

---

H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 225

Richard J. Golsan, *The Vichy Past in France Today: Corruptions of Memory*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2017. 168 pp. Acknowledgements, Bibliography, and index. €60.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-4985-5032-1.

Review by Bertram M. Gordon, Mills College.

In *The Vichy Past in France Today: Corruptions of Memory*, Richard J. Golsan has made another significant contribution to our understanding on both sides of the Atlantic of France during the “Dark Years,” or the German occupation of 1940-1944, and the legacy left by the government of Marshal Philippe Pétain at Vichy. The defeat of France in 1940 and the subsequent government and policies established at Vichy during the following four years continue to resonate in France, illustrated in Marine Le Pen’s campaign and second place finish in the April and May 2017 presidential elections.[1] In an article in *Libération* in October 2017, historian Catherine Brice referenced the memory of the war and the *État Français*, or French State, established in Vichy as “preoccupations of the moment.”[2]

In the sense of Benedetto Croce’s observation that “[a]ll history is contemporary history,” Golsan offers a fascinating perspective on the ways in which the present sees the past, interpreting it and reinterpreting it to fit its own interests and perspectives.[3] Following the work of Henry Rousso on the “Vichy syndrome,” and Golsan’s own previous writing, notably *History and Counterhistory in Postwar France: Vichy’s Afterlife*,[4] Golsan analyzes a World War II past that is “reimagined,” based on the commemorations in 2014 of the seventieth anniversaries of the Normandy landings and the liberation of Paris both of which, he argues, magnified the role of the French to the detriment of the other Allies, whose soldiers had done most of the fighting (p. xxi). The commemoration of the 1944 events seventy years later, he writes, are examples of the “Resistantist Myth,” exaggerating the role of the French in the Allied victory, thereby distorting the memory of the war (pp. xiii-xiv). The year 2014 also saw the publication of Eric Zemmour’s *La Suicide Français*, which sought to revive the earlier defense of the Vichy government by arguing that it had acted as a shield protecting the French from even worse treatment by the Germans. Zemmour’s book, which became a bestseller in France, followed by a year the publication of a book by the political scientist Jacques Sémelin that had made a parallel case for the Vichy state having acted as a shield for France’s Jews during the war (pp. xiv-xv).

In asking in his introduction, why Vichy and why now, Golsan cites the 2013-2014 events as evidence for the continuing impact of the remembrance of the Dark Years in French politics and culture and, even more importantly, for the ways in which the legacy of the French State has been distorted in France’s more recent public discourse. He maintains that memories of the Vichy years in France became increasingly “judeocentric” following the trials during the 1980s and 90s of Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier, and Maurice Papon. These trials also coincided with the exposure of François Mitterrand’s Vichy past in 1994 and were followed soon after by the second place finish of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the French presidential elections of 2002 (p. xvii).

More recent attacks by Islamic extremists fed into this “judeocentric turn” in the recent memory of the Dark Years (p. xviii), all contributing to what Golsan cites Charles Maier as having called “a surfeit of memory” (p. xviii). To help explain this turn in memory Golsan looks to the work of historian Robert Frank, as well as Rousso. Frank sees current preoccupations with the Dark Years as part of a larger French decline beginning with the defeat of 1940 and extending through the Occupation, followed by the loss of empire and a diminished role for France in world affairs. To Rousso the traumatic nature of modern warfare manifested in the two world wars of the twentieth century created a shift in popular views of history from something to be respected to something to be somehow judged and acted upon in the present (pp. xix-xxi). All of this, in Golsan’s view, produced an obsession with and, to use his term, “corruption,” of Second World War memory, creating first a focus on judgment during the trials of the 1980s and 1990s and more recently a seemingly more positive but still misleading over-emphasis on a French heroic role in the commemorations of 2014. In both cases, he argues, a concentration on subjective “memory” distorted the history of the 1940-1944 years in French political and literary discourse.

Golsan concludes his introduction with “five propositions regarding the nature of Vichy’s memory as it exists in France today” (p. xxii). They are: 1. a shift in focus from attempts in the 1990s to “better understand the historical realities of the Dark Years” to a more polemical view of the period in line with anti-Americanism and other present-day views, 2. an inaccurate view of the victims of Nazism and Vichy created by facile comparisons with those of colonialism and other phenomena, 3. a simplification of history by defining other historical phenomena as genocides and crimes against humanity, thereby distorting the crimes of the Second World War, 4. a present-day tendency to use the name “Vichy” as a “metaphor for generalized social and cultural evil,” again watering down its meaning and distorting history, and 5. an “‘ossification’ of the memory of Vichy,” inducing a sterile sort of rote imagery that obscures the real history of the period. All five of these factors together produced a decay or, to use the term Golsan employs in his subtitle, a “corruption,” in the memory of the Dark Years. He makes clear that history will invariably be reinterpreted over time but “that it must be re-interpreted *responsibly*, [his italics] on the basis of solid historical evidence” (pp. xxii-xxiii). The remainder of the book is a careful and well-documented study of a series of instances where he argues this has not been the case.

The five chapters that follow focus on the recent memory of the war years in France’s legal, political, and literary history, with chapters three through five centered on the literary world. Chapter one addresses the “fractured legal vector of memory,” notably the trials of the 1980s and 90s and their repercussions in France. The second chapter, the “Le Pen moment,” zeroes in on the second place finish of *Front National* leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the French presidential elections of 2002, which allowed him to challenge Jacques Chirac in the run-off election. The following chapters focus on Alain Badiou’s *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, and Yannick Haenel’s *Jan Karcki*, all of which in one way or another evoked the memory of the Vichy years, helping to keep it alive in French literary and political circles. All of these examples, Golsan argues, tend to simplify and distort the historical record.

Arguing in chapter one that the trials of Barbie, Touvier, and Papon raised controversial questions of *ex post facto* laws passed long after the events in question when the persons in the docks were elderly men in many ways far different from their personas of half a century earlier, Golsan suggests that at best these trials were simulacra of the immediate “historically more urgent” purge trials of the late 1940s (p. 2). Discussing the Touvier and Papon trials as stand-ins for what the trial of René Bousquet (the former head of the police under Vichy) might have been had he not been murdered in 1993 before he went to trial, Golsan again sees “simulacra” at work presenting history in “specifically moral terms,” and thereby simplifying and distorting it (p. 12). Post-facto memorial laws, such as the Gayssot Law of 1990 legislating fines for those denying the Holocaust, and others prescribing that French schools teach the “positive” aspects of their colonialism, threatened to simplify history and discourage researchers from investigating these areas (p. 14). Memorial laws, Golsan suggests, are attempts to legislate the past and

their attempts to fulfill perceived duties to memory can be lethal. He cites *Le Monde* journalist Alain Frachon who suggested that the murders of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff members and the Hyper Kacher market in Paris in 2015 might have resulted in part from a “competition of victims” (p. 17).

In chapter two, Golsan takes up “the Le Pen Moment” of 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen captured seventeen percent of the popular vote in the first round of the presidential elections, coming in one percentage point ahead of then Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, and propelling him into a second-round run-off with Jacques Chirac, won by the latter with more than four fifths of the vote. Although many were surprised, even “shocked” by Le Pen’s first-round score, Golsan argues that given the lackluster campaigns of the two mainstream candidates, Le Pen’s vote should not have come as so great a surprise (p. 23). His assessment of Le Pen’s growing popular support was reaffirmed in the 2017 presidential elections in which Marine Le Pen, who had succeeded her father as head of the *Front National*, scored nearly twenty-two percent in the first round, qualifying her for the second round run-off against Emanuel Macron, against whom she garnered more than a third of the votes. Again turning to literature, Golsan links two publications that appeared in 2002 to memory of the Dark Years. The first, *Du sens* by Renaud Camus, recently profiled in the *New Yorker* magazine [5], called into question the use of terms such as “Shoah” (as representing a kind of artificial political correctness) and “Frenchness,” (calling into question the numbers of “non-French” in France) (pp. 30-32). Daniel Lindenberg’s *Le Rappel à l’ordre*, found similarities between the France of the early twenty-first century and that of the 1930s and caused considerable reaction among political commentators (p. 38).

As noted, the final three chapters focus on the literary works of Badiou, Littell, and Haenel. Chapter three addresses *De quoi Sarkozy est le nom?* [*The Meaning of Sarkozy*], in which Badiou used the term “transcendental Pétainism” to refer to a set of conditions combining capitulation, a sense of moral crisis, a need for correction from abroad, a propaganda campaign emphasizing an evil that had occurred leading to France’s problems, and racism. Badiou asserted that Sarkozy’s election in 2007 represented all of these conditions and that Sarkozy’s call for France to go “back to work” echoed the moralism of the 1940 National Revolution. For Sarkozy, the correction from abroad was represented by America, Britain, and China and the evil that had led to France’s problems in 1940, the Popular Front, was represented in postwar France by May 1968. The role of the prewar and wartime Jews was taken by more recent immigrants (pp. 55-56). Badiou’s use of the term “rats” to describe Sarkozy’s leftist supporters evoked painful memories of the use of the term during the Occupation years (pp. 56-57).

In Chapter four, “Remaking of the *Mode Rétro*,” Golsan references the “*mode rétro*,” a term used to describe a wave of interest and, as he sees it, a kind of eroticization of the Nazi and fascist past in literature and film. Following the death of Charles de Gaulle, films such as “The Sorrow and the Pity” and “Lacombe Lucien” depicted the Resistance in less heroic terms and an easing of censorship opened a door to more eroticization in films (pp. 68-70). In Golsan’s analysis, Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, a highly successful and much praised novel in France about a fictional former SS officer, borrows from and distorts a kind of Nordic perspective in the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs, as well as contributes to an eroticized distortion of the war years, seen through the distorted prism of the *mode rétro*. Golsan notes: “In evoking and invoking the *mode rétro* in its thematics and aesthetics, it is not simply the World War II past that is called into question, but also the shapes and forms that its *memory* [Golsan’s italics] has assumed. And the fact that that memory still proves controversial, that sensibilities associated with the *mode rétro* are not extinct, so to speak, suggests that the “work of memory” undertaken with the trials, commemorations, presidential speeches, etc., of the 1990s intended to put the World War II past and subsequent traumas associated with it to rest, has not completely accomplished its aim. The nation is not in fact fully reconciled to the history of the Dark Years, nor to the avatars of its memory” (p. 84).

Golsan’s fifth chapter, devoted to Yannick Haenel’s novel *Jan Karcki*, (published in 2010), which dealt with the Polish Resistance fighter, analyzes the fictionalized description of the real Karcki’s July 1943 visit to President Franklin Roosevelt, in which he discussed the plight of the European Jews in Poland.

Roosevelt is portrayed in the novel as indifferent “and more interested in his secretary’s legs than in what Karski has to say” (p. 90). Once more, Golsan describes fiction posing as history or what today might be called “fake history.” In Haenel’s focus on French collaboration as opposed to Polish resistance during the war, Golsan sees a continuation of historian Robert Frank’s focus on “obsessive *déclinisme*,” an obsession with a sense of France’s diminishing role in the world from 1940 through the present (p. 106).

In his Conclusion, Golsan asks whether the memory of Vichy and the World War II past will eventually fade and die out in France and suggests that terms such as “Islamofascism” imply continuity at least on some level (p. 114). He writes: “the evidence gathered in the present study suggests that the Vichy and World War II past still assume pride of place, and that other traumas of the past as well as the present live under its shadow and are subject to its distorting lens” (p. 114). He cites Bruno Tertrais who suggests that as the generation that experienced the war dies off, its horror and destruction will be forgotten and only the “heroic” narratives will remain. Another possibility not mentioned by Golsan is that the passing of the generation that experienced the war will shift its narrative into a long historical line of France’s wars going back to the Hundred Years War and Joan of Arc, through the wars of Louis XIV, the Revolution and Napoleon, and the wars of the early and mid-twentieth century.

Whatever the future, Golsan has written a highly informative study combining literary and political history. *The Vichy Past in France Today* is not only a first-rate analysis of memories of the war years in France and the ways in which they are used for political and literary purposes, it also offers insights into the creation of what Marianne Hirsch has called “post-memory,” or the transmission of memory to succeeding generations.[6] Golsan’s work falls into what Alon Confino noted some twenty years ago, an approach that might be called “top down” history, or the construction of memory by political, heritage, and academic communities, whose perspectives are more accessible to the researcher, than the private memories passed on by less prominent actors in society to be found (in Confino’s view) in the study of “the family, voluntary association, and workplace.”[7] In contrast to the political actors, writers, and film-makers discussed by Golsan are the “ordinary” followers, highlighted in the German case by Christopher Browning’s 1992 book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. The degree to which Golsan’s subjects represent more deep-seated feelings among the French population beyond the political class and the literati may not be fully knowable.

Golsan has given us a magnificent study of the public sphere of politics and culture pertaining to the memories of the war years. As one example of their continuing impact, the city of Vichy has struggled with the memory of the war and its association in the minds of many with the government of Marshal Pétain. As recently as the beginning of the twenty-first century, longtime Mayor Claude Malhuret of Vichy continued his efforts to legally forbid the use of the term “Vichy government” in official documents.[8]

Unfortunately, Golsan’s excellent book is marred by minor errors of fact and grammar. On page xxi, “sixteen Century” appears where “sixteenth” is meant. Jean Marie Le Pen did not win in the first round of the 2002 elections (pp. xxv, 35, and 45). His second-place finish allowed him to compete in the runoff. The bottom line on page 37 needs to be re-written. “Marshall” should be “Marshal” Pétain at the top of page 102. These and other minor points aside, Golsan has made a significant contribution to the study of memory in late twentieth and early twenty-first century France. Hopefully, his book will be updated in future editions, where the minor errors may also be corrected.

## NOTES

[1] Olivier Faye, “Marine Le Pen choque en déclarant que « la France n’est pas responsable » de la rafle du Vél’ d’Hiv,” *Le Monde* (10 April 2017), <<http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle->

---

2017/article/2017/04/10/marine-le-pen-choque-en-declarant-que-la-france-n-est-pas-responsable-de-la-raffe-du-vel-d-hiv\_5108622\_4854003.html>, accessed 5 October 2017.

[2] Catherine Brice, "L'histoire, partout et par tous," in Libé des historiens, *Libération* (4 octobre 2017), <[http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/10/04/l-histoire-partout-et-par-tous\\_1600931?xtor=EPR-450206&utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=quot](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/10/04/l-histoire-partout-et-par-tous_1600931?xtor=EPR-450206&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=quot)>, accessed 5 October 2017.

[3] Simon Ditchfield, Book Review of Adriano Prosperi, *La vocazione: Storie di gesuiti tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016) *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, 4 (2017), pp. 484, 488.

[4] Richard J. Golsan, *History and Counterhistory in Postwar France: Vichy's Afterlife* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

[5] Thomas Chatterton Williams, "Letter from Europe, 'You will not replace us,' The French origins of the white-nationalist rallying cry," *The New Yorker* (4 December 2017), pp. 24-25.

[6] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photographs, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.

[7] Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997), p. 1395.

[8] François Dufay, "Vichy: cette ville qui veut oublier Pétain," *Le Point*, 2177 (31 January 2003), <<http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-region/2007-01-19/vichy-cette-ville-qui-veut-oublier-petain/1556/0/52489>>, accessed 7 June 2014.

Bertram M. Gordon  
Mills College  
[bmgordon@mills.edu](mailto:bmgordon@mills.edu)

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172