

# The collective memory of WWII in France

Written by James Chisem

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JAMES CHISEM, AUG 22 2011

### What factors have shaped remembering of the Second World War in France in the six decades since 1945?

During the so-called ‘*dark years*’ of 1940-1944, the French nation was subjected to a contradictory array of external impositions, indigenously wrought tribulations and bitter-sweet triumphs[1]. On the one hand, the *Third Republic* was rapidly and comprehensively defeated in May-June 1940 – a humiliation referred to by Marc Bloch as a ‘*strange defeat*’ – and for the next four years French soil became witness to the indignity of *Pétainism*, along with the abhorrent culmination of natively incubated anti-Semitism at Vel d’Hiv[2]. On the other, resistance groups played an integral role in the liberation of 1944, and, ultimately, France emerged from the war as a victorious power[3]. In light of this ambiguous and controversial historical heritage, it is perhaps no surprise that collective memory of the war in France has been defined by the existence of competing and contested narratives[4]. As the *Fourth Republic* dissolved into the Fifth, a narrow Gaullist interpretation of the war came to dominate national remembering[5]. However, the proliferation of academic and cultural challenges to the ‘*myth of resistance*’ since the spring of 1968, the most famous of which remains Marcel Ophüls’ 1970 documentary ‘*Le Chargin et la Pitié*’, has given increasing prominence to the crimes of the Vichy regime in French memory[6].

The author suggests that, over the past six decades, collective memory of the Second World War in France has been centrally implicated in, and influenced by, wider socio-political debates relating to the nature of French national identity.

The discourse will be structured in a manner which engages with the primary vectors of French memory regarding ‘*les annes noires*’. The first section will examine the importance of the resistance to post-war identity in France. Section two will focus on the impact of wartime collaboration on the French psyche.

#### i) (Re)constructing French National Identity: Resistance

*“If de Gaulle hadn’t existed, we would have created him”*  
An un-named delegate of the Metropolitan Resistance Group[7]

Since the French Revolution of 1789 there has been a marked tendency, amongst scholars and policymakers alike, to conceptualise French history in terms of stages of decline, fall and renewal. This cyclical narrative, which enjoyed unprecedented historiographical and cultural pre-eminence up until the 1970s, is fundamental to understanding the different contours of French national memory pertaining to the Second World War[8]. In a post-war Gaullist context, although not necessarily exclusively so, the fall of 1940 was seen to be indicative of the *decadence* and decline of the Third Republic, whereas the heroic exploits of the resistance and eventual liberation represented a phoenix moment of national revival[9]. As Raoul Girardet points out, this trope has been “embedded in constructions of French national identity” and has “consistently been used to considerable effect in the political discourse”[10]. Indeed, the largely consensual collective memory of the war which materialised after 1944 was intrinsically linked to attempts by certain sections of the French elite – most conspicuously De Gaulle and his followers – to establish internal political legitimacy, whilst simultaneously restoring French *Grandeur*. Such a task required the development of two mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating ‘*mythologies*’[11].

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The first of these took the form of the Gaullist '*myth of resistance*', a memory-narrative which had its genesis in the post-liberation period – reaching its zenith during the 1950s and 1960s – but which remains a ubiquitous component of French remembering[12]. Successive post-war French leaders, mindful of the often brutally nihilistic acts of retribution carried out against alleged collaborators throughout 1944-45, were acutely sensitive to the potential for the division of the occupation years to create a barrier to national renewal[13]. There was an interest, therefore, in offering the French “a unitary and unifying mirror of their immediate past”[14]. The Gaullist myth, with its inclusive notion of the entire French nation pitted in a noble struggle against the German invader, certainly fulfilled this criterion. Rather than being a uniquely Gallic phenomenon, Vichy was cast as a temporary and foreign aberration, and collaboration as the retreat of a few reactionaries and undesirables[15]. Richard Goslan observes that this papering over of the more noxious elements of France’s wartime past, in tandem with the elevation of a mythic story with its own imagery and heroes to the centre of national memory, was “crucial to...national recovery and to France’s ability to view itself in a positive...light”[16]. The primary appeal of such a depiction of the war, on both a political and socio-psychological level, lay in its externalisation of responsibility for the injustices perpetrated during the occupation solely onto the Germans. This was arguably reflected by the limited scope of the *épuration*, as well as the emphasis given to treason, as opposed to racial persecution, during the trials of Laval, Petain, and other Vichyite luminaries[17].

A second, yet equally influential, myth which impressed itself upon French memory after the war was that of '*self liberation*'. This account explicitly sought to downplay the participation of Allied nations in the liberation of France, presenting the victory of 1944-45 as an almost exclusively home-grown salvation[18]. De Gaulle’s characteristically uncompromising position on this subject was evident as early as August 1944 – “*Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people...with the support and help of all France*” [19]. As Lagrou notes, being liberated, in contrast to liberating oneself, is “too passive a mode to celebrate the recovery of national independence, and gratitude is a weak basis for national identity”[20]. The self-liberation myth, however, was not just a Gaullist project. A climate of anti-Americanism, which was symptomatic of post-war European leftist groups, was a key facilitator of its perpetuation[21]. Crucially, the ignominy of having to play third fiddle to the Americans and British during the '*dark years*', and the pre-occupation with maintaining international autonomy which this imbued amongst policymakers, had a substantial impact on French memory, directly guiding France’s post-war foreign policy[22]. The decision to pursue an independent nuclear deterrent, the French veto of the British request to join the ECC, the 1966 withdrawal from the command structures of NATO, and President Mitterrand’s forceful condemnation of the Reykjavik Summit, can all be viewed within this context[23].

In addition to promoting national reconciliation and independence there was a desire on the part of the Gaullist establishment to appropriate the mantle of resistance and disassociate the *Fourth* and *Fifth Republic* from the *Third*, thereby substantiating its own authority[24]. Nevertheless, despite the successful marginalisation of the role played by the (mostly communist) internal resistance after the war, it would be an abstraction to suggest that the vectors of French memory which conform to the '*La Resistance*' are entirely a Gaullist construct. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the organised left, in concert with high-profile intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, were implicit in the instrumentalisation of the resistance’s legacy and as a result in strengthening the hegemony of De Gaulle’s interpretation of the war[25]. The *PCF*, for instance, brazenly exploited its association with the resistance by referring to itself as the “party of 75,000 shot”[26].

It is pertinent to note that the persistence of the resistance '*image*' in French memory can to a considerable degree be viewed as a consequence, as well as a source, of France’s specific post-war socio-political context. The challenges posed by decolonisation in Indochina and Algeria, together with the difficulties involved in adjusting to the new international political dynamics of the Cold War, relegated the conflicts of 1940-1944 to the margins of national consciousness[27]. At the same time, the pinnacle of the resistance myth’s stranglehold on public and political discourses – the potency of which was highlighted by the socio-ideological conformity manifest in the transfer of Jean Moulin’s ashes to the Parthéon in 1964 [28] – coincided with an extensive period of economic expansion known as *les trentes glorieuses*. According to Wood, this instilled the French with a positive self-image and provided a “central mechanism of national cohesion”. Repression of the more problematic aspects of France’s wartime experience thus became much easier[29]. That is not to say that the political utility of these myths has diminished in a contemporary setting. On the contrary, the tensions caused by the fragmentation of French society along ethnic, religious, and

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political lines over the past three decades have led to their ongoing inclusion in debates concerning French national identity[30]. Indeed, Nicolas Sarkozy has consistently associated his Presidency with the supposed virtues of the resistance, calling for France to abandon the “posture of repentance” adopted by Jacques Chirac[31].

Although based to a certain extent on tangible realities, the inter-connected memory-narratives of resistance and ‘*self-liberation*’ are largely symbolic and procedural in nature. They reflect long-standing traditions in French historical thinking and self-referential notions of French identity. Moreover, they are implicated in the linking of “the national past and future in a causal relation”[32].

## ii) Confronting and Obsessing: Collaboration

*“If you had invented a time machine and offered to rent it to us, I’m not sure that we would have accepted”*  
Marcel Ophuls[33]

Over the past six decades, the relationship between collaboration and French collective memory has been tumultuous. In attempting to synchronise the character of Petain’s regime with the grand continuum of French history, scholars have variously suggested that Vichy was a “curious interlude”, an “aberration in the evolution of the French Republic”, or a more insidious product of the political divisions which plagued inter-war France. The hegemony of the Gaullist myth in the immediate post-war period ensured that memory of Vichy remained peripheral and, as a result of the ensuing intellectual vacuum this left, largely sanitised[34]. During the 1970s, however, a profusion of challenges to this ‘amnesia’ emerged which fundamentally transformed public memory of the occupation[35]. The release of Ophuls’ iconoclastic documentary, *‘La Charge et la Pitié’*, shattered the widely-held belief that the entire French nation had been united in resistance against the Germans[36]. Similarly, Robert Paxton’s monograph, *‘Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order’*, undermined the thesis that Petain had acted as the ‘shield’ to De Gaulle’s ‘sword’, instead arguing that the Vichy government had actively collaborated with the Nazis[37]. A series of unremitting judicial and political scandals in the following decades – most notably the trials of Touvier and Papon, along with the controversy surrounding Mitterrand’s connection to former Vichy police chief René Bousquet – further shifted Vichy to the centre of French remembering[38]. Indeed, this led Henry Rousso to postulate that by the late eighties French memory had come to be afflicted by a so-called ‘*Vichy Syndrome*’[39].

There is little doubt that the swiftness of De Gaulle’s departure from high office in 1969, in tandem with his death the following year, contributed significantly to the disintegration of the national consensus regarding 1940-1944. For instance, the liberalisation of French state television, which occurred after, and possibly as a result of, his death, was pivotal in exposing the public to a more nuanced view of the war years[40]. Whilst the absence of the General from contemporary national life was intellectually liberating from a politico-bureaucratic point of view, it was perhaps the disappearance of the physical embodiment of *La Résistance* which had the biggest impact on French memory – a process compounded by the continued electoral demise of the *PCF*[41].

What really began to “crack the mirror”, as Rousso puts it, were the monumental student protests and industrial stoppages of May 1968. A generation of students and workers, who had no direct temporal connection to the war, nor any vested interest in sustaining a politically expedient image of the occupation, began to question, amongst other things, the quietism which permeated representations of Vichy. The “repudiation of a certain type of society”, therefore, necessarily involved the refutation of a “certain vision of its history”[42]. The effects of this “cultural time bomb” on the progression of national memory have, in recent years, been exacerbated by wider structural factors[43]. Indeed, the increasing fascination with Vichy has to all intents and purposes overlapped with a “low-ebb in national self-esteem”. Mass immigration and debates over the changing nature of French identity have not only added to a sense of “national malaise” and social division, they have also diluted the authority of a monolithic interpretation of the past, whilst adding greater multiplicity to collective memory in general[44]. The communal introspection which this encourages has arguably led to a negative feedback loop which problematises the relationship between French memory and identity. The ‘*Vichy Syndrome*’ – which in part emerged as a response to particular social conditions – has obscured the constructive role played by French forces in the Allied war effort – a conception which in itself had formed an important constituent of France’s positive post-war image[45].

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Domestic considerations aside, it is evident that an additional dynamic driving the ongoing French preoccupation with Vichy was the emergence, during the 1960s, of a distinctly Jewish memory of the Second World War[46]. Prior to the 1967 *Six Days War* – an event which Pierre Nora identifies as the inception of this process – two factors had precluded extensive public interrogation of Vichy's complicity in the Holocaust[47]. Firstly, there was a failure in most European nations, including France, to recognise the unique injustices suffered by Jews at the hands of the Germans. The experiences of resisters and deportees were often given equal, if not greater, weight to that of Jewish victims. Second, until the 1960s, there was a disinclination amongst Zionists to confront this interpretation. In essence, remembrance of the *Shoah* was “incompatible with the combative identity of the new state of Israel”[48].

As the edifices which had supported these stances began to crumble, the Holocaust, and in particular the French dimension of it, came to occupy a central position in the French consciousness – culminating with Jacques Chirac's denunciation in 1995 of the “criminal insanity” of Petain's regime in supporting the Third Reich's genocidal policies[49]. The growth in Jewish memory coincided with, and contributed to, an intensification of France's obsession with Vichy, and, in turn, deepened its post-war identity crisis. As Rousso points out, the lingering malign influence of Vichy has “played an essential if not primary role in the difficulties that the people of France have faced in reconciling themselves to their history” [50]. He further contends that the emphasis on a Judeo-centric understanding of the occupation has, in a detrimental sense, marginalised other narratives. Ironically, Rousso's own work may have added to this development[51].

The ‘*Vichy Syndrome*’ in French collective memory is, therefore, reflective of a wider paradigm shift, indicative of post-modern European cultures, which has progressively undermined the constructive connection between the national past and future[52].

## Conclusion

Since 1945, collective memory of the Second World War in France has been situated within a broader context of cultural, social, and political contestation concerning French national identity. It has substantially influenced, and in turn been influenced by, contemporary socio-structural conditions. The twin narratives of resistance and ‘self liberation’ were informed by the need to project a positive identity to a domestic and international audience, and provide the foundations for post-war social cohesion, in a manner which related to traditional interpretations of French history. The generational transformation of May 1968, together with the explosion of Jewish memory and wider structural changes in French society during the 1970s, contributed to the weakened potency of these images and the increasing centrality of Vichy in French memory.

The tension between *La Resistance* and the ‘*Vichy Syndrome*’ is arguably emblematic of the ambiguities of France's wartime and post-war experience. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front, stunned the world by reaching the second-round of the French Presidential elections. This result, as well as the public and political response to it, drew attention to the fact that the traumas of France's wartime past are still very much at the forefront of the national psyche[53]. Remembering, then, does not occur in a vacuum – it is an inherently relational concept. In this sense, collective memory can be seen as a process of negotiation by a nation between its past, present, and future.

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