# Vichy and the Holocaust

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## Q. What was Vichy's policy towards the Jews?

A. From 1933 onwards, the French authorities pursued a policy of reconciliation with the National Socialists by regularly putting foreigners under house arrest, imprisoning or extraditing them. The main victims of this policy, which infringed asylum laws still in force in the Third Republic, were political immigrants and Jews who had fled or been forced to leave Germany, or refugees from the Civil War in Spain. The Armistice Treaty of June 1940, signed by representatives of the republican administration, formalized this practice. In particular, Article 19 of the treaty stipulated that all German nationals on French territory must, when requested, be handed over to the National Socialist authorities. This policy was designed primarily to extradite political and intellectual dissidents considered to be agitators in exile, as well as foreign (non-French) and stateless Jews.

Internment camps were set up as early as 1939 to contain refugees. Statistics recorded at the time are revealing: of 32,000 internees registered in unoccupied France in August 1940, 7,500 were German nationals, of whom 5,000 were Jewish. In September that year, the military administration ordered a census to be taken specifically to record numbers of Jews but also to record information in police files, the so-called 'Jewish files'. The regime in Vichy not only did not protest at these measures, but independently initiated its own anti-Jewish legislation. The French State (the official name of the Vichy regime) passed a law on the 'status of Jews' in October 1940, set up a Central Office for Jewish Questions in March 1941, followed by a second law on the status of Jews in June that year, which extended the policy of taking censuses and compiling files to the unoccupied zone, and initiated the so-called 'Ayranization' of Jewish property. First convoys of deportees began in March 1942 followed in July by the signing of an agreement by René Bousquet, then Secretary General of the Interior Ministry, which guaranteed the cooperation of the French police with the German military administration – in anticipation of mass round-ups and deportations in July and August 1942 in both the occupied and unoccupied zones. By 1944, two-thirds of Jews in France were in hiding, under the protection of locals, churches and supporting networks.

The most remarkable aspect of Vichy's policy towards the Jews was that it largely surpassed the severity of the directives issued by the occupying military command. Collaboration meant compliance with the military administration but also cooperation in the form of indigenous anti-Jewish legislation and practices. The second law on the status of Jews, for example, adopted racial concepts from the Nuremberg laws of 1935, including the fundamental contradiction according to which putative racial characteristics were deduced from religious and cultural belonging. Such laws and decrees were applicable throughout French territory, though the military command could override legislation in the occupied zone at will.

The motivation behind such zealous collaboration was ostensibly patriotic. Pétain claimed to be proving to the National Socialists and to the French that such policies would sustain a degree of national sovereignty and accelerate a peace agreement. However, they undoubtedly fed on genuine xenophobic and anti-Semitic sentiments at all levels of the French administration and population, without which legislation alone would have been ineffective. After all, the German military administration did not have sufficient personnel or local knowledge to efficiently register, intern and deport people. Vichy representatives implemented many of these policies unilaterally, compiled police files, set up camps and organized deportations from the occupied and unoccupied zones.

## Q. What was the Holocaust? How was it organized across Europe?

A. The term 'Holocaust' refers to the mass murder of Jews in Europe organized by the National Socialist regime in Germany and carried out during the course of military advance into occupied territories and with the collaboration of neighbouring countries and satellite states between 1939 and 1945. It was preceded by a process of definition, expropriation and legal discrimination of unwanted social groups, and their social, then physical, isolation in camps or ghettos. Racial laws, the exclusion of Jews from the local and national economy, the enforcement of symbolic insignia such as the yellow star, racism, anti-Semitism and ethical systems of thought based on rigid notions of honour, loyalty, obedience and camaraderie, were sustained by elaborate propaganda and the corruption of language. The annexation of Austria, the Sudetenland then Bohemia and Poland was accompanied by the progressive transformation of racial ideology into action. Three million, that is, 90 per cent of Polish Jews, were systematically removed from their homes, isolated and killed in pogroms, mass shootings and mobile massacres such as gassings in vans from 1939. The invasion of the Soviet Union and the large numbers of potential victims living there ultimately led to the mass deportations to centres of extermination. The so-called 'Final Solution', the order to systematically destroy the entire Jewish population of Europe, was given during the course of 1941–42 and finalized at a meeting of the National Socialist elite in a villa beside the Wannsee lake near Berlin in January 1942. Mass killings in concentration camps had already begun in 1941 in Belzec; systematic gassings began in Auschwitz in 1942. Massacres were also carried out of other groups including political dissidents, Gypsies, homosexuals, and handicapped people.

The implementation of industrial mass murder on this scale was possible only with the help of state authorities and local organizations and administrations as well as a very large number of people actively involved in or acquiescing in manoeuvres within occupied territories and satellite states. These included satellite states such as the Ustasha regime in Croatia and the Hlinka regime in Slovakia, occupied countries like the Netherlands, or collaborating states such as Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania and, of course, France.

The Holocaust unfolded in an uneven fashion across Europe, due both to the different types of political regime in place and to the constantly changing political power relations determined by the war over time. The National Socialists moved in to occupy the entire territories of France, Italy, Slovakia and Hungary in response to local crises occurring between 1942 and 1944 following periods of collaboration that bear comparison yet remain specific in each case. Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, for example, all regained lost territories as a consequence of their collaboration with Germany. Bulgaria appointed a Commissioner for Jewish Affairs and deported 11,000 Jews. Romanian forces, while fighting to capture territory from the Soviet Union, massacred tens of thousands of Russian Jews on the assumption that they were loyal to the Soviet authorities, though the Romanian authorities were pressurized into forbidding persecutions from 1942. The Hungarian authorities complied first by excluding Jews from economic life, and only engaged in mass deportations from 1944 after the invasion of German troops, when they deported approximately 450,000 Jews from the Hungarian provinces within months.

## Q. What was Vichy's role in the Holocaust?

A. Vichy was unique insofar as it was the only country to draw up and sign a formal armistice treaty with the National Socialists. The Vichy authorities pursued a preventative strategy designed to ensure a degree of independence by pointedly implementing policies such as expropriation, the exclusion of Jews from the civil service, and internment, forced emigration or deportation. However, the fact that the zeal of French civil servants and politicians largely surpassed the stipulations of the Armistice Treaty, as well as the expectations of the occupiers, suggests that motives for these policies were not only reactive. The so-called 'National Revolution' drew on indigenous anti-republican and anti-Semitic sentiments that did not result solely from the wish of the National Socialists to impose their will on France.

The institutions and agents involved leave no doubt about the sources and location of responsibilities. The Office of Jewish Affairs, for example, was first led by Xavier Vallat, then by the notorious Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, who had led the Anti-Jewish Movement of France in the 1930s. Another key name is Pierre Laval, Prime Minister from 1942, who advocated the policy of collaboration and is considered to be responsible for concessions made to German demands: for the deportation of 20,000 stateless Jews from the unoccupied zone, and for setting up the STO (*Service du travail obligatoire*), according to which one French POW was released in exchange for the delivery of two men to make up for the labour shortage in German factories. Other organizations included militarized formations such as the French Popular Party, led from 1936 by Jacques Doriot and which contributed to the round-ups of 1942, and the Militia, founded in 1943 after the demobilization of the armistice army.

However, it would be misleading to focus exclusively on political parties and state organizations, since Vichy's role in the Holocaust relied heavily on what we today call 'civil society': the intermediary institutions operating between state and individuals, including mayors and local police forces, which in turn relied on measures to either intimidate or indoctrinate local populations, such as propaganda. In statistical, administrative, legal, social and ethical terms, Vichy clearly played a considerable role in the Holocaust.

At the beginning of the Second World War, France had the largest Jewish population in Europe and a more liberal immigration policy than the UK and the USA, for example. At the end of the war, 78,000 foreign and stateless Jews had been deported, approximately 22 per cent of the Jewish population in France. While the persecution and deportation of Jews in France were not as efficient as in Hungary in 1944, for example, or as brutal as in Romania when local troops collaborated in the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, this was due to the partial autonomy of the Vichy administration, the geographical dispersion of potential victims, the individual protection provided by neighbours and friends, and the limited resources available to the occupiers to carry out persecutions themselves.

The question ‘What was Vichy’s role in the Holocaust?’ begs the long-term question ‘What is the role of the Holocaust in French self-understanding?’ For to this day, the contradictions inherent in French tradition between Enlightenment conceptions of citizenship and conceptions of cultural or religious belonging – between modern constitutional and anti-republican traditions – have been magnified by the legacy of the Vichy regime.

**Q. How has Vichy’s role in the Holocaust been remembered in France since 1945?**

A. The public memory of the post-war years was marked by Communist, Gaullist and Pétainist myths. The first provided a ready-made interpretation of the events in terms of economic exploitation, the second of a population united in resistance in the service of an eternal nation, while the third suggested that collaboration had been an act in defence of national sovereignty or a ‘shield’ against German domination. These myths began to crumble after the Eichmann trial in 1961, which revealed the specific persecution of Jews, and also during the gradual arrival of 235,000 North African Jews during the 1960s, whose presence quadrupled the Jewish population in France and fostered a new self-awareness. Other factors included the effects of de Gaulle’s hostile rhetoric and policies towards Israel following the Six Day War in 1967, and the awakening of the ‘second generation’, that is, young adults who had not directly experienced the war but who dared to ask probing questions. This period also gave rise to the first historical studies on Vichy by Eberhard Jäckel and Robert Paxton, and to the release of the film *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le chagrin et la pitié*) in 1971, a sobering documentary film by Marcel Ophuls depicting, in a series of interviews with eyewitnesses and propaganda sequences, how members of all social strata accommodated themselves to prevailing conditions or actively collaborated.

In general terms, the public remembrance of Vichy’s role in the Holocaust unfolded in two phases. The first, from 1944 to 1970, was characterized by myth-making and general forgetting; thereafter by rising awareness and reparation. This is how the historian Henry Rousso presents it: in terms of ‘before’ and ‘after’ the shock waves triggered by events of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

However, there are drawbacks to this interpretation. First, it is misleading to conceive of the remembrance of Vichy in terms of a progression from myth to truth. The very term ‘dark years’, often used in reference to Vichy, underpins such a teleological perception as a progression from darkness to light. In reality, approaches to the past have been consistently characterized by a tension between forces leaning towards either distortion or transparency. Holocaust denials, which originated in the early 1950s, came to public attention in 1978 in a press interview with Robert Faurisson at the same time as legal investigations into the cases of Maurice Papon and René Bousquet got under way. Likewise, a group of secondary school pupils in Lyon, Nancy and Strasbourg distributed negationist tracts in 1987, the same year in which the trial of Klaus Barbie took place.

Second, processes of collective remembrance cannot be adequately understood in terms of remembering and forgetting, a vocabulary derived from individual psychology. Rather, they unfold with respect to a complex communicative process conditioned by what is remembered, by whom, how, when and in which circumstances or social frameworks, and with respect to their degree of formalization or institutionalization. The remembrance of Vichy’s role in the Holocaust can perhaps best be described as a process of relative focus, whereby some aspects have been highlighted in the public sphere and other aspects marginalized. In the post-war years, ordinary people's experiences were largely eclipsed, including the humiliation and shame of defeat and occupation in 1940, the extent of collaborationist activities, the fate of STO victims and POWs, and that of victims of persecution, deportation and of their relatives.

Surviving deportees returning to France were largely misunderstood by a suspicious and confused public which possessed no categories with which to understand the experiences of deportees. They exchanged memories in private circles among peers in what was a silent memory, quite unlike the profusion of public rhetoric we know today – although no less than 114 witness reports by surviving deportees were published between the summer of 1945 and the end of 1948. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that memories of the Holocaust were progressively institutionalized and ritualized in the form of school curricula, films, exhibitions, monuments and commemorations. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the events also increasingly gained recognition via more official channels of memorial representation. However, it is not clear to what extent we may infer individual understandings of and attitudes to the Holocaust from public commemorative practices.

Today, memories of Vichy's role in the Holocaust are systematically evoked in relation to political and social issues. The public authorities, spearheaded by President Jacques Chirac, pursue a policy in favour of integration while calling for vigilance against anti-Jewish behaviour, as exemplified by the opening of the new national Memorial of the Shoah in January 2005. At the same time, repeated attacks on Jewish symbols and sites, open support for the Palestinian cause among France's Muslim population since the beginning of the second intifada in the Middle East, Le Pen's repeated revisionist statements and political success in 2002 when he reached the second round of the presidential election, the resurgence of negationism at the University of Lyon III, and the Franco-Israeli diplomatic crisis in July 2004 following Ariel Sharon's public call on French Jews to emigrate to Israel, continue to fuel the ambivalent status of French Jews, between assimilation and Zionism, which arose as a result of frayed Franco-Israeli relations during the Six Day War and which intensified memories of the Holocaust.

**Q. How specifically has the round-up of Jews in Paris in July 1942 been remembered?**

A. Since 1993, the Vél d'Hiv (Vélodrome d'Hiver), where over 13,000 Jews were interned before deportation in July 1942, has been the site of the official annual National Day in Memory of the Victims of Racist and Anti-Semitic Crimes of the French State, commemorated each year on the first Sunday following 16 July. Similar ceremonies and speeches are held simultaneously in provincial towns and on the sites of internment camps, adding a nationwide decentralized dimension to this commemoration. Historically, the round-up of July 1942 followed a logic of social, economic and racial exclusion marked by round-ups in Paris as early as May, August and December 1941. More specifically, it was a consequence of Adolf Eichmann's plans to deport 100,000 Jews from France, and of a formal agreement made between his representative, Helmut Knochen, and the chief of police, René Bousquet, in the wake of the Wannsee conference. The specific significance of the round-up of July 1942 is that it was neither a purely 'German' nor 'French' initiative, but one that relied on the specific mechanism of mutual collaboration. Having been ordered by the

German military government, the operation was carried out by French police, the militarized French Popular Party and with the help of buses supplied by the local transport authority. Remembrance of this event thus focuses on a logic of cooperation rather than on unilateral indigenous acts of exclusion and anti-Semitism.

After the war, the site was initially used for commemorations and mourning by surviving deportees, by their relatives and representative associations. It acquired political significance on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary commemoration of the round-up in 1982 when Chirac, then mayor of Paris, attended the ceremony, and in 1986 when Chirac (now prime minister) unveiled a stone marking the site of the stadium and a street sign naming the adjacent square as the Square of Jewish Martyrs. President François Mitterrand's presence at the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the round-up in 1992 lent solemn state recognition to the event. However, Mitterrand did not go far enough in the eyes of pressure groups like the Vél d'Hiv 42 Committee, for example, for the president refused to respond to their demands, which urged him to give a speech in which he was to recognize, on behalf of the Fifth Republic, 'that the French State of Vichy is responsible for persecutions and crimes against Jews of France'. Mitterrand claimed that such a declaration would blur the distinction between the French republic and the Vichy regime, and that adequate purges had already been carried out immediately after the liberation.

Almost all major political figures of the 1990s took a stand on the Vél d'Hiv, above all Chirac, whose Vél d'Hiv speech of 1995 was applauded as a sign of national reconciliation with the victims of crimes committed during the Vichy regime (in contrast to Mitterrand, Chirac readily made an official recognition of the crimes). However, the rivalry of the two presidents and the cathartic effect of Chirac's speech have been overplayed by the media. Beyond the spectacle of political gesture and public memorial representation, there is still a great deal to be done towards raising public awareness of the short- and long-term effects of the Vichy regime and its role in the Holocaust.

In general, the Vél d'Hiv represents the progressive nationalization of the memory of Vichy's role in the Holocaust. The fascination it inspires among political and educated elites derives largely from its ambiguity, for it is a site of national remembrance and of national crime at the same time. The very temporal proximity of the annual day of commemoration to Bastille Day celebrations on 14 July is a poignant reminder of this.

In less purely political terms, the round-up of July 1942 is striking because of the unusually large number of children deported, and because there exist no known visual documents of the event, except one photograph of a row of buses parked in front of the cycling stadium. This tension between the presence of the Vél d'Hiv round-up in contemporary consciousness and the relative lack of images was intensified when the building was demolished in the 1950s and replaced by an office block belonging to the Interior Ministry.

### Q. What was the significance of the Maurice Papon trial in 1997?

A. As the Secretary General of the Gironde department and supervisor of its Service for Jewish Questions, Papon was responsible for organizing the arrest and deportation of 1,560 Jews. Since he was acting on the orders of René Bousquet, the Secretary General of the police, via the Prefect of the Gironde, Maurice Sabatier, the trial focused not only on the question of Papon's liability but also on his complicity in crimes against humanity, as defined in the Charter of the International Military

Tribunal in Nuremberg of 1945. And unlike the previous trials of Klaus Barbie in 1987, head of the Gestapo in Lyon, and Paul Touvier in 1994, who was acting on orders from the occupying military authorities, Papon was the first French man to be tried who had acted on orders issued by Vichy officials. This convergence of legal and moral issues raised questions such as: Was Papon aware of the consequences of his acts? Should he have disobeyed orders?

Such a highly publicized trial inevitably underscored the exemplary status of one man, an archetypal desktop perpetrator who was not especially ideological, zealous or even brutal, but who, when faced with the choice between duty and conscience, chose the former, motivated either by professional ambition or ethical short-sightedness resulting from the complex chain of responsibilities which often blinds individuals to the consequences of their acts. He did not stand for the regime as such, but for the function of individuals within it. Although trials of this kind are manipulated in the media to ends that distort the historical picture, the didactic value of the trial acquired a reality of its own, as the trial of a bureaucrat and an ethical system.

In social terms, the Papon trial brought a new generation of witnesses into the limelight who were children during the war and had experienced incarceration, deportation, and often traumatic loss at a very early age. The trial thus exposed a remarkable generation gap or lack of symmetry between survivors and perpetrators due to the fact that the number of victims surviving today is far higher than that of perpetrators. This emphasis on victims' accounts effectively reversed their relative absence from the public sphere in the immediate post-war years.

A far-reaching effect of the Papon trial has been debate over the very didactic utility of trials and the epistemological categories in which we are to understand the Second World War and, in particular, the Holocaust. What do trials teach us about the past? A poll carried out by Sofres in 1998 stated that 82 per cent of respondents claimed that they did not learn anything new about the period as a result of the Papon trial. The historian, Henry Rousso, who demonstratively refused to stand as a witness in 1997, argued vociferously that legal proceedings promote too sharp a distinction between perpetrators and victims, between the guilty and the innocent, which detracts from the historical reality and moral complexity in which people found themselves at the time; that sentences appear to repair crimes which by definition cannot be adequately repaired; and that while the emotional nature of judicial debate may lead to public catharsis, it does little to further historical understanding.

This controversy brought to a head a long-term professional dispute between Rousso and the lawyer Serge Klarsfeld, whose indefatigable investigations had brought Vichy officials before the courts since the 1970s. Yet it is also symptomatic of learning processes in an age when historians compete with journalists and lawyers and even writers and artists via the mass media to establish socially accepted narrative models or meanings. Hence the essential significance of the Papon trial is less didactic than heuristic. It exposed some of the problems facing educators today, who deal with increasingly complex means of communication. In this context, Papon symbolized the temptation to contemplate the past in judicial terms, to delegate responsibility to individual figures (as if one person can ' stand for' a historical period) and to detract from the ethical responsibility that we each bear today in the face of the abuse of power and even mass murder.

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