Review:


Miriam E. Wells

Framed, only for effect, in psychological and medical terms, *The Vichy Syndrome* is an exploration of the continuing *malady* of memory of World War II in France. Rousso claims to have attempted a strict history of the Vichy regime, and discovered that even half a century after the war, the topic was still too fresh and too troubling to achieve distance. As a result, Rousso is attempting to reconstruct the ways the memory of the Vichy regime has been repressed over the course of the 20th century, and also the ways in which it has been reinterpreted to suit contemporary needs.

Rousso has characterized reaction to the war in roughly three periods. The period directly following the war was a time of “unfinished mourning.” Under the leadership of de Gaulle and into the 1960s, memory of the Vichy regime was “repressed.” Then, in the wake of the student demonstrations and upheaval of the late 1960s, he notes an obsession with the war and the Vichy government, based on new political realities and developments. Rousso ends his book by discussing the vectors, or carriers of memory, how each group of carriers has contributed to the “illness.” In his final chapter, “Diffuse Memory,” Rousso discusses the public reaction to the different types of memory created by the vectors of his earlier chapters.

Occupation, war and liberation between 1939 and 1945 in France, Rousso argues, was so continuous and so abrupt that it was impossible for the French to make sense of the changes while they were occurring. Therefore, it seemed critical in the period after the war for the French government to claim an uninterrupted vision of the Republic of France, which therefore negated the Frenchness of Vichy during WWII. Rousso points to the tendency of Charles de Gaulle to proclaim France as having been “liberated by itself (16)” thereby creating an “imaginary,” heroic picture of France under which to unify the country. He also highlights de Gaulle’s “thirty years war,” which conflates World Wars I and II, as well as the intervening civil war. This is a rather shrewd connection for de Gaulle to make, because as Rousso points out later, the French memory of the memory of the trench combat veteran from WWI is a “universally admired archetype (22),” and the association of the two wars together ultimately puts the focus on “military matters” and “diverts attention from . . . ideological conflict and genocide (17).” Rousso also deals with the early problems and inappropriateness of memorializing WWII, especially in the years directly following the war.

Very shortly after liberation, new problems became apparent. In his attempt to regenerate unity and national pride (a “return to glory”), de Gaulle ushers in a new right-wing government, at least partially composed of Vichy collaborators. This was due, at least in part, to the almost immediate concerns of the Cold War, in which Vichy collaborators were given amnesty in the name of political unity, and former resistance members were prosecuted for presumed communist ties (38). Rousso notes dissent from this view in literature, but does not characterize it as strong enough to change the direction of collective memory at this early date. This period ends with both a revival of Petainism (Vichy) and increased visibility of the stories of survivors of the war.

Despite a few high-profile court cases (for instance, those of Oberg and Knochen), Rousso successfully argues that the period of economic expansion between 1954 and 1971 was also a period of repression of memory of WWII. However, Rousso argues that one event, the Algerian War and its aftermath, caused a resurfacing of memory that broke the calmness of those decades. It was
not that the Algerian War had much connection with Occupation (75), but that people involved in the Algerian War who had experienced occupation were making direct connections with WWII, and applying those experiences to their contemporary circumstances. In particular, these associations gave rise to revived political divisions within French government between those nostalgic for Vichy and French dominance, and skeptics of French colonialism and fascism.

1968, Rousso argues, was the real turning point for memories about Occupation. In part, this was due to student and leftist movements, which continued through the 1970s. It was also due to (the possibly connected phenomenon of) cultural representations of Occupation in film and literature in the 1970s. This wave of cultural contributions begins with The Sorrow and the Pity, a documentary about a “typical” French city during occupation, populated not by great historical figures, but by “ordinary” Petainists, collaborators, local officials and resistance fighters—a picture of the occupation to which most French would be able to relate, and perhaps remember (100-101). From this point on, cultural contributions about the war emphasize the “areas of amnesia (104)” that the French public has been harboring, and so begin to reshape public memory in the 1970s.

Changing political and social behavior, not only about memories of Occupation, but also about contemporary issues involving Israel and anti-Semitism were driven by vectors or carriers of memory. In his chapter, “Vectors of Memory,” Rousso gives us a “temperature chart” of events over the course of the last 50 years, with correlation of the events to a rise and fall of a state of crisis over the memory of WWII (220). In it, he shows the spikes of intensity connected not only with political events, but also literature and film, which drive national memory in different, but not lesser ways. In fact, Rousso delineates four types of carriers of memory, each bearing different characteristics. The official carriers of memory—local or national ceremonies and memorials, as well as court decisions—are unified memories that are the result of compromise across disparate groups. The organizational carriers of memory have more specific memories of the past that Rousso argues have a more static representation over time. He also outlines a role for cultural carriers of memory, through media like film and literature, which transmit implicit, rather than explicit messages, and scholarly carriers of memory, such as histories. These are often expected to be, though are not always, objective.

Rousso’s final chapter is an exploration of the ways in which these vectors of memory have affected their audiences, and the public’s collective memories about the war and Occupation. He does this by tabulating viewers of films, and sales of books about the subject. He then compares these with studies that test general knowledge about the period—and reveal, in fact, quite a bit of ignorance.

In a sense, the book is intended to remain somewhat unfinished—in part because Vichy and its memory continues to affect politics as much as it affects public and private memory, even into the 1990s (the publication date of this volume). Rousso places his theoretical and methodological concerns up front. He writes about the newly shaky ground of objectivity for historians, and admits that history, while sometimes (or in part) reinforcing the status quo of its time, can also provide a vector of memory in a new direction. Rousso is familiar with the memory theories of Halbwachs and Nora, though in the body of the book, these theories are not directly applied, but background to his analysis. He also addresses why he did not take on this history through a communist lens, or through the perspectives of the resistance movements. Ultimately, Rousso is arguing that France did not face its participation in the Vichy government, or in genocide, in the same way that West Germany did following the war. However, the comparison may be misguided, given the evidence that Jeffrey Herf presents in Divided Memory about West German emphasis on the sacrifices of the anti-fascist Social Democrats, and its relative shyness towards issues of anti-Semitism and genocide, which seem to mimic the themes that Rousso attributes to France.