Introduction

"It is good that a nation have a tradition and a sense of honor strong enough to find the courage to denounce its own mistakes. But it should not forget the reasons it might still have to value itself." Formulated at the time of the Algerian War, this observation by the French writer Albert Camus applies with particular pertinence to the memory of World War II. Revisiting the tragedies France experienced during the dark years, an honest observer cannot help but be distressed by and condemnatory of the unscrupulous Vichy government. Imposing an authoritarian regime; collaborating with the Third Reich; handing over German political refugees, Jews, Resistance fighters, and opponents of the occupying power; and greeting the Allies who had come to liberate North Africa with cannon fire, the French state under Marshal Pétain—an aggravating circumstance—found the necessary cooperation in both French society and the French administration to carry out its dirty work. At the same time, however, a fraction of the country refused the choices dictated by so-called realism. Continuing the battle by responding to Charles de Gaulle's appeal launched on June 18, 1940, developing a resistance in France that gained depth over time, the sounder part of the population, in the shadows, helped to save 75 percent of the Jews of France, refused en masse the Compulsory Labor Service (Service du travail obligatoire, or STO), and often opposed the arrogance of the occupying forces by the "silence of the sea," to adopt the title of the celebrated book by Vercors.

The memory of World War II bears the stamp of that ambivalence, an ambivalence that was able simultaneously to commune in the masochistic denunciation of past aberrations and celebrate with pomp the grandeur of heroes, humble or famous, who against all odds saved the national honor and contributed to victory.

This observation suggests the magnitude of the problems connected to the definition of the French memory of World War II. Boundary disputes raise a first question at the outset: how should the term be defined. For the "memory of the war" in fact covers three distinct phenomena. It refers in the first place to the experience of the war, a war, it hardly needs saying, that only briefly affected metropolitan France: aside from Allied bombing and military confrontations between Resistance fighters and the repressive forces (for example, in le maquis du Vercors), France was exposed to the violence of arms only in May and June 1940, and then from the summer of 1944 on, when Allied troops landed in Normandy and later in Provence. At the risk of exaggerating, the experience of forty million French people between 1940 and 1945 was anything but an experience of war. But the French did suffer—this is the second aspect of this memory—under the yoke of an occupation, first of northern France (occupied zone and forbidden zone—the Nord-Pas-de-Calais was attached to the German administration in Brussels and Alsace-Lorraine was de facto annexed to Germany), and then after November 11, 1942, to all of metropolitan France. Although the German yoke was characterized by its brutality, it appears to have more closely resembled—all things being equal—occupations suffered over the centuries by territories ruled by a merciless conqueror than a "brutalization" following battle. The French, finally, bore for four years the iron rule of the Vichy state. For the first time in the history of the nation the extreme right came to power and, under cover of the National Revolution, was intent on applying its program, seconded by some men from the traditional right and even some from the left. Born of defeat and a product of the war, the regime of Philippe Pétain, through the conditions of its birth and in order to perpetuate itself, tied its fate to that of the Third Reich, which it accompanied in retreat to Sigmaringen. It did not, however, intend to slavishly copy the Nazi model. Drawing its inspiration from the legacy of the reactionary and revolutionary right, adopting the men and ideas of the interwar period, its roots lay deep in French soil that made it more or less explicitly impossible to imitate Il Duce or Der Führer.

Historians have not always distinguished among these three aspects, bringing together under the vague terms *dark years*, *black years*, and sometimes *shady years* (the list could go on indefinitely) the period from 1940 to 1944. But everything encourages us to dissociate them—except in terms of memory. For although scholarship can allow itself to separate these different levels of analysis, the French, subjected to roundups, bombing, shortages, and authoritarianism, don't bother with these subtleties, blending the memory of their days into a single whole.

The memory experienced by the mass of the population, that is, all the representations forged after the fact by the state, political parties, associations, and individuals, linked these three aspects together from the outset. And memorial policies carried out by institutions—the state, municipalities, associations—put them together just as much. At the top of the pyramid the government simultaneously had to eliminate the aftereffects of the war, the Occupation, and the Vichy regime—the "four years to erase from our history," in the words of the prosecutor André Mornet at the trial of Philippe Pétain. First it had to eliminate the supporters of the old regime, black sheep whose disloyalty to the Republic had worsened the condition of millions of the French and betrayed the humanist principles of the country. It also had to try to remedy the harm the war had caused both to civilians and to soldiers. It had to restore the rights of the recently proscribed, victims of the Occupation and Nazi barbarism. Finally, and perhaps most important, it had to shed light on the meaning of this tragic period by integrating it into a national narrative. These were, in outline, the purposes of a memorial policy carried out beginning with the Liberation, aimed at both healing wounds and offering a sensible and acceptable interpretation of the dark years.

The government, then, set to this titanic task. It had simultaneously to bury the dead, exalt the heroes, punish the traitors and hurl them into an ocean of opprobrium—or oblivion—compensate the victims, and provide them with a status. This policy turned out to be particularly arduous because it mixed together different phenomena. Unlike World War I, the memory of World War II could not be limited to the impressions and scars of battle. The unity of time could not cover the disparity of places and actions. Hence, the memory of battle soon occupied a relatively minor portion of the space of memory, in competition with noncombat memories, STO conscripts yesterday, or so-called political deportees (a category that covered primarily Jews but included hostages and Communists not in the Resistance) today. Aside from the fact that it helped blur the meaning attributed to World War II, this juxtaposition turned out to be just as rash in that it provoked—as it still does—competition among victims, with groups experiencing their relation to the past in the form of rivalry rather than complementarity.

The vagueness of the borders separating the camps—and their possible fluctuation—also posed formidable problems. Of course, those who joined the Resistance in 1940, Jews sent to their death, and the collaborationist members of the Milice in 1944 unquestionably belonged to clearly marked groups. It was different for men who, committed to Vichy for a time, later joined the Resistance—like a number of soldiers who came together in the Army Resistance Organization (Organisation de résistance de l'armée, or ORA). Likewise, what place should be given to the men who had fought on the wrong side, whether they had obeyed the orders of the French state or been forced to put on a German uniform? These men had certainly been combatants, whether at Dakar, in Syria, in North Africa, or the Russian steppe. But should they be granted the rights that went with that status?

In the immediate aftermath of the victory in 1918, governments had striven to eliminate the aftereffects of the war, but the questions posed by that painful conflict had received an unequivocal answer. The sides were clearly identified. France, attacked by Imperial Germany, after defending its soil and its values, recovered "its place in the world to pursue its magnificent journey in the infinity of human progress, once the soldier of God, today the soldier of humanity, always the soldier of the ideal,"[1] in the famous formulation of Georges Clemenceau announcing the Armistice to the French parliament in 1918. If the victims of the first German occupation deserved compensation, the glory unquestionably went to the poilus. This identification was notably easy because nearly eight million Frenchmen in all had been mobilized. Generous France opened its arms finally to its lost children. Considering that the inhabitants of Alsace and Lorraine, as German citizens,[2] had merely done their duty, it gave them ad hoc pensions without hesitation.

The situation after World War II appeared in a very different light. If one were to draw up the macabre list of victims, one would find that combatants made up only a minority alongside many other categories—Jewish, political, and Resistance deportees; civilians who had been bombed; and members of the Resistance and the FFI who had died in battle. The very category of military victims of the war was confused. Should it include Resistance fighters who died with their weapons in hand although they were not wearing uniforms? Should it incorporate men of Alsace and Lorraine who had fought against their will in the Wehrmacht or even the Waffen SS? What should be done with conscripts who had enlisted, for example, in the *Das Reich* division, notorious for having massacred the population of the village of Oradour-sur-Glane and committing other war crimes? But the ambiguity of the status of combatant concealed even more pitfalls. How, for example, was one to consider prisoners of war, most of whom, caught in roundups, had never engaged in armed struggle? Similarly, how should one consider the internal Resistance fighters whose struggle had often been conducted in the framework of civilian resistance, which gave pride of place to the distribution of the underground press, the fabrication of false documents, and the sheltering of draft dodgers or outlaws and had sometimes deliberately rejected the military dimension in favor of unarmed combat?[3] Should these men and women in the end benefit from both a right to compensation and a right to recognition? The answer, as one might imagine, was not obvious. It can even be asserted that the memory of World War II and, as a result, its handling by government authorities raised painful questions: the state experienced great difficulty in imposing unequivocal and therefore consensual criteria.

The variety of lived experiences further complicated the situation. Between 1940 and 1945 the French experienced varying fates. Whereas the image of the poilu, stoically buried in his trench, summed up the Great War, no model by itself made it possible to subsume the diversity of paths traveled during World War II. Deportation, resistance, forced labor in Germany, rationing, bombing, fighting in the Forces françaises combattantes of General de Gaulle were all different and, strictly speaking, incomparable situations. "All those who 'took up arms' between 1939 and 1945 did not bear the dominant collective experience, in France as in the whole of Western Europe, where the figures of the deportee and indeed the captive in general competed from the outset with the figure of the Resistance fighter."[4] If one agrees that memory is in part the reflection—or the mimesis—of an experience lived through collectively, one must recognize that the heterogeneity of conditions thwarted the emergence of a common memory. No discourse, no place, no symbol can, by itself, account for the plurality of ordeals undergone by the forty million contemporaries who lived through the dark years.This diversity unquestionably led to the fragmentation of French memory of World War II. It also helped politicize it, because every group, if not every individual, tended to interpret the past in accordance with its itinerary and ideological preferences, mobilizing the memory of the war in the service of its contemporary battles and interests. Some, for instance, opposed the Algerian War and torture by invoking the memory of the Resistance, like the Resistance fighter Claude Bourdet, who denounced "your Gestapo in Algeria."[5] Others, such as the Christian-Democrat Georges Bidault, defended the imperial cause and even established an ephemeral Conseil National de la Résistance to preserve the rights of France in North Africa. The multiple meanings of the Algerian War, as these examples suggest, provided everyone active on the French political scene a set of references whose mobilization, they hoped, would make it possible to legitimate their combat and discredit their adversaries, suspected of having betrayed "the true France."

The desire to defend one's material and moral rights, finally, largely helped amplify the fragmentation of memory. Every group tried to acquire and preserve its own rights. Resistance members, for example, fought to obtain the status of combatant. But beyond material issues—which were significant—they also sought to obtain symbolic recognition from the nation. This struggle amplified the balkanization of memory and fanned the flames of conflict, because the individual construction of identity threatened other communities that feared the devaluation of their past combat, that it would be identified with causes considered, rightly or wrongly, less noble. Political and racial deportees, for example, were disturbed by the claims of former STO conscripts who demanded to be given the title "labor deportee," thereby fostering conflict among veterans. The proliferation of statuses above all impeded the emergence of a shared language able to integrate the variety of experiences into a common narrative.

In other words, the memory of World War II, then as now, seems to be a fragmented memory, conflicted and politicized, that divides rather than brings together.

This sense of conflict also posed genuine political problems by inflaming passions and dividing public opinion, whereas the memory of the Great War had had rather unifying and integrating qualities. The prosecution brought against the criminals of the *Das Reich* division in 1953, for instance, created conflict between the population of Alsace, which called for clemency for those drafted against their will into the SS, and the population of the Limousin, which was outraged at seeing the French responsible for the massacre of Oradour-sur-Glane escape punishment. Georges Pompidou's pardon of the milicien Paul Touvier troubled French society throughout 1971 and 1972. The obstacles the government placed in the way of prosecuting two former high officials of the Vichy regime, René Bousquet and Maurice Papon, also provoked vigorous debate and darkened François Mitterrand's second term as president. All this amounts to saying that the memory of World War II, far from being a neutral or secondary issue, has sometimes influenced the political agenda, forcing the state to intervene in a potentially explosive field. It has also evolved in a remarkable way from the Liberation to the present, pursuing goals and adopting forms that have deeply changed in the course of time.

Confronted with this reality, in the sixty-plus years that separate us from the capitulation of the Third Reich, the state has played a role that has been both huge and limited. First it tried to deal with the most pressing issues, burial for the dead and compensation and recognition for the living. It also conducted a memorial diplomacy, subjecting the memory of conflict to reconciliation with yesterday's enemies. It put similar effort into conferring an overall meaning on World War II, by trying to attenuate conflicts in order, over time, to bring all participants together into the national narrative—with the exception of thoroughgoing collaborators. But this peaceful interpretation was not accepted without conflict. By recognizing the most varied rights, the government tended to shatter the coherence of the national narrative and to amplify the balkanization of memory. As a further perverse effect, "We moved from a modest memory, that asked only finally to be recognized, respected, integrated into the great record of collective and national history, to an essentially accusatory memory that destroyed that history," in the words of the historian Pierre Nora.[6]

Most important, the government did not always play the game of truth and, rather than confronting unpleasant facts—the politics of the Vichy regime, for example—it chose to favor denial:

> What is specific in the French reaction to the worldwide surge of memory and what makes it so virulent is probably the contrast between the power of the immaculate image that France learned to adopt for itself and the painful, belated, and thwarted confrontation with historical realities that contradict that image, shatter it, and seem themselves darker than they were. On Algeria, the Occupation, the Resistance, the 1914 war, colonization . . . there have been legends, lies, falsifications, blockages, denials. These obstacles, fortified by all the means at the state's disposal to prevent knowledge of the truth (beginning with archives kept secret) laid the groundwork for all the grievances and belated prosecutions. They fostered the unhealthy idea of a skeleton still hidden in the closet. They made us into virtual penitents, ready to believe that the caricatures were true and reparations legitimate.[7]

In other words, by giving in, for good or bad reasons, to pressure groups, by preferring legend over history, the government did not perhaps conduct a coherent politics of memory—even if its action had a pacifying effect by including the previously banished, except for a few black sheep, in the national community.

That said, not everything depended on the state, and that is still true. The government, of course, had enormous resources at its disposal to impose its views. Definitions of status, the choice of dates to commemorate, the organization of ceremonies, the establishment of school curricula, and the support provided for building monuments or museums were all its prerogatives. But other participants played essential roles in shaping the contours of memory: associations, local communities, historians, journalists, and artists (particularly writers and filmmakers). In cinema Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* unquestionably helped shift the frontiers of memory by changing the issues. The same thing was true of Robert Paxton's book *Vichy France* (1972). Consequently, the state often had to negotiate with various forces and intervened more as a regulator, or even an arbitrator striving to respond to the sometimes conflicting appeals of diverse groups or lobbies, rather than as an initiating force defining in majesty its politics of memory.

These observations confirm the complexity associated with the memory of World War II, a memory, as I have said, that is atomized, conflicted, and politicized, that divides more than it brings together, and whose definition is not under the solitary control of government authorities. With this groundwork laid out, I turn to an assessment of the policies carried out from 1945 to the present.