

## Remembering Auschwitz: a French perspective

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In France, Auschwitz remains both the term and the site symbol of genocide. This is partly because of the size of the camp, partly because it lied at the heart of the geography of the “final solution” system. The death camp was the endpoint of travel, where the lives of Jews from all over Europe were cut short. Though Auschwitz was not the only extermination camp, nor the only massacre site, it is remembered as the place where the trainline stopped, a black hole at the heart of a European wide network of human destruction.

In this enterprise that stopped to nothing, France and its authorities contributed to sending around 76000 French and European Jews to their death, out of the 300 000 Jews living in France at the time. Hence the ambivalence of French authorities after the end of the war. Indeed, over the last 75 years, the French politics of memory have gone through several phases all closely connected to national politics.

This synthesis paper will first briefly retrace this evolution. Without dwelling much on history itself, it will highlight various moments of memory and the ways in which war narratives developed in time. I will do so by focusing on popular artefacts: films books and documentaries, the production and reception of which illustrate the relation that the French entertain with the memory of the second WW and of Auschwitz. In a second shorter section, I highlight a couple of current challenges related to space: how memory unfolds today in websites, in events and teaching practices. As witnesses die of old-age, key questions are raised as to the transmission of the memory of the Shoah. These remain important issues because, beyond the events themselves, the art and ways in which we remember impact how we address violence, racism and antisemitism in 2020.

## 1 Remembering: A long walk to listening?

In France, remembering WWII and the Shoah evolved from a narrative focused on resistance to Nazism to critical approaches that progressively, though incompletely, opened spaces to listen to witnesses, first to Jewish voices, then, very progressively, to other voices.

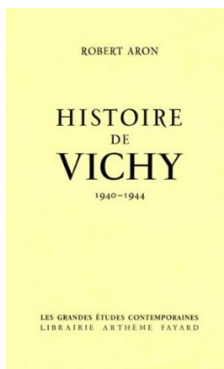
### 1A Emphasis on « Résistance » (1945-1970s)

In 1945 France needed reconciliation maybe even more than physical rebuilding, except in bombed out towns in Normandy. Yet it got a mix of forgetfulness and resistance rhetoric. Throughout most of the Golden Age, from 1945 to the beginning of the 1970s, war memories remained embedded in a strong national rhetoric. France was portrayed as an occupied country which, apart from a few traitors, resisted Nazism. These views were supported not only by nationalists (of which De Gaulle was a key) but also by communists who view themselves as a martyr resistance movement, *Le parti des 75000 fusillés*. The historian Henry Rousso called this official memory *Mémoire résistancielles*. Its narratives and stories ignored the silence of the large majority of French citizens as their neighbors were discriminated against. Ignored as well was the active collaboration of the truncated French state (the Vichy Regime led by the Marechal Pétain) with the Nazi occupation forces, especially in the first years of the occupation. The collaboration to the deportation of Jews was constantly downplayed and evidence of it censored.

The popular film *La bataille du Rail* (1946) for instance depicted the heroic resistance of national railway workers yet ignored the role played by the national railway in the deportation. It echoed strongly of the discourse of the General de Gaulle in Paris in August 1944. This widely broadcasted speech suggested that the French capital, like the rest of France, had freed itself on its own.

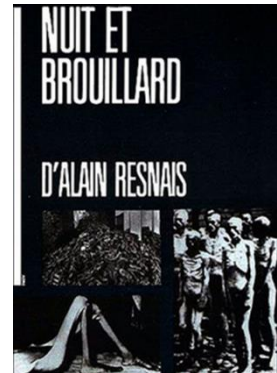
Published in 1954, the book of reference on the history of governance during the war, *Histoire de Vichy* by Robert Aron, defended the idea that the Vichy Regime shielded populations, giving time for the resistance (inside and outside) to





organize. In his words, Pétain was the shield whereas De Gaulle was the sword, a perspective that could fit more the myth of eternal France than the reality of the war. In the post-war years, after some wild retaliation and a few military trials (some *in absentia* like for Paul Touvier or Klaus Barbie), most supporters of Pétain could rewrite their personal war trajectory. Adopting the 'resistance' or 'passive resistance' narrative frameworks, they could carry on with their lives and political careers. This was the case of Maurice Papon, amongst others.

One of the first documentaries to use archive material (pictures of the camps), *Nuit et Brouillard* by Alain Resnais came out in 1956. Yet it had its picture of a French policeman supervising the camp of Pithivier (Eure-et-Loire) tampered with to make it impossible to identify the French police uniform.



It is interesting to note that this act of censorship took place in the context of the Franco-German reconciliation. Indeed, the German embassy put pressure on France so that the documentary from Resnais would be withdrawn from the Cannes competition. In the end, it was projected but withdrawn from the competition.



In the early 1960s, as the Algerian independence war raged (without being named 'a war'), the celebration of "Résistance" carried on. A resistance memorial was set up, near Paris at the Mont Valérien to commemorate the thousands of executions that had taken place there under the occupation. In 1961 a yearly school competition, the 'Concours de la Résistance', was set up. It was established to encourage 15 years old kids to explore resistance issues. I did participate to it in 1986 and interviewed my grandfather who had been in the resistance, caught and sent to Dachau, Germany. It did not occur to me, at the time, to ask why he had been an outcast in his family, nor to interview the rest of my uncles and aunts whom I vaguely knew had been supporters of Pétain. The mythicized glory of a few, left the rest of France in a comfortable shadow for a long time.

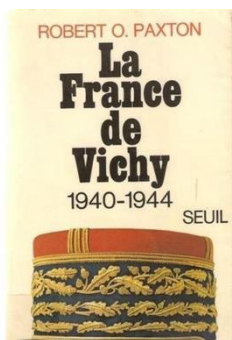
## 1B The slow rise of critical memory (1970s-1990s)

There is evidence however that some journalists and intellectuals started to discuss the issues as early as the 1950s. Artists as well : the 1963 song of Jean Ferrat *Nuit et brouillard*, uses the title of Resnais' documentary (with authorization) for a very melancholic song in honor of those (including his father) who died in the camps. The lyrics insist on numbers, both the sheer number of victims and the indignity of being reduced to numbers. Though it became a success, the song was initially censored in official radio programs. Indeed, in the context of the preparation of the Elysée Treaty of reconciliation between Germany and France, silence and denial were still dominating. This means schoolkids still grew up believing in narratives of heroism and sacrifice that placed France in the category of the winners.



Critical memory emerged nevertheless from the mid-sixties onward to become an issue in the 1970s and 1980s. Several events and social trends contributed to this: the trial, in 1961, of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem, followed by further 'Auschwitz trials' in Frankfurt opened at least a first debate on responsibility and on obedience. Besides, the post-war baby-boomers reached adulthood. They were a generation that challenged not only social rules and norms in the 1968 demonstrations, but also the state-based narratives that they were served at school. They challenged war rhetoric, that of Vietnam, colonial wars and WWII. They questioned their parents and grandparents. In France, this context was also marked by the eclipse and then the death of De Gaulle (November 1970). During the 1970s the decline of the Communist party and its internal division, notably following the publication of Soljenytsin's 'Gulag Archipeligo' also contributed to challenging set political narratives. To this, one should add the rising instability in the middle east (6 days war, Kippour war etc.) that also contributed to opening debates.

In these years, it became possible, not only to unearth but also to publish evidence that the French authorities and many citizens had willingly collaborated with Nazi Germany. And still, it required outsiders to help France to face the mirror. The four hours documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* (a co-production of France, Switzerland and the Federal State of Germany in two parts) examined in depth the various postures taken



by French people in Clermont-Ferrand during occupation. Completed in 1969, it became a success in the cinema in 1971, after the national television program it was produced for refused to air it. The French writer, Françoise Giroud, commented that such a documentary made it impossible to hide that France had not only lost the war but also its honor. Another challenge to official memory came from an American historian, Robert Paxton, who published *La France de Vichy 1940-1944* (1973 for the French translation). Working from archives of the communication between German authorities in France and in Berlin he showed the extent of collaboration between Vichy and Nazi Germany and challenged the idea that Pétain and de Gaulle had worked in a similar “spirit”, one negotiating and buying timing for the other to reorganize and

strike back.

Indeed, since the 1970s, several narratives about the roles of the French in the war and in the Shoah coexist. The topic became a legitimate source of debate amongst historians and all had to come clearer, more explicit about their methods and their sources of information. This is still the case today. Recently for instance, the historian Jacques Sémelin revisited history and emphasized the fact that 75% of Jews in France did survive the war. Working from local and catholic archives, he explored the various factors that can explain this survival rate, including some subtle forms of popular daily non-cooperation with the occupation forces.



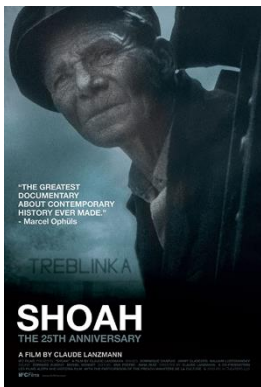
Yet, beyond the debate on historiography, this coexistence of narratives, or *mémoires plurielles*, has also been used for more personal or political purposes. On the one side, some historians and social scientists started to develop arguments that negate, minimize or distort facts about the genocide (Faurisson, Garaudy). Some political leaders, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, manipulated and challenged facts and their historical significance. On the other side, Jewish civil society activists enhanced their documentation of the holocaust by tracing better the trajectories of both the victims and the perpetrators. In particular, the Franco-German spouses Klarsfeld worked tirelessly to pursue war criminals out of hidden places, out of anonymity and impunity. They had located Klaus Barbie already in the early 1970s in Bolivia and fought until he was tried in Lyon in 1987. They also tried and get Alois Brunner extradited from Syria, though to no avail. These were long term struggles. Indeed, it took until the 1990s for a French criminal to face justice. After the trial of the German Klaus Barbie in Lyon, Paul Touvier was condemned in 1994 for crimes against humanity (whereas he had been pardoned by Président Pompidou in 1971 for an earlier military sentence for war crimes). Maurice Papon, after a successful political career as a gaulliste, was tried in 1998 for his role in the deportation of about 1600 Jews from Bordeaux.

To sum up, as contradictory narratives and ambiguous trajectories emerge, as critical thinking becomes possible, the dimensions of the genocide (and possibly truth itself) turned out to be debatable. In this context, the time witnesses became increasingly important, and chief among them was the figure of the camp survivor whose voice bore more legitimacy than any other.

## 1C The rise of witnesses

Simone Veil, one of the 2500 camp survivor who returned to France, made it clear: nobody wanted to hear them for decades. Camp survivors were not combatants, not heroes, at best victims. Worse, they were the unwanted witnesses of the France that nobody wanted to hear about. This was not unique to France: Primo Levi, for instance, experienced difficulties to publish his text ‘If this is a man’ in the late 1940s. It was indeed published in 1947 but became a best seller only in the 1960s, almost 20 years after it had been written.

The historian Annette Wieviorka suggested that, first ignored, camp survivors and direct witnesses started to be sought after in the 1960s, after the trial of Eichmann. Initially, it was for judicial purposes. Slowly, as societies accepted to explore the dark side of its participation to the Shoah, as citizens moved from the



grand national history to the compilation of multiple personal histories, and as Jewish organizations mobilized, witnessing the Shoah became central, not only for trials but also for the rebuilding and the transmission of memory. *Shoah*, the 9 hours documentary from Claude Lanzmann in 1985, illustrates this change. It is based not on archive pictures, but on witness accounts and pictures of camps sites, all taken between 1974 and 1981. The film is a triumph in that it puts names and faces over numbers. Yet it also attracts criticism for sacralizing the Shoah and privileging aesthetics over understanding and complexity. Lanzmann, like Wiesel, portrays the Holocaust as a trauma beyond history.

In French schools it became standard to invite and to listen to witnesses (not only resistance witnesses but also camp survivors). Given that most survivors who could witness in the 1990s and 2000s had been young people, sometimes children at the time of deportation, this could impact on listeners, themselves kids. More films emphasized the fate of European Jews and the trauma they experienced: the TV serie Holocaust 1978-79, the novel and film *Sophie's choice* (1979/1982) even though the character of Sophie is not a Jew, the documentary "The eye of Vichy" (1993), Spielberg's *Shindler's list* (1993), etc. Maybe the death of Primo Levi in 1987 (ruled as a suicide), after he had worked for decades in understanding and helping traumatized persons also contributed to grasping the depth of suffering tied to Auschwitz.



Coming to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, the attention given to Jewish experiences of death camps overshadowed other smaller populations and groups that had also suffered greatly, if not similarly: Roma, disabled persons sometimes left to die in their institutions, Soviet and Polish prisoners of war etc. These silenced memories took longer to emerge and, as always, the journey to recognition required the active mobilization of survivors and their kin. Today, other groups also want to share their stories and suffering. In France for instance, there is a movement for the recognition of the *Malgré-nous* and of the *Malgré-elles*, young people from the Alsace and the Lorraine who were drafted in the *Wermacht*, the German army against their will. Some stories however remain largely taboo, for instance that of the children born of franco-german relationship during occupation.

It is important to bear in mind that French authorities never gave up the control of narratives. Rather, they kept participating to the debate, always seeking to shape it. The notion of duty to remember, *le devoir de mémoire*, emerged in the 1990s. Yet, président Mitterrand, for instance, refused to apologize for the role of the Vichy Regime in the deportation, arguing that "Vichy was not France". In 1995 however, under the impulsion of Jacques Chirac, new steps were taken to acknowledge responsibility. Several legislative texts emphasized this duty to pay respect to the victims of WWII, but also of slavery, and other genocides, notably the Armenian genocide. During the 2000, a special attention was given to the Roma victims of the Nazis, thanks to the involvement of Simone Veil. In parallel the notion of 'Justes parmi les Nations' was emphasized in cooperation with Yad Vashem. Still, the heritage of colonialism for instance remains a sensitive issue.

## 2 Memory, space and experience

This short review of the politics of memory of WWII and the different stages through which it went, raises several issues related to transmission. In this second section of the paper two will be addressed, two issues have less to do with time than with space: first the online space, the websites on which the memory is now labored, second the sites of memory (like Auschwitz) which have become experiential so as to encourage learning through other means than seeing and listening.

### 2A Digital memories and critical truth

Because witnesses pass away and because WWII and its transmission remain a source of controversy until today, we need to pay attention to what happens online. In France, museums, in particular 'Le memorial de la Shoah' have developed extended websites and placed online multiple materials: dematerialized archives,



databases that can be searched, documentaries, material for teachers, and the recording of multiple witness accounts. The latter are also freely available *via* Youtube and other mass media websites.



Rechercher une personne

Déporté Juif de France, Fusillé, Interné, Résistant, Juste, Enfant caché, Responsable de persécutions ...



Rechercher un document

Archives, Photographies, Ouvrages, Périodiques, Films, Enregistrements sonores, Affiches, ...

**AAARGH**  
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Witness accounts remain central to the narrative told. Currently for instance the Memorial de la Shoah runs an exhibition entitled the voice of witnesses *La voix des Témoins* focused on the accounts of a few well-known survivors like Simone Veil who died in 1917. Key parts of her witness statements however were recorded in 1988.

Yet it is also online that controversies have developed: French negationists have used the internet since its foundations to spread different theories. For instance, since 1996, the revisionist website AAARGH, *Association des anciens amateurs de récits de guerre et d'Holocaustes*, sought to offer a range of anti-Semitic literature. Condemned and shut down by French courts in the early 2000, the site moved to Belgium, yet kept on at least until 2010. Today, one can find everything online. In France, antisemitism seems deeply embedded in the debate over the Palestinian conflict. Indeed, the very harsh politics of Israel toward the Palestinians since the collapse of the Oslo agreement and the second intifada has led to a deep resentment, amongst the French youth (and not only those from an immigration background) against Israel. This, combined with a lack of historical knowledge provides a backdrop for multiple confusions on Jewish history, identities, politics etc.

The rise of ISIS and their online recruitment strategies have shown the dangers of brainwashing for political purposes. However, the problem goes beyond extremist websites and conspiracy theories. The sheer amount of material available online, combined with the polarization of political discourses and even of mainstream medias has led to the collapse of “dialogal spaces” in societies. Today, it is possible for anyone to circulate in a closed world of information that only reinforces one’s views. The risk here is that each community, each school of thought, each intellectual movement ceases to engage in respectful encounters of arguments, in the search for some “common sense”. Mainstream TV debates and electoral contests have become increasingly personalized and are bitterly fought with lies and dirt. Social networks, with their emphasis on speed and limited size messages only worsen the risk to transform the democratic and intellectual arenas into punching rings.

There is therefore an urgent need to rethink modes of communication. This entails recognizing first that though access to truth remains incomplete, it is important to keep searching; second that because access to truth is, by our human limits, flawed, it is important to search collectively. Taken together both these assumptions mean that we need to agree on methods and standards in human exchange that build on respect as core concept. Last, it means acknowledging the difficulties of searching the truth when it comes to a painful past. Even though very few people today have a firsthand experience of WWII, most have inherited strong family and community narrative and this is part of who they are. As the poet and writer Ben Okry noted ‘we live by stories, we also live in them’.

School have an important role to play here. The question of the political construction of memory has been dealt with in French school programs. The second WW is approached at different moments from primary school to high school. Until this year 2020, a chapter of the last school year was devoted precisely to the construction of war memories: those from WWII and the Shoah, but also from the Algerian independence war. This was meant to encourage youngsters to reflect critically on the linkages between memory and history. It was meant to help them distinguish between a witness and an historian, to decipher between qualitative and quantitative data, to understand numbers and what they mean. Unfortunately, the remodeling of the baccalaureate has led to serious changes in the history program and it seems that this chapter has disappeared.

## 2B Beyond watching and listening, experiencing?

Direct witness disappear, online spaces are saturated and aggressive. This may be why memorial institutions always complete their online presence with work on site. This may explain why schoolteachers still devote time and energy to organizing school trips where history was lived. This may be why buildings and ceremonies are maintained to pay respect to victims of the *Rafle du Vel d'Hiv* or *Oradour sur Glane* or why artists are still encouraged to express plastically or musically the pain, distress and suffering of the Shoah, in an endless search for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Today, it is possible to walk the geography of violence: through stones and plaques like that of the *Vel d'Hiv* (photo below), around the camp of Drancy in the north of Paris where Jews were held before being deported (photo right). Visits, off the walls school trips, seminars on site, these events literally give flesh to history. This orientation fits with emerging concepts in educational sciences. It echoes the idea that learning is multifaced. Reading and listening are not enough, neither is seeing. Body and mind, as a whole, play a role in learning. And the more active, the more engaged we are, the better we remember.



The question remains though, of the limits of such experience-based approaches to memory. Can one pretend to experience Auschwitz? Are there no risks of confusion, of trivialization? Which ethical issues should we pay attention to? Between education and entertainment, between paying respect and sheer voyeurism, the path is narrow. The tourist industry, like the cinema industry, is often at risk of overstressing decent enquiry and forgetting respect.

To me, key is whether the experience brings about growth in the human person. When standing at the edge of the abyss and staring at it, do we feel deeper our personal trajectory, our connections to others, our rights and duties? When contemplating this 'past that lies before us' (Lederach), do we grasp how little we know about the future? Do we understand better the risks to act ourselves inhumanly? For these questions to emerge fully, time and space must connect again. One cannot just visit Auschwitz as part of a busy European tourist tour, it should be prepared, read upon, even meditated on. The travel must also sink in to be transformative. The same could be said of many memory rituals that seek to engage the body. Are these school-trips just compulsory curriculum passages? Or are they prepared and reflected upon as experiencing humanity in its worse and best dimensions? Several persons told me before I went to Poland, 'Oh Auschwitz! It has always been on my 'to do' list.' And I wonder what this means.

## Conclusion: remembering, and acting?

I wrote my PhD in the 1990s, partly on displacement caused by the Rwandan Genocide. I was in Britain at the time, terribly upset that French main news media were discussing at length the trial of Maurice Papon whilst ignoring the support that the French government had just given to a genocidal Rwandan regime. Since then, France has still not come clean on Rwanda and has not cooperated with international justice. Only last year (25 years after the genocide), did Emmanuel Macron open some archives to some chosen scholars. It does take time to turn around, face and maybe own nasty past. We live still in the meantime.

In this meantime, truth cannot be owned. Shaped by partial community narratives, we need to find respectful ways to explore our family tales, school programs, histories and testimonies and to confront them with those of others. It is also crucial that experience (whether encountering survivors, walking in Auschwitz-Birkenau or singing 'Nuit et Brouillard') is given quality time and space, so as to deepen one's connection to humanity for more than a few hours.

In the end, whether such moments lift us to a higher level of awareness, to larger circles of empathy, can be checked. The proof lies in change. It lies in the mobilization of this newly gained awareness to act, individually and collectively, to protect human dignity, here and now. This is not only about Franco-Rwandan

reconciliation. It is about extreme inequality amongst European citizens, about millions of people who hunger invisible though here, about communities still largely marginalized (Roma, homeless, etc.), about migrants whom we leave to die in the Mediterranean or in Libyan camps. It is less about them and then than about us and now.

## Some resources

Clément René (1946) *La bataille du Rail*, film, <https://www.libertyvf.one/films/streaming/7625-la-bataille-du-rail.html>

Ferrat Jean (1963) *Nuit et Brouillard*, Song, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k8VsjdTwo>

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Lederach John Paul (2005), *The Moral Imagination* (Oxford, Oxford University Press)

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Ophuls Marcel, Harris André (1969), *Le chagrin et la pitié, chronique d'une ville sous l'occupation*, documentary.

Resnais Alain (1956) *Nuit et Brouillard*, documentary.

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