

The Resistance: Historians as myth-makers

The Resistance in World War II France provides us with an excellent opportunity to study history not just as a professional activity but also as the production of public historical consciousness, a process in which historians as well as non-historians participate. It is the relationship between these two forms of historical knowledge that I want to discuss today.

1. Memory, myth and historical writing.

As discussed in the introductory lecture, Resistance, which occurred in France between 1940 and 1944, consisted of various activities, from intelligence gathering and escape networks to the clandestine press and military action, and more. It comprised individuals (whose number can in theory be determined) and organizations, whose structure, members and activities can be reconstructed, despite the lack of written sources characteristic of secret organizations.

The Resistance had two fundamental dimensions. The first was the Free French in London (and later Algiers) under de Gaulle, out of which grew the Provisional Government in exile. The second dimension was the internal Resistance, which grew up largely without reference to the Free French, based on movements of various political colourings in each half of France (occupied and unoccupied). Of course, the Free French sought to maximize their influence over the internal Resistance, without ever doing so completely, and they helped the movement achieve a loose, federal structure (Mouvements Unis de la Résistance [MUR], which became the Conseil National de la Résistance [CNR] in 1943), notably with the dispatch to France of Jean Moulin as de Gaulle's plenipotentiary.

The two dimensions of the Resistance converged (and in some ways collided) as the Free French participated as a minority element of the Allied landings in Normandy (June 1944) and Provence (August 1944). However, as the Germans withdrew, much of France was taken over by the internal Resistance before Allied forces arrived. The internal Resistance and Free French (through General Leclerc's First Division, which were part of the Normandy landings) combined in reality and symbolically in the Liberation of Paris, 18-26 August 1944.

The Resistance (in France and elsewhere) was undoubtedly an important aspect

of the Second World War (some would say one of its most original). As such its rather complex history has long attracted the attention of professional historians. However, from the moment the war ended it also occupied a crucial place in 'current history'. If that term seems an oxymoron, it is worth noting that 'contemporary history', the 'histoire du temps present' or 'Zeitgeschichte' are roughly equivalent terms coined in the aftermath of the Second World War and meaning just that - the history of the current period. Their specificity is to focus on the history of events which strongly mark the present and which are well within the life-compass of those still living and active.

'Contemporary history' is part of the political, cultural and social present because a sense of the past is one of the fundamental dimensions with which all societies operate. The manner in which they do so of course varies. For example, after the Second World War, the sense of a national history was undoubtedly stronger than it is today, when historical consciousness has become more fragmented, though probably even more insistent and widespread. But the point is that knowledge about the past is important to society, does not depend on historians alone for its production (far from it), but inevitably influences historians.

Let me develop further two aspects of the social production of historical knowledge. First, history is connected with memory - both individual and collective. Some historians and philosophers doubt whether 'collective memory' exists - only individuals remember, not institutions or organizations. Yet people's remembering is shaped by collective mechanisms, whether these be a commemoration ceremony, a debate in parliament or the press – or a controversial history book. Moreover, remembering is selective for groups as for individuals, and indeed is accompanied by its logical opposite - amnesia or memory gaps (whether deliberate or involuntary) – or silence (which is not quite the same thing). How memories of an historical event or episode play out over time is thus an important dimension of the period in question.

The second point is that public knowledge of the past is not just a question of memory, but is also constructed more actively. Societies, like individuals, require narratives to make sense of what has happened to them and to embody truths, values and norms (whether moral, political or other). Without these, no human community can exist. The stories that perform that function have a mythic

dimension - indeed may be considered as myths. This does not necessarily mean that they are factually false (though in some cases they may be). Rather it means that they condense moral or political truths into a simplified narrative whose purpose is to help order current society and provide with a past compatible with present needs. Of course, such myth making reflects a range of motivation, from deliberate manipulation to multiple and conflicting myths produced by different groups or agencies. But in one form or another it is a central feature of any human culture, and one that (especially in the modern, secular world) exerts a gravitational pull on popular consciousness.

It might be tempting to see the professional historian's role solely as that of iconoclast and revisionist, as myth-breaker and critic of 'memory' understood in the foregoing sense. Historians certainly do perform this role. They have constructed a critical history of the Resistance, as they have of collaboration and Vichy France (which we shall consider in the next segment of the course). But historians have also been influenced by, and involved in, the role of the Resistance in French memory and myth making about the war in the post-war period. Precisely because the relationship between professional history-writing and historical myth and memory is a complex one, it follows that there is a need for a history of just that relationship. In other words, part of the historian's subject is the way in which historical knowledge about events is produced over subsequent periods during which they remain influential - and the role of historians in that process. This type of inquiry is particularly important for contemporary history, though it is by no means confined to it. In session 3 of the course we shall look at precisely this issue – how history-writing contributed to myth histories of the Resistance before going on in session 4 to consider how historians have constructed a critical history of the Resistance.

2. History-making as a historical process.

For this reason, we begin with two of the most recent histories that deal with the production, transmission and function of historical memory and myth relating to World War II France - Henry Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome. History and Memory in France since 1944* (1987, English translation 1991), and Pieter Lagrou's comparative study, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (2000). Rousso's work concerns more than the Resistance. Indeed, as the title implies, it is really about

the memory of Vichy in post-war France, and for that reason it is part of our consideration of that topic as well in sessions 5 and 6 of the course. But one of Rousso's contentions is that the history of the Resistance is a component of the 'syndrome' that he identifies - albeit a minority component for reasons that Lagrou goes on to amplify. Both of them offer ways of thinking about the myth and memory of Resistance and hence about its relationship to historical writing.

Rousso uses the metaphor of Freudian psychoanalysis for the part played by Vichy in the memory of post-1945 France. Born in 1954, he belongs not just to a post-war but a post-1968 generation. As a young researcher in the late 1970s, he wished to write as an impartial scholar directly about the Vichy regime. But as he puts it, he found:

that the corpse was still warm. It was too soon for the pathologist to begin an autopsy; what the case called for was a doctor qualified to treat the living [...] - perhaps even a psychoanalyst.

The fundamental hypothesis of his book is that military defeat and the loss of national sovereignty in 1940, and their consequences down to 1944, amounted to the most traumatic collective experience endured by the French in the 20th century. The divisive legacy of the Vichy regime opened up a 'French civil war' which, even if it began during the war, continued long afterwards. In all kinds of ways (and through various pathologies), the difficulty of absorbing the Vichy experience made the memory of Vichy after 1945 a continuing (and continuously changing) drama as well a vehicle onto which all kinds of other divisions were displaced. Vichy thus becomes the key to post-war memory and historical consciousness in France. Rousso therefore argues that the Resistance played an important but minority role, failing ultimately to triumph over the Vichy syndrome.

Rousso points out that two narratives of the Resistance emerged at the end of the war. De Gaulle formulated one in his speech on 25 August 1944 in Paris:

Paris! Paris humiliated! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, by its own people, with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France.

In this view, the Resistance is equated with the entire French people, aided only

by the Free French, with no mention made of the internal Resistance organizations or the Allies, the entire epic process being summed up in de Gaulle himself whose authority it legitimated. The alternative myth arose from the internal Resistance, and was expressed most powerfully by the Communists who had indeed taken an important - but not dominant - part, and only unambivalently so after the Nazis invaded Soviet Russia in 1941. The French Communist Party (PCF) sought to monopolize the idea of the heroism of the internal resistance. It claimed to be the party of the '75,000 fusillés' (75,000 executed - in reality about 20,000 Resisters were killed or executed, and more died in deportation).

The PCF sought to combine working class and nation, Communism and patriotism (as it had done during the Popular Front period), maximizing its popular base. It invoked the major historical references of French Republicanism (the Revolution, 1848, the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune) as well as fidelity to the Red Army and the USSR, and it was particularly active in the local commemoration of the internal Resistance, an activity virtually ignored by de Gaulle's supporters in the immediate post-war period. The historical memory of Resistance was thus sharply different in the two cases. What they had in common was the suggestion that the mass of the French people had identified with Resistance and that only a minority was tainted by Vichy's record.

Rousso does not suggest that these binary epics of the Resistance easily suppressed the troubling and conflicting presence of Vichy down to the early mid-1950s (the so-called 'period of mourning'). On the contrary, he shows how the latter constantly broke through as erstwhile Vichyites sought to justify their past, rehabilitate either themselves or Pétain, with the campaign for his release, and after 1951, for his burial at Verdun). They attacked the Resistance, with uncomfortable accusations of 'resistancialisme' i.e. that most Resisters were sham, having joined at the last moment for personal survival or advantage.

Moreover, the twin myths of the Resistance were enlisted in a rapidly changing political scene, with the onset of the Cold War, and they acquired very different connotations and even relations with the memory of Vichy. Thus, the affair of Colonel Rémy (1950) needs to be understood in the context of de Gaulle's opposition to the Fourth Republic. Rémy, who was a leading Gaullist and member of Catholic right wing Resistance movement, was an archetypal

Resistance hero and a founding figure of de Gaulle's attempted mass party which opposed the Fourth Republic, the Rassemblement du Peuple Français. In 1950, he published an article in which he reported de Gaulle as saying: 'Remember that France always had two strings in its bow. In June 1940 it needed the Pétain string as much as the de Gaulle string.'

Although de Gaulle rejected Rémy's account publicly (the opposition between Vichy and the Gaullist Resistance was crucial), he was, on the evidence of his own speeches, much more ambiguous. This was partly to do with the need for post-war reconciliation between the French, those who had resisted and those who had collaborated, and the attempt therefore to minimize wartime divisions in current memory. But it was also to do with de Gaulle's need to recruit the political right (those most likely to have collaborated) to his movement of opposition to the Fourth Republic. Historical memory was thus forged by current political needs.

Rousso has less to say about the Communist Resistance myth, but it is not hard to see it as the basis of the oppositional stance of the Communists to the Fourth Republic from 1947 and the emergence of the Cold War. The PCF claimed an alternative legitimacy to both the Fourth Republic and de Gaulle. The party represented a quarter of French voters but was isolated in the pro-Soviet camp by the Cold War (a process traced by Ronald Tiersky in his book on French Communism). In particular, the Peace Movement was used by the PCF to contest the Gaullist hold on Resistance mythology.

Thus, Rousso argues in *The Vichy Syndrome* that the Resistance proved to be too narrowly-based and its idealism too peripheral to post-war life (most French people retrospectively approved the Resistance but also wished to return to normality) for it to act as the basis of a stable, rehabilitating post-war myth. This impossibility was reinforced by the fact that the Cold War set the two epic narratives that the Resistance had generated - Gaullist and Communist - against each other.

Pieter Lagrou, in his book, adds a further, important argument. The Resistance actually invoked minority experiences in the war. It was not just that a tiny proportion of French people were active resisters (200,000 had Resistance cards and entitlements by the late 1950s) but that other wartime experiences were

much more typical: e.g. prisoners of war (1.5 million), forced workers sent to Germany by the Service du Travail Obligatoire (600,000), refugees, deportees or persecuted Jews. Resistance could only work as a validating national myth by excluding these alternative memories. It was the return of these memories (and the way they constantly renewed the question of Vichy's role and responsibility) which was to be so troubling after 1970. The model for national memory as a process of mourning and source of national identity was that of the veterans of the Great War. But it was a model (Lagrou points out) that could not easily be adapted to France post-1945 (e.g. the failure of Mont Valérien as a monument; or the '90 days combat' rule for the veterans' card). So even when a movement of Resistance 'veterans' developed in the 1950s, it created a hierarchy of national worthiness depending on the kind of Resistance, in contrast to the simple veteran status of soldiers of the First World War of whom over 3 million joined veterans' organizations between the wars.

Nonetheless, the attempt was certainly made to use the Resistance as redemptive myth for post-war France, and indeed, down to the present the Resistance (of both kinds) still plays a vital role in this sense. Perhaps the zenith of the Resistance myth came with the consolidation of de Gaulle's authority in the new Fifth Republic after the end of the Algerian War. In December 1964, the burial of remains of Jean Moulin in the Panthéon, and the oration of André Malraux, marked the high-point of this movement (Moulin having been de Gaulle's plenipotentiary who established links with the internal Resistance, helped form the MUR and captured and killed by Klaus Barbie, head of the Gestapo on Lyon). What was the role of historians proper in this process?

3. Historians and the Resistance, 1945-1970.

In some ways it is remarkable that as yet there is no serious study of this question (neither Rousso nor Lagrou focus especially on the role of professional historical scholarship in Resistance myth and memory-making). But it is clear that from the end of the war, the state both promoted and influenced academic research on the history of the Resistance as a major priority for the reconstruction of a national identity, and that studies of the Resistance massively predominated over studies of Vichy down to the 1970s. Rousso gives a good account in his book of this process.

From 1945 to 1950, a Commission d'Histoire de l'Occupation et de la Libération de la France (CHOLF) gathered eye-witness accounts from Resisters (oral memory was doubly important given the paucity of written documents). In 1950, the government set up the Comité pour l'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale with considerable funding and ministerial control, which pursued this work of writing what amounted to an official history of the Resistance. The output can be compared to the massive official histories of the national war efforts produced by the British, Americans and the Commonwealth countries). The focus was above all on organizations and doctrines, including studies of most of the major non-communist movements. The redoubtable director of the Committee was Henri Michel, a former Gaullist Resistant, who gained his own doctorate at the Sorbonne in 1962 with his *Courants de pensée de la Résistance* (Currents of Resistance Thought). The leading dignitaries of Resistance officialdom were all present at his thesis defence. The studies undertaken under the aegis of the committee were empirically sound and scholarly. But they tended to take the categories of Resistance as given, being those defined by the memory of the veterans. And the importance of the subject was simply self-evident, without being fitted into any more complex view of the war.

The tenor of this entire school of history is summed up by Henri Michel's little *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, first published in 1950 and still being reissued in the 1970s. Unfortunately it was never translated into English, hence my substitution of his broader history of Resistance in Europe on the course reading-list. However, I have translated a little of his French history in the documents package on this theme. Significantly, Michel's account begins with La France libre i.e. de Gaulle as the foundation and legitimate source of the Resistance. After a survey of movements and activities, the culmination comes with the fusion of the FFL and the FFI after D-Day (i.e. the Free French and the internal Resistance) and their conversion into a conventional French army of significant size that contributed to the Allied effort ('Without the aid of the Resistance, the task of the Allies would have been incomparably harder and their success less rapid'). In a final chapter on the 'martyrdom of the Resistance', Michel raises the thorny question of the corruption of the Resistance by self-interest and opportunism, only to see it redeemed by its dead: 'For four years, the life of the Resistance was nothing but a long martyrdom.' And if it is clearly stated that the Resistance was 'only a minority', it is equally

claimed that gradually 'it gained the support of the entire population.' In a triumphant closing passage, Michel succinctly defines the 'myth', while taking this to be the reality of course.

Despite (sometimes lively internal quarrels), the greatest national unity in French history was achieved by the Resistance; in disagreement on everything before the war, the Resisters agreed [during the war] on fighting the occupier and Vichy, restoring France to its rank as a great power, and carrying out wide reforms. Thus, there was no civil war; the period of disorder [at the Liberation] was short and localised; [and] the repression was much less bloody than has been stated.

There was, of course, a parallel semi-official of the Communist view of the Resistance issued by the considerable scholarly-cum-propaganda apparatus of the PCF. And there was a wider circle of more popular works and memoirs conveying the same myths - e.g. de Gaulle's own *War Memoirs* (1954-59) and Robert Aron's studies of both Vichy (relatively benign) and de Gaulle (hagiographic). In a way perhaps not quite brought out by Rousso, historians, professional and popular, contributed substantially to the attempt to gloss the deep divisions provoked by World War with their epic narratives of Resistance.

Only after the late 1960s, when interest within France had turned decisively to Vichy France, did a more scholarly and critical history of the Resistance emerge, significantly in Britain and the USA rather than in France. It is to this that we shall turn in the next session.

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