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Laurent Joly

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# Anatomy of a historical falsification. A reading of a recent rant on Vichy and the Holocaust

A discussion of Jean-Marc Berlière, Emmanuel de Chambost, and René Fiévet, *Histoire d'une falsification. Vichy et la Shoah dans l'Histoire officielle et le discours commémoratif*, Paris, L'Artilleur, 2023, 325 pages, ISBN 978-2-8100-1154-4

Laurent JOLY

At the beginning of 2023, a strange book, 325 pages long, appeared in bookshops: *Histoire d'une falsification. Vichy et la Shoah dans l'Histoire officielle et le discours commémoratif* [History of a Falsification. Vichy and the Holocaust in Official History and Commemorative Discourse]. The authors: Jean-Marc Berlière, seventy-five, an emeritus professor of history known for his work on the French police force during the dark years, and two hobby historians, Emmanuel de Chambost (seventy-five, retired engineer) and René Fiévet (seventy-one, former economist), who are active members of the l'Association pour une Histoire Scientifique et Critique de l'Occupation (Committee for a Scientific and Critical History of the Occupation, known as the HSCO association, see pp. 153–169). The publishing house: l'Artilleur, which specializes in the publication of self-declared “non-conformist” essays that aim, for example, to denounce the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)’s supposed lies on climate change or dispute the reality of the genocide against the Tutsi.

The idea for *Histoire d'une falsification* came, we are told, from the authors’ “stupefaction” on hearing Emmanuel Macron’s speech during the commemorations to mark the eightieth anniversary of the Vel d’Hiv Roundup in Paris in July 1942, which led to the deportation and extermination in Auschwitz-Birkenau of more than twelve thousand Jewish men, women, and children, who were first separated and held in atrocious conditions by the French authorities on the orders of a government collaborating with the Nazi occupying forces.

In his speech, the French president evoked the ordeal undergone by the victims, blasted the criminal policies of “the French state of Pétain, Laval, Bousquet, and Darquier de Pellepoix,” and emphasized that “the French

Republic and the French spirit were not in Vichy”<sup>1</sup> but were instead embodied in the police officers who allowed Jews to escape, in the words of Monsignor Saliège (who spoke out publicly against the roundups of foreign Jews on August 23, 1942), and in the heroism of resistance fighters like Daniel Cordier or Lucie Aubrac, without forgetting (in an odd hierarchy) London and General de Gaulle. Ever the catch-all politician, Macron also expressed outrage at the Vichy government’s actions against the Romani, freemasons, and homosexuals, before denouncing the ever-present scourge of anti-Semitism and the falsifications of nationalism.

In short, the memorial speech was, though certainly not the worst, a downright scandal in the eyes of Berlière and his coauthors. Faced with the complicit “silence” and lamentable “capitulation” (p. 15) of “court historians” (p. 17), the trio felt duty-bound to respond!

It is not uncommon for specialists to be offended by the political uses of history and to seek to point out the errors or distortions found in speeches commemorating the deportation of Jews. The 2010s saw a regrettably widening gap between historical reality and the politico-memorial narrative: on July 22, 2012, President Hollande gave a speech that contained not the slightest allusion to the Occupation or Nazism, while on July 16, 2017, President Macron brought everything back to France’s murderous anti-Semitism without mentioning the genocide of the Jews planned by Hitler’s Germany.

In that respect, although the 2022 presidential speech was certainly less problematic, it nevertheless contained numerous approximations and anachronisms that deserve to be analyzed in detail. In contrast to what we might expect, however, *Histoire d'une falsification* does not present a methodical deconstruction of this presidential speech (nor of the previous ones mentioned).

The book opens in a polemical tone lambasting “current right-thinking” and the “manipulation of history” (pp. 9–10). The first and longest part, which is Berlière’s work, is entitled “Putting History back in place” (“Remettre l’Histoire en place”). In a hundred or so pages, the historian presents his interpretation, which he claims is in line with “current knowledge” (p. 19), of the Vichy regime’s anti-Semitic policies and its role in the deportation of Jews. It is to this part that we will pay most attention.

The second section of the book, “When historians become ideologues” (“Quand des historiens deviennent des ideologues”), by de Chambost, is one long polemic: it claims that Robert Paxton and Serge Klarsfeld have elaborated an “accusatory history” of Vichy and the Holocaust that has become hegemonic in the media and the commemorative sphere. Meanwhile, “independent” researchers who speak out against this “doxa” are supposedly condemned to the stake by “court historians” and a new generation of hired specialists (including the author of these lines, who is described as the “Grand Inquisitor,” p. 174).

1. Translator’s note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

The third and final part, “History, memory, and presidential discourse” (“Histoire, mémoire et discours présidentiel”), by Fiévet, is largely devoted to the question of whether the Vichy regime was representative of France. This section, with its sometimes-stimulating analysis, would be the least questionable of the three, did it not betray a bizarre, slightly paranoid and nationalistic turn of mind.<sup>2</sup> Fiévet is also responsible for the incongruous note that concludes *Histoire d'une falsification*: “As we come to the end of this book, the authors must make some confessions: they are French and republican; and they believe it is time to rebalance things and restore meaning to our history” (p. 299).

Having reached this point, readers will no doubt be wondering why anyone should dwell on such a book. But a book like this does not come out of nowhere. It is part of a historiographical tradition around the Vichy regime and its crimes of collaboration that has, over the last few decades and right up to Éric Zemmour’s recent provocations, produced a whole literature seeking to minimize the gravity of its crimes.<sup>3</sup> Zemmour’s sophistic argument that “the Vichy regime protected French Jews and handed over foreign Jews” is, for the authors, a historically “irrefutable” statement (p. 195)! It is thus crucial to identify the movement to which *Histoire d'une falsification* rightly belongs in terms of its intellectual genealogy.

As it happens, the book is misleadingly presented. The presidential speech of July 2022 is just a pretext for the three authors to cast themselves in a favorable light as researchers who “share a deep concern for rigor” and are committed to restoring the full “complexity” of the history of the Vichy regime, going against the grain of the “ideological shift being driven by a few historians.”<sup>4</sup> *Histoire d'une falsification* aims above all to defend the theories of another “active member” of the obscure HSCO association, which comprises around fifteen “independent” researchers studying the Second World War: Alain Michel,

2. For example, the Conseil d'État's decision on April 12, 2002 (sentencing the state to pay half of the damages imposed on the former Vichy Sub-Prefect Maurice Papon in April 1998, at the conclusion of his trial for complicity in crimes against humanity), which is certainly problematic in historical terms, is interpreted as a sign of the deliberate intention of the elites to bring shame upon France and the French people. Likewise, Macron's comments in July 2022, when he opposed Vichy France to the France of the Republic and of London, is equated to the Pétainist theory of the “sword” and the “shield.” Fiévet wants to show that “France was in London, not in Vichy,” as claimed by the great jurist of Free France, René Cassin. That's all well and good. But to try to reconcile this perspective with a reading of Vichy anti-Semitic policies in terms of the theory of the “lesser evil” is an absurd and chaotic mixture of two fundamentally antithetical positions: the dogma of Gaullism and the justification of Vichy.

3. See Laurent Joly, *La falsification de l'Histoire. Éric Zemmour, l'extrême droite, Vichy et les juifs*, edition with a new preface (Paris: Flammarion, 2023).

4. According to the publisher's explanation, which the international journal of the Auschwitz Foundation published without scrutiny in its “To read/ to see/ to follow” section (*Testimony. Between History and Memory* 136 [April 2023]: 158). Similarly, the journal of the Office universitaire de recherche socialiste (OURS) (University Office of Socialist Research) published an article by Jean-Louis Panné (a writer specializing in communism who also fell victim to the deception—or was just lax?) that takes at face value the authors' historical update and their claim of a “history distorted” by “ideological interests.” See Jean-Louis Panné, “Le régime de Vichy et les nazis: quelle collaboration ?,” *Lours*, April 7, 2023, accessed April 2, 2024, [www.lours.org/le-regime-de-vichy-et-les-nazis-quelle-collaboration-par-jean-louis-panne/](http://www.lours.org/le-regime-de-vichy-et-les-nazis-quelle-collaboration-par-jean-louis-panne/)).

born in 1954, a historian and rabbi who lives in Israel and was the inspiration for Zemmour's historically false claims about Vichy France.

Influenced by René de Chambrun (1906–2002), the son-in-law of Pierre Laval, and drawing on biased statistical analyses and almost non-existent archival research, Michel claimed in his 2012 book, *Vichy et la Shoah*, that Pétain's regime “was the principal reason why 75 percent of French Jews survived” and that its leaders' actions “ultimately had more positive than negative consequences”!<sup>5</sup>

Inevitably, this kind of theory, which was lapped up by the intellectual Far Right—from Radio Courtoisie to Éric Zemmour<sup>6</sup>—attracted harsh criticism from experts like Robert Paxton and Jacques Semelin, as well as from myself, in my introduction to the July 2020 edition of the *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah*,<sup>7</sup> for instance. In response, Michel and Berlière (who has also been criticized on scholarly grounds—in a book published in 2018 he presented a similar interpretation to that of *Vichy et la Shoah*),<sup>8</sup> unsuccessfully demanded the publication of “rights of reply,” convinced that “genuine controversy” on the subject is being stifled by “official History” (p. 67). That was the true origin of the tirade published this year by L'Artilleur.

*Histoire d'une falsification* thus poses problems that go to the heart of the discipline of history. How can we distinguish, when building knowledge about the past, between academic controversies, divergent interpretations, and legitimate debate? And, in contrast, how can we distinguish between genuine errors (of fact or interpretation) and ideological manipulation? How, ultimately, can we identify and dismantle a manifestly tainted historical or historiographical argument?

#### FACTUAL ERRORS AND MISLEADING INTERPRETATIONS

The world of historical research is not perfect, but it operates according to a number of principles and rules that make it possible to assess the scholarly value of studies. A work that claims to challenge the established historiography must, therefore, not only subject it to an exhaustive discussion, but also draw on new or hitherto unexploited evidence. This is essential, especially when authors, like those of *Histoire d'une falsification*, claim to be using archives to combat the “manipulation of history” (p. 10) and assert that researchers like

5. Alain Michel, *Vichy et la Shoah. Enquête sur le paradoxe française* (Paris: CLD Éditions, 2012), 355 and 369.

6. Alain Michel took advantage of the CNews polemicist's candidacy to emphasize, in *Causeur* (November 2021), that “the Vichy government wanted to protect all French citizens, including Jews,” and that Zemmour was only “mistaken on one point”: “When he says ‘Pétain saved France's Jews,’ that is inaccurate. It was not Pétain, it was Laval, aided by Bousquet”!

7. Laurent Joly, “Introduction.” *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah* 212 (2020), 11–29, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhsho.212.0011>.

8. Jean-Marc Berlière, *Polices des temps noirs. France, 1939–1945* (Paris: Perrin, 2018).

Robert Paxton or Serge Klarsfeld (who have spent years of their lives working in archive centers and unearthed numerous unexplored collections) put forward theories that are “intellectually and historically untenable” (p. 289). And yet the reader is hard pressed to find any new, unpublished, or neglected sources in this book. . .

Under these conditions, what is the value of the historical claims, supposedly based on “current knowledge,” put forward by the authors? This article will examine just four of these claims.

*The Vichy government’s Law of 3 October 1940 on the status of Jews and the policy of handing over foreign Jews in summer 1942: No link to speak of?*

According to Berlière, there “is [ . . . ] a real consensus among historians that these are two very different things.” Those who claim the contrary are merely “historians transformed into ideologues” (p. 25). Moreover, continues the expert on police history, the very existence of a law concerning the status of Jews proves that “Jews could not be targeted in an arbitrary manner” and illustrates the supposed “paradox” of the Vichy government, “which combined legal persecution with legal protection” (pp. 26–27)!

Only by completely ignoring the work of jurists and legal historians, from Joseph Lubetzki to Danièle Lochak via Dominique Gros, Marc Olivier Baruch, or Philippe Fabre, would it be possible to write something so outrageous about Vichy anti-Semitic legislation, which careful, clear research has shown to be a “monstrous law” that perverted ordinary legal concepts for entirely arbitrary and racist purposes.<sup>9</sup> In short, the opposite of the “paradoxical” laws that at once persecuted and protected, as the three authors claim.

To demonstrate the existence of this “real consensus among historians,” Berlière is reduced to name-dropping distinguished historians (Jean-Pierre Azéma, Philippe Burrin, Marc Ferro, etc.) who have only tangentially (and sometimes inaccurately) touched on the Law on the status of Jews in their work. At the same time, he ignores recent in-depth studies by Barbara Lambauer, Michael Mayer, or Tal Bruttman, that show how the decision to enact the status law was, in Vichy, inextricably linked to the choice to collaborate with Germany and its plans to “de Judaize” the continent of Europe.<sup>10</sup>

In 1940 there was obviously no way of predicting the events of 1942, but the Nazis had very early on announced their intention to “free Europe from the Jews.” To pass a racial law in such a context effectively meant laying the

9. See the important edited volume *Le Droit antisémite de Vichy*, published in the journal *Le Genre humain* 30–31 (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

10. See particularly Barbara Lambauer, “Opportunistischer Antisemitismus. Der deutsche Botschafter Otto Abetz und die Judenverfolgung in Frankreich (1940–1942),” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 53, no. 2 (2005): 241–273, and Michael Mayer, “Wie autonom regierte Vichy? Zur aktuellen Debatte um die Einführung einer antisemitischen Rassengesetzgebung in Frankreich 1940,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 64, no. 1 (2016): 151–164.

groundwork for further concessions. Joseph Billig, the first major historian of state anti-Semitism in occupied France, wrote in 1956 that: “The Vichy Government opened the door for the radical step of the ‘final solution.’ The occupier would no longer have any difficulty in organizing massive roundups in the name of security or reprisals.”<sup>11</sup>

It is nonsense to deny any link between the anti-Semitic legislation of October 1940 and the policy of police collaboration of summer 1942. To do so would be to fail to see that the “Law on the status of Jews” constituted an “overall plan” to turn French and Algerian Jews into second-class citizens (laws of October 3 and 7, 1940, concerning the status of Jews and repealing the Crémieux Decree) and to deprive foreign Jews of liberty with a view to their expulsion (law of October 4, 1940, allowing prefects to imprison foreigners of “Jewish race”).<sup>12</sup> Without actively wanting the death of Jews, Marshal Pétain’s government nevertheless embedded its anti-Semitic policies within the Nazi framework of large-scale deportations. The law of October 4, 1940, gave the occupying forces the legal footing and the pretext they needed to carry out the first roundup of stateless Jews in Paris in May 1941: the first stage of the “final solution” in France. . .

But to point out this historical and historiographical evidence is, in the eyes of Berlière and his friends, to be an “ideologue.” Their ability to twist reality is quite something. If anyone is an “ideological historian,” it is someone who uses a veneer of science to spruce up the neo-Pétainist claim that there was no link between the 1940 Law on the status of Jews and France’s role in the deportations in 1942.

In its most sophisticated version, as formulated by the lawyer Jean-Marc Varaut (1933–2005), this argument consists in admitting the “unjust” nature of the status law in order to better highlight that in 1942, “in defense,” the Vichy government managed to limit the implementation of the “final solution” and save French Jews.<sup>13</sup> Its crudest manifestation is exemplified by Éric Zemmour holding forth on television: “Paxton’s error, and the general error nowadays, is to think that there was a connection between the anti-Semitic laws of October 1940 [. . .] and the final solution and the extermination of the Jews. This is false.”<sup>14</sup>

The ideological agenda here is fairly transparent: to reduce the police collaboration of summer 1942 to a policy driven not by a clearly anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and criminal logic, but by a desire to seek the “lesser evil” and save French Jews in the face of Nazi pressure.

11. Joseph Billig, “La condition des Juifs en France (juillet 1940–août 1944),” *Revue d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale* 24 (1956): 39.

12. See the important studies by Tal Bruttman, *Au bureau des affaires juives. L’administration française et l’application de la législation antisémite (1940–1944)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 29–54, and “Naissance d’une politique antisémite: Vichy, juillet–octobre 1940,” *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah* 212 (2020): 33–57.

13. See for example Jean-Marc Varaut “Le procès Pétain,” *Le Maréchal* 179 (1995): 26.

14. On an episode of “Les terriens du dimanche,” broadcast on *Canal 8*, September 16, 2018.

*Was saving French Jews the principal goal of the police agreements of summer 1942?*

For the authors of *Histoire d'une falsification*, the protection of French Jews was at the heart of the negotiations that took place in June and July 1942 between the Vichy police chief, René Bousquet, and the German police chiefs. In their view, the “compromise” that was reached, which has also been described as a “pact with the devil” (p. 84, quoting Zemmour), enabled the survival of “more than 90 percent” of French Jews (p. 48, 58, 65, 102).

This figure, which the authors hammer home in a bid to convince their readers, is incorrect: in reality, the survival rate among French Jews did not even reach 85 percent, compared to the figure of around 60 percent for foreign Jews. Worse, it is used to support an argument that has little to do with “current knowledge” and much to do with the old rhetoric of the Vichy government.

For example, take what Berlière writes about the decisive meeting on July 2, 1942, when Bousquet, alone against the leading figures of the German police force in France, including SS General Oberg and SS Colonel Knochen, agreed to order the French police to arrest, in occupied France as well as the free zone, as many foreign Jews as the victorious Nazis desired.

For forty years, since Serge Klarsfeld’s revelation of the importance of this meeting,<sup>15</sup> specialists have debated Bousquet’s motivations and margin for maneuver. How and why did the young technocrat, Pierre Laval’s right-hand man, make such a concession? Did he override his Vichy superiors (on the following day, July 3, 1942, Laval assured the Council of Ministers that no such decision had been taken), obsessed as he was by his weeks-long negotiations with Oberg and Knochen regarding the autonomy of the French police force in the occupied zone? Or was he merely carrying out a government policy designed to confirm the regime’s collaboration with Germany and rid France of as many foreign Jews as possible?

These complex questions, which have been the topic of important studies (notably the seminal work by the German political scientist Wolfgang Siebel, *Persecution and Rescue*, 2016)<sup>16</sup> and an academic debate between Klarsfeld and Paxton, are breezily ignored by Berlière, for whom it is all simply “doxa”! For him, the main issue at stake during the meeting on July 2, 1942, was quite simply “the protection of French Jews” (p. 91). The police historian insists that the “autonomy of the French police force” was “not at stake during the negotiation” because Bousquet knew by then that “he had virtually secured it” (pp. 88–89).

One look at the minutes of the meeting, which have been published by Klarsfeld,<sup>17</sup> is sufficient to show that this interpretation is completely untenable.

15. Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz. Le rôle de Vichy dans la solution finale de la question juive en France. 1942* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

16. Wolfgang Siebel, *Persecution and Rescue: The Politics of the “Final Solution” in France, 1940–1944*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

17. Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz*, 227–32.

Before reaching the final point on the agenda, entitled "Special police" (in other words the arrests of Jews), the Germans and the secretary general to the Vichy police force addressed several matters, all related to the first point ("Agreement with the French police"). General Oberg declared that Bousquet's suggestions "with a view to an agreement" had been "read with interest" but that they were "nevertheless still being reviewed." The French police force's autonomy was thus far from secured. On the contrary, it was being used as bait. The following points were then discussed: "2. Police schools"; "3. Groupes mobiles de reserve (mobile reserve groups); "4. Protection of the rail network"; "5. Paris fire brigade"; "6. "Gendarmerie"; and finally, "7. Special police."

This last point is by far the most important. Faced with France's reluctance to conduct large-scale operations in the occupied zone ("only the involvement of the French police was 'awkward,'" summarizes Bousquet, who had "nothing against the arrests themselves"), Colonel Knochen invoked Hitler's firm desire to find a "definitive solution to the Jewish question": "If the French government obstructed the arrests, the Führer would certainly not be sympathetic." Under pressure, and with so much at stake for the future of Franco-German relations, the Vichy police chief accepted "the following arrangement: since, following the Marshal's intervention, there was at that time no question of arresting Jews of French nationality, Bousquet declared his willingness to arrest as many Jews of foreign nationality as we wished anywhere in French territory in the course of a unified operation." He also emphasized "that it was, as far as the French government was concerned, a completely unprecedented action and that the government was aware of the difficulties it would cause."<sup>18</sup>

To put it another way, Bousquet indicated that the concession he was being asked to make was immensely costly and that his government was expecting a political advantage in return. In fact, the expected "difficulties" did not, as might seem likely after the fact, concern public opinion or the views of the administrative services. Rather, the young technocrat evoked the "difficulty" encountered in "handling the Jewish question in Africa" because of the obstacles posed by the Italian authorities, before dwelling on his complicated relationship with the commissioner-general for Jewish affairs, Darquier de Pellepoix. In short, Bousquet adhered closely to the political line taken by Pierre Laval, who in July 1942 was still hoping that France would eventually, thanks to his diplomatic genius, supplant Italy as the second power in a Europe dominated permanently by Nazi Germany. He also stubbornly pursued his project to reduce the influence of parallel bodies within the state apparatus, which had been one of his obsessions since taking over as head of the French police in April 1942.

Thus, only someone who had not read the minutes in detail could dare to affirm, going against all historical research since Serge Klarsfeld, that the meeting on July 2, 1942, was "a trade-off between the 'handing over of

18. Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz*, 231.

foreign Jews and the protection of the French Jews.’ That was the meaning of the ‘agreement’” (p. 90, our emphasis on the euphemistic turn of phrase). In reality, however, Bousquet, caught in the web of collaboration and his police negotiations, promised to hand over *all* foreign Jews, while the German leaders did not hide the fact that French Jews were being only temporarily spared.

But this seems to be Berlière’s way of working: taking documents that Klarsfeld has painstakingly collected, edited, and analyzed and making them express ideas that are different from, or even the complete opposite of, their intended meaning.

For example, in order to prove that Laval was unaware of the systematic murder of deported Jews,<sup>19</sup> Berlière thinks it appropriate to cast suspicion on the formal protest addressed by the Israelite Central Consistory of France to the head of government on August 25, 1942:

The Central Consistory can have no doubt about the final fate that awaits those deported once they have undergone terrible suffering [. . .]. It has been established by detailed, consistent reports that several hundred thousand Jews have been massacred in Eastern Europe (quoted on p. 52).

Noting a statement by a witness claiming that Jacques Helbronner, the president of the Consistory, had confided the following year that he did not believe Jews were being murdered in the East, Berlière argues that “his incredulity in 1943 raises doubts about what he peremptorily asserted in 1942” (p. 53). In reality, Helbronner was absent then and did not play a part in drafting the Consistory’s protest, which was finalized in two sessions on August 23 and 24, 1942, the minutes of which, published by Klarsfeld,<sup>20</sup> clearly reveal the heightened emotions of those present. There was thus no “peremptory assertion,” but rather an acute intuition that a horrifying tragedy was taking place...<sup>21</sup>

*Were the “refusals” of September 1942 and August 1943  
a continuation of the Laval-Bousquet policy?*

In fact, every aspect of Berlière’s argument seems to be an attempt to minimize the reality of the Vichy government’s criminal policy in summer 1942.

Regarding the German demand in June 1942 for the deportation of forty thousand Jewish women and men of working age, he presents the situation

19. Even if he did not know about the gas chambers, everything suggests that, like Bousquet, he could not have been unaware of the criminal nature of the Nazi policy and that he simply chose to deny it.

20. Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz*, 358–61.

21. Two days earlier, one of those present at this Consistory meeting (Roger Olchanski, its appointed vice-president) wrote a distraught letter to a member of Pétain’s civil cabinet denouncing the “inhuman acts” and “atrocious forms of execution ‘forced upon them [by the Nazis]’—we want to believe it”: “These pitiful creatures—including children and the elderly—are crammed into cattle wagons under the watchful eye of armed Gardes mobiles for an eighteen-day journey. To where? . . . To death. And after how much suffering? Can France continue to commit such atrocities, even when ‘forced’ to do so?” From a copy of this letter, dated August 21, 1942, sent in the 1960s by Olchanski to Henri Amouroux (Service historique de la défense, Vincennes, Amouroux collection, PA94 326).

as follows: obliged by the Armistice agreement to comply, Pierre Laval, the “realistic” and “calculating” head of government, sought a “fallback position” (p. 89) consisting of handing over foreign Jews in order to save French Jews. The argument is familiar: “He only stopped defending foreign Jews [ . . . ] to protect French Jews,” wrote Laval’s daughter, Josée de Chambrun, to the Pétainist writer Alfred Fabre-Luce in 1946.<sup>22</sup> Berlière merely adds, as if in passing: “This position, incidentally, was in line with his xenophobic policy toward foreign Jews” (p. 89).

The whole art of minimization lies in that “incidentally.” The crux of the matter is this: it was precisely because the Laval-Pétain government wanted to get rid of foreign Jews that it submitted so readily to the occupying forces’ demands in summer 1942 instead of using the legal means available to them (the Hague Convention, but also the Armistice agreement, no provision of which entitled the occupying forces to demand the handover of women and children to be brutally deported) to resist those demands, which would have served to delay proceedings and buy time.

But Berlière never imagines that any other policy could have been possible. In contrast, his entire argument relies on a second flawed premise: that the protection of French Jews was not just the central concern of Laval and Bousquet in July 1942, but was also the aim of the head of government when, in September 1942, following protests from bishops in the southern zone, he asked the occupying forces to suspend the deportation of naturalized Jews—“Laval persisted in his refusal,” writes Berlière (p. 105)—, and again, in August 1943, when he definitively abandoned the collective denaturalization of Jews (which he had signed a few weeks earlier).

Completely ignoring the context, Berlière delivers his lessons on method: the historian is not a judge, he must describe what happened and not slip into historical fiction, and so on. But what he himself describes is not actually what happened in 1942, but a version of the 1942 reality that was revised after 1945.

It is worth remembering what else was going on in summer 1942. At the beginning of July, the Third Reich and its allies had the wind in their sails: the German army was on the offensive on the Eastern Front, Rommel’s troops were advancing steadily in Egypt, and the Japanese were bombing Australia. On July 3, the BBC broadcast a speech by de Gaulle that opened with the following words: “It would be weak-minded to wrap ourselves up now in forced optimism.”

The decisions taken at the very beginning of July 1942 by Bousquet and Laval, with the approval of Marshal Pétain, which cannot be understood in isolation from this highly favorable context for the Nazis, implicitly ruled out two possibilities: the hypothesis of a negative response from the public, and the hypothesis of a military defeat for Germany.

22. Archives nationales (Pierrefitte, hereafter AN), Alfred Fabre-Luce collection, letter from Josée de Chambrun to Fabre-Luce, December 18, 1946.

The minutes from the session of the Council of Ministers on July 3 are revealing in that respect. As has been said, Laval did not dare inform his colleagues that the costly decision to hand over tens of thousands of foreign Jews had been taken on the previous day by his young police chief. He referred to a “refusal” and started introducing language designed to camouflage the crime being prepared:

We must distinguish between French Jews and the trash sent here by the Germans themselves. The German government intends to create a Jewish state in Eastern Europe. It would not be dishonorable for me to send the innumerable foreign Jews currently in France to that Jewish state someday. I am raising the question, not demanding a decision. I am merely taking a census of the Jews in France since September 1, 1939.

Marshal Pétain responded that “he felt the distinction was fair and would be understood by the public.”

On July 4, 1942, in Paris, Bousquet hurried to tell Colonel Knochen that Pétain and Laval had given their consent for the “evacuation, initially, of all stateless Jews currently living in the occupied and non-occupied zones.” What zeal, what haste!

All the available sources and contemporary accounts show that the head of government and the secretary general to the police assumed full responsibility for the policy they were implementing: “France will be no worse off [ . . . ]. Time will prove us right”<sup>23</sup>; “The alignment of the French Jewish problem with the German Jewish problem [...] will bring us nothing but benefits”<sup>24</sup>; “I’m hitting them hard so they understand. I’ve eliminated thirteen thousand of them and will keep going until they settle down.”<sup>25</sup>

So said Laval and Bousquet in summer 1942.

As it turned out, their political predictions were very quickly shown to be incorrect. On one hand, the public in the occupied and free zones were deeply shocked by the roundups targeting women and children on a scale that nobody (starting with the Vichy leaders) had suspected. This is clear from all reports on public opinion by the prefects and the Renseignements Généraux (the police intelligence service). It has also been confirmed by all studies by specialists from Pierre Laborie to Renée Poznanski. Moreover, in fall 1942 the Third Reich started to experience serious military setbacks. In summer 1943, with the Allied landing in Sicily and the fall of Mussolini, there was no longer any doubt that Germany was incapable of winning the war.

23. Comment by Bousquet in response to the director general of the Fédération des amicales des anciens engagés volontaires étrangers (Federation of Foreign Volunteers for Military Service), General Goudouneix, who came to plead with him in August 1942 on behalf of his Jewish soldiers: cited by Joseph Ratz, who was present at the meeting, in *La France que je cherchais. Les impressions d’un Russe engagé volontaire en France* (Limoges: Imprimerie A. Bontemps, 1945), 176–77.

24. Comment by Laval, reported by his colleague Paul Morand, *Journal de guerre. Londres, Paris, Vichy, 1939–1943*, ed. Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), entry for August 15, 1942, p. 477.

25. Comment by Bousquet reported in Morand, *Journal de guerre*, entry for August 31, 1942, p. 499.

Trapped within his own analytical framework—the Vichy government had no choice but to hand over foreign Jews, and it did its best to save French Jews—, Berlière refuses to seriously consider how the international context affected and altered the policies of Pétain's regime. To do so would be to acknowledge two factual realities that have been robustly established by historians: first, the regime's criminal complicity in the Nazi deportations in summer 1942 was a political choice, rather than the result of intense pressure from the occupying forces; second, the pullbacks in September 1942 and August 1943 were due principally to the Vichy government's awareness of public opinion and the way the war was going.

It is, therefore, with a breathtaking levity, ultimately taking refuge in a footnote, that Berlière tackles the “turning point” of summer 1943.

After November 1942 and the Allied landing in North Africa, when Vichy France was no more than a rump state—deprived of its sovereignty (the free zone had been subsumed), its empire (the second-largest in the world), its Armistice Army (one hundred thousand men), and its navy—its leader, Laval, was still able to outright refuse a German demand that was just as costly and criminal as that of the previous year: to deliver, after stripping them of their French status, tens of thousands of Jews for deportation.

Berlière surreptitiously comments (inaccurately attributing the analysis of this “turning point” to the Israeli historian Asher Cohen, when in reality it was Serge Klarsfeld who presented it in the second volume of *Vichy-Auschwitz* in 1985): “The Germans, who saw the French as suppliers rather than collaborators [. . .], took no retaliatory measures following this refusal, thus confirming that France was not Poland and that its contribution to the German war economy was more valuable in their eyes—along with the safety of the troops stationed in France—than the Jewish question” (pp. 112–13).

But what was true in 1943 had been even more so in the previous year. Defenseless before the facts—the Vichy government would have been much better equipped to refuse the occupying forces' demands in the summer of 1942 than in the summer of 1943, had it not been pursuing an anti-Semitic policy in the perspective of a German victory—Berlière is quick to dodge the question: “It is this episode that has led to the bewilderingly naive claim, with no regard for the context, and particularly the military context, that the Vichy government would have been able to refuse the German demands in summer 1942 in the same way” (p. 113, n. 107)!

The authors of *Histoire d'une falsification* are convinced that the margin of autonomy afforded to the Vichy government made it possible to limit the scale of the “final solution” in France. But the numbers say the opposite: it was precisely when the Vichy regime had most sovereignty that most Jews were deported: thirty-six thousand men, women, and children, almost half the total number of the entire Holocaust in France, were sent to Auschwitz in just four months, from July 17 to November 11, 1942, as a result of the Bousquet-Knochen agreement that Berlière calls a “compromise.”

*Is it "dishonest" to mention the French nationality of the children in the Vel d'Hiv Roundup?*

We could stop there, but there is one more point to be examined, which is touched on in their own way by Berlière and his two friends: the tragedy of the Vel d'Hiv children. The facts are well known, but they deserve to be recalled in all their brutality.

When, on July 2 and 4, 1942, Bousquet diligently committed to deliver all foreign Jews living in French territory to the occupying forces, he probably did not imagine the human consequences of that decision. As an unempathetic technocrat, convinced he was implementing a high-caliber policy, the secretary general to the police had only a vague, inaccurate idea of the population in question: refugees who had recently arrived in France (remember that Laval referred specifically to Jews who had arrived after 1939 at the Council of Ministers on July 3, 1942), "undesirables," black market traffickers, and so on. But the roundup on July 16 and 17 in Paris, Bousquet's principal objective, would reveal a very different reality to the anti-Semitic and xenophobic stereotypes in vogue in Vichy France: the vast majority of the nine thousand or so men and women arrested were not refugees or illegal migrants but perfectly legal immigrants, many of whom had been living in France for a long time, and they had children (four thousand arrested), most of whom had been born in Paris and were French. At that time, the 1927 law on nationality allowed any foreigner to "declare" that his or her children had been born in France. This act of naturalization made the children irrevocably French: "definitively" in the official language. The Vichy government did not repeal this provision. Instead, it delivered thousands of French nationals, children who had been born and educated in France, to the occupying forces, and so added an additional, indefensible aspect to the crime perpetrated at the instigation of the German authorities.

For logistic reasons that were kept secret (the crematoria were still under construction at Auschwitz-Birkenau and could not yet accommodate the expected numbers of deportees from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands), the Nazis only asked for working-age adults in July 1942. This represented a loophole that would have made it possible to save a considerable number of victims. But, in contrast to the operations carried out in parallel in the provinces (around a thousand stateless men and women were arrested in Angoulême, Bordeaux, Dijon, Rennes, etc., around July 15, 1942), the arrests in Paris included children. This led to a criminal chain of events with consequences unique in Western Europe: the hell of Vel d'Hiv (four thousand children confined along with four thousand adults), the awful separations at Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande, the convoys of children sent to Auschwitz in a state of extreme physiological distress mixed in among adults they did not know.

This is the reality of the agreement between Bousquet and Knochen, the reality of the famous "compromise," which, far from saving French Jews, sent

around three thousand of them off to their deaths in summer 1942. Vichy France never sacrificed so many French citizens as during the Vel d'Hiv Roundup!

This is the reality that Berlière and his friends strive, time and again, to minimize. Once more taking refuge in a footnote, the police historian casts doubt on the French nationality of the children born to foreigners on French soil. Clearly unaware that any foreigner could “declare” his or her child to have been born in France, he gets lost in misguided considerations of the provisions of the law of 1927, before concluding that nobody has ever carried out a “detailed analysis” (p. 58, n. 51) to determine whether the deported children born in France were indeed French. Nevertheless, we know from Klarsfeld’s work, as well as countless eyewitness accounts and more recent research, that the vast majority of children born in Paris did have definitive French nationality: in fact, more than 75 percent of the children targeted by the roundup on July 16 and 17, 1942, were French.<sup>26</sup>

Thanking “Alain Michel for this reminder,” (p. 58, n. 51), Berlière leaves it to de Chambost to deliver the coup de grâce in the second section of the book. De Chambost argues that Klarsfeld is “bordering on intellectual dishonesty” when he claims that the Vichy government did not save French Jews in summer 1942, because he “knows perfectly well that they were condemned because they were the children of foreign Jews incarcerated following the ‘roundup’ and that their nationality (French or otherwise) had no bearing on their fate” (p. 136). But that is precisely the problem. And de Chambost, pointing the finger at me and my research into the Vel d’Hiv Roundup, concludes shamelessly:

Note the specious, even sordid way that Laurent Joly uses the children’s tragic fate to justify the claim that French Jews were not protected and turn it into a false generality [. . .]. In contemporary jargon, this kind of thing is known as manipulation. Nevertheless, he [Joly] is well aware that these children were only deported because they had foreign parents and that their nationality (French or otherwise) had no impact on their fate (pp. 210–11).

Regrettably, Jean-Pierre Rosenczveig, a well-known judge and former president of the Bobigny juvenile court, expressed unreserved praise for *Histoire d’une falsification* on his blog, hosted by LeMonde.fr, writing: “Is the right to History not a fundamental right of children?”<sup>27</sup>

Examined in detail like this, the book serves as a case study for understanding and illustrating the difference between a work that circumvents the usual rules of the historian’s profession (which it nevertheless invokes repeatedly)<sup>28</sup> for ideological purposes, and a work that adds to academic knowledge (or contributes elements of interest to the historical debate).

26. See Laurent Joly, *La Rafle du Vel d’Hiv. Paris, juillet 1942* (Paris: Grasset, 2022).

27. Jean-Pierre Rosenczveig, “‘Histoire d’une falsification’ (853),” *Le Monde*, March 19, 2023, accessed [www.lemonde.fr/blog/jprosen/2023/03/19/histoire-dune-fasfication/](http://www.lemonde.fr/blog/jprosen/2023/03/19/histoire-dune-fasfication/).

28. The authors repeatedly state their principles, declaring their opposition to any kind of “reductive and simplistic Manicheism” (p. 19) and “commitment” to the “ethical code” of the historian, which consists of “a tenacious quest for the truth” (p. 17), “reestablishing historical truth” (p. 287), and restoring “the simple truth with which history presents us” (p. 291), and so on.

The exact intellectual lineage with which this kind of book and argumentation can be associated remains to be identified. To do so, we must take a historiographical and memorial trip back in time.

### THE REINCARNATIONS OF THE PÉTAINIST “SHIELD” THEORY

Rejected by public opinion and swept away by the Liberation, the Vichy regime retained some obstinate, avid defenders for decades afterward. They were rarely heard on public radio and almost never seen on screens, but they had access to the press and published newspapers (*Aspects de la France* or *Rivarol*), journals (*Écrits de Paris*, *Le Monde et la Vie*, etc.), and books.

Time and again, these former ministers under Marshal Pétain, lawyers, or writers who had survived the purge, took up the self-serving arguments furnished in the great post-war trials and adapted them to the turbulent political atmosphere of the Fourth and Fifth republics. The theory of the “sword” and the “shield” (the former representing de Gaulle in London, the latter representing Pétain in Vichy) and the axiom of the “lesser evil” encompassed an inexhaustible repertoire of arguments supposedly intended to “reconcile the French people.”

At the beginning of the 1970s, the emergence of the “Jewish memory” of the Occupation did not put Vichy apologists off their stride: their case had been fully formed since 1945.

#### *The Fabre-Luce case (1971–1979)*

In 1971, in the first public controversy around “Vichy and the Jews” that followed the theatrical release of Marcel Ophuls’s shock documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Pétainist writer Alfred Fabre-Luce (1899–1983) claimed in *Le Monde* that “the vast majority of French Jews (95 percent) survived thanks to [. . .] Pétain,”<sup>29</sup> before presenting the false “shield” theory as historically settled:

The Vichy government, despite feeling no sympathy for the Jews, nevertheless in general strove to protect all French citizens from the worst abuses of the occupying forces, including Jewish citizens. [. . .]

Historians find themselves faced with a paradox: the French government (of Laval) that agreed to the despicable handovers of foreign Jews is also the government that, at the hour of supreme peril, saved the entire French Jewish community from the threat of mass deportation.<sup>30</sup>

29. Alfred Fabre-Luce, “Autour de deux films. Morale et cinéma,” *Le Monde*, May 13, 1971, accessed [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1971/05/13/autour-de-deux-films-morale-et-cinema\\_3065380\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1971/05/13/autour-de-deux-films-morale-et-cinema_3065380_1819218.html).

30. Alfred Fabre-Luce, “La réponse de M. Fabre-Luce,” *Le Monde*, June 8, 1971.

At the end of the decade, in 1979, Fabre-Luce published a polemical essay, *Pour en finir avec l'antisémitisme* [Putting an End to Anti-Semitism]. The title has a strange ring to it, with hints of denial and inversion (the same could be said of *Histoire d'une falsification*). Ever since *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which was followed in 1973 by the momentous publication of the American historian Robert Paxton's book *Vichy France* and then, in 1978, by the start of Serge Klarsfeld's campaign to ensure "judgment for the anti-Jewish policies of the Vichy regime," Fabre-Luce had been observing, with a gaze at once acute, perverse, and irate, an evolution in attitudes to the France of the dark years. Following the Darquier de Pellepoix affair (a scandal provoked by an interview with the former Vichy commissioner-general for Jewish affairs that appeared in *L'Express* in October 1978) and then the accusations against two senior officials who had been in charge of the French police force in 1942—René Bousquet (1909–1993) and his former right-hand man, Jean Leguay (1909–1989), who were indicted in March 1979 for complicity in crimes against humanity—Fabre-Luce therefore decided to write a book arguing the case for the need to "review the history of the Occupation."<sup>31</sup>

"From 1973, what could be called a historians' lobby appeared and attempted to present the French people with a history of their war years seen through a Jewish prism," he complained in *Pour en finir avec l'antisémitisme*, convinced that the "black-and-white version of History" pushed by media "propaganda" under the influence of the Paxton-Klarsfeld "lobby" was "in conflict with the natural feelings of the French people."<sup>32</sup> Reprising the usual arguments of the "shield" and the "lesser evil," Fabre-Luce rushed to defend Bousquet, the main target of Klarsfeld's campaign: the former Vichy police chief, he asserted, "clearly sought to limit the persecution" and to "save French Jews."<sup>33</sup>

In the context of 1979, such a book was bound to arouse consternation and, against Fabre-Luce's wild expectations, to convince only those already in Pétainist circles, which had by then almost entirely faded away.<sup>34</sup> It was a time of growing awareness and reasoned intellectual consensus. While *Vichy France* provoked lively controversy when it was published in 1973, *Vichy France and the Jews*, coauthored in 1981 by Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, was met with unanimous approval.<sup>35</sup> Times had changed. Fabre-Luce himself struggled to find faults in their masterwork and was reduced to outlining the following sophism in *Le Figaro*: because fascist Italy had protected its Jewish citizens better than the Vichy regime, more victims would therefore have been

31. Alfred Fabre-Luce, *Pour en finir avec l'antisémitisme* (Paris: Juillard, 1979), 134.

32. Fabre-Luce, *Pour en finir*, 61 and 134.

33. Fabre-Luce, *Pour en finir*, 93 and 100.

34. See Joly, *La Falsification*, 104–105.

35. Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

saved in France if Pétain and Laval had been more closely aligned with Nazi Germany!<sup>36</sup>

At the beginning of the 1980s, the theory of the “shield” and its twin, the “lesser evil,” seemed to have been definitely consigned to the shelf of outdated ideas. Even Henri Amouroux joined the mainstream in his bestseller *Les passions et les haines*, which appeared in 1981: on the subject of the Vichy government’s responsibility for the deportation of Jews, the *Figaro*’s favorite historian presented a similar analysis to that of the experts, from the pioneering works of Joseph Billig in the 1950s to the more recent studies of Klarsfeld and Paxton.<sup>37</sup>

Fabre-Luce, in truth, was a transitional figure. Author of Pétainist texts under the Occupation, he was not closely associated with Vichyist circles after the war, despite having numerous friends there. He was above all an omnivorous essayist, always on the lookout for topical subjects. In fact, *Pour en finir avec l’antisémitisme* presaged a new memorial regime that Fabre-Luce had noticed and desperately attempted to ward off: that of the 1980s and 1990s, haunted by Vichy and the Holocaust, which consisted of legal cases against former French state officials as well as public controversies, principally to do with President Mitterrand’s ambiguous relationship to the Pétainist regime (which he himself had served as a young man before joining the Resistance in 1943).<sup>38</sup>

### *Historians irritated by the “Jewish memory” of Vichy France*

The historian Henry Rousso analyzed this change practically in real time in *The Vichy Syndrome* and *Vichy, An Ever-present Past*.<sup>39</sup> One of the features of this new memorial regime was the resurgence, toward the end of the 1980s, of an intellectual reaction that recycled old Vichyist justifications. Interestingly, this reactionary movement, galvanized by the vociferous claims of “Jewish memory” activists, was no longer the preserve of Pétainist or related figures (like Fabre-Luce), who now definitively belonged to another era, but of conservative journalists and historians, some of whom had been members of the Resistance, and all of whom operated within the orbit of *Le Figaro*.

In 1989, the historian of communism Annie Kriegel (1926–1995), herself a survivor of the Vel d’Hiv Roundup and a former resistance fighter, spoke out against *Vichy France and the Jews* (despite having praised its exceptional

36. Alfred Fabre-Luce, “L’histoire contemporaine progresse,” *Le Figaro*, June 30, 1981.

37. Henri Amouroux, *La grande histoire des Français sous l’occupation*, vol. 5, *Les passions et les haines. Avril–décembre 1942* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981), 178, 199, and 310.

38. See also the excellent article by Denis Charbit, “Pour en finir avec le cas Alfred Fabre-Luce. Ultime apparition d’un antisémitisme suranné ou naissance d’un type nouveau?” *Archives juives* 55, no. 2 (2022): 91–117.

39. Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994); Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

competence a few years previously)<sup>40</sup> and *The Vichy Syndrome*. According to Kriegel, these works, “fundamentally incorrect in their problematic and their perspective” because they did not start “from the root, Nazi Germany,” amounted to “an exploitation of the Holocaust” for “ideological” purposes!<sup>41</sup>

This reproach, which was unfounded (had Kriegel, a researcher with little knowledge of the archives and historiography on Vichy, even read the books she dismissed so peremptorily?), was a disgruntled reaction to the outrageous simplifications of an imprecise, moralizing, even masochistic breed of journalism that was typical of the period and still very much alive today. For example, she became involved in an argument with Bernard Frank in the press, and made no secret of her annoyance at Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, who wrote in *Le Monde* in 1983, “with the best intentions in the world,” that under the Occupation “The sight of our honorable kepis made Jewish children tremble [ . . . ] even more than the gray-green caps.”<sup>42</sup>

Kriegel thus slipped imperceptibly from the register of opinion and emotional reaction to that of historical interpretation, in which she became embroiled at the beginning of the 1990s, with scant scholarly ammunition and to the delight of far-right intellectuals and the last holdouts of Pétainism. In an interview with *Valeurs actuelles* and again in a rather muddled passage in her memoirs, the historian repeated the theory of the “shield” when discussing the Vichy regime’s anti-Jewish policies in 1942.<sup>43</sup>

The widely renowned Henri Amouroux (1920–2007) went down the same route. He, like Kriegel, was perturbed by the way representations of the Vichy regime were becoming increasingly focused on its anti-Semitic crimes. Appalled by President Chirac’s historical speech on July 16, 1995, in which he acknowledged the French state’s responsibility for the deportation of Jews, and irritated by the trial of Maurice Papon (1910–2007), the former minister under Giscard who had served as prefectural secretary general in Vichy France and was condemned in April 1998 to ten years’ imprisonment for his role in the organization of several Jewish convoys, the author of *La grande histoire des Français sous l’occupation* revised his opinion on the matter.

In 1997 and 2005, Amouroux published the two volumes of his definitive work, entitled, echoing Fabre-Luce, *Pour en finir avec Vichy* [Putting an End to Vichy]. Denouncing “the simplification of history by time, by journalists, by historians terrified of not being politically correct,”<sup>44</sup> the venerable historian developed, at length, an analysis partially inspired by the theory of the “lesser evil.” He emphasized the responsibility of the French state in the deportation

40. Annie Kriegel, *Réflexion sur les questions juives* (Paris: Hachette, 1984), 88.

41. Cited by Henry Rousso in *Le Syndrome Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*, 2nd edition (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 25.

42. Kriegel, *Réflexion*, 103-104.

43. Annie Kriegel, *Ce que j’ai cru comprendre* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991), 172.

44. Henri Amouroux, *Pour en finir avec Vichy*, vol. 2, *Les Racines et les passions, 1940–1941* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005), 17.

of foreign Jews while praising Pétain's regime for having helped to save others: "equally responsible for using delaying tactics and playing a 'double game' that was useful to 'French Israelites' on several occasions."<sup>45</sup> Too honest and level-headed to fully adopt the Vichyist rhetoric of the rescue of French Jews, he nevertheless ultimately managed, via fairly lengthy detours away from the rigorous examination of the facts (and figures), to equate the crime committed in summer 1942 by the Vichy regime in handing over foreign Jews to the occupying forces with the additional crime that would have consisted in handing over French Jews with the same enthusiasm. This blatant logical error inevitably led him to minimize the true extent and origins of the Vichy regime's anti-Semitic policies.

*"Amateur historians" against "official History"*

The impassioned memorial and legal context of the 1980s and 1990s produced reactionary tensions and, in some cases, intellectual confusion. Inevitably, too, media coverage of these matters further wound up disturbed minds, historical obsessives, obscure brooders, and tireless letter-writers.

One Albert Ley (1922–2005), "amateur historian," card-carrying "refractory patriot on the issue of the de facto annexation of Alsace," and tax administration official, addressed endless missives to figures from the Resistance, historians, journalists, and prominent intellectuals. In 1979, inspired by Fabre-Luce, he implored Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, a columnist at *Le Monde*, to "move away from this Manichean [black-and-white] history."<sup>46</sup> Fighting his corner against Robert Paxton, and with ties to remaining Pétainist groups, he floated the idea of an "Association for the understanding of the history of 1939–1945" at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>47</sup> In 1983, he saw the indictment of Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity as an "unexpected opportunity to [. . .] tear down the wall of silence that has, for forty years, prevented any proper study of the problems facing a responsible government"—whose strategy, in this case, consisted of sacrificing foreign Jews in order to save French Jews. . .

Ley was not an isolated example. In 1997, on the eve of the Papon trial, a "Group of Independent Historians" was formed in order to "distinguish the truth of the matter from the morass of more or less biased information circulating these days." And to clarify, in an "open letter" addressed to the Keeper of the Seals, Élisabeth Guigou, that "France has nothing to feel ashamed of," that the Vichy government did its best to protect French Jews, and that those deported

45. Amouroux, *Pour en finir*, vol. 2, *Les Racines*, 559.

46. AN, 72AJ3207, Louis-Dominique Girard collection, copy of a letter from Albert Ley to Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, January 7, 1979.

47. "Association pour la compréhension de l'Histoire de 1939 à 1945." See AN, 72AJ3207, copy of a letter from Albert Ley to Georges Lamirand, March 27, 1982.

did not know that death awaited them at the end of the journey; as for Maurice Papon, his actions during the Occupation consisted of “avoiding the worst.” And finally, to conclude, among other absurdities, that: “For us, it is not a matter of judging people but of offering contemporary history an impartial account.”

Such phrases abound in the *Histoire d'une falsification* under the pen of Berlière and his comrades at the HSCO association. Of course, 2023 is not 1983. The key players are different. Nevertheless, the intellectual motivations and attitudes remain similar. Once again, we have a veteran historian irritated by changing memorial habits and media simplifications. Once again, we have an obscure group of amateur researchers claiming they can show “official History” a thing or two about academic research. Once again, we are witnessing a more or less blatant—and more or less conscious—recycling of Vichyist justifications that date back to the trials following Liberation. And finally, once again, we are witnessing the inevitable culmination of the recovery of the intellectual Far Right and the last bulwarks of militant Pétainism.<sup>48</sup>

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To conclude this lengthy critique, we can identify at least two elements that indicate flawed historical or historiographical reasoning.

First, the use of terms like “doxa” or “official history” is a telltale sign. These kinds of words, this kind of claim (“Putting history back in place”) are typical of fallacious arguments. In democratic regimes, the scholarly understanding of history does not work like that. There is no “truth” that must be “put back in place” or “set right” because it has been “twisted” by “official” historians and “ideologues.” There is a cumulative store of knowledge that is updated bit by bit, and when a work has a big impact, like *Vichy France* in 1973, that is normally because the ground has been prepared by others, because the time is “ripe.” In fact, the idea that there is a “historical school launched by Robert Paxton’s work” (p. 223–24) is a complete myth: on the contrary, “Robert Paxton’s work” follows in the wake of the pioneering studies of the 1950s and 1960s by Joseph Billig, Henri Michel, or Eberhard Jäckel. Moreover, even before Paxton published his books, Admiral Auphan, a former minister under Pétain and author of a *Histoire élémentaire de Vichy*,<sup>49</sup> was already attacking “official history” . . .

48. Berlière, Chambost, and Fiévet’s book features in the “Recommended reading” section on the website of the Association pour Défendre la Mémoire du Maréchal Pétain (ADMP) (Association to Defend the Memory of Marshal Pétain), founded in 1951 and still active online, among a handful of other works, including *Pétain et De Gaulle. Une part de vérité* by Michel Issaverdens, which proposes to “refute certain widespread lies about Marshal Pétain”; and a collection, *La Révolution nationale. Quand le Maréchal parle aux Français!*, which aims not just to respond to the “insults and slanders regularly directed at the Marshal,” but also, and above all, to publicize “the principles of the National Revolution” in order to “rebuild an ordered, organic, and hierarchical society, free of the liberalism, materialism, and hedonism that prevail today.” See “Lectures conseillées,” ADMP official website, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://marechalpetain.com/category/lectures/>.

49. Paul Auphan, *Histoire élémentaire de Vichy* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1971).

The second (almost infallible) indicator is the work's reception. If a book, as is the case for *Histoire d'une falsification*, is only approved by isolated non-specialists or in specific political circles (in this case populist and far-right), that is a clear sign that it does not meet the expected standards of the academic world, or even that it has deliberately turned its back on them. This seems to be the path chosen by Berlière, who, in the past, authored pioneering works on the French police force,<sup>50</sup> has in the last decade or so assumed the garb of a vengeful polemicist.<sup>51</sup>

**Laurent Joly**

*Centre de Recherches Historiques (CRH) (Center for Historical Studies), UMR 8556,  
a research unit for the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) (French  
National Centre for Scientific Research) and École des Hautes Études en Sciences  
Sociales (EHESS) (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences)  
54 boulevard Raspail  
75006 Paris  
laurent.joly@ehess.fr*

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Translator: Isabelle Chaize, Editor: Sophie Borresen,  
Senior Editor: Mark Mellor

50. For example, Jean-Marc Berlière, *Le Monde des polices en France XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1996), 275; or Jean-Marc Berlière, “L'impossible pérennité de la police républicaine sous l'Occupation,” *Vingtième siècle* 94, no. 2 (2007): 183–198; whose analyses of the Vichy regime's anti-Jewish policies reflect the latest research at the time they were written, particularly when it comes to Bousquet's role.

51. See for example his article “Vichy et les juifs: Zemmour/Klarsfeld/Paxton au(x) risqué(s) de l'Histoire?” in *Lettre aux amis de la police (et de la gendarmerie!)*, which he published on the internet (January 2015, accessed [http://siteedc.edechambost.net/Paxton/Texte\\_Berliere\\_jan\\_2015.pdf](http://siteedc.edechambost.net/Paxton/Texte_Berliere_jan_2015.pdf)), or his opinion pieces on the Vel d'Hiv Roundup published online, “Commémoration du ‘vel' d'hiv’” ou l'histoire assassinée,” *Front Populaire*, August 12, 2022, [https://frontpopulaire.fr/opinions/contents/commemoration-du-vel-dhiv-ou-lhistoire-assassinee\\_co13481083](https://frontpopulaire.fr/opinions/contents/commemoration-du-vel-dhiv-ou-lhistoire-assassinee_co13481083); and “La ‘raffe du vel' d'hiv' vue par les médias et les politiques: c'est l'histoire qu'on assassine! Suite et fin,” *Causeur*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.causeur.fr/la-raffe-du-vel-dhiv-vue-par-les-medias-et-les-politiques-cest-lhistoire-quot-assassine-suite-et-fin-239642>.