World War 2 France and the Historians: the Empire and Conclusions.

In this last lecture I want to address one outstanding issue that we have not tackled so far and then to draw some summary conclusions about the course. The issue is the Empire. In some ways I hesitate to include it, since here we are raising something of a ‘silence’ or an ‘absence’. But in history, and therefore historiography, a central lesson is always to look for, and ask questions about, what is not there as well as what is. This is hard to do, since lack of evidence (in our case, lack of historiographical evidence) makes the task difficult. Fortunately, we have something to go on in the case of the French Empire during the Second World War. We can at least conduct the investigation. I want to do so, as a concluding theme in the course, because I think it is intrinsically so interesting but also because it addresses one of the central paradoxes of the war for the French and one of the most important (albeit unrecognized) trajectories of memory and silence regarding World War Two France since 1945, that which links the trauma (or syndrome) of Vichy to the trauma of the Algerian War of 1954-62.

1. The French Empire in World War Two.

What, then is the paradox? It is this. When France was defeated in 1940, the empire was also defeated. Yet because it remained unoccupied by Germany, and was then ‘liberated’ by the Allies and the Free French, the empire played a crucial part in the Liberation of France itself and in post-war reconstruction as if the imperial defeat of 1940 and the impact that World War Two had on the empire had not really happened. The empire was reincorporated more or less in existing terms and in a subordinate role into the history of France in World War Two. Yet defeat and the unfolding nature of World War Two, and not least the Atlantic Charter of 1941 with its promise of democracy and national sovereignty as universal goals for the Allies, helped transform the dynamic of decolonization and made it far more bitter (especially in Indo-China and Algeria) than it might otherwise have been.
As we have seen myth histories of the first quarter century after the war (which was also the period of decolonisation, this being over by 1970), and scholarly revisionism since the 1970s, have been about national history – about the relative importance of the Resistance, Collaboration and the shades of grey between for France. The empire has been at most a minor current in that historiography and historical consciousness. Just consider the best synthesis we have in English or French, Julian Jackson’s monumental *The Dark Years* (2001): this contains no separate sub-heading on the empire and very little about it. This is not a criticism. Jackson’s book is a brilliant discussion of the state of the art in history-writing on the war. But it reflects the relative silence that I have mentioned. Moreover, Anglophone historians have been far more active in the field of French colonial history than French historians. Here we have our first clue. With the traumatic loss of the most important French colony and the only settler colony, Algeria, in the bitter conflict of 1954-62, the French turned their back both on that war and on the empire. Only within the last decade has Algeria come back into French awareness in part due to the problem of ‘assimilating’ the large community of mainly Muslim people from North Africa into French society and the upsurge of fundamentalist Islam on French soil. With it, logically, the issue of the empire during the war ought also to resurface. For if the French understandably addressed the Second World War for so long in mainly national terms, relegating the empire to the margins, this does not mean that World War Two was marginal to the empire. Quite the contrary, it decisively transformed the relations of colonial dominance and helped set the path to the bloody confrontations of decolonization in the French case.

So what are the issues? The first theme is that of colonial soldiers. The French (much more than the British) used colonial soldiers not just to win and rule the empire but as a vital adjunct to the national army. Half a million colonial soldiers (the bulk from North
Africa and West Africa) fought in the French army during the First World War, most of them on the western front. ‘Men of colour’ came to France on a large scale and encountered the metropolitan French for the first time – and they found these relations to be very different, and often more humane, than those with whites in the colonies. More importantly, by serving in the army and fighting for the ‘mère patrie’ they began to articulate the reciprocal right to citizenship, whether within the colonies or (during the interwar period) as part of a move towards national independence.

In 1939-40, the French used colonial soldiers in the same way. Yet the story of their involvement has by and large not interested French historians. The Germans had (since 1870) objected to the use of colonial soldiers in European theatres of war, which they considered a barbarous practise. The Nazis naturally took an even dimmer view of the practice. In the course of the campaign of May-June 1940, there were several instances in which Black prisoners were massacred. This remained one of the silences within the history of the débâcle, which we have seen that French historians have been notoriously reluctant to deal with. An American historian, Raphael Scheck, wrote the only serious study of this question, *Hitler’s African Victims: the Geman Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (2006).

A second aspect of the soldiers’ experience was the fate of the majority of the colonial soldiers taken prisoner (some 80,000) of them. Again, with the exception of one recent and rather polemical French study (Armel Mabon, *Prisonniers de guerre indigènes*), the only two studies are anglophone – a forthcoming book by Raphael Scheck and the PhD completed in this department by Sarah Frank in 2014. These studies explore the ways in which Vichy’s need to hold onto the empire as proof that collaboration had succeeded in maintaining some functioning sovereignty resulted in a strange status for the colonial prisoners. The Germans refused to have them in Germany on racial grounds. Vichy therefore tried to intervene in their fate in France, trying to protect them
in the interests of the long-term preservation of the empire and the status of the colonial authorities. Yet the Germans remained in control of the colonial POWs and of course sought to use their labour for their war effort. Caught in the middle (but helped by many ordinary French people) the colonial prisoners of war may actually have fared better than French pows or compulsory labour in Germany. But they had also seen France defeated and Vichy humiliated by the Germans at first hand.

A third aspect of the colonial military experience has not (as far as I am aware) been addressed by historians at all. Once again (as we have seen before) it was left to a film to raise it, in this case the 2006 French-Belgian-Algerian-Moroccan feature film directed by the French director of Algerian descent, Rachid Bouchareb, *Indigènes*, badly translated into English as *Days of Glory*. The film takes as its subject a group of Algerian and Moroccan soldiers who join up in 1942 (once North Africa has been invaded by the Anglo-American invasion in November 1942) in order to help ‘liberate France.’ They fight as Free French units in Italy in 1943 and then take part in the invasion of southern France from North Africa in August 1944. The group are finally the first French soldiers to enter Alsace in January 1945, with only one of them, Corporal Abdelkader, surviving the war. The film addresses the reality of this Expeditionary Corps in 1944, in which 50,000 soldiers fought under General Lattre de Tassigny, of whom 90% were from North Africa, with 50% actually born in the Maghreb (both white settlers and *indigènes*, or natives).

What the film portrays is a range of attitudes on the part of the group of North African Arabic comrades, including an intimate but harsh relationship with Martinez, the white settler sergeant, both towards France and the war. But in varying degrees, all are humiliated and demeaned by an internalised, colonial belief that France really is their motherland (‘Je libère un pays, c’est mon pays, même si je ne l’ai jamais vu,’ says one of them, Rachid). For they all encounter discrimination in the army and a flagrant
disparity between the egalitarian rhetoric of French officers and politicians and the realities of their own experience. The end of the film notes laconically that pensions for colonial soldiers who fought with the French in the Second World War were frozen in 1959 – something Jacques Chirac as president of the Republic hastily reversed when the film came out. But that apart, the visibility of the veterans’ story has not noticeably improved, any more than that of the Harkis, or Algerian soldiers who fought for the French during the Algerian war of decolonisation and who had flee to France in 1962.

The second theme is that of what happened in the colonies themselves, on which the most sustained work has been by anglophone historians (such as Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War 1940-45* [2007]). Amongst other things, Thomas makes the point about how devastating was the experience of the defeat of the colonial power for its subjects. The war also exposed them to new influences. These included a colonial version of Vichy’s National Revolution and, in the case of Indo-China, harsh Japanese military rule. Indo-China also saw an indigenous national Resistance (paralleling that in France) which after the war was turned against the French. French North Africa was ‘liberated’ not by the French but by Anglo-American forces, and as early as the winter of 1942-42. The Americans declared that the era of European colonial rule was over. This fostered hopes already stirred by military service of either full and equal integration into France (as advocated by Ferhat Abbas, the moderate Algerian leader) or independence, as demanded by Messali Hadj, the radical nationalist leader. The Free French, however, saw the Empire playing an important role in the restoration of French fortunes and post-war reconstruction of the country. While willing to promise reforms, they could not offer serious self-government, let alone independence, without depriving themselves of the empire. Hence, they were determined to resist any such demands as the war ended. This notion of a reformed empire was especially strong among those on the centre-left, who often been active in the Resistance.
In Algeria, the inevitable clash between these two positions was signalled by the events of Sétif. When victory celebrations in Sétif (in eastern Algeria) on 8 May 1945 were accompanied by chants from some Algerians in favour of national independence, the police tried to intervene. This prompted an upsurge of violence against European settlers with somewhere over a hundred being killed. The army and policy retaliated in a wave of bloodshed in which between 10,000 and 15,000 Algerians died, radicalising the nationalist movement. In Senegal, a similar effect resulted from a massacre in late 1944 at Thiaroye, a military base, where Black soldiers mutinied for better conditions and back pay, only to be fired on, with 35 being killed. These incidents were indicative of the clash between growing indigenous demands for independence and the French determination to reinstate the empire (albeit dressed up as a French Union and with some limited measures of native representation within the colonies). Yet neither Thiaroye nor Sétif, nor the restoration of the empire as the contradictory reverse side of the the Liberation, figure largely in historical accounts of the Second World War.

As I have already suggested, the reason for this may have to do with the trauma of the French exit from Indo-China (after a military defeat at Dien-Bien-Phu in 1954) and from Algeria after a bloody war that cost 25,000 French dead and 300,000 Algerian dead. In the latter case in particular, the breadth of support for the struggle to maintain French Algeria led to many strange reversals of the experiences (and the ‘myth histories’) of the Second World War. Take Jacques Soustelle, antifascist in the 1930s and a leading figure in the Free French, who as governor general sought to reform Algeria in 1955-56 while refusing majority rule, and who broke with de Gaulle over the need to accept Algerian independence. Or consider the numerous French soldiers who, nurtured on the stories of Resistance to Nazi occupation, now found themselves in situations in which they were the occupiers and the enemy the Resistance. Both because they raised such awkward contradictions in French self-understanding in relation to World War Two and because they invited re-examination of the entire
colonial project, decolonisation in general and the Algerian War in particular may well have hindered the willingness of the French, including many of their historians, to place the Empire firmly in the frame of World War Two. Only in recent years have issues such as slavery and the Algerian conflict (until very recently not even called a war) begun to replace Vichy France as the new ‘past that will not pass.’

2. Conclusions to the course.

The point of departure for my concluding remarks on the course as a whole is the nature of historiography. We have deliberately taken a broad approach to this. Historiography normally means debates among professional historians, differences in concept and methodology, the succession of different historical schools and the relationship between them. This traditional approach can also be extended to encompass the institutional and other ways in which the historical profession has been constructed over the last two hundred years - the reviews, chairs, universities and research institutes in which it has conducted its business - how it has done what it has done.

But while these concerns are central, historiography has a broader remit. This is the production of knowledge and representations of the past. At this level it includes individuals and agencies other than the historians who have professionalized it as an academic discipline. It encompasses the media, artists, governments and and various institutions. It extends to the ways in which the group, or collective, memory of an event or episode is constructed over time. In other words, how a society makes its sense of the past (what the French historian François Hartog has called ‘historicity’) is the broader context of historiography. This is particularly important because it provides the frame within which the professional historian works, and it may well influence what s/he does. At the very least, it may set up tensions, since the historian writes for an
audience, and that audience (whether fellow historians, students or the wider public) is subject to all the other ways in which society produces its knowledge about the past.

One of the reasons for choosing the most divisive, traumatic and controversial episode in 20th century French history was that (in principle) it should demonstrate these connections between professional history and historians and the broader production of historical knowledge with particular clarity. I hope you feel that this has been the case, and that you have had the chance to explore the work of professional historians, such as Robert Paxton, Roderick Kedward, Henry Rousso (to cite only some of the most obvious) in relation to ‘historicity’ and these wider constructions of views and knowledge about the past. Henry Rousso’s 1987 book on the Vichy Syndrome is one of the most sophisticated studies we possess on the relationship of history-writing to ‘historicity’ on any subject.

Among the other subjects that we have raised, and that many of you have written about or will be doing for the final essay, is the historian as participant in history through the example of Marc Bloch, and the nature of The Strange Defeat. We have also looked at how professional historians are not always free of involvement in the institutional and collective production of history, notably through ‘myth histories.’ True, these were often produced by non-professionals. But the example of Henri Michel and or the Communist historian, Claude Willard, show that they may be written by professional historians too. Some of you in the first round of essays tended to portray ‘myth histories’ as the opposite of academic histories. Would that things were so clear. Professional historians also write official histories, engaged histories or simply honest histories within a particular framework of production and reception that gives them the function of simplifying or justifying ‘myth histories’.
Nonetheless, we have also seen how professional historians observing the canons of the discipline (scrupulous use of sources, the search for new sources to cross check existing ones, rigorous argument, critical dispassion) have played a key role at vital moments – whether in challenging the myth histories of the Resistance (Robert Paxton), rewriting the history of Resistance in a more sophisticated and accurate way (Roderick Kedward), exploring the ambiguities and compromises of life and survival under occupation (John Sweets or Renée Poznanski) or using concepts of gender to raise disturbing questions about the lingering myth history of the Liberation.

Finally, we have seen that since time (and therefore history) belong to us all, many other types of work (documentary films, feature films, novels or compilations such as the Klarsfeld’s extraordinary Memorial to the deported Jewish children of France) all address the past and reconstruct it in ways that engage with the ‘historicity’ (or sense of history) of the time in which they are produced. Particular notable has been the role of films, whether The Sorry and the Pity in disturbing complacent but increasingly inadequate views about occupation and collaboration, Goodbye Children in raising the moral implications of being a bystander, or Indigènes by focussing on the internal contradictions of colonialism, contradictions that the war itself magnified.

There are no definite conclusions. The course has not been linear. It has been a circular tour both of a specific but controversial issue – the history of France in WW2 – but even more fundamentally of the nature of history, of how we try to try to write and understand it and of how we can never do without it.