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‘Avec un certain malaise’: The Paxtonian Trauma in France, 1973–74

Upon its publication in France in 1973, Robert Paxton’s *La France de Vichy*¹ caused something of a scandal. Henry Rousso has viewed the publication of Paxton’s book as part of a turning-point in postwar French historical memory — the phase of ‘the Broken Mirror’, the shattering of the dominant Gaullist consensus, a phase which Rousso located in the years 1971 to 1974.² *La France de Vichy* was reviewed and/or passionately debated by virtually every publication of significance in France. Paxton, almost overnight, became a famous man in French letters and, in later years, thanks to his testimonies in the trials of accused Vichy collaborators, even something closer to a household name. In more ways than one, this reception was astonishing. For one thing, Paxton was a foreigner, and an American to boot; French intellectual circles did not usually become so worked up over the scholarship of a non-French historian of France. Second, Paxton’s earlier book, *Parades and Politics at Vichy*, which contained more than a grain of what was to come in *La France de Vichy*, was ignored by the French academic community on its publication in 1966.³ It was not translated into French and was reviewed by only one scholarly journal.⁴ What caused this dramatic turnaround? Why was Paxton’s scholarship received so differently in 1966 and in 1973?

The answer may lie in the respective natures of the two books. *Parades and Politics at Vichy* was a more specific tome. While critical of Pétain, Paxton was not overtly perceived as challenging the fundamental assumptions about Vichy which had dominated French historiography (and public discourse at large) since the end of the second world war. Of course, because it was not translated, it could not have much of an impact. *La France de Vichy* was something else entirely. First, it was translated (by the Seuil publishing house).

I should like to thank Professor Jay Winter, who encouraged the writing of this article, and Professor Robert O. Paxton, who graciously granted me a lengthy interview. My thanks also to Professor Volker R. Berghahn.

1 Robert O. Paxton, *La France de Vichy* (Paris 1973); originally published as *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York 1972).

2 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (New York 1991); originally published as *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris 1987).

3 Robert O. Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy: The French Officer Corps Under Marshal Pétain* (Princeton, NJ 1966).

4 *Revue française de science politique*, 17, 1 (February 1967), 576. The anonymous reviewer devoted eight lines to the book.

Second, and most important, it was an openly critical *synthesis* of the Vichy period. As Janine Bourdin wrote (in an unfavourable review), ‘on attend donc que l’originalité du travail . . . se révèle dans la vigueur de la synthèse et la rigueur de la démonstration’.⁵ She put her finger on what was arguably the main *historiographical* power of Paxton’s book. He had done what is now taken largely for granted — he unified the many different ‘Vichys’, each of which had previously been written about separately, into one coherent, ideological whole. Moreover, *La France de Vichy* was also trenchant in tone. And perhaps no less importantly, Paxton was an ‘outsider’ — an American. To his critics, this counted against him; to his supporters, it worked to his advantage. The fact that Paxton was not French became an important part of the debate.

Yet the transition from the quiet of 1966 to the storm of 1973 must be understood on a broader level. *La France de Vichy* appeared in France at a unique time — one year after the release (and subsequent television censorship) of Marcel Ophuls’ landmark documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* (1972), which became a *cause célèbre* for its depiction of ordinary people in Claremont-Ferrand, a town in the unoccupied southern zone during the Vichy years. In addition, the Touvier Affair — Gaullist President Georges Pompidou had pardoned Paul Touvier, a former member of the *milice* who had been sentenced to death in absentia during the *épuration* — had outraged and polarized public opinion. From Rousso’s point of view, the volatile events of 1968, as well as the subsequent death of the great symbol and consensus-maker himself, General de Gaulle, triggered the disintegration and collapse of a number of powerful myths. Paxton’s work, in this sense, appeared in the right place at the right time; it caught the attention of a generation eager to find fault with their fathers and elders.⁶

La France de Vichy played its part in shattering those myths. Paxton argued that collaboration ‘was not a German demand to which some Frenchmen acceded, through sympathy or guile. Collaboration was a French proposal that Hitler ultimately rejected.’⁷ This went against the long-established notion, put forth almost 20 years before by Robert Aron, that Vichy served some sort of practical purpose, as a shield from German atrocities, and that it had two heads — Laval’s and Pétain’s. According to Aron, while Laval strived for an alliance with Germany, Pétain wanted simply to safeguard France until the war was over; thus a ‘Double Game’ was played.⁸ Paxton asserted that Pétain, the hero of the Great War, the ultimate grandfather figure (who, ironically, had no children of his own), the man who in the eyes of many had fallen victim to the excesses of the *épuration*, was just as much a collaborator as Laval. Pétain, too, had wanted a ‘reversal of alliance’, a part in Hitler’s new

5 Janine Bourdin, ‘Notes bibliographiques’, *Revue française de science politique*, 23, 3 (June 1973), 631.

6 Rousso, *op. cit.*, 98–131; also Bourdin, *op. cit.*, 252–6.

7 Paxton, *Vichy France*, *op. cit.*, 51.

8 Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy, 1940–1944* (Paris 1954).

European Order, a German victory. There had been no ‘Double Game’; there had been only one Vichy.

Some of what Paxton wrote was a reiteration of the work of the German historian Eberhard Jäckel, who had already demonstrated that collaboration was a French initiative.⁹ But Paxton went further. He argued that the men of Vichy had acted not out of opportunism, or survival instinct, but out of conviction. They were not simply traitors, they were ideologues. In forging the ‘National Revolution’ — the drastic restructuring of French society along strongly conservative lines — Vichy leaders were driven primarily by a desire for revenge against the Popular Front and by a profound hatred of the Third Republic and its institutions. Paxton showed that collaboration with Germany on the foreign front and the implementation of the National Revolution on the domestic front were two sides of the same coin. Both were internal initiatives which stemmed from the same ideological source. When Vichy began to make life difficult for France’s Jews, it did so almost entirely of its own volition. Its antisemitism was not imported from Germany; it was homegrown. Vichy, in short, was an authentically French — not German — entity, and it ‘enjoyed mass support and élite participation’.¹⁰ This, in 1973 France, was disturbing news to many. But Paxton’s real blow was not to those who wished for a rehabilitation of Pétain and his ilk. It was one thing to attack Vichy, quite another to question the integrity of the *Résistants*. Many liked to think that just as there were two Vichys during the war, there were also two Frances: the France of collaboration and the France of resistance. According to Paxton, this was another false memory. ‘Where . . . were the “resisters of the first hour”’, he wanted to know, ‘as numerous by 1944 as Mayflower descendants at a DAR convention?’¹¹ His answer was that there were virtually none. Paxton thus did not settle for a critique of the Vichy élite. He also exploded one of the founding Gaullist myths, that of the ‘Eternal France’ resisting the enemy from the outset. Paxton argued that this myth was a result of selective memory: postwar Frenchmen found it easier to remember 1944, when everyone seemed to be in the Resistance, rather than 1940, when Vichy enjoyed tremendous popularity.¹² In reality, ‘Eternal France’ turned against Pétain and the nazis only when things began to go badly. And, perhaps most importantly, Vichy left a lasting legal, social and political legacy. In a way that was hurtful to many, Paxton showed the continuities between pre-war, wartime and postwar France.

Paxton ended the last chapter of *La France de Vichy*, entitled ‘The Moral Balance Sheet’, with the following conclusion: ‘The deeds of occupier and occupied alike suggest that there come cruel times when to save a nation’s deepest values one must disobey the state. France after 1940 was one of those

9 Eberhard Jäckel, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa* (Stuttgart 1966); trans. Denis Meunier, *La France dans L’Europe de Hitler* (Paris 1968).

10 Paxton, *Vichy France*, op. cit., 5.

11 Ibid., 38.

12 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

times.¹³ In a sense, this article is about how French writers responded to the message of this paragraph.

This article does not discuss the long-term impact of Paxton's work on French historiography, historical consciousness and memory.¹⁴ Instead, it focuses on the *immediate* reactions to its publication. This allows us to look at memory in the making. *La France de Vichy* appeared at a crucial time in the evolution of French postwar memory, as we have seen, but also long before the advent of the memory boom in historiography. 'Memory', in other words, was not an issue then — at least not a conscious or scholarly one. Paxton's critics were not yet aware of the 'Vichy Syndrome' and did not know that they were afflicted with it. They also could not know that their reviews would one day be studied in the context of the relation between French history and memory, that *La France de Vichy* would be considered the definitive work in the field, that Paxton himself would be defined as a 'vector of memory',¹⁵ and that they, on the other hand, would be seen as guardians of soon-to-be-shattered legends. The immediacy of these sources, their lack of self-consciousness, is what makes them interesting as *representations of memory*. Whereas the term 'memory' is at present often used as a metaphor for nearly anything and everything, it barely appears in the 1973 reviews of *La France de Vichy*. I use the term as carefully as possible. Although I do not accept Pierre Nora's somewhat Franco-centric formulation of memory — particularly his notion that it should be understood as a product of crises in national (i.e. French) unity — Vichy is a case which fits his theoretical mould.¹⁶ It *was* a crisis in national unity which produced conflicting and competing memories. Many of Paxton's reviewers represented different groups within French society — communists, Jews, resisters, ex-Vichyites, etc. Nora's approach fits the Paxton case also because this article is, after all, a study of intellectual élites. *La France de Vichy* was not consumed by a mass audience (and Paxton did not write it for such an audi-

13 Paxton, *Vichy France*, op. cit., 383. In the introduction to the second edition of *Vichy France* (New York 1982), xv, Paxton explained that this conclusion, like the rest of his book, 'was not written in a mood of easy moral superiority. Indeed it was written under the shadow of the Vietnam War, which sharpened my animosity to nationalist conformities of all sorts. The comparisons that haunted me when I wrote in the late 1960s were not with the defeated French but with the smugly confident Germans of the summer of 1942.'

14 For this topic see Rouso, op. cit., especially 252–71; Sarah Fishman et al. (eds), *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (New York 2000); Jean-Pierre Azema, 'Vichy et la mémoire savante: quarante-cinq ans d'historiographie' in Jean-Pierre Azema et al. (eds), *Le Régime de Vichy et les français* (Paris 1992), 23–44; Jean-Pierre Azema et François Bedarida, 'Vichy et ses historiens', *Esprit*, 181, 5 (May 1992), 43–51. Azema's mother, Claude Bertrand, translated *Vichy France* into French. Azema later collaborated with Paxton on the documentary film *L'oeil de Vichy* (1995).

15 Rouso, op. cit., 252–6.

16 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Représentations*, 26 (Spring 1989), 7–24; for various examples of this approach see the three-volume Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (Paris 1996).

ence), and it was discussed mostly by intellectuals, journalists, academics and public figures.¹⁷

So are we dealing with history or memory? That is hard, if not impossible, to say. *La France de Vichy* is a ‘history book’ par excellence, but it would not have made such an impact had there not been dominant memories in place at the time of its publication. These memories had deeply influenced historiography, and vice versa, to the point where it was sometimes difficult to tell the two apart. Participants in the war were writing histories of the period and professional historians had often been participants in the events. The Paxton affair thus defies simple categorizations. Maurice Halbwachs’s sharp distinction between History and Memory is a case in point:¹⁸ it does not hold true for either Paxton’s book or the responses to it. To put it more baldly, it probably does not hold true for any historian writing about the still living or the recently deceased. I agree with Rousso’s notion that historians are themselves carriers, or ‘vectors’, of memory. In the first sentence of his introduction to the second edition of *Vichy France*, Paxton wrote: ‘By the time I had finished writing [*Parades and Politics at Vichy*], I had come to feel that most general works about Marshal Pétain and his armistice regime at Vichy were wrong-headed.’¹⁹ In other words, Paxton wrote *La France de Vichy* with a particular ‘dominant memory’ — that of French historians of the second world war — in the background. The same misgivings about Halbwachs’s argument hold true for the reactions to Paxton’s work. What to do, for example, with reviews published in the reputable media by people about whom Paxton had written? Admiral Paul Auphan, Secretary of the Navy under Pétain until 1942, attacked *La France de Vichy* in *Le Monde*. He also debated directly with Paxton on French television. How does one distinguish in Auphan’s case between ‘history’ and ‘memory’?

At the same time, it would be a mistake to treat these criticisms smugly. It has become almost a commonplace to view the negative 1973 reactions to Paxton’s book as signs of intellectual primitivism (the positive reviews are treated more kindly). Stanley Hoffman, Paxton’s mentor (he wrote the preface to *La France de Vichy*) and a voice of authority in French intellectual life, has called that reception ‘unintelligent’. Paxton’s and Hoffman’s historiographical paradigm of Vichy France has won out, and historiography — just like ‘history’ itself — is written by the winners. But to go back to the original critiques of *La France de Vichy* is to raise a number of questions that were valid then and are still valid now; there were other reasons for the criticism besides disingenuousness and false consciousness.

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17 Rousso, op. cit., 276, puts the sales for *La France de Vichy* at 13,382 for the period 1973–85.

18 Maurice Halbwachs, ed. Lewis Coser, *On Collective Memory* (New York 1992). For an illuminating essay see Alon Confino, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problem of Method’, *American Historical Review*, 102, 5 (December 1997), 1386–1403.

19 Paxton, *Vichy France*, op. cit., xi.

Paxton's right-wing critics were perhaps his most vociferous. Some were unabashedly personal. Dominique Jamet, in a piece titled 'L'oeuf de Columbia', wrote in *L'Aurore* that 'il paraît que M. Robert Paxton enseigne actuellement l'histoire de l'Europe contemporaine à l'université de Columbia. On a peine à le croire.'²⁰ Others were more substantial. One issue of contention was Paxton's extensive reliance on German archives, seized by the Allies at the end of the war. The French archives of the Vichy period were not yet open to scholars. Paxton did what no French historian had done before (but which Eberhard Jäckel *had* done) — he took a look at what the German records had to say. The result, to some, was a misleading view of the French leadership as seen through nazi eyes. This was the opinion of Alain-Gerard Slama in *Contrepoint*.

[Paxton] devait avoir quelques notions d'escalade, car il s'instilla tout en haut de son tas d'archives, se donna à peine le temps de reprendre souffle, et regarda. Que l'homme est petit, vu du haut de la mer de Glace! Et que la France est méprisable, quand on la considère avec les yeux d'Abetz!²¹

To Slama, Paxton had made a fetish of the German archives. He had failed to treat them critically. He trusted the word of Otto Abetz, the nazi ambassador, over that of Vichy leaders. He ignored French sources that *were* available to him. But beyond the methodological criticism and sardonic tone, Slama's review raised a number of key points that would be echoed elsewhere. Could Paxton claim to have written a definitive history of Vichy without the French archives? Could he have come to such severe conclusions if what he had at his disposal was mostly the interpretation of nazi officials?

It is no accident that the issue of the archives became a central part of the debate. Paxton's book was based on archival materials; attack them and you discredit his conclusions. And his methodology had a provocative edge. Previously, French scholars tended to view Vichy from the inside out — from France, the occupied, looking to Germany, the occupier. But Paxton turned the gaze outside in, from occupying Germany to occupied France. It was an entirely new view; many did not like what they saw. Alfred Fabre-Luce, a prominent Pétain apologist and author, argued in *Contrepoint* that the German documents were prejudiced and did not reflect the hardships and constraints of Vichy's position. Paxton, in Fabre-Luce's words, was no more than 'un archiviste américain'.²² In *Le Monde*, Fabre-Luce claimed to have a proprietary memory of the past. There *was* a double game, he argued; Vichy did all it could to protect the Jews; the German archives were unreliable. How did he know all this? He was there: 'Telle est l'Histoire qu'avec beaucoup d'autres j'ai observée et vécue.'²³ This was a direct, head-to-head confrontation between

20 Dominique Jamet, 'L'oeuf de Columbia', *L'Aurore*, 9 February 1973, 21.

21 Alain-Gerard Slama, 'Les yeux d'Abetz', *Contrepoint*, 10 (April 1973), 119–25.

22 Alfred Fabre-Luce, 'Lettre', op. cit., 126.

23 Fabre-Luce, 'Quatre points', *Le Monde: Livres*, 22 March 1973, 22–3.

‘history’ and ‘memory’. On the one side stood Paxton, who worked exclusively with archival materials and considered memoirs and recollections selective and often manipulative.²⁴ On the other side stood Fabre-Luce, who argued that the experience could not be expressed by historical documentation. He had a point, to the extent that perhaps Paxton had underestimated the shock, dismay and depression caused by the humiliating defeat of 1940 — emotions that could not readily be found in the nazi archives.

Fabre-Luce was seconded by an even harsher reviewer. Paul Auphan, as a former member of the Vichy regime, had a personal stake in the debate. His position was straightforward: he could not understand how anyone could choose to believe the German records over the recollections of Vichy officials. *La France de Vichy*, he argued, was simply ‘un exposé passionné qui cherche à tordre un peu l’histoire pour dresser l’opinion américaine contre la France traditionnelle.’ Zeroing in on Paxton’s final passage, which I have cited above, he concluded that ‘Paxton, qui avait huit ans en 1940, déclare que les quarante millions de Français de la métropole auraient dû, à cette époque, désobéir à l’Etat et se révolter. Ce livre n’est, au fond, qu’un pamphlet pour essayer de justifier cette opinion.’²⁵

These critics’ problem with the German archives was twofold. First, the supposed general uselessness of archival documentation in conveying human experience — in this case, the humiliation of defeat, the fear of civil war, etc. This point was raised also by Jacques de Launay, a conservative writer and ex-*résistant*, who had published his own book on the Vichy period just one year before.²⁶ Under the headline ‘Les traces écrites suffisent-elles?’, de Launay contended in *Le Monde* that as a matter of principle, archival material was not conclusive: ‘Les traces écrites font état de ce langage. Elles ne recèlent rien des intentions, des objectifs réellement poursuivis.’²⁷ Rather, in his view, Paxton’s sources merely showed the obsequious attitude of Vichy officials eager to please their nazi occupiers. But was this the true face of Vichy?

This criticism was somewhat misplaced. Paxton had used not only dry bureaucratic materials; he also included diaries and letters, some of which were quite personal and revealing (André Gide’s diaries, for instance, produced some of the most fascinating quotes in the book). But Paxton *did* refuse, as mentioned, to use postwar memoirs as authoritative sources. In other words, he clearly preferred representations of history over representations of memory: ‘Memory’, as he has put it, ‘is the shakiest of all human constructions; the documents in the archives, on the other hand, don’t change.’²⁸

The second and probably more crucial problem with the German archives

24 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

25 Paul Auphan, ‘Un pamphlet pour justifier une opinion’, *Le Monde: Livres*, 22 March 1973, 24–5; see also Auphan’s lengthier review in *Le Maréchal*, 90 (May 1973), 4–5.

26 Jacques de Launay, *La France de Pétain* (Paris 1972).

27 Jacques de Launay, ‘Les traces écrites suffisent-elles?’, *Le Monde: Livres*, 17 March 1973, 24.

28 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

was that they represented the voice of the enemy. French scholars and their public had not yet heard this voice. The German perspective was still seen as illegitimate and Vichy still considered, by many, a Nazi imposition. Paxton had insisted that the true France of Vichy could not be found in self-reflection, or in French memory, since that memory had been shaped and coloured by political interests and personal agendas. The real Vichy *could* be seen in the German reflection. He was in effect arguing that French historiography had been misled thus far by the false memories found in the French sources. A far more accurate picture of Vichy could be seen through ‘les yeux d’Abetz’.

Everywhere in the 1973–74 reviews Paxton is referred to as *un jeune historien américain*. This could be meant as either insult or acclaim. Auphan, for one, was furious: how dare Paxton, who, he complained, was only eight years old and playing ball in a backyard in faraway Virginia when France went through the trauma of defeat, judge those who actually lived through those times, who came forward to lead France in her worst hour? This visceral reaction is not unlike those of war veterans to the writings of younger scholars and journalists of the next generation. You were not there; I was. Indeed, Auphan *was* writing as a veteran of sorts. His attack on Paxton (and on Hoffman, who wrote an article in *Le Monde* defending the book) can be likened to an attack by ‘memory’ on ‘history’. Auphan had just published his memoirs and a third edition of his history of the navy during the war;²⁹ whose version of history should the public trust, his or Paxton’s? There was no doubt in his mind that ‘la compétence implique . . . qu’on ait été plongé dans des drames analogues à un échelon de décision ou, au moins, qu’on se mette humblement par la pensée à la place des acteurs, hommes d’Etat ou chefs militaires, responsables des vies humaines placées sous leur obédience’.³⁰ He might have said that those who *write* have no business criticizing those who *did*.

Auphan’s central claim was that Paxton could not understand the Vichy period because, quite simply, he was not French. Auphan spoke of ‘le culot d’un jeune professeur à la lointaine université Columbia’.³¹ He rejected the notion that Vichy had international or universal implications. Its history, he asserted, should be ‘une affaire à traiter entre Français’.³² This was a crude version of a widespread sentiment; similarly, de Launay argued that the key to understanding Paxton’s book was that it was written for an American public, with an American political agenda: ‘Ainsi, l’administration et le public américains disposent d’éléments d’appréciation irréfutables sur le comportement de la France sous l’occupation.’³³ Yet the feelings about Paxton’s nationality were ambivalent. Some of his supporters argued that he was free from the political

29 Paul Auphan, *La marine française dans la seconde guerre mondiale* (Paris 1967).

30 Paul Auphan, ‘Une affaire à traiter entre Français’, *Le Monde: Livres*, 17 May 1973, 23.

31 Auphan, ‘Un pamphlet’, *op. cit.*

32 Auphan, ‘Une affaire’, *op. cit.*

33 De Launay, *op. cit.*

struggles that tainted the historiography of twentieth-century France. He could write with a detachment that was simply not an option for a French national. If Paxton attacked Vichy, he was not doing so out of affiliation with the *Résistance*, Gaullism or communism. In a sense, to these reviewers a book such as *La France de Vichy* could *only* have been written by a non-French historian. Paul Gillet, in *Le Monde*, opened his review by asking, tongue-in-cheek: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il lui prend, à cet Américain, de venir rouvrir nos placards à cadavres?’³⁴ The historian and novelist Max Gallo, in *L’Express*, enthusiastically contended that ‘Paxton a, pour parler de cette période discutée, la témérité d’un étranger éloigné par nature de nos guerres de religion’. *La France de Vichy* was ‘un miroir qu’il nous tend, peut-être avec chagrin. Sûrement sans pitié.’³⁵ Jacques Ozouf, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, asked rhetorically: ‘Faut-il être américain pour écrire l’histoire de la France de Vichy?’³⁶

Paxton was not the only foreign historian to be intensely debated in France for his scholarship on a sensitive internal topic. Ze’ev Sternhell (Israeli) and Tony Judt (British) both encountered similarly aggressive responses in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Sternhell’s study of the intellectual roots of 1930s French fascism created an uproar in 1983 (he even found himself on trial for libel), while Judt’s polemical indictment of the pro-communist post-war intellectuals became a hot topic in 1992.³⁷ These two controversies (which were provoked by works quite different from Paxton’s and from each other) bolstered the impression that foreign historians of contemporary France provoke a unique type of reaction in France. Paxton himself has noted that since the 1970s it has become common among French intellectuals to believe that only foreign historians stir up controversy because the French themselves are unwilling fully to face their tortured past.³⁸

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34 Paul Gillet, ‘L’avènement des technocrates’, *Le Monde*, 1 February 1973, 17–19. This review sparked the debate and correspondence in *Le Monde*.

35 Max Gallo, ‘Vichy: le jugement des archives’, *L’Express*, 12–18 February 1973, 112–14.

36 Jacques Ozouf, ‘Maréchal, vous voilà!’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 29 January 1973, 62.

37 Ze’ev Sternhell, *Ni droite, ni gauche: l’idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris 1983); Tony Judt, *Un passé imparfait: Les intellectuels en France, 1944–1956* (Paris 1991). For the Sternhell affair, see Robert Wohl, ‘French Fascism, Both Right and Left: Reflections on the Sternhell Controversy’, *Journal of Modern History*, 63 (March 1991), 91–8. For some responses to Judt, see Irwin Wall, ‘From Anti-Americanism to Francophobia: The Saga of French and American Intellectuals’, *French Historical Studies*, 18, 4 (Fall 1994), 1083–1100.

38 Paxton, ‘Vichy Fifty Years After’, *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 21 (1994), 233. Henry Rousso, ‘The Historian, a Site of Memory’ in S. Fishman et al. (eds), 285–301, has refuted this notion. At the height of the Judt debate, Jean-François Sirinelli, ‘Le Mystère Français’, *Le Monde*, 27 November 1992, 28, observed that ‘l’école historique française est aiguillonnée par des travaux venus d’ailleurs, qui ayant investi sans crier gare notre carré, viennent tisonner nos débats historiographiques’. Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, CA 1992), 9–10, argued that being a non-French scholar was an advantage: ‘A foreigner may be predisposed to raise matters that would not immediately concern a French scholar...because [the questions] are framed in comparative terms — why was France so different? — these are the sorts of questions a foreigner might ask where a native would not.’

If conservatives or outright Vichy apologists were understandably distressed by *La France de Vichy*, the response of professional academics was more complex. Those outside Paxton's field of expertise — including Gillet, Ozouf, Gallo, Marc Ferro and Jean-Pierre Bloch — were usually favourable. Ferro, for example, in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, did not hold back: 'Un livre iconoclaste. Un livre fort. Dru. Rafrâichissant.'³⁹ Those closer to Paxton's field, on the other hand, were not quite so enthusiastic. Their reaction can now be seen as a denial of his achievement, which placed them in an unfavourable light. For if Paxton's view of Vichy was accurate, what did that say about his French peers? One form of this denial was an almost obsessive focus on detail. Janine Bourdin's review in *Revue française de science politique*, written after the book had been debated in the press, is a case in point. Together with René Rémond, Bourdin had organized a 1970 colloquium at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, attended by both scholars and former Vichy functionaries, on the first two years of Vichy. This colloquium reaffirmed, with qualifications, the 'double game' thesis of Robert Aron.⁴⁰ In her review of *La France de Vichy*, Bourdin expressed regret that no French scholar had hitherto bothered to venture into the German or American archives. But the book, she found, was filled with errors (a typically petty example: Paxton should not have written that René Belin was 'un des dirigeants du syndicat des employés du téléphone', when he was actually 'secrétaire de la Fédération nationale des PTT').⁴¹ Her real discomfort, however, had to do not so much with the book itself but with the circumstances surrounding its publication:

C'est avec un certain malaise que l'on aborde la lecture du livre . . . les historiens qui s'intéressent à cette période étaient prévenus 'Attendez Paxton', la publication de l'édition française fut annoncée par une publicité péremptoire et, depuis lors, journalistes, spécialistes ou témoins utilisent les colonnes du *Monde des livres* pour échanger des propos dénués d'aménité. Cette mise en condition a de quoi décourager ou irriter; elle n'aide guère à la sérénité de la lecture que souhaite faire l'historien.⁴²

It was a telling complaint. Partly due to Seuil's public relations (but mostly due to the iconoclasm of Paxton's scholarship), *La France de Vichy* had, by the time Bourdin wrote this, made the transition from a purely 'academic' history to a more public history. Bourdin was apparently displeased with the spilling of the sensitive topic from the ivory tower to the pages of the dailies. What that publicity had to do with the overall quality of Paxton's work Bourdin never made clear; but we see here the annoyance of an academic historian at the public commotion surrounding the work of a fellow scholar.

There was also a turf war going on, and nothing conveyed this more clearly than the review by Henri Michel, then the *doyen* of the history of the second

39 Marc Ferro, 'Maréchal, nous sommes toujours là', *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, 16–28 February 1973, 25–6.

40 Colloque de Science-Po, *Le Gouvernement de Vichy, 1940–1942* (Paris 1973).

41 Bourdin, op. cit., 630–2.

42 Ibid., 630.

world war, in *Revue de l'Histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* (of which he was patron).⁴³ Paxton had not incorporated this journal's scholarship into his work because, as he explained, he wanted to start 'afresh' with the primary sources.⁴⁴ Michel did not take to this decision kindly. He started by acknowledging that Paxton's study was 'excellent . . . la meilleure étude d'ensemble parue à ce jour sur l'Etat français'. He had nothing but praise for Paxton's use of German and American archives (he himself would use those archives — or at least Paxton's findings in those archives — in later years). And he was pleased with what he saw as Paxton's neutral stance. Yet rather than focus on the book's 'excellence', most of Michel's review was devoted to what Paxton had *not* done. Paxton had not thoroughly examined public opinion and ordinary people at the grassroots. He had not looked at specific regions and the differences between them. He had not compared the occupied and unoccupied zones. He had overlooked some important military details. Like Bourdin, Michel did not miss any opportunity to correct errors of detail. And he added that these 'gaffes' would have been avoided had Paxton consulted the *Revue de l'Histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*. These criticisms were relatively calm; in previous private exchanges with Paxton and Hoffman, Michel had been far more bellicose.⁴⁵ This correspondence gives insight into Paxton's impact on established historians in France. The turf war was about more than just ego. Michel was particularly insulted by Hoffman's preface to *La France de Vichy*. 'In six pages', Michel wrote to Hoffman, 'you manage to talk about a mediocre film with no historical merit and you say not a word about the works of the Committee for the History of the Second World War and the review that it publishes.' Hoffman's reply was blistering: 'I hope that I am wrong to suspect that your agitation comes, rather than from my omission, from the fact that a young American has so audaciously . . . treated a subject which until now was considered by French university protectionism a little like their private turf.'

Michel's letter to Paxton was less furious. He bemoaned the lack of cooperation between French and American scholars and expressed his disappointment at Paxton's not having worked with Michel's Committee for the History of the Second World War while researching *La France de Vichy*. Such collaboration, he stressed, would have saved Paxton from the errors in his book. In fact, Michel's own memory was selective. Paxton *had* approached the Committee before working on the book; Michel had simply turned him away. Paxton politely wrote to Michel that perhaps he had forgotten about this visit, since Paxton was then a young researcher with a 'terrible accent'.⁴⁶

43 Henri Michel, 'Comptes rendus', *Revue de l'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, 24, 93 (January 1974), 112–17. For Michel's own scholarship of the period see his *La drôle de guerre* (Paris 1971).

44 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

45 Some of this correspondence can be found in John Sweets, 'Chaque livre un événement: Robert Paxton and the French, from *briseur de glace* to *iconoclaste tranquille*' in Fishman et al. (eds), *op. cit.*, 26–7. Also Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

46 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

Michel's problems with the book ran deeper than all this suggested. To start with, Paxton, to his mind, was too direct, too trenchant, too belligerent. His questions, Michel complained, demanded simplistic 'yes' or 'no' answers:

Il semble que, un peu irrité par une montagne d'ouvrages de propagande ou de plaidoyers, il ait surtout voulu répondre à des questions comme: oui ou non, le régime de Vichy a-t-il collaboré volontairement? Oui ou non, son comportement était-il réaliste? Oui ou non, a-t-il épargné des souffrances aux Français?

Michel could not accept Paxton's belittling of the 'resisters of the first hour'; the main reason that Paxton underestimated the Resistance was that 'comme la plupart des Américains, Paxton a beaucoup de mal à comprendre l'action clandestine'. All in all, *La France de Vichy* was too absolute. It minimized the terrible difficulties which the French faced. 'On oublie ainsi', Michel wrote, 'que rien n'était clair, rien n'était simple.' Paxton, he felt, was not only out to get the Vichy regime. He had it in for France as a whole: 'Un léger parfum d'hostilité à la France se dégage peut-être d'un livre dont la documentation et les interprétations méritent tant d'éloges.'⁴⁷ Michel, the Gaullist historian, seemed to believe that if one wrote a criticism of the 'Eternal France' myth, one was against the French nation itself. For de Gaulle equals the Resistance equals France.

In certain quarters, by contrast, *La France de Vichy* was received with almost unmitigated joy. Diametrically opposite the Auphans, the de Launays, the Fabre-Luces, stood those for whom Paxton's thesis spoke volumes. For many among the generation of 1968, Paxton's book was further proof that the Gaullist father (and the Pétainist grandfather) had gravely sinned. But the pro-con camps did not split so neatly along generational lines; some of Paxton's harshest critics (Slama, Bourdin and Jamet, for example) were quite young. The traditional left/right axis more accurately reflected the breakdown of attitudes towards *La France de Vichy*. Generally, the book was defended by the left and criticized by the right, although here, too, there were exceptions: the conservative *Le Figaro*, for example, published a favourable review by the Jewish journalist Jean-François Kahn.⁴⁸

Political ideologies affected not only how the book was received, but also how it was read. Alain-Gerard Slama bitterly remarked in *Contrepoint* that 'après avoir étudié la collaboration, Paxton en savait assez sur le masochisme français pour être sûr de rencontrer, du *Nouvel Observateur* à *Mademoiselle Age Tendre*, des commentateurs réjouis de voir traîner leur pays dans la boue, fût-ce par un américain'.⁴⁹ And as Slama feared, many left-wing reviews of *La France de Vichy* were indeed glowing. Jean-Pierre Azema (who, as we have seen, had a connection to the book), in *Esprit*, praised 'les grandes qualités de

47 Michel, op. cit., 117.

48 Jean-François Kahn, 'A Vichy, Pétain était-il à la tête d'une armée d'experts et de technocrates?', *Le Figaro*, 10 February 1973, 24.

49 Slama, op. cit., 120.

cette synthèse argumentée et vigoureuse'.⁵⁰ Frantz-André Burguet, in *Magazine Littéraire*, exclaimed that 'ce livre fait tressauter les anciens et les nouveaux bérets basques'.⁵¹ The rapture expressed here stemmed from the left-wing conviction that Pétain and his regime had been rehabilitated by a Gaullist establishment anachronistically clinging to an artificial postwar 'national unity'. The beneficiaries of this process were Vichyites and their apologists, who, according to some of these reviewers, were now trying to rewrite the history of the war.⁵² Paxton's book, they hoped, would combat and defeat the proliferation of this 'false memory'. Burguet, for example, recalled witnessing a march held for Pétain in Verdun in 1969: 'J'ai profité de la vaste rigolade qu'a suscitée . . . le récent voyage post-mortem du Maréchal Pétain, pour écouter un peu ce que ces campagnards qu'il avait tant aimés pensaient de lui, aujourd'hui. Leurs réactions montrent l'utilité d'un livre comme celui de Paxton.'⁵³ Ozouf, in Slama's dreaded *Le Nouvel Observateur*, approvingly compared the effect of Paxton's book to that of a gunshot in an operating room (this last metaphor described the state of French scholarship on the war years). He was critical not only of other scholars, but also of Paxton's critics: most of them, he argued, had found in *La France de Vichy* what they wanted to find, and ignored that which was especially painful and embarrassing. Thus, the deportation of the Jews, perhaps the most sordid feature of the Vichy period, was barely an issue in the 1973 controversies.⁵⁴

This is true even of the Jewish sources, which were not as effusive towards Paxton as one might perhaps expect. While Henry Bulawko, in *Information Juive*, praised *La France de Vichy* as a fine exposé,⁵⁵ Roger Berg, in *Le Monde Juif*, was reserved, even critical. He echoed the sentiment that without a thorough investigation of the French archives Paxton's work could not be conclusive: 'Ce qui corrobore la thèse générale de l'auteur . . . il faudra encore longtemps avant que la divulgation des archives de Vichy permette de dire si Paxton a eu raison.'⁵⁶ Neither Bulawko nor Berg devoted special attention to Paxton's findings about Vichy's treatment of the Jews. Jewish memory, particularly concerning the Holocaust, was not nearly as strong as it would later become; these two writers responded to *La France de Vichy* no differently from their non-Jewish counterparts.

Very few reviews could match the ardour of the communist response. But for Paxton, this was faint praise. He later referred to the approval of *L'Humanité* as 'selectively fitting [the book] into earlier orthodoxies'.⁵⁷ The

50 Jean-Pierre Azema, 'Librairie du Mois', *Esprit*, 9 (September 1973), 349–50.

51 Frantz-André Burguet, 'La France de Vichy', *Magazine Littéraire*, April 1973, 33.

52 See, for example, Jean-Pierre Bloch, 'Plains Feux sur Vichy', *Droit de Vivre*, February 1973, 13.

53 Burguet, *op. cit.*

54 Ozouf, *op. cit.*

55 Henry Bulawko, 'Notes', *Information Juive*, March 1973, 19.

56 Roger Berg, 'Livres', *Le Monde Juif*, April–June 1973, 42–3.

57 Paxton, *Vichy France* (2nd edn), xiv.

PCF newspaper's anonymous reviewer described *La France de Vichy* as attributing Vichy and its crimes to the pro-nazi views of a reactionary minority — a minority countered throughout the war by the heroism of communist resisters.⁵⁸ That, obviously, was not the book Paxton had written. But 'communist memory', in the Nora sense, had its own agenda and version of the past. Roger Martelli, writing in *Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Institut Maurice Thorez*, was more sophisticated. Like Burguet, he settled accounts with the Gaullist establishment, which, in his view, had rehabilitated Pétain's regime in the name of national unity. Martelli, interestingly, was one of the few reviewers to discuss explicitly the Jews under Vichy. But he did so in the context of what he saw as Vichy's real driving ambition: the implementation of 'state monopoly capitalism'. Vichy's antisemitism, to his mind, was part of an attempt to overshadow the class struggle. Martelli praised Paxton's conclusions about the Vichy élite, but, not surprisingly, he was far less pleased with Paxton's sceptical view of the Resistance. For the communists, as for the Gaullists, the memory of the Resistance is all-important politically.

Martelli was also one of the few reviewers who made any reference to the important acts of remembering and forgetting. 'Voilà donc [un ouvrage]', he concluded, 'qu'on peut lire avec profit, pour connaître mieux ce que fut le vrai régime de Vichy, pour mieux répondre aux falsifications de ceux qui voudraient que le peuple oublie ses bourreaux.'⁵⁹ He made no mention of what the communists themselves were eager to forget — the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact in 1939 and the official PCF support of the nazi invaders in 1940–41.⁶⁰ The selective communist memory was only one of the various competing false memories which Paxton's book aimed to eradicate; for Martelli, the best way to deal with this threat was simply to shift the attention towards others.

The controversies of 1973–74 had conspicuously died down by the time Paxton published his next book, *Vichy et les Juifs* (with Michael Marrus), to almost universal acclaim.⁶¹ In the 20 years since, that acclaim has spread. Paxton's paradigm on Vichy is now largely accepted by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. In France, he is treated by both the press and scholars with a sort of reverence.⁶² His testimonies in the trials of suspected Vichy war crimi-

58 *L'Humanité*, 12 April 1973, 17.

59 Roger Martelli, 'A propos de Vichy', *Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Institut Maurice Thorez*, 31, 3 (1973), 198–201.

60 See David Wingeate Pike, 'Between the Junes: The French Communists from the Collapse of France to the Invasion of Russia', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, 3 (July 1993), 465–85.

61 Robert O. Paxton and Michael Marrus, *Vichy et les Juifs* (Paris 1981); originally published as *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York 1981). For the response to this book see Marrus, 'Vichy et les Juifs: Fifty Years After' in Fishman et al. (eds), op. cit., 40–55.

62 For example, Ruth Zylberman, 'Robert Paxton: Un Américain Tranquille à Vichy', *L'Histoire*, 203 (October 1996), 20–1; Eric Conan, 'Paxton: "L'engrenage de la rafle"', *L'Express*, 16 July 1992, 24–5; Jean-Christophe Coffin, 'Rencontres: Robert Paxton', *Sources: Travaux historiques*, 19 (1989), 45–50.

nals were devastating to the accused. Recent articles about the long-term intellectual impact of *La France de Vichy* carry such bombastic titles as ‘Before and After Paxton’ (Stanley Hoffman), ‘The Paxtonian Revolution’ (Jean-Pierre Azema), and ‘L’ère paxtonienne’ (Sarah Fishman).⁶³ Scholars of the Vichy period, for the most part, work within the framework that Paxton outlined 30 years ago. The original reviewers of his book can now be divided into two: those who ‘won’ and those who ‘lost’. Here, it would seem, is a true historiographical triumph if ever there was one.

Or is it? Historiography is always characterized by cycles and revisions, and Paxton, too, is waiting for the backlash.⁶⁴ I have discussed *La France de Vichy* as a historian’s critique of memory — or, specifically, of French representations of memory. The long-term success of *La France de Vichy* might therefore represent a victory of ‘history’ over ‘memory’. But a new debate might emerge, with new focus and participants. Paxton’s book could also be seen as a product of its time. To his own recollection, Paxton was eager in the late 1960s to topple Aron’s historiographical edifice and the Gaullist consensus about Vichy. This sentiment was shared by many in the post-1968 period. Paxton’s book, to the delight of many and the chagrin of others, turned the scholarly gaze inward, into France, and shifted much of the responsibility from the occupier to the occupied. But the pendulum could swing back again. The argument that Vichy is an internal French affair can seem one-sided when viewed in a larger context. For who ultimately was responsible for the events of 1940–44? Would the Vichy regime ever have come into being without Hitler’s decision to invade France? Can Vichy really be seen as a logical continuation of the anti-Popular Front winds of the 1930s? Could it have come to power as merely a French decision? One could be critical of Paxton and argue that without the external element — nazi Germany — there never would have been a Vichy to debate. Vichy cannot, therefore, be considered an ‘internal affair’. Future scholars might argue (without a particular political agenda) that Paxton’s work was important in showing Vichy’s motivations and workings, but that we must see even Pétain and his followers, just like the rest of the people of France (indeed, of Europe), as victims of nazi occupation and brutality.

Such a debate would most likely be over memory *and* history, or about the influence they have on each other. As I have tried to show, Paxton wrote *La France de Vichy* not only against the existing historiography, but also against a long-established and long-entrenched dominant memory. Robert Aron’s 1954 work had had that kind of influence. But Paxton’s book was even more successful: so much so that it has shattered the remains of the Aron paradigm and established a new dominant memory. With the exception of the hardcore right wing, Vichy is predominantly remembered in France today as Paxton portrayed it in 1973. The debate over *La France de Vichy* in 1973–74, in other

63 These articles are in Fishman et al. (eds), op. cit.

64 Paxton to author, 23 April 2001.

words, was over both history (what happened at Vichy and why), and memory (how Vichy is remembered versus how it *should* be remembered). Paxton's success was not only a victory of 'history' over 'memory', but of one memory over another. A future debate over Vichy, if one should occur, would again take place in both of these worlds, although this time, in the wake of the memory boom, the issue of memory vis-à-vis history would be widely and consciously discussed. I suspect it will be no easier then than it is now to tell where one ends and the other begins.

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