sociological or psychological theories.

It's early in his book, in the "Avant-Propos" section, that Laborie begins presenting his theory, his approach to understanding public opinion and its related challenges. Laborie establishes several guiding principles, research limitations, and other reflections that he believes must be considered when analyzing the history of Vichy and the matter of public opinion more generally. Laborie also lays out the objective of his work: to investigate the nature of French collective



attitudes during the war. Laborie writes “Abstraction faite des raisons subjectives, quelques idées simples sont à l’origine de ce livre. En premier lieu, une seule mais vaste interrogation sur ce que furent les attitudes collectives des Français au cours des années de guerre, sur les cheminements et les causes de leur évolution, sur leur rôle, leurs fonctions sociales et leur signification. Ensuite, étroitement associées à ce qui précède, quelques grandes orientations en définissant la conception d’ensemble, l’esprit et la méthode : vérifier si, dans les esprits, tout part de la rupture violente de juin 1940 ou si l’on peut éventuellement déceler des signes probants d’une antériorité à l’atmosphère ambiante de la France de Vichy.”<sup>146</sup> Thus, Laborie first wishes to understand public opinion during the Occupation, but considers that a scrutiny of the “crise d’identité nationale” of the 1930s can also expand our understanding of the attitudes and opinions during the years of the Occupation. Although Laborie favours a broad historical scope of analysis when studying Vichy and the years of the Occupation, he also warns against going too far in the other direction, that is, against the trap of interpreting the socio-political context of 1930s France as having made Vichy in some sense inevitable.<sup>147</sup> In other words, the attitudes of the pre-war era did not determine, on their own, the making of the regime. He writes : “[...] l’idée qu’il existe des éléments de continuité dans les attitudes ne suggère aucune fatalité et ne repose sur aucune sorte de déterminisme. [...] Il [Vichy] n’est pas le résultat inéluctable des difficultés d’une conjoncture de déclin relative qui marque les années 30.”<sup>148</sup>

The first major section of Laborie’s book “La crise d’identité nationale – Sources, Méthodes, Problèmes” is a continuation of some of the notions laid out in the Avant-propos, but

---

<sup>146</sup> Laborie, p.28

<sup>147</sup> Laborie, p.35-40

<sup>148</sup> Laborie, p.37

specifically concerns methods, sources, and an introduction to France's identity crisis in the 1930s. With regards to sources, Laborie highlights the difficult process historians are confronted with when sorting through vast and diverse sources to determine opinions and uses the example of correspondences to highlight some of the difficulties he himself encountered. Laborie warns that such documents, as interesting and useful as they may be, do not always convey an accurate or very representative picture of public opinion. Also discussed in this section is the matter of imaginary representations (*réalité de l'événement imaginaire*) and the "construction of representations". In this regard, some of Laborie's approach seem to echo the theories of Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, published in 1983. For instance, Laborie discusses the construction of popular representations that then shape the making of collective memory and interpretation of the political perspectives of the period before the Occupation: "La crise de la nation est en grande partie le reflet d'une grave crise de conscience collective, ou encore de la « moralité collective » [...] La nation est de l'ordre de l'imaginaire. L'identité nationale est une composante de l'identité tout court et les citoyens ont besoin de se reconnaître et de se sentir reconnus, dans et par la communauté à laquelle ils appartiennent"<sup>149</sup> In parallel with this larger question of collective memory and perspective, the positionality of the historian's perspective in understanding the past is also discussed. Laborie argues that historians are influenced first by tangible information and the facts of history, but also by "systems of beliefs," that is, their own positionality within the interpretation of this history. Laborie considers these elements to be crucial in understanding both the period of Vichy (1940-1944) and the period before Vichy (the 1930s). He further highlights that in the case of Vichy, historians have occasionally allowed their own interpretation and biases to colour their analysis. Thus, Laborie ties the previously established

---

<sup>149</sup> Laborie, p.70

notions of imaginary representations to what he considers to be France's national identity crisis, the landscape of national opinions and attitudes before the war. Laborie writes: "Dans la crise intense de conscience collective qui marque les années 30 et 40, tout indique l'importance considérable qui revient à l'imaginaire social. Pour la seule période de l'avant-guerre, les exemples se succèdent, reliés par le même fil : le 6 février 1934, identifié, à gauche, à une tentative de coup de force fasciste avec les conséquences que l'on connaît et, dans les esprits, la perception durable d'un 'danger fasciste' intérieur ; les explosions de l'été 1936 vécues, dans une autre partie de l'opinion, comme les signes annonciateurs d'une insurrection révolutionnaire et d'un écroulement de l'ordre social et moral [...] Le poids de l'irrationnel est partout."<sup>150</sup> Here, Laborie ties the events of the 1930s directly to the time of the Occupation, specifically referring to the Popular Front government of 1936, and the class warfare that was taking place during this period. Laborie suggests this period had taken a heavy toll on French national consciousness and further laid the groundwork for a political regime harping back to traditions, and a more conservative social structure, as implemented during Vichy.

In the second part of his book, "Vichy avant Vichy, Dérives et Engrenages," Laborie presents a fuller analysis of what he coined "the national identity crisis" of France during the 1930s, which he believes experienced a disintegration of the national social fabric.<sup>151</sup> In this section, he highlights the dominant attitudes, feelings, concerns, and political tendencies prior to the start of the Occupation. Laborie begins by once again underlining that, in the final analysis of Vichy, the beginning of the Occupation cannot be exclusively seen as a break beginning in 1940. According to Laborie, the dominant attitudes under Vichy were influenced by the intellectual and

---

<sup>150</sup> Laborie, p. 62-63

<sup>151</sup> Laborie, p.85

political conditions that were set in the pre-war attitudes of the 1930s and not merely as a by-product of the Occupation itself. He writes: “L’analyse des représentations dominantes de l’opinion à la veille de la guerre révèle ainsi la dimension, les ramifications et les effets corrosifs de la crise d’identité collective qui affaiblit le pays et sape les fondements de la nation. [...] Il apparaît bien que la compréhension des attitudes sous Vichy ne relève pas de la seule histoire des années 40, que le problème, malgré la brutalité et l’aspect spectaculaire des faits apparents, ne peut pas être posé exclusivement en termes de rupture. Le mauvais fonctionnement du régime parlementaire, la médiocrité des élites et des ambitions, la sclérose du haut état-major, le désastre militaire et les chocs successifs du ‘plus atroce effondrement de notre histoire’ – en bref, l’arsenal des causes traditionnelles – ne suffisent pas à expliquer de manière satisfaisante le lent processus de renonciation dont le large courant de ralliement au maréchal Pétain est un premier aboutissement.”<sup>152</sup> In his analysis of the 1930s, and building on his previous argument with regards to imaginary representations, Laborie highlights that pre-war France was dominated by a climate of confusion, a loss of national cohesion and common references, and of national decline, all of which acted against the sentiment of belonging to a national identity, and feeding insecurity and divisions. As an example of this expression of confusion and division, Laborie discusses the matter of pacifism at length. Indeed, the desire for peace dominated much of the political discourse during the interwar years. This desire for peace, he argues, was one of the rare areas of consensus across diverse political and social groups during the 1930s. Yet, this widespread motivation for peace did not necessarily help sow the existing divisions between those on the right and those on the left.<sup>153</sup> Laborie argues this pacifism could take many forms on either end of the political spectrum:

---

<sup>152</sup> Laborie, p. 205

<sup>153</sup> Laborie, p. 102

pacifism was expressed by antifascists, anti-communists, but it could also take a more conservative, patriotic, opportunistic, international or revolutionary flavor, among many other variations. Thus, even though this desire for peace was widely shared, its diverse expression did not necessarily bring about a unification of political forces. Another dynamic mentioned by Laborie is the rejection of change and a larger sense of “immobility” during this period of the 1930s. To demonstrate this appeal, Laborie cites Ladislas Mysyrowicz and a speech by Pétain delivered in 1935 where the latter commended the values of the peasantry for its prudence and conservative nature. These were of course attitudes that would later find expression in Vichy’s National Revolution. Laborie argues that these comments by Pétain were part of a larger movement within certain conservative and traditionalist social groups which may in part explain France’s defensive doctrine, and the attitudes during the Occupation. Laborie writes “Ladislas Mysyrowicz suggère fortuitement une corrélation entre les conceptions stratégiques défensives de la France et le poids des résistances sociales inséparables des valeurs dominantes du monde paysan. Des valeurs qu’en novembre 1935 [...] le maréchal Pétain vient exalter comme modèles des vertus publiques d’une ‘nation conservatrice’ qui ‘a protégé ses frontières terrestres par une barrière bétonnée’ : la ‘prudence faite de prévision à longue échéance’ les décisions ‘lentement mûries, la confiance raisonnée, le goût d’une vie rude et simple’ [...].”<sup>154</sup>

At the end of this second section, Laborie argues that the ideological project of Vichy responded to many of the national struggles French society experienced towards the second half of the 1930s. With Vichy, he argues that a strong sense of order, a return to traditions, paternalism and a return to different forms of “certainties” alleviated the previous sense of confusion and

---

<sup>154</sup> Laborie, p.168 ; Ladislas Mysyrowicz. *Autopsie d’une défaite. Origines de l’effondrement militaire français de 1940*, Lausanne, l’Âge d’hommes, 1973

disorder, which reigned in the 1930s, but which were also compounded by the defeat and the subsequent Occupation in the 1940s. “C’est bien dans ces représentations du déclin et dans les réseaux de cet imaginaire de la peur que Vichy va venir s’emboîter. C’est sur l’irrationalité qui les imprègne qu’il va s’appuyer. Le symbolique et le système de références du Vichy de l’été 1940 vont au plus court : l’ordre, la hiérarchie, le retour aux repères solides du bon sens traditionnel enraciné dans le temps, le paternalisme protecteur, les certitudes péremptoires des analyses répondent aux doutes et à l’anxiété.”<sup>155</sup>

### 3.3.3. The dominant opinions and attitudes during the Occupation according to Pierre Laborie

The third and last section of Laborie’s book, “LES REPRÉSENTATIONS DOMINANTES ET LE MOUVEMENT DE L’OPINION 1940-1944” is the section in which Laborie details the matter of public opinion in France during the Occupation. Here, Laborie demonstrates that unlike previously established dogma on public opinion (as seen with Paxton previously), the general population was not supportive of collaboration, rather, they were supportive of Pétain, first personally as a leader and as hero of the Great War, and second (at least early on), as head of the Vichy regime, since they believed the regime was protecting the nation from Germany. Furthermore, Laborie also demonstrates that the public’s adherence and confidence in the regime soon faltered, that is, as early as 1941. Laborie highlights the many different variables of influence and dynamics which influenced popular opinions with regards to resistance, Jews, Pétain, the Occupation and the war, among other topics. His research shows

---

<sup>155</sup> Laborie, p.212

French attitudes were ambivalent and fluctuated over time, rather than a linear upward progression of support for de Gaulle that had been suggested by historians like Robert Paxton and others.

This segment of Laborie's work is largely sourced on the everyday rural population of France who, unlike other regions, experienced the full effects of the Occupation after 1942. It is divided into five time periods: June 1939 to 1940, 1940-1941, 1941, 1942-1943, and 1943-1944. In every section, the dominant attitudes of the French population for each of these chronological periods of Vichy are detailed. Laborie first takes notes of some of the major dynamics which impacted attitudes and opinions throughout the Occupation. For instance, until 1942-1943, opinions and attitudes largely differ between the two zones (unoccupied and occupied) as their experience of the Occupation varied considerably. Another major influence on public attitudes was the presence or absence of Resistance activity (or alternatively of Vichy Militia) in a given area. These activities could lead to atypical opinions and attitudes as these would have a direct and local influence on people's perception of the Occupation, which you wouldn't find in areas that had comparatively little to no Resistance or Militia activity.<sup>156</sup> Finally, Laborie also highlights that, while the matter of personal cowardice or heroism (as a corollary of resistance and collaboration) was historically regarded as a determinant factor of adherence or revolt against the Occupation, he believes social affiliation to be a much more important determinant. As an example, Laborie mentions that a Catholic business leader who had been fearful of the disorder and left-leaning political movements of the mid to late 1930s would welcome the new values of order and anticommunism of someone like Maréchal Pétain in the course of the Occupation.

---

<sup>156</sup> Laborie, p. 226-227

For the first year of the Occupation, between 1940 and 1941, Laborie highlights the importance of Pétain as a leader who brought reassurance in times of considerable instability, fear and chaos. “Vouloir soupeser en pourcentage le volume des adhésions qui se portent sur le vainqueur de Verdun au lendemain de la défaite paraît un calcul dérisoire. Enthousiaste ou silencieuse, la nation, en tout cas ce qu’il en reste, rentre massivement dans le rang et se place derrière le maréchal. [...] Le mouvement spontané de confiance vers Pétain est, en premier lieu, le produit de l’imprévisible. Le poids des contingences, à travers l’exode et la débâcle, a suffisamment été souligné pour qu’il soit utile d’y revenir. La masse flasque qu’est devenue la nation éperdue et culpabilisée recherche instinctivement le refuge des valeurs et des solidarités élémentaires. Elle ressent un immense besoin de certitudes et de repli sur des repères inébranlables. En raison de son prestige exceptionnel, de son passé de vainqueur, d’une simplicité attentive au sort des hommes, d’une prudence de paysan qui lui évite d’être classé comme l’homme d’un clan [...] Philippe Pétain est perçu par les Français comme la première de ces certitudes, comme le point fixe, pour reprendre l’image de René Rémond, auquel ils vont s’amarrer.”<sup>157</sup> In other words, the attachment to the character of Pétain was, for many, one of the only ways of retaining “Frenchness” in a time of foreign Occupation, according to Laborie.<sup>158</sup> In addition to the reassuring character of Pétain, Laborie adds that the population generally sensed that there were no other alternatives but to submit to the regime. Many also felt that Vichy was merely a provisional or transitional apparatus adapted for the exceptional circumstances of the war, and not necessarily the final desired political outcome. There was also a strong religious component which played into the support for the regime. At the time, the Catholic church, with its deeply ingrained conservative

---

<sup>157</sup> Laborie, p.234-235

<sup>158</sup> Laborie, p.230



and anti-communist prejudices, believed the defeat was the result of God's punishment for sinful acts. It is in this climate that France was receptive to a figure like Pétain, who many saw as a saviour.<sup>159</sup> Laborie reiterates that even in the early days of the Occupation, evidence tends to show high levels of hostility towards collaboration, but not against Pétain personally. In other words, collaboration, Pétain and the regime were not yet necessarily understood to be identical, which is how we tend to see them today.

According to Laborie, the year 1941 was critical as it signaled the first sign of inflection in terms of public opinion and attitudes away from the regime. For one thing, an increasing deterioration of life conditions, the economic situation and rations fed into an already widespread hostility against Germany and the Occupation. For these reasons, it was in the course of 1941 that a gradual loss of confidence in the government and the leadership of Pétain started to occur. The population remained *attentiste* and wished for Germany to be defeated in preference to any other outcomes. Again, this was largely contrary to Paxton's interpretation of public opinion during this period. The years 1942-1943 further exacerbated the hostility that was already present in 1941, especially with the return of Pierre Laval, given his support for a German victory.<sup>160</sup> Public opinion on the regime, the Occupation, but also on Pétain continued to deteriorate, fueled by several developments. Frustration over the Service de travail Obligatoire (STO) - a labour program initiated in 1942 meant to aid the German war effort - was beginning to boil over; further antagonizing large segments of the population against the regime while also undermining many of the ideals promoted by Vichy, namely that the French state was there to protect French people. Additionally, whereas in 1940 Germany had looked invincible, the global conditions of the War

---

<sup>159</sup> Laborie, p.231-234

<sup>160</sup> Laborie, pp.266-269

between 1943 and 1944 were beginning to look grim for Germany. The defeats in Russia and in North Africa helped convince many of an eventual Allied victory.<sup>161</sup> Laborie also highlights the question of public opinion with regards to Jewish persecution under the Occupation. The deportations and the general living conditions of the Jews were not well known during the Occupation to the extent they were at the time of writing. For many at that time in France, the persecution of the Jews was interpreted as a larger casualty of the effects of the war rather than in terms of the exceptional, and targeted nature of their persecution as we know it today.<sup>162</sup> However, it also goes without saying that some of the French antisemitic attitudes would certainly not translate into sympathy for Jews either.

Thus, this nuanced analysis of public opinion during the Occupation was quite novel. Before Laborie, as seen previously, the analysis of public opinion was relatively crude. We recall that Paxton had essentially suggested that support for Vichy faltered at a midway point during the Occupation, with support for De Gaulle increasing in a relatively linear fashion. In essence, Laborie's analysis rejects this interpretation for being too reductive. Laborie's work on public opinion during the Occupation has since been commended by several other historians. This includes Julian Jackson, who mentions in his book *France: The Dark Years* that other studies on specific social groups like workers, women, youth, and collaborators had largely supported Laborie's claims.<sup>163</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> Laborie, pp.289-90

<sup>162</sup> Laborie, p.277

<sup>163</sup> Jackson p.13

### 3.4 Conclusion – On the importance of remembering, and moving on

The matter of public opinion was a particularly enticing subject of study after the Aronian and Paxtonian debates had been settled. Very little work had been done on the opinions, attitudes and the general state of mind of French society during the Occupation until Laborie's work. Perhaps one of the most important contributions by Laborie was to show that the average French person never truly approved of any form of collaboration, even at the early stages of the Occupation. In reality, popular attitudes were much more subdivided, nuanced and complex than originally suggested. There was rarely a simple binary opposition between resistance or collaboration, according to Laborie, but the result of multiple variables of influence. Laborie argued that ambivalence and hesitations with regards to the regime translated into different attitudes with regards to patriotic forms of support for the nation. Some felt adherence to the Vichy regime was a patriotic act towards the nation as a whole and they felt this could be expressed through the state and Vichy, while others felt it needed to be expressed differently through acts of defiance and resistance. This could also explain the notion of Vichysto-résistant, as seen previously on page 76.

Laborie also shows that popular support for the regime was primarily coming from a notion of patriotism, which could translate either into support for the regime (which some thought was there to protect them) or resistance against it (on the grounds that it was failing to do so). This, according to Laborie, explains the ambivalent attitudes many felt towards Vichy. He writes : "Tout ce que nous apprend l'étude de l'opinion au cours de cette période montre que les choix ne se sont jamais posés en fonction des données tranchées d'une contradiction simple, comme le seraient, par exemple, les termes d'une alternative entre l'adhésion à Vichy ou à la Résistance. L'ambivalence

qui perdure n'est pas le reflet de ce débat mais, dans la ligne de force d'un patriotisme de sensibilité jacobine, celui des hésitations entre les différentes possibilités d'adhésion et de soutien."<sup>164</sup> By "patriotisme de sensibilité jacobine", Laborie is referring to a larger republican tradition going back to 1789, based on the idea that French sovereignty should not and could not be divided; and on the importance for everyone to rally behind a single larger political movement to defend the nation. Thus, for many, Vichy was about being a patriot in a time of crisis and defending the nation first and foremost. Laborie was also able to show that the figure of Pétain, the Vichy regime and collaboration were usually interpreted as different entities, although today, with what we know and understand, we often tend to see all three of them as being all part of collaboration. But we should keep in mind that the information we have today was very different than the information the average Frenchman had access to during the Occupation. And yet, as seen previously, Laborie argues, that hostility towards collaboration was very high even in the early days of the Occupation.<sup>165</sup>

Beyond the topic of public opinion and Vichy, another impactful idea of this period, which was developed by Rousso, but also developed by scholars like Laborie, was the importance of moving on from the time of Vichy. The amount of attention the Occupation had attracted over the past decades had come to a level of obsession, with new scandals and trials bringing back the debates and controversies of the war over and over again. Thus, several scholars began to argue that there must come a time when moving on from the past may be a healthier approach than constantly reliving or re-examining it. Rousso and Laborie argued that the constant re-examination of the years of the Occupation does not necessarily do service to the memory or our collective

---

<sup>164</sup> Laborie, p.313

<sup>165</sup> Laborie, p.331-332

understanding of the events. In an essay from *France at War, Vichy and the Historians*, Laborie writes:

“By stirring up almost obsessively the memory of those four interminable years, France keeps asking and repeating the same troubled questions about itself over and over, while ignoring or pretending to rediscover each time truths long ago established by scholars. The repeated expressions of surprise, exploited and amplified by the media, show the French to be stubbornly oblivious to the strangeness of their own deafness. They endlessly repeat that it is time to lift the time-worn taboos, that it is urgent to speak at last of those issues that are never spoken of. To be sure, we are far from having said everything about Vichy, collaboration, or the Resistance; we know even less about the various ways that French society made it through this period. But one is entitled to wonder what can be gained from the continual stutterings of a history/memory that is constantly being adapted to suit the changing trends of the moment. What remains of the civic dimension of reflecting on the past, when the whole process is being manipulated and distorted in successive reconstructions, when identity politics encroach on the logic of truth, when ideological agendas result in anachronistic interpretations that show scant regard for basic rules of method and concern for accuracy?”<sup>166</sup>

I definitely agree with Laborie’s sentiment. Certainly, new information and knowledge can be gained from the archives with regards to how history unfolded itself at the time of the Occupation. Yet, the major debates of this period are now undeniably settled and reopening them does not help the larger political discourse or our larger understanding of history. Yet, this continues to happen,

---

<sup>166</sup> Laborie, “France at war – Vichy and the Historians” p.181-182

sometimes on behalf of the media, for the sake of generating clicks and provoking reactions from the public. But the media is not the only culprit, I believe. In the final chapter, we will examine how, even eighty years after the beginning of the Occupation, the memory of Vichy continues to be instrumentalized for political ends. We will examine contemporary forms of the far right in France, and how the discourse of Vichy fits within the current debates for the next presidential elections.

## 4. Conclusion – Vichy in French contemporary politics: the return of the shield theory and exploiting postwar memory for political ends

In this final section, I shall present my perspective on the postwar debate over the political legitimacy of Vichy and discuss how these issues have evolved in the contemporary political landscape today with a particular focus on the far right in France. I argue that far right politics since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century has challenged the historical consensus around Vichy and the Holocaust for political ends, and that it constitutes an attack against the liberal tradition which had been dominant during this period. Still today, in the midst of a presidential election campaign, we are seeing the same strategy play out with regards not only to Vichy but also to other historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I shall primarily focus on the upcoming French presidential elections, the history of the Front National, and contemporary political figures like Eric Zemmour to discuss their position with regards to Vichy, and thereby show that the legacy of Vichy still influences current day politics.

In the previous chapters, I posited that postwar memory had largely been about the making of reconciliation within French society over the actions of the regime during Second World War with different segments of society reconciling themselves in different ways with what had happened during the Occupation, between those on the one hand who wanted to believe the regime and collaboration had done something good, and those on the other who thought it had aided and abetted the worse crimes of the Occupation. Throughout this postwar history of Vichy scholarship, the academic community came to a consensus and rallied itself around the findings of researchers like Robert Paxton and Eberhard Jäckel in the 1970s. Major debates like whether Vichy acted as

shield against the Occupation, along with the nature of the complicity with Nazi Germany, had been settled since the Paxton era, and I would argue this narrative hasn't been contested by any serious historian since. Despite this general consensus among historians over these fundamental debates, the notion that Vichy had protected French interest and French Jews – along with other kinds of apologetic discourse for the actions of the regime – has endured to this day, in non-academic spheres and within far right political movements. Today, the topic of Vichy continues to make headlines, eliciting media frenzy and heated discussions between prominent political figures.

I argue that, with few exceptions, most of the postwar challenges to the historical consensus established within academia with regards to Vichy and the Holocaust came from the right, especially the far right (by far right, I am mostly referring to contemporary movements such as le Poujadisme, Ordre Nouveau, Le Front National and popular figures like Eric Zemmour) for whom Vichy incarnated, in many cases, many of its political projects, (i.e., a return to traditional social structures, a dislike for communism and the left, and a general disdain for parliamentarism, among others.)<sup>167</sup> These challenges also say something about the weakened state of far right politics in between the end of the war and the 1980s. Indeed, a series of political events, along with the arrival of Paxton's research, made it much more challenging to attach any defensible arguments in favor of the Vichy regime. The ugly legacy of the Occupation, the independence of Algeria and May '68 all came as losses and stains on the political image of far right forces.<sup>168</sup> Many of their political aspirations were tied to the aspirations of Vichy, and the loss of Algeria as a French colony was

---

<sup>167</sup> James G. Shields, "Poujadism Fifty Years On" *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 22, No 1, (2004) <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/academic/jgs/shields - fpcs 221 - an enigma still - as published.pdf> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021) ; Henry Rousso, "Les racines du négationnisme en France", *Cités*, vol. 36, no. 4, (2008), p. 51-62. <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-cites-2008-4-page-51.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>168</sup> Rousso, "Les racines du négationnisme en France"



another blow to their agenda. In the postwar era, feeling as though they were losing ground, one of the key strategies of far right organizations like the Front National was the denial and distortion of the existence of the Holocaust. This strategy, despite its obvious antisemitic nature, had less to do with an ideological objective, and more to do with removing the Holocaust as an obstacle to the electability and legitimacy of the far right.<sup>169</sup> Denying the existence of the Holocaust, or claiming its violence had been exaggerated, was politically expedient in that it was an attempt to renew the far right's legitimacy within the electorate and to erase the association between the horrors of the Second World War and far right politics. Over time, questioning the official historical account of the Holocaust became part of a larger strategy within the far right, and it was applied in a similar fashion with regards to Vichy.

In the postwar era, the most prominent political organization of the far right in France has been Le Front National. Founded in 1972 by Jean Marie Le Pen, from the ashes of the neofascist organization Ordre Nouveau, Le Front National was well known in its debut for its overt antisemitism. Jean Marie Le Pen was initially a member of the Poujadisme movement in 1956, a conservative movement of small business owners known for its hostility to parliamentary politics under the Fourth Republic and for its antisemitism.<sup>170</sup> Ordre Nouveau, founded in 1969, was a much more radical and violent organization composed of former Waffen-SS, as well as people feeling nostalgia for the Vichy regime and of French Algeria. Many of the members of Ordre Nouveau eventually went on to join Le Front National.<sup>171</sup> Le Front National was one of the first

---

<sup>169</sup> Rousso, "Les racines du négationnisme en France"

<sup>170</sup> Gérard Delaloye, "Pierre Poujade, l'homme qui lança Jean-Marie Le Pen dans la politique", *Le Temps*, April 9th 1998, (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>171</sup> Nicolas Lebourg, Jonathan Preda, Joseph Beauregard. "Aux racines du FN L'histoire du mouvement Ordre nouveau", *Fondation Jean Jaurès*, 2014. [https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01709289/file/Aux\\_racines\\_du\\_FN\\_Lhistoire\\_du\\_mouvement.pdf](https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01709289/file/Aux_racines_du_FN_Lhistoire_du_mouvement.pdf) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

powerful expressions of Holocaust denial in the 1970s, rapidly accelerating its popularity in the 1980s. Despite the radical roots of Le Front National, the party has gone through multiple redirections over the past decades in an attempt to be more electable and to normalize its presence within the political and media landscape. Today, it is well known for its anti-immigration stance and opposition to the European Union. The organization is now headed by the daughter of Jean Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen, and the party has changed its name to Le Rassemblement National as of 2018.

During this 1970 to 1980 period, Holocaust denial in France became inherently linked with the debate over the responsibility of the Vichy regime in the deportations of Jews. This coincided with a reorientation of scholarship on the Holocaust among which figures a new book by Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus: *Vichy France and the Jews*, published in 1981. Not unlike Holocaust denial, sowing doubt over the historical consensus that Vichy had been complicit in Jewish deportations was also politically expedient for a political party like Le Front National. In many ways, this was about questioning the sentiment of shame stemming from France's past. They maintained this sentiment was unjustified, being largely created by cosmopolitan elites and left-wing forces trying to undermine national identity and traditional social structures. With regards to Vichy, the tactics of Le Front National have been somewhat similar. Marine Le Pen does not necessarily deny the crimes of Vichy, but argues, somewhat evasively, that the "real French government," referring to de Gaulle, was in London, not in Paris.<sup>172</sup> This way, whatever had happened under Vichy could not be the responsibility of the French state, according to her. With

---

<sup>172</sup> Sacha Ghozlan, "La France des fondateurs du FN n'était pas à Londres, mais à Vichy", *Libération*, April 13th 2017 [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/13/la-france-des-fondateurs-du-fn-n-etait-pas-a-londres-mais-a-vichy\\_1562534/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/13/la-france-des-fondateurs-du-fn-n-etait-pas-a-londres-mais-a-vichy_1562534/) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

that said, the Front National has been divided over Vichy. While Marine Le Pen insisted that the Vichy regime was “not the French State”, with these comments being echoed by other prominent Front National members like Florient Philipot, her father, Jean Marie Le Pen largely embraced the shield theory “Je crois que Vichy, pour ma part, a fait ce qu'il pouvait pour essayer de défendre les Français contre un horrible malheur qui venait de se produire et dont étaient responsables, tout de même, les gens qui avaient dirigé le pays avant la défaite, en n'oubliant pas, quand même, que les quatre cinquièmes des sénateurs et des députés du Front populaire ont voté l'investiture de Pétain.”<sup>173</sup> This quote by Le Pen is also indicative of a longstanding debate in the Front National as to how far they should go with controversial and extremist narratives such as this one. Marine Le Pen, unlike her father, has been known for taking a more careful and moderate tone on certain issues, fearing extremist discourse could alienate key segments of voters. Additionally, this quote is also evidence of the right’s attempt at deflecting part of the blame for the outcome of Vichy towards the left, and in this case, towards the Popular Front.

The strategy of the Front National has mostly paid off. Over the past few years, France has witnessed a resurgent far right movement. Le Front National (now known as Le Rassemblement National) is not the fringe party it used to be, and went on to be second favourite during the 2017 presidential election.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, other fringe political movements such as Génération identitaire, have also been very vocal (in spite of their recent dissolution for incitement of

---

<sup>173</sup>As quoted in an anonymous source, “Le régime de Vichy divise le Front national”, Le Parisien, October 21<sup>st</sup> 2014, <https://www.leparisien.fr/archives/le-regime-de-vichy-divise-le-front-national-21-10-2014-4229047.php> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>174</sup> France. Ministère de l’intérieur. *Résultats de l’élection présidentielle 2017*. 23rd of April and May 7<sup>th</sup> 2021. [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult\\_presidentielle-2017/\(path\)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult_presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

violence).<sup>175</sup> Then, there are prominent figures such as Eric Zemmour who has enjoyed a surge of media attention for his controversial comments on immigration and identity politics, but also on Vichy history. As a renowned political commentator and aspiring far right candidate to the 2022 French presidential elections, Zemmour currently polls behind Macron, and as of the time of this writing, but slightly in front of Le Pen as a favorite for the presidency.<sup>176</sup>

The subject of Vichy has continued to make headlines in recent years and the 2022 French presidential elections, currently less than ten months away, have been no exception. There have been diverse attempts at justifying and defending the actions of the Vichy regime, in spite of the eighty years separating us from the Second World War, and not to mention what is by now a very well-established historical consensus. Interestingly, the matter of Vichy is not always limited to the debates over the history of Vichy itself, but Vichy becomes a symbol for other problems, or a memory instrumentalized to pose a problem by proponents of a far right agenda. As of the recent past, this holds particularly true on matters of immigration. In one of his recent books, *Le Suicide Français*, published in 2014, Eric Zemmour highlights the subject of Vichy in parallel with another issue, a critique namely of intellectuals who initiated the “deconstruction” movement in the field of social sciences in the 1960s, with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as prime targets. Zemmour believes this new approach to research led to a destruction of traditional structures, a rise of individualism and market domination, at the expense of the French tradition of republican

---

<sup>175</sup> Kim Willsher, “France bans far-right 'paramilitary' group Génération Identitaire”, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/03/france-bans-far-right-paramilitary-group-generation-identitaire> (Consulted on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

<sup>176</sup> La rédaction de LCI, “SONDAGE EXCLUSIF - Présidentielle 2022 : Macron en tête, Zemmour et Le Pen au coude-à-coude, les candidats LR distancés”, November 7<sup>th</sup> 2021, <https://www.lci.fr/politique/sondage-exclusif-presidentielle-2022-macron-en-tete-zemmour-et-le-pen-au-coude-a-coude-les-candidats-lr-distances-la-gauche-loin-derriere-2201191.html> (Consulted on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

universalism.<sup>177</sup> This, according to him, led to the formation of new political objectives around the issue of feminism, LGBT rights, and other matters related to an egalitarian agenda. All of this combined with the new waves of immigration led, according to Zemmour, to a progressive decline of the French nation. This discourse is also consistent with the narrative of the far right towards the liberal and progressive tradition of academia, which has been dominant in the last few decades, including in the field of history where Zemmour believes the French have been lied to. Zemmour has also claimed that facts and opinion cannot be separated, and thus, questions the objectivity of historians on this issue.<sup>178</sup> Zemmour believes many academics go unquestioned because of a common pretension that their findings cannot be contested. Interestingly, this notion, of “separating facts and opinion” is perceived to be part of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of social sciences, as argued during a debate on the popular television show *On est pas couché*. This line of argumentation was partially directed at Anglo-Saxon academics who studied French history, including Vichy (we can think of Paxton, among others). Although the theme of Vichy is a small section of his book, Zemmour says he felt compelled to include it, arguing that guilt over Vichy is at the heart of “French self-loathing”, especially with regards to immigration policies.<sup>179</sup> He argues that anti-immigration policies are often unfairly compared to the deportations of the time of the Occupation.<sup>180</sup> Zemmour is also critical towards Robert Paxton for drawing what he believes to be a black and white image of the regime, adding that Paxton does not explain how some French Jews

---

<sup>177</sup> On est pas couché, “Eric Zemmour “Le suicide français” - On n'est pas couché 4 octobre 2014”, October 6th 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV4IK7yC56Y> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>178</sup> *Idem* (5:17)

<sup>179</sup> Eleanor Beardsley, “A French Best-Seller's Radical Argument: Vichy Regime Wasn't All Bad“, National Public Radio, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/11/05/361790018/a-french-best-sellers-radical-argument-vichy-regime-wasnt-all-bad> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>180</sup> *Idem*

escaped deportations.<sup>181</sup> Zemmour has also made other revisionist comments pertaining to Vichy. In 2018, on national television, Zemmour accused communist resistance fighters of inciting civil war during the Occupation as they were executing collaborators, while adding that de Gaulle himself wanted to prevent communists from triggering a larger conflict.<sup>182</sup>

While these examples demonstrate Zemmour's eagerness to dispute the historical consensus around Vichy, the real objective, I believe, is to legitimize current day policies that are undermined by postwar memory, such as the stance on immigration of far right political parties, and the opposition to the European Union, an organisation largely perceived as a symbol of the resolution of the Second World War. In an opinion piece of October 2021, Antoine Vitkine posits that Eric Zemmour is exploiting the sentiment of shame from France's past in favor of reactionary and xenophobic attitudes. He writes "La défaite de 1940 et la collaboration continuent de hanter l'imaginaire national, expliquant, en partie, le succès du polémiste qui prétend déculpabiliser les Français en déresponsabilisant le régime de Pétain et en niant sa complicité dans la Shoah [...]"<sup>183</sup> Thus, one way to address a sentiment of national shame is to suggest far less of it was truly shameful, unlike what was suggested by the work of (primarily liberal) academics. For many, anti-immigration and nationalist policies hark back to the time of Vichy and are perceived as a fascist reflex. If one can remove the shame associated with the Occupation, one can also argue against

---

<sup>181</sup> Chloé Leprince, "Les contre-vérités d'Eric Zemmour sur Pétain et Vichy", France Culture, November 19th 2018 (updated in May 5th 2019) <https://www.franceculture.fr/histoire/trois-contre-verites-deric-zemmour-sur-petain-et-vichy-rassemblement-national> (Consulted on December 20th 2021) ; Eleanor Beardsley, "A French Best-Seller's Radical Argument: Vichy Regime Wasn't All Bad", National Public Radio, November 5th 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/11/05/361790018/a-french-best-sellers-radical-argument-vichy-regime-wasnt-all-bad> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>182</sup> LCI, "Eric Zemmour, jusqu'où peut-il aller ? - Interview Complète", September 28th 2021, <https://youtu.be/KO57kelxpqM?t=1400> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

<sup>183</sup> Antoine Vitkine, "« Eric Zemmour exploite le sentiment de honte né de Vichy au profit d'une pensée réactionnaire et xénophobe »", October 25th 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/10/25/eric-zemmour-exploite-le-sentiment-de-honte-ne-de-vichy-au-profit-d-une-pensee-reactionnaire-et-xenophobe\\_6099831\\_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/10/25/eric-zemmour-exploite-le-sentiment-de-honte-ne-de-vichy-au-profit-d-une-pensee-reactionnaire-et-xenophobe_6099831_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

creating parallels between what happened during the war and the xenophobic and racist policies put on the table today, policies the Front National and the far right are attempting to make a reality. Le Front National and Zemmour are not merely engaging in a historical debate, they wish to reframe the postwar narrative in a way that doesn't subvert their political agenda. In many cases, this historical revisionism constitutes a return of the "shield" thesis advanced by Robert Aron as we can see with Zemmour, for instance, who continues to suggest Vichy protected French Jews.

One must also ask why is it that events from the mid or even early 20<sup>th</sup> century continue to be debated within the larger discussion of a presidential election in 2022. According to Philip Nord, few countries express such a strong sentiment of guilt and trouble over its postwar memory.<sup>184</sup> Debates over France's past are not only limited to Vichy and the Occupation, the trial of Alfred Dreyfus and the heritage of the Third Republic are occasionally brought up in the midst of debates about current day presidential elections. When comparing with the situation here in Canada, I rarely hear political commentators link significant historical events to contemporary political issues. In Canada, for instance, even those in favor of the separation of Quebec do not make a habit of rehashing the October crisis, even less so during elections. Yet, in France, the attachment to the past seems to be much stronger, and some are quick to connect events from nearly a century ago to contemporary political issues. The question of traditional social structures, a rejection of current day identity politics, non-heteronormative ways of living and what is often coined in France as "communautarisme" are the new enemies, but they are often perceived to be connected to the divisions France experienced under the same left-right dichotomy decades earlier. The idea of a France in decline, a loss of common references, the notion that French society is no

---

<sup>184</sup> Idem

longer capable of recognizing itself echo some of the arguments that Laborie raised with regards to the anxiety of the 1930s, and the “Vichy avant Vichy” chapter, where Laborie examines how the political climate of the 1930s influenced the attitudes of the public during the Occupation. Today, the left are still the usual suspects, but the scapegoats are changing. Muslims and the social justice movement are now the primary target, with terms like “islamo-gauchisme” being used to attack them. We ought to wonder what good it is to rehash the past and to try to connect events from a vastly different period, not to mention what such parallels can do to the collective understanding of history, how it informs the present, and how it shapes national identity. In the case of Vichy, the major debates and final outcome have been settled by historians. I believe it’s time to condemn the justification of Vichy in much stronger terms. Beyond the danger of revisionist commentary from the far right and political figures like Eric Zemmour, the failure to educate the public through the valuable work of multiple generations of historians leaves us vulnerable to future forms of totalitarianism.



# Bibliography

## Books and book chapters

Maurice Agulhon, André Nouschi, Antoine Olivesi and Ralph Schor. *La France de 1848 à nos jours*. Paris : Armand Colin, 2008

Robert Aron. *Histoire de Vichy*, Montréal : Cercle du livre de France, 1954

Jean-Pierre Azéma. “Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton” in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. 13-20. Oxford: Berg, 2000

André Gide. *Journal, 1939-1949. Souvenirs*. Paris : Gallimard, 1954

Stanley Hoffmann. “Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton” in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. 49-57. Oxford: Berg, 2000

Julian Jackson. *France The Dark Years*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001

Pierre Laborie. “1940-1944: Double-Think in France” in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. 181-190. Oxford: Berg, 2000

Pierre Laborie. *L'opinion française sous Vichy Les Français et la crise d'identité nationale (1936-1944)*, 2nd ed. Paris : Seuil, 2001

Michael Marrus. “Vichy Studies in France: Before and After Paxton” in *France at war – Vichy and the Historians*, First ed. Sarah Fishman et al. 35-47. Oxford: Berg, 2000

Ladislas Mysyrowicz. *Autopsie d'une défaite : Origines de l'effondrement militaire français de 1940*, Lausanne : l'âge d'hommes, 1973

Robert O. Paxton. *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982

Henry Rousso. *Le Syndrome de Vichy De 1944 à nos jours*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris : Seuil, 1987

## Theses and dissertations

Mariette Thom, “Robert Aron. Itinéraire d'un non-conformiste, de l'avant-garde à l'Ordre Nouveau (1921-1939)”, Master's thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2017

### Online periodicals (Journal, Magazine, and Newspaper articles)

Anonymous, “Le régime de Vichy divise le Front national”, *Le Parisien*, October 21st 2014, <https://www.leparisien.fr/archives/le-regime-de-vichy-divise-le-front-national-21-10-2014-4229047.php> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Anonymous, “M. Robert Aron : les Mémoires du général de Gaulle œuvre d'histoire mais aussi de légende”, *Le Monde*, November 25th, 1959, [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1959/11/25/m-robert-aron-les-memoires-du-general-de-gaulle-uvre-d-histoire-mais-aussi-de-legende\\_2166401\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1959/11/25/m-robert-aron-les-memoires-du-general-de-gaulle-uvre-d-histoire-mais-aussi-de-legende_2166401_1819218.html) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Anonymous, “The Quarter’s Polls.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1944): 567–603. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2745313> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Johanna Barasz, “De Vichy à la Résistance : les vichysto-résistants 1940-1944”, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 242, no. 2, (2011) : p. 27-50. <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-guerres-mondiales-et-conflits-contemporains-2011-2-page-27.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Arthur Berdah. “Macron crée la polémique en justifiant l'hommage à Pétain”, *Le Figaro*, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2018/11/07/25001-20181107ARTFIG00121-macron-petain-a-ete-un-grand-soldat-pendant-la-premiere-guerre-mondiale.php> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Eleanor Beardsley, “A French Best-Seller's Radical Argument: Vichy Regime Wasn't All Bad“, *National Public Radio*, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/11/05/361790018/a-french-best-sellers-radical-argument-vichy-regime-wasnt-all-bad> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Gérard Delaloye, “Pierre Poujade, l'homme qui lança Jean-Marie Le Pen dans la politique”, *Le Temps*, April 9th 1998, <https://www.letemps.ch/opinions/pierre-poujade-lhomme-lanca-jeanmarie-pen-politique> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Laurent Douzou, “Pierre Laborie (1936-2017), hors des sentiers battus“, *Le Mouvement Social*, vol. 271, no. 2, 2020, p. 3-14 <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-le-mouvement-social1-2020-2-page-3.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Sacha Ghozlan, “La France des fondateurs du FN n’était pas à Londres, mais à Vichy”, *Libération*, April 13th 2017 [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/13/la-france-des-fondateurs-du-fn-n-etait-pas-a-londres-mais-a-vichy\\_1562534/](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/13/la-france-des-fondateurs-du-fn-n-etait-pas-a-londres-mais-a-vichy_1562534/) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

La rédaction de LCI, “SONDAGE EXCLUSIF - Présidentielle 2022 : Macron en tête, Zemmour et Le Pen au coude-à-coude, les candidats LR distancés”, *LCI*, November 7th 2021, <https://www.lci.fr/politique/sondage-exclusif-presidentielle-2022-macron-en-tete-zemmour-et-le-pen-au-coude-a-coude-les-candidats-lr-distances-la-gauche-loin-derriere-2201191.html>

(Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Chloé Leprince, “Non, l’épuration n’a pas été « sauvage » après la Seconde guerre mondiale” France Culture, <https://www.franceculture.fr/histoire/non-lepuration-na-pas-ete-sauvage-apres-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale> (Consulted January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021)

Annelise Rodrigo, Olivier Loubes, “Pierre Laborie, un historien « trouble-mémoire » “, *Monde Sociaux*, December 3rd 2013, <https://sms.hypotheses.org/1651>, (Consulted on October 18th, 2021)

Émilie Lanez and Robert O. Paxton, “Jean Jardin, un lavaliste convaincu qui aidait ses amis”, *Le Point*, January 6th 2011, [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/robert-o-paxton-jean-jardin-un-lavaliste-convaincu-qui-aidait-ses-amis-06-01-2011-127359\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/robert-o-paxton-jean-jardin-un-lavaliste-convaincu-qui-aidait-ses-amis-06-01-2011-127359_23.php) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Henry Rousso, “Les racines du négationnisme en France”, *Cités*, 36, no. 4, (2008), p. 51-62. <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-cites-2008-4-page-51.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

James G. Shields, “Poujadism Fifty Years On ” *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 22, No 1, (2004) [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/academic/jgs/shields\\_-\\_fpcs\\_221\\_-\\_an\\_enigma\\_still\\_-\\_as\\_published.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/modernlanguages/academic/jgs/shields_-_fpcs_221_-_an_enigma_still_-_as_published.pdf) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

John F. Sweets, Reviewed Works: Une Jeunesse Française: François Mitterrand, 1934-1947 by Pierre Péan, *The American Historical Review*, 100, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 474-477. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2169008> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Jean Touchard, “Aron (Robert) - Histoire de Vichy, 1940-1944”, *Revue française de science politique*, no.1, (1955): p.186-187. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/rfsp\\_0035-2950\\_1955\\_num\\_5\\_1\\_402602\\_t1\\_0186\\_0000\\_002](https://www.persee.fr/doc/rfsp_0035-2950_1955_num_5_1_402602_t1_0186_0000_002) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Patrick Troude-Chastenet, “La critique de la démocratie dans les écrits personalistes des années 1930 : Esprit et Ordre nouveau”, *Cités*, 16, no.4, (2003): p.161-176. doi : 10.3917/cite.016.0161 <https://www-cairn-info.proxy.queensu.ca/revue-cites-2003-4-page-161.htm> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Antoine Vitkine, “« Eric Zemmour exploite le sentiment de honte né de Vichy au profit d’une pensée réactionnaire et xénophobe »”, *Le Monde*, October 25th 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/10/25/eric-zemmour-exploite-le-sentiment-de-honte-ne-de-vichy-au-profit-d-une-pensee-reactionnaire-et-xenophobe\\_6099831\\_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/10/25/eric-zemmour-exploite-le-sentiment-de-honte-ne-de-vichy-au-profit-d-une-pensee-reactionnaire-et-xenophobe_6099831_3232.html#xtor=AL-32280270) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Kim Willsher, “France bans far-right 'paramilitary' group Génération Identitaire”, *The Guardian*, March 3rd 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/03/france-bans-far-right-paramilitary-group-generation-identitaire> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Gordon Wright, “Reviewed Work(s): Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944. by Robert O. Paxton” *Political Science Quarterly*, 88, No. 4 (1973): p. 763-765  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2148184> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

## Videos

LCI, “Eric Zemmour, jusqu'où peut-il aller ? - Interview Complète”, September 28th 2021, <https://youtu.be/KO57kelxpqM?t=1400> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Le Média. “LE FASCISME FRANÇAIS - ANNIE LACROIX-RIZ”, YouTube, February 26th 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7\\_KzTgM7LM&t=448s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7_KzTgM7LM&t=448s) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

On est pas couché, “Eric Zemmour “Le suicide français” - On n'est pas couché 4 octobre 2014” October 6th 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV4IK7yC56Y> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

## Websites

Nicolas Lebourg, Jonathan Preda, Joseph Beauregard. “Aux racines du FN L’histoire du mouvement Ordre nouveau”, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2014. [https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01709289/file/Aux\\_racines\\_du\\_FN\\_Lhistoire\\_du\\_mouvement.pdf](https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01709289/file/Aux_racines_du_FN_Lhistoire_du_mouvement.pdf) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

Chloé Leprince, “Les contre-vérités d'Eric Zemmour sur Pétain et Vichy “, France Culture, November 19th 2018 (updated in May 5th 2019) <https://www.franceculture.fr/histoire/trois-contre-verites-deric-zemmour-sur-petaain-et-vichy-rassemblement-national> (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

France. Ministère de l’intérieur. *Résultats de l’élection présidentielle 2017*. 23rd of April and May 7<sup>th</sup> 2021. [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult\\_presidentielle-2017/\(path\)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult_presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)

The Avalon Project, “Geneva Agreements - 20-21 July 1954 - Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam”, Yale Law School,

[https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN\\_540720\\_GenevaAgreements.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf) (Consulted on December 20th, 2021)