

### 1945-1953: Unfinished Mourning (*le deuil inachevé*)

From Liberation in 1944 to the amnesties of 1954, France was engaged in dealing with the aftermath of occupation and the virtual civil war that took place during that period. This was a process, as Rousso suggests, of unfinished mourning (*un deuil inachevé*). It was relatively easy - if mourning the loss of those close to you can be described thus - for French men and women to enter the process of mourning for the 1,500,000 fatalities of the First World War. Up and down the country, in cities, towns and villages all over France war memorials sprang up to commemorate French losses - the million and a half dead on the so-called *champs d'honneur*.

The Second World War was an entirely different matter. There were far fewer losses at an estimated 600,000 fatalities. However, the precise nature of these deaths was a much more complex matter. Around 200,000 died during military action (about 90,000 in 1939-40 alone). The Vichy régime itself was responsible for the death of 135,000 people, including the deportation of 76,000 Jews of which only 3% returned. The Resistance too was responsible for an estimated 10,000 killings. After the war during trials, around 7,000 were sentenced to death but only 767 were eventually executed.

The immediate aftermath of liberation saw a spontaneous settling of scores with summary executions commonplace (*l'épuration*). There were trials too, with charges brought against and prosecution of collaborators like the writer and intellectual Robert Brassilach. Economic collaborators tended to escape - France clearly needed its entrepreneurs and captains of industry however much they may have compromised themselves during the war. One notable exception to this was Louis Renault.

The period immediately following liberation then represented an imperfect coming-to-terms with the past that ignored, for example, the anti-semitism of Vichy and its complicity in the deportation of 76,000 Jews. *Collabos* were judged to be traitors to France rather than French fascists. The entire question of collaboration, argues Rousso, was couched in patriotic rather than political terms.

A tension emerged between desire to celebrate glorious or heroic actions (of the resistance) and to forget the shameful (of the collaborators). The memory and consequent memorialization of Nazi atrocities centered on crimes committed against the French like the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane (near Limoges in south-west France), rather than the so-called *grande rafle du Vél d'hiv'* in Paris. The *village martyr* of Oradour-sur-Glane was visited by De Gaulle in 1945 who ordered that it be preserved for posterity as a memorial to Nazi aggression. The Vélodrome d'Hiver sports stadium on the rue Nèlaton near the quai de Grenelle, on the other hand, was demolished. Similarly, the horror of the Nazi concentration camps centered on Buchenwald where resisters and politicals were held, and not Auschwitz-Birkenau where Jews and gypsies formed the bulk of the detainees.

In this difficult period new fault lines emerged. The postwar trial of 22 soldiers of the *Das Reich* regiment, 14 of whom were Alsatian *malgré-nous*, who took part in the massacre of the villagers of Oradour is a good example of this. The fault line here was geographical rather than ideological, and revealed the different forms of humiliation and suffering experienced during *les années noires*. Many Alsatians had felt that they had suffered enough during the war and were reluctant to see former *malgré-nous* in the dock, dragging up old memories of past crimes. The relatives of those murdered at Oradour were, on the other hand, keen to see justice done at last and those responsible for the massacre sentenced for their crimes against unarmed civilians (including an eight-day old baby).

---

### 1954-1971: Repressed Memory (*le refoulement*)

The period between 1954 and 1971 are the years of the Gaullist 5th Republic which sought to silence any reminder of past divisions. The amnesties of 1951-53 had sought to mark a clean break with the past and herald a new beginning.

The period was that of *les trente glorieuses*, and, more specifically, of *la République gaullienne*. This was a period of increasing affluence in which more and more French men and women enjoyed the fruits of postwar prosperity. One witnesses the creation of a myth to play down divisions and allow repression of reality, were the years of the political dominance of Charles de Gaulle. During this

period, a myth about occupied France was constructed. This was known as the 'Gaullist myth'. The 'Gaullist myth' can be summarised in a number of central tenets or beliefs:

- there was minimal collaboration - only a handful of crackpots and marginals who were atypical of French opinion;
- national unity - the French essentially unified, essentially patriotic (with only a few misled individuals);
- France's interests were protected by an élite of heroic Resistance fighters (supported by the mass);
- iv) Charles de Gaulle was the personification of the Resistance - 'le premier Résistant de France'. In his famous victory speech to a newly liberated Paris on the 25 August 1944, de Gaulle proclaimed that Paris was liberated by the unified efforts of the French:  
Pourquoi voulez-vous que nous dissimulions l'émotion qui nous étreint tous, hommes et femmes, qui sommes ici, chez nous, dans Paris debout pour se libérer et qui a su le faire de ses mains. Non ! Nous ne dissimulerons pas cette émotion profonde et sacrée. Il y a là des minutes qui dépassent chacune de nos pauvres vies.

Paris! Paris outragé! Paris brisé! Paris martyrisé! Mais Paris libéré! Libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec l'appui et le concours de la France tout entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle.

Je dis d'abord de ses devoirs, et je les résumerai tous en disant que, pour le moment, il s'agit de devoirs de guerre. L'ennemi chancelle mais il n'est pas encore battu. Il reste sur notre sol. Il ne suffira même pas que nous l'ayons, avec le concours de nos chers et admirables alliés, chassé de chez nous pour que nous nous tenions pour satisfaits après ce qui s'est passé. Nous voulons entrer sur son territoire, comme il se doit, en vainqueurs. C'est pour cela que l'avant-garde française est entrée à Paris à coups de canon. C'est pour cela que la grande armée française d'Italie a débarqué dans le Midi et remonte rapidement la vallée du Rhône. C'est pour cela que nos braves et chères forces de l'intérieur vont s'armer d'armes modernes.

C'est pour cette revanche, cette vengeance et cette justice, que nous continuerons de nous battre jusqu'au dernier jour, jusqu'au jour de la victoire totale et complète. Ce devoir de guerre, tous les hommes qui sont ici et tous ceux qui nous entendent en France savent qu'il exige l'unité nationale. Nous autres, qui aurons vécu les plus grandes heures de notre Histoire, nous n'avons pas à vouloir autre chose que de nous montrer jusqu'à la fin, dignes de la France.

Vive la France!

(L'allocution de général de Gaulle à l'Hôtel de Ville le soir du 25 août 1944)

In a later speech on the 31 December 1944 he repeated this view:

Sauf un nombre infime de malheureux qui ont consciemment préféré le triomphe de l'ennemi à la victoire de la France et qu'il appartient à la Justice de l'État de châtier équitablement, la masse immense des Français n'a jamais voulu autre chose que le bien de la patrie, lors même que beaucoup furent égarés sur le chemin. Au point où nous en sommes et étant donné tout ce qu'il reste à faire pour nous sauver, nous relever et nous aggrandir, les fureurs intestines, les querelles, les invectives sont injustes et malfaisantes.

These speeches are essential to our understanding of the so-called 'Gaullist myth' that emerged after the Liberation.

Some historians use the term la France résistante or le résistancialisme to describe this myth. Historians and critics had proposed a number of explanations for the 'Gaullist Myth':

- to boost morale;
- to establish order/stability;
- to re-inforce de Gaulle's political legitimacy;
- to assert France's claim greatness (*rentrer dans le rang*).

The 'Gaullist myth' tended, as a result, to minimize the active role of Vichy and the support it commanded amongst the French population as a whole and created a new object of memory, the Resistance which reconciled different groups (e.g. Gaullists and Communists).

---

### 1972-1980: The Broken Mirror (*le miroir brisé*)

The period from 1972 until 1980 sees the return of the repressed, *le retour du refoulé*. What had been smothered under a reassuring myth of national resistance returned, and returned with unexpected vehemence.

According to Henry Rousso's overview of postwar attitudes to *les années noires* (Rousso: 1990), the period between 1954 and 1971 (*le refoulement*) are years when the Gaullist 5th Republic sought to silence any reminder of past divisions. As Rousso comments:

Le Général avait pratiqué tour à tour l'exorcisme de Vichy, et l'histoire sainte et édifiante de la Résistance (Rousso: 1990 p.120)

However, a number of developments after 1968 unsettled the image many French people had of the period of Occupation. Amongst the most important developments were the release of Marcel Ophüls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in 1969 and Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* in 1973 and the French translation of Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (*La France de Vichy*) in 1972. These all played, in their different ways, an important role in ushering in a new period in France's troubled relation to its wartime past, the period Rousso calls that of *le miroir brisé*.

*Le Chagrin et la pitié* is a long documentary - 4 hours and 16 minutes to be exact - and is composed of a variety of interviews and archive materials like photographs, old newsreels, film clips and recorded speeches with a soundtrack of contemporary music from performers such as Georges Brassens, Charles Aznavour etc..

It concentrates on the town of Clermont-Ferrand - not far from Vichy - and primarily, although not exclusively, on the attitudes of its inhabitants towards the main events and developments that took place in France during the Occupation. The France it represents is far from the comforting image of the so-called 'Gaullist myth' A divided France in which a variety of opposing attitudes. For this representation of France Ophüls and his colleagues were accused of being *fouilleurs de merde* and *videurs de poubelles*.

---

### 1980-present: *obsession*

By 1980 and the beginning of the Mitterrand years, the repression and reassessment of *les années noires* had turned into an obsession. Every month a new revelation about the period of Occupation would appear and dominate the news agenda.

The trials of Klaus Barbie (1987), of Paul Touvier (1994), Maurice Papon (1997-8) and, more recently still, the attempted extradition of Aloïs Brunner from Syria to face a trial for crimes against humanity in France (1999) have also served to give the Occupation a continued high media profile.

This intensified in the 1990s with the fiftieth anniversary of the years of Occupation and the growing importance of what historians call *la mémoire juive*.