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*Des Terroristes à la retraite*. 1983/France/Color. Director: Mosco Boucault. Studio: Zek Productions. Running Time: 84 min.

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The January 2001 release of the film “Terrorists in Retirement” (“Des Terroristes à la retraite”), directed by Mosco Boucault, brings to American theaters one of the more controversial treatments of France’s wartime experience to appear in recent years. At the time of its release, in 1983, the film provoked such a firestorm of dispute that its broadcast on French television was delayed for nearly two years. Prior to this year’s re-release, the film’s first and only American showing was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April 1999. Having just run in New York, the film will move on to other cities in the coming weeks. In both its representation of the Resistance and Resistance activity, and in the heated controversy surrounding it, the film will stimulate historians of modern France, particularly those interested in the changing politics of French memory in the last few decades.

The subject of the film is a group of foreign-born, mostly Jewish partisans, who, as members of the Communist Party’s *Main d’oeuvre immigré* (MOI), formed into special detachments of the *Francs-tireurs-partisans* (FTP) to engage in acts of direct violent resistance against the French and German authorities during World War II. As the film opens, a 1944 German newsreel triumphantly recounts the recent capture, trial, and execution of a group of these partisans, the so-called *Groupe Manouchian*, named for the Armenian poet who served as its leader. The clip shows the famous *Affiche rouge*, posted all over Paris during the trial, prominently displaying the names, nationalities, and faces of the accused beneath the headline of “Liberators?” At a time of mounting crisis for the occupation, the intention behind this propaganda drive was manifestly clear: to discredit the Resistance before French opinion as communist and, even more, as foreign and Jewish.

Boucault seizes this poster as a sort of surviving artifact, inviting exploration of a current of Resistance activity long marginalized in official and popular memory of the period. He seeks out those veterans of the cell who managed to survive the Gestapo crackdowns of late 1943 and early 1944, finding them living ordinary, even marginal lives, working mostly as tailors in the 11th arrondissement of Paris. In a style reminiscent of the two most prominent French films on the memory of World War II and the occupation, Marcel Ophüls’ “The Sorrow and the Pity” and Claude Lanzmann’s “Shoah,” the narrative emerges primarily through exchanges of witnesses with the director, the latter attempting to trigger buried or partial memory about events taking place forty years ago. Sketching (probably too) briefly the background of their immigration to France, in the twenties and thirties, and their deepening communist engagements, the interviews center principally upon the decision to hazard acts of violent resistance to Nazi occupation.

In addition to having the veterans recount their memories of the period, and their often-conflictual feelings about undertaking such dramatic and risky actions, Boucault actually has them dramatically reproduce those actions. The effect is a peculiar one, especially at the beginning, as one watches these now-graying and thoroughly ordinary men reenact their bold assassinations and terrorist bombings on

the streets and subways of contemporary Paris. Yet what seems at first faintly awkward, almost closer to slapstick than historical reconstruction, grows more affecting as one continues to watch. The peculiar disjunction between the extraordinary actions reenacted and the very quotidian contemporary setting throws *en jeu* the issue of heroism and heroization, and this problematic remains central throughout the film. Boucault studiously avoids the insertion of newsreel clips, newspaper headlines or the like, and with them, perhaps, the irresistible pull toward the mythic and heroic which had long circumscribed representation of the Resistance. It is as if he wishes to maintain this tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, as a commentary upon the nature of Resistance heroism and of a heroism denied.

This is not to say that Boucault wishes to question the heroism of Resistance activity. To the contrary, the patient accumulation of detail in the interviews has the effect of conferring the heroic mantle of resistance upon individuals long denied it. The director, himself of Bulgarian Jewish origin, has described as one of his motivations in making the film a desire to restore agency to Jews, in a historical context long defined by Jewish victimization. This the film certainly accomplishes; yet the heroism that emerges is a peculiar one, perhaps for remaining so understated throughout. The principals maintain a self-effacing quality, their recountings filled with memories of doubt, confusion, and even stumbling. Like Ophuls and Lanzmann, Boucault is fully attentive to the *mise en scène* for the interviews: he has these narratives of courageous abandon before the most extreme risk proceed amidst the most ordinary of circumstances, in some cases as the *raconteurs* work away at their sewing machines. In doing so, the film does not simply reproduce Resistance history in the heroic-mythic register, instead maintaining a distance from the seemingly inevitable pull toward sacralization.

### The Controversy

There is little in the first two-thirds of the film to suggest why such heated controversy accompanied the film immediately upon its release, and then for two years thereafter. For the duration of this period, from 1983-1985, "Terrorists in Retirement" was more news event than film, the subject of often acrimonious dispute in the French media. The uproar derived primarily from the film's contention that the eventual capture and execution by the Gestapo of these veterans' former comrades in the "Groupe Manouchian" might have been facilitated by the Communist leadership itself, a willing sacrifice by the party as it attempted to cultivate nationalist credibility in the impending post-war political settlement. These suspicions center around the winter of 1943-4, as the Gestapo began to undertake a counter-offensive against the Parisian FTP-MOI, identifying its members for arrest. It was common practice for the Communist Resistance leadership, upon being alerted to imminent crackdowns, to relocate its fighters to safer areas, away from Paris. The film advances the strong suggestion that the clandestine central command of the Party knew of the impending danger, but nevertheless refused to take the targets out of harm's way.

This accusation was not entirely new when the film was finally shown for the first time in 1985, having first been floated by the CNRS historian Philippe Robrieux in 1984, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Manouchian Group's trial and execution. While Robrieux's claim triggered some outrage on the part of the PCF and certain Resistance survivors, it was the prospect of television broadcast of these charges to a mass public which brought the matter to a head. The decision of the network Antenne 2 finally to broadcast the film on June 2, 1985, prompted a full-blown *affaire* in the French press during the spring and early summer of 1985, with the Communist Party in particular voicing outrage over the accusations. *L'Humanité* judged the film "defamatory," one instance of a deeper campaign of anti-communist slander then being conducted in the press and on television.

The spring and summer of 1985 was, of course, an especially charged period for memory of World War II and the Resistance. The fortieth anniversary of the Liberation provoked a new cycle of commemoration and controversy, including the opening of an official Museum of the Resistance in

Champigny and the release of Lanzmann's "Shoah," as well as the much-disputed laying of wreathes at Bitburg. In this climate, it is hardly surprising that the broadcast of Boucault's film should have so polarized French opinion. With argument over the film filling the papers and air waves, in May and June of 1985, the French High Authority on audio-visual communications convened a "Jury of Honor," consisting of five surviving members of the Resistance (all non-communist, and including Raymond and Lucie Aubrac), to advise it on the advisability of broadcasting the film. Unanimously, the jury voted that the allegations of the film were unproven and ultimately defamatory, "an operation of disinformation with obvious and shocking political intent." Its members signed a statement declaring that, were they in charge of the network, they would not allow transmission of the film. Antenne 2 followed this recommendation, postponing broadcast of the film one month, to July 2, and then appending both a presentation of historical context beforehand, and a debate of concerned parties afterwards. In the interim, vitriol continued to flow in the French press, with advocates of the film denouncing the delay as "censorship" and evidence of cowardice before the bullying of the PCF, and opponents of the film cataloguing its inaccuracies and denouncing its thinly-veiled political agenda.

### Resistance Represented

Viewed through a historical optic, Boucault's representation of the Resistance testifies to broader shifts in French memory of the *années noires*. The crumbling of the fragile post-war consensus of memory in France, beginning in the late 1960's and early 1970's, could not but influence understanding and representation of the Resistance. Prior to this "breaking of the mirror," to borrow Henry Rousso's phrase, memory of the actual Resistance had often been subsumed in the larger myth of a *France résistante*, of a country united in a spirit of resistance, if not always in actions of resistance. Promoted primarily by Charles de Gaulle, and by the French Communist Party, though widely accepted across the political spectrum, this version of the immediate past served to repress—however imperfectly, as Rousso amply documents—the fratricidal divisions at the core of France's wartime experience and provided a framework for postwar republican renewal and economic modernization. Of course, memory and commemoration of the Resistance, or a certain version of the Resistance, played a vital role in the building of this consensual past and future. The images and stories surrounding the Resistance provided an updated foundation myth for the French republic, after its startling failure in 1939. Fully incorporated into the school curriculum and in official commemorative culture as part of the civic catechism, the Resistance became a vital shared reference point for the French. The elevation of Jean Moulin as the transcendent figure of resistance—culminating in the solemn transfer of his remains to the Pantheon in 1964—was particularly emblematic of this myth-making impulse in post-war French political culture.

As first Ophuls' "Sorrow and the Pity" and then Robert Paxton's *Vichy France* prompted radical reconsideration of the wartime years. It was primarily the Vichy regime and questions of collaboration which attracted a suddenly "obsessive" (to use Rousso's term) attention. At the center of French remembering in the 1960's, the Resistance would only come back to the center of memory politics in the 1980's. As with other parts of the wartime experience, the terms of understanding and memory of the Resistance altered significantly with the lifting of the mythic veil of the Gaullist period. Denuded, at least partially, of the mythic and political weight it formerly had to carry, the Resistance has emerged, over the last twenty or so years, as more complex, historical, and contested, a shift signaled by Boucault's film and the controversy surrounding it.

The positive aspect of this shift is apparent in Boucault's more nuanced and in some ways more realistic depiction of the Resistance. If the mythologizing of the past in the postwar period had depended upon certain elisions, one of these was surely the minimizing of the very real differences between Resistance groups. The Resistance was always a very complex, even divided movement, a fact often lost in the period of Gaullist remembering. Uncertainty, chance, and political confusion often defined Resistance activity, far more than well-coordinated and unitary direction from above. The film also attests to the

importance of the socially marginal in the drama of occupation and resistance, as the widely-shared impression of social rupture enabled new actors and new actions. Just as enthusiastic collaboration often attracted those positioned somehow on the social margins, so too did the most active resistance often fall to figures such as these in the film, forcibly separated from family, and increasingly subjected to exclusionist political designs. The surviving veterans speak often of having little to lose, of violent resistance being a natural, even inescapable decision.

Boucault's film symptomizes the shift from a consensual, all-encompassing memory of the Resistance to more plural, perhaps more partial, even private ones. In *The Vichy Syndrome*, Henry Rousso details the emergence of a "Jewish Memory", beginning in the 1970's, as French Jews made a particular mnemonic claim upon the events of World War II. While Lanzmann's film would mark the pinnacle of this current of remembering, "Terrorists in Retirement" advances a similar, if less epic, claim to a specifically Jewish memory of the experience of war. In subtle and less subtle ways, Boucault foregrounds the Jewishness of his subjects, at times at the expense of their communist commitments. His insistence upon filming them working away as tailors while being interviewed affirms their identity not simply as workers, but as Jewish immigrant workers, their lives a continuity stretching from Eastern to Western Europe. The final sequence of the film makes this claim even more forcefully, pausing rather ominously upon contemporary shots of the desecrated graves of a Jewish cemetery. Such gestures were not at all incidental to the film's appeal, nor to its controversy: among those arguing most passionately for the television broadcast of the film were groups of surviving relatives of deportees, who lauded its depiction of Jews "not simply going to slaughter, but actually fighting on behalf of liberty and the dignity of all men", to quote a statement of one such group. The assertion of a partial claim to memory, like the larger claim to specific or multiple identities (as opposed to being exclusively "French") is of course always a problematic business in France. Rousso himself identifies "Jewish Memory" as a form of "obsession," with its suggestion of pathology, and expresses concern over the emergence of a "Judeo-centric" claim upon memory.

The vociferous response of the PCF to the film similarly testifies to this fragmentation of memory in the last twenty years. That the party's posture toward the film should be so defensive is understandable, as it had long derived much prestige from its deep association with the Resistance and the Resistance myth. Combating the film and its charges became a larger defense of the party against an anti-communist slander suddenly acceptable in the media. The disgust of the party at its return to political marginality -- after having served alongside the Socialists from 1982-1984--and at the increasingly moderate course taken by the Mitterrand government is certainly never far from the surface in its condemnations of the film. Articles denouncing the film in *L'Humanité* dwell constantly upon the gross affront that the "parti des fusillés" should be so impugned, that there should be so little hesitation in attacking the heroic memory of the party. Here again, a formerly consensual memory gives way to deeply conflicting memory claims, often based in the political needs of the present. The question of how the retreat from communism and communism's decline and fall-- as both world-historical event and, for many, as deeply personal experience--has influenced personal and collective memory of the war years is an important one that deserves to be further pursued.

It seems worth asking, as well, how exactly the Resistance was "made French" both during and after the period of the war, a question raised powerfully by this film. Boucault suggests that the indifference, and perhaps even treachery, of communist Resistance leaders in the face of known threats to the Manouchian cell is explained by the desire of those leaders to eliminate association with foreign and Jewish elements in the ranks. With the post-war settlement looming, it is alleged, the Communist Resistance sought to associate itself with more "French" sounding names, and that, to quote Philippe Ganier-Raymond, one of two Resistance historians appearing in the film, "It would have been exceedingly embarrassing for the French Communist Party to have to reveal that their Resistance heroes were not grassroots Frenchmen but people with names like Mitzflicker, Weissberg and Kojitski."

The veracity of this accusation aside, it is worthwhile to consider how the construction of the Resistance and its myth -- and the Resistance was never free of mythic content, even during the war itself--always proceeded in line with certain specific codings and exclusions. To assume the burden of so profoundly representing France, and in particular republican France, the Resistance had to assert its continuity with certain aspects of the French past. Certainly, for example, the Resistance re-girded the notion of public virtue, updating the revolutionary iconography of the citizen-at-arms; so, too, did it serve at times as a story of masculine renewal, a heroic reversal of the French army's debacle in 1940. As the film implies, the recasting of resistance as unifying myth invariably privileged certain currents of resistance, and certain Resistance figures, over others.

What of the future course of Resistance remembering and representation? Controversy surrounding the Resistance has, if anything, intensified since the release of Boucault's film in the mid 1980's. If the lifting of the sacred aura formerly surrounding the Resistance and central Resistance figures has in some instances allowed for a more nuanced historical understanding of the movement, it has also given rise to iconoclastic impulses to tear down further the remaining vestiges of the old myths. New misgivings in particular have been directed at the figure of Jean Moulin, taking the form of accusations of his being a communist agent during his work in the Resistance. First advanced in the 1970's by Resistance veteran Henri Frenay, such accusations found a new life in a 1993 book by Thierry Wolton and the accompanying scandal in the French media. The circumstances surrounding Moulin's arrest, torture, and death also gave rise to controversy, beginning during the Barbie trial in 1983, but then resurfacing in the late nineties in the so-called "Affaire Aubrac," in which two of Moulin's closest associates struggled to clear themselves of suspicions of having betrayed him to the Gestapo. Played out fully in the French media, with often-acrimonious interventions by Resistance veterans, historians and current politicians, these scandals mark the latest episodes in France's ongoing reconsideration of its wartime experience. Perhaps these are best considered the birth pangs of a new understanding of the wartime past as the Resistance ceases to be such a living issue and makes its passage into history. As remaining witnesses--who have been among the more influential custodians of wartime memory--pass from the scene, professional historians and the popular media likely will continue to wage turf battles over how the period is understood and represented. It is not yet clear whether the Vichy years are fated to remain for the French, again borrowing from Rousso, "un passé qui ne passe pas."

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