



REVIEW ARTICLE

# The Price of Isolation: Fascism, Vichy and the Holocaust in French History

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Serge Bernstein and Michel Winock, eds., *Fascisme français* (Paris: Perrin, 2020), 426 pp., ISBN 978-2271083104.

Alya Aglan, *La France à l'envers. La guerre de Vichy (1940–1945)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), 752 pp., ISBN 978-2072842146.

Georges-Henri Soutou, *Europa! Les projets européens de l'Allemagne nazie et de l'Italie fasciste* (Paris: Tallandier, 2021), 544 pp., ISBN 979-1021050235.

Florent Brayard and Andreas Wirsching, eds., *Historiciser le Mal. Une édition critique de Mein Kampf* (Paris: Fayard, 2021), 847 pp., ISBN 978-2213671185.

The historiographical debate about France during the Second World War has long been dominated by two foreign historians. On the one hand, the Israeli intellectual Zeev Sternhell notoriously placed the origin of fascism in France's Belle Epoque and saw Vichy France as the paradigmatic example of a fascist regime in his book, *Neither Right nor Left*, four decades ago.<sup>1</sup> Year after year, Sternhell, who had studied in Paris, made criticisms of the Parisian intellectual milieu and denounced its egocentrism and provincialism. On the other hand, American historian Robert Paxton reigned over the history of French collaboration with Nazi Germany. Although it raised certain controversies when it was translated into French in 1973, his *Vichy France* has been since accepted as the key reference on the subject, as well as an indispensable pedagogical tool against apologetic views of Marshall Pétain's regime, which enjoy periodic revivals in the country.<sup>2</sup> Despite their age – Sternhell died in 2020 and Paxton is ninety years old – these two historians have remained the unavoidable cornerstones in the discussion on French attitudes during the Second World War – the first as a competitor, the second as a paternal figure.

Unfortunately, the first debate on French fascism lost steam over time due to the intransigence of the opposing camps, as the recent book by Serge Bernstein and Michel Winock, introduced by Jean-Noël Jeanneney, can confirm. In 2020, these two distinguished professors at Paris Sciences Po chose to edit a new and expanded version of their *Fascisme français* of 2014, which takes aim at Sternhell's interpretation.<sup>3</sup> This would be the final strike of Sciences Po, after many, against its former student as Sternhell died around the time when it was released. This unfortunate timing transforms the

<sup>1</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). The first French edition was published in 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944, 3rd edn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Serge Bernstein and Michel Winock, eds., *Fascisme français* (Paris: Perrin, 2020). See, previously, Serge Bernstein and Michel Winock, eds., *Fascisme français? La controverse* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2014).

book into the last testimony of a debate which too often oscillated between verbal jousting and ideological feuding. Whereas the 2014 book essentially concentrated on refuting Sternhell's depiction of how fascist thought arose in France before the First World War, the new sections respond to Sternhell's own edited book on the *Parti social français*.<sup>4</sup> According to Sternhell, this party, which emanated in 1936 from the *Croix-de-Feu*, a rightist league of veterans, to become the largest political group in France before the Second World War, provides proof that fascist tendencies not only possessed some intellectual influence in France but were widely shared before the defeat of 1940. On the contrary, most French historians claim that the *Parti social* did not possess fascist characteristics, as it sustained a conservative agenda tinged with social Catholicism, and its leader, Colonel François de La Rocque, ultimately joined the Resistance during the war.<sup>5</sup> Defining the relationship between the *Parti social* and fascism provides one of the keys to understanding French adherence to fascism, as the *Parti social* was the only mass movement on the right of the political spectrum in France at the time. Given the lack of consensus on the definition of fascism among historians, it is understandable that this issue has been debated for years.

Yet, if the issue is a legitimate source of debate, the answers which Sternhell and his French opponents provided are obscured by the personal animus that bleeds through into the research. This new book counters Sternhell's provocative tone with even more heated rhetoric. Berstein launches the new hostilities with a virulent denunciation of the 'Sternhell imposture': according to him, 'the methods used by Sternhell for his surprising "revelations" would have disqualified any novice student'. Indeed, he added, these 'sensational assertions did not belong to historical science'.<sup>6</sup> This tone might appear to the reader as a sign of leading French historians' embarrassment to confront Sternhell's challenge, and the rest of the book confirms this impression. For instance, the new version ends with a statement by the Chief Rabbi of France, who approvingly cites the judgement of one of his predecessors, who testified that La Rocque had been a true member of the Resistance.<sup>7</sup> Then, the appendix provides a list of errors (some anecdotal) by the authors who contributed to Sternhell's book.<sup>8</sup> As for the new historical contributions, while Sternhell's ideological use of history is justifiably denounced, they tend to veer into the territory of hagiography. In one chapter, La Rocque – an ambiguous figure who pushed Vichy in 1940 to take radical steps in the implementation of their authoritarianist National Revolution – is transformed into a precursor of Gaullism.<sup>9</sup> In another, without paying sufficient care to the chronology, the *Parti social* is presented as the true bastion of the Resistance.<sup>10</sup> Even Laurent Joly, the author of a reference book on French antisemitic policies during the Second World War, does not resist this rehabilitation.<sup>11</sup> His article on La Rocque's reaction to Vichy's infamous Statute of the Jews in October 1940 passes over the fact that, whereas the colonel tried to protect the Jewish veterans of his own clan, La Rocque simultaneously defended tougher measures than Pétain's government.<sup>12</sup>

However, the most contestable aspect of the book lies in the fact that no contribution admits that Pétain's National Revolution was deeply influenced by the *Parti social*. La Rocque's evolution in the middle of the war should not obscure that the group was an essential inspiration for the Vichy regime, which the colonel explicitly acknowledged in 1940.<sup>13</sup> Although the *Parti social* admittedly did not

<sup>4</sup> Zeev Sternhell, ed., *L'histoire refoulée. La Rocque, les Croix de feu et le fascisme français* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Serge Berstein and Jean-Paul Thomas, eds., *Le PSF. Un parti de masse à droite* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Serge Berstein, 'La Rocque, les Croix-de-feu et le fascisme français. L'imposture Sternhell', in Berstein and Winock, eds., *Fascisme français* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2014), 256.

<sup>7</sup> 'Témoignage de M. le Grand Rabbin Haïm Korsia sur les rapports entre le Grand Rabbin Kaplan et le colonel La Rocque', in Berstein and Winock, eds., *Fascisme français*, 391–3.

<sup>8</sup> 'Comment on écrit l'histoire', in *ibid.*, 397–408.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Perrault, 'Un soufflé qui retombe', in *ibid.*, 291.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Epstein, 'La Rocque deux fois fascisé', in *ibid.*, 263–86.

<sup>11</sup> Laurent Joly, 'La Rocque, l'antisémitisme et le statut des juifs de Vichy', in *ibid.*, 311–26. See also Laurent Joly, *L'Etat contre les Juifs. Vichy, les Nazis et la persécution antisémite (1940–1944)* (Paris: Grasset, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> François de La Rocque, 'La Question juive', *Le Petit Journal*, 5 Oct. 1940.

<sup>13</sup> François de La Rocque, 'Qu'est-ce que la Révolution nationale?', *Le Petit Journal*, 1 Oct. 1940.

resemble the Italian fascist party or the NSDAP, its activities anticipated the corporatist, Catholic, and antisemitic Vichy regime. Even the motto of the National Revolution – ‘Work, Family, Homeland’ – was directly recycled from the slogan of La Rocque’s group. In fact, all the new sections of the book, including Bernard Bruneteau’s contestation of the totalitarian nature of Vichy, unintentionally confirm this close affiliation. Bruneteau insists, for instance, on Vichy’s aim to move beyond politics and to embrace an ‘all-social’ ideology, which was exactly what the *Parti social* had already advocated: ‘Social first’.<sup>14</sup> The influence is thus so obvious that the authors’ decision to avoid highlighting it diminishes the legitimacy of every chapter of the second part of the book. In truth, there is not much to add to this debate: some of the bad blood between historians was also caused by the fact that the word ‘fascism’ in English has a broader meaning than in French, in which it is more clearly distinguished from other forms of authoritarianism. The former debate on American historian Robert Soucy’s books already raised this issue two decades ago. Another supporter of the idea of widespread fascist tendencies in France before the war, Soucy essentially viewed fascism as a tougher form of authoritarianism, while French historians more exclusively associated fascism with the Italian model. On this point, even if Sternhell is more inclined to closely connect Vichy and Italian fascism, the present controversy is a repetition of the former ‘dialogue of the deaf’.<sup>15</sup>

More sophisticated is the evolution of French historiography on the collaboration during the war, in comparison to Robert Paxton’s key book. As noted, most of the American historian’s interpretations of Vichy have had remarkable staying power, although certain central arguments of *Vichy France* should be qualified. For instance, his famous thesis, according to which the French rather than the Germans asked for the collaboration with Nazi Germany, ambiguously plays with the polysemy of the concept.<sup>16</sup> In fact, both countries wanted to cooperate starting in 1940, but their interpretation of what this meant diverged. ‘Collaboration’ could encompass military participation in the conflict, the services given to the Nazis by French fascists, French support of Jewish deportation and of German warfare, and the role envisaged for Vichy in the new European order that emerged in 1940–1.<sup>17</sup> Yet, whereas Paxton’s polemical position was perhaps useful in the 1970s to expunge myths about the double game Pétain would have endorsed to secretly protect France and pave the way to de Gaulle – ‘the shield and the sword’<sup>18</sup> – it now tends to produce the contrary effect. While seeking to avoid any return to the apologist perspectives of the past, French historians have ended up providing new interpretations tinged with some soft patriotism as a compensation for this dependence on Paxton’s unavoidable interpretation. This present trend is part of a longer history of back and forth between critical perspectives on collaboration and counter-offensives.<sup>19</sup> To understand this tendency better, two other elements should also be added. On the one hand, the isolationism of the Parisian intellectual milieu, denounced by Sternhell, is a reality. This insularity, which is often reinforced by a language barrier, can certainly provoke some successful historical counter-perspectives from abroad, as exemplified by Paxton, but current foreign specialists of French history are not as able to shake the Parisian historical milieu as those before.<sup>20</sup> On the

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Bruneteau, ‘Le regime de Vichy: un bien étrange totalitarisme’, in Berstein and Winock, eds., *Fascisme français*, 293–310, esp. 297.

<sup>15</sup> See the articles in *Vingtième Siècle*, 95, 3 (2007), 219–46, including Soucy’s own intervention: ‘La Rocque et le fascisme français. Réponse à Michel Winock’, and Berstein’s response: ‘Pour en finir avec un dialogue de sourds’.

<sup>16</sup> Paxton, *Vichy France*, ch. 1.

<sup>17</sup> On the numerous forms of collaboration, see Eberhard Jäckel, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa – Die deutsche Frankreichpolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966), which is too easily associated with Paxton’s interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> According to the famous expression popularised by Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy: 1940–1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1954), 94.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Note that Henry Rousso, a friend of Paxton, also played with this sort of compensation. He famously became one of the most prolific authors on Vichy by repeatedly pointing out the so-called ‘Vichy syndrome’: the fact that French people would be obsessed with Vichy’s past.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Julian Jackson, *France. The Dark Years 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Chris Millington, *France in the Second World War: Collaboration, Resistance, Holocaust, Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

whole, a Francocentric view of French history still tends to predominate, within which attempts at revalorising the national narrative fit all too neatly. Nothing demonstrates this tendency more clearly than the narrow conception of the defeat of 1940 that has become the authoritative explanation: that the disaster was essentially caused by military mistakes.<sup>21</sup> The extent of defeatism among French ruling circles, which paved the way for the complete failure of the army, is thus omitted from this account.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, recent trends in historical research, such as the rise of transnational and global history or new developments in cultural history, should, in theory, have thwarted such national interpretations. However, on the contrary, historiographical shifts have allowed historians to move away from the most burning political issues of the period, without the legitimacy of the research being questioned or its moral or political regression being denounced. It is therefore possible to use these approaches to soften certain aspects of the French collaboration period.

This tendency to sidestep awkward political issues has recently reached a deep level. *La France à l'envers*, a comprehensive monograph on Vichy, illustrates how a critical viewpoint on the French past could be overturned by implicit assumptions. This book by Alya Aglan, professor at La Sorbonne, presents itself as a nuanced history of France between 1940 and 1945, anchored in cultural, social and global history.<sup>23</sup> However, the way in which the historical facts are exposed compromises the overall picture presented in this monograph. For instance, although its introduction suggests the opposite, Aglan's book implicitly revives an old thesis: to separate Vichy from the 'true' France which would have remained impervious to the regime from the very beginning. To this end, Aglan uses various techniques. The sociological methodology and discourse analysis, coupled with a loose approach to chronology, make it possible to grant the same weight in the first part of the book to the tiny groups of resistance between 1940 and 1942 and the political realities of the collaboration.<sup>24</sup> The anchorage in global history is also of some utility for this purpose. The rallying of a part of the empire to 'France Libre' – less than one-tenth of the colonised population at the end of 1940 – could nourish the myth of a balanced confrontation between de Gaulle and Pétain already from the first year of the war.<sup>25</sup> Basing her interpretation on the idea of the 'European civil war', Aglan is therefore liable to the charge of implicitly remythologising the resistance spirit.

Nevertheless, if *La France à l'envers* distinguishes itself, it is in the way Aglan chooses to depict not the heroes of the Resistance but rather the opposing dark side of the collaboration. Following the dichotomist narrative which structures the piece, one would expect her interpretation of Vichy to resemble Paxton's, but crucial facts reveal that Aglan's critical thinking on the French past is also rather ambiguous on the question of collaboration. The shift in the focus of analysis induced by the global approach allows her to remain laconic about some aspects of Vichy's policies and, therefore, to avoid confronting the brutality within France induced by Marshall Pétain's regime. It is highly significant that the book loses its way when it tackles the deportation of the Jews, Vichy's worst crime. It should be recalled here that a revisionist tendency has recently emerged in France on this issue. In its radical form, this tendency irrelevantly challenges the role of Vichy in the genocide by highlighting the higher percentage of Jews who survived in France – compared, for instance, with those in the Netherlands – without acknowledging that the special case in Western Europe was the latter, not the former. However, Aglan does not deeply intervene in this discussion; she prefers simply to ignore the most troubling episodes in this history. Vichy's participation in the deportation of the Jews is never analysed carefully in the book. For instance, Aglan avoids including an account of the Vel' d'Hiv round-up, France's most radical action of collaboration in the genocide.<sup>26</sup> In a 750-page book dedicated to all aspects of Vichy, these omissions could not have been unintentional. Aglan's book is

<sup>21</sup> Robert Frank, 'Juin 1940: La défaite de la France ou le sens de Vichy', in Alya Aglan and Robert Frank, eds., *1937–1947: la guerre-monde*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 207–59.

<sup>22</sup> See Christophe Farquet, 'One Last Step to the Front: The Defeat of France in 1940', manuscript to be published.

<sup>23</sup> Alya Aglan, *La France à l'envers. La guerre de Vichy (1940–1945)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, chs 4 and 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 325–41.

thus a relevant example of the exculpatory approach tacitly taken by certain Parisian historians. It also shows how they tend to assemble contradictory ideas rather than create their own coherent framework to analyse the defeat of 1940 and the subsequent events, which in the end contributes to obscuring the historical reality of France's dark years.

The monograph written by Georges-Henri Soutou, also a professor at La Sorbonne, demonstrates in another way how this sort of assemblage can affect the history of Europe as a whole. Based partly on his own research into the archives and anchored this time in diplomatic history, his *Europa!* analyses Nazi and fascist plans to rearrange Europe from 1940.<sup>27</sup> Placing itself at the crossroads between the general studies of totalitarian regimes and the historiography of the French collaboration, Soutou's book seeks to demonstrate that, although the continental reorganisation programme announced by Nazi Germany and fascist Italy after the defeat of France was part of a propaganda campaign aimed at European elites and people, it did not consist merely of a series of spurious plans intended solely to temporarily calm the political situation in the occupied countries. On the contrary, according to Soutou, the programme was based on Europeanist conceptions that were widely shared by the right at the time and, as such, would have offered a real political option if the conflict had turned out differently. Ideas defended by the Nazis and the fascists, such as corporatism, economic international collaboration and coordination of social policies, could have built the foundation for a new long-term order. Moreover, despite their failure, these projects would have had a profound influence in Europe after the war. At first glance, Vichy's insertion into this broader spectrum of European collaboration is no attempt by Soutou to soften the interpretation of its politics; in this account of Nazi continental organisation, France receives a central role. When Soutou wrongly claims that Pierre Laval was the creator of the concept of the new European order in summer 1940, he even goes beyond Paxton.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, this critical point may be a red herring within the work. Soutou's overarching goal is to highlight the continuities linking the 'Neue Europa', which the Nazis wanted to implement from 1940, to both interwar schemes for unification and the post-war European project. Consequently, as Soutou tries to establish connections between the Nazi order and the European Economic Community, he ends up diminishing the brutality of the former to strengthen the link between such divergent systems in radically different situations. One reason for Soutou's apparent disregard for the unique horrors of Nazism is his book's reliance on diplomatic discourses, which creates confusion between rulers' words and the reality of the time. This confusion is sometimes perceptible in his discussions on Vichy, about which Pétain's figure is too often depicted by his own words, inducing the sort of contradiction that one also finds in Aglan's book.<sup>29</sup> However, if this methodological bias has harmful effects, it is above all because it affects the whole picture of the European collaboration with Nazism, in which Vichy is embedded. The 'Neue Europa' analysed by Soutou is essentially limited to the projects made in less than a year, in 1940–1, until, according to the author himself, the launching of Barbarossa definitively disturbed the initial continental programme. Yet, as the imminence of the ultimate confrontation with the USSR was already obvious in Hitler's mind during the summer of 1940, this 'Neue Europa' was nothing more than a mystification from the beginning. The intensification of mass murders after June 1941, justified by the fight against Judeo-Bolshevism, is much more revealing of Nazi aims than the provisional political equilibrium achieved in Western Europe in 1940, which was expressed in some rather improvised plans. This second part of the conquest was a crucial step in the implementation of a new order; it was not the end of it, as Soutou claims, thereby sharing the early illusions of European elites.<sup>30</sup> And if there were one single project which had been pursued across Europe between 1941 and 1945, it was the Final Solution; as in Aglan's monograph, this is seldom mentioned in Soutou's book.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Marie Soutou, *Europa! Les projets européens de l'Allemagne nazie et de l'Italie fasciste* (Paris: Tallandier, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–7; 324–5; 369.

Soutou's idea of continuity with the current Europe is thus sustainable, on the one hand, by euphemising the Nazi order during the war and, on the other, by only slightly touching on the meaning of the European project. In the end, Soutou does not really attempt to prove his fundamental assumption. He only draws as many parallels as possible between the war and the post-war era: National Socialism and Keynesianism, international cartelisation and the European Coal and Steel Community, evident continuities among employers' circles in Europe. As he claims that Nazi Europa impacted European construction both as a model and as a repulsive force, everything which serves the analogy could be listed.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, this book is unlikely to become a significant contribution to the vast historiography of Nazism, as it reveals a deep misunderstanding of its political nature and its international objectives. At one point, Soutou goes so far as to contend that 'the leaders, Hitler, Goebbels, Rosenberg himself, did not really believe in their own anti-Bolshevik propaganda: it was not a question of rebuilding an Eastern European space free of communism, but of extracting all the necessary resources for the German people and its economy'.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, Soutou's work is no exception. If the historiography of Vichy, like that of French fascism, presents certain contestable trends, which are visible in other European countries' national narratives, the French historiography of Nazism is rather more peripheral.<sup>34</sup> In this field, French isolationism has had more severe consequences in terms of the quality of the research, which sidelines the huge English-speaking and German literature. French historians are thereby permitted to adopt controversial attitudes that would not be accepted for an international audience.

Florent Brayard, who recently co-directed the new French edition of *Mein Kampf*, titled *Historicising the Evil*, best illustrates this French approach to the most crucial topic of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> To understand Brayard's agenda, one has to go back a decade. After having achieved a PhD and written several studies on the historiography of the Holocaust,<sup>36</sup> Florent Brayard, a scholar in his forties at the time, set out to write a sensational book, *Auschwitz, Enquête sur un complot nazi*.<sup>37</sup> This monograph was dedicated to the so-called 'conspiracy' of the Nazis which would have led to the Holocaust. The historian claimed that few Nazi leaders were aware of the real extent of the genocide – hence the dubious notion of a 'plot' – and he went so far as to contend that Goebbels himself did not know the fate of German Jews who were deported to Eastern Europe until as late as October 1943. This peculiar thesis should have been sustained by years of archival research, but to shake the established knowledge on the genocide, Brayard instead used a curious investigative procedure: re-reading well-known sources cited in the literature on the subject, such as Goebbels' journal, with a methodology inspired by cultural history. Unfortunately, as previous expertise has shown, this text clearly demonstrates that the Minister of Propaganda was aware of what was happening in the East in 1942: for instance, after the first gassing of Jews in Belzec in mid-March 1942, he heard of it around ten days later and clearly anticipated that the German Jews would be the next victims.<sup>38</sup> He then directly observed the process at play in summer 1942 when he went to Warsaw in the middle of the purge of the ghetto and witnessed the deportations to Treblinka. As for the inconceivable idea that Goebbels discovered the reality of the genocide in October 1943, due to a speech made by Himmler in Posen, this apparent revelation is not borne out by Goebbels' brief and indifferent reaction to the

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 439–61.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Johann Chapoutot and Christian Ingrao, *Hitler* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2018); Johann Chapoutot, *Libres d'obéir. Le management, du nazisme à aujourd'hui* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Florent Brayard and Andreas Wirsching, eds., *Historiciser le Mal. Une édition critique de Mein Kampf* (Paris: Fayard, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Florent Brayard, *La 'solution finale de la question juive'. La technique, le temps et les catégories de décision* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Florent Brayard, *Auschwitz, Enquête sur un complot nazi* (Paris: Seuil, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Goebbels' diary is consultable online: *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels Online*: <https://www.degruyter.com/database/tjgo/html>. See the diary entry of 27 Mar. 1942. This entry is considered of crucial importance against negationist attempts.

discourse.<sup>39</sup> In fact, as the sources demonstrate, far from seeing a real difference between Ost- and West-Juden, Goebbels, as the Gauleiter of Berlin, was an active force in the extermination of German Jews beginning in late 1941.<sup>40</sup>

Relying extensively on a text which Goebbels envisaged as a public testimony of Nazism, Brayard thus played a troubling game. To support his thesis, he relied on the reluctance of the Nazis to publicly speak about the gas chambers, confessed by Goebbels in his own journal, and the ambiguity of expressions such as ‘expulsion’ or ‘evacuation’ to refer to the murders of Jews. How did the idea come to Mr Brayard? Although he was himself a specialist in the history of negationism in France – with a first book on the precursor of Holocaust denial, Paul Rassinier<sup>41</sup> – he tended to minimise the German leaders’ implication in the genocide, as well as collaborators’ responsibility in Europe (including France). Yet, what were the reactions of Parisian historians when the book was published? They welcomed it with moderate scepticism, as if Brayard had sustained an audacious but plausible thesis.<sup>42</sup> This consequently legitimised its scientific value. On the contrary, the reception in Germany and in Britain was much fiercer: Robert Jan van Pelt, the expert on Auschwitz, even hypothesised a diffused influence by Holocaust deniers like Robert Faurisson – Rassinier’s successor – to explain why ‘French historiography on the Holocaust lost its way’.<sup>43</sup> This supposed affiliation was probably not the best explanation for Brayard’s path, which seems to have been caused above all by the weaknesses of the French scholarship on Nazism and a desire to provoke. In any case, contrary to French expectations, foreign audiences tended to overlook this monograph. While the relative lack of attention garnered abroad may have been disappointing to a historian such as Brayard, who had adopted a more international profile than many French colleagues in the years before the publication of his book, it ultimately spared him a potentially damaging international debate on his research. Since the work’s publication, he has suffered little reputational harm, pursuing a successful career as director at the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* and as a leading specialist on the Holocaust in France.

This contrast between the reception of Brayard’s theories in France and abroad is a striking illustration of the egocentrism of the Parisian historical establishment. Remarkably, in 2015, when the memory of Brayard’s investigation into a conspiracy was still vivid in Paris, the provocative scholar himself was chosen to co-direct one of the most important projects on the history of Nazism ever launched in France: the re-edition and re-translation of *Mein Kampf* in an adaptation of the German version published by the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* in Munich after the book had entered the public domain.<sup>44</sup> The French publishing house ensured that the project met the highest scientific standards. In addition to the collaboration with the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* and its director, Andreas Wirsching, no fewer than nineteen historians were involved in the six-year-long process of creating and supervising the edition, which includes some 2,800 footnotes and a long introduction before every chapter. Despite these efforts, Parisian unease with the history of the Second World War was nonetheless apparent precisely in the caution with which the project was conducted. The introductions paraphrase the book at length, as if readers might not be able to understand it properly themselves, and they are redundantly preceded by a general overview aimed at justifying the project’s legitimacy. These disproportionate precautions give the impression that the authors view *Mein Kampf* as either too dangerous or too sophisticated to be treated like any other historical source on Nazism. This

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7 Oct. 1943.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 24 Oct. 1941; 28 Oct. 1941; 2 Nov. 1941; 18 Dec. 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Florent Brayard, *Comment l'idée vint à M. Rassinier: naissance du révisionnisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Nicolas Patin, ‘Repenser la solution finale’, in *nonfiction.fr*, 6 Feb. 2012, <https://www.nonfiction.fr/article-5459-repenser-la-solution-finale.htm>; Laurent Joly, ‘Florent Brayard. Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi’, *Revue historique*, 314, 4 (2012), 1003–6; ‘“Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi” fait polémique. Interview de Christian Ingrao’, in *Le Figaro*, 15 Feb. 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Jan van Pelt, ‘A Conspiracy to Deceive, or Tactful Silence?’, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 41, 2 (2013). See also Thomas Sandkühler, ‘Rezension zu: Brayard, Florent: Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi. Paris 2012’, in *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 24 Jan. 2013, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2013-1-054>.

<sup>44</sup> Christian Hartmann et al., *Hitler, Mein Kampf eine kritische Edition*, 2 vols. (München: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016).

implicit assumption contributes to a fetishisation of the book, reinforced by its inappropriate title, its prohibitive price and the recommendation to hide it on the shelves of bookstores. Similarly, the debate it raised in Paris and the related regressive arguments resembled a caricature of a historical discussion. Those involved in the project heavily insisted on the unquestionable morality of republishing *Mein Kampf*, while their main opponent, Johann Chapoutot, who is considered in Paris as a foremost scholar of Nazism, questioned its relevance with his preferred motto, which sounded like a resurgence of the worst structuralist argument of the 1970s: the insignificance of Hitler in understanding Nazism.<sup>45</sup>

Oscillating between excessive dependence on foreign leading historians and a homegrown politicisation of the historical discourse, the Parisian historical milieu still struggles to carve out its own approach to the history of the Second World War. From abroad, it resembles an aquarium that, however much it replicates the oceanic ecosystem, is noticeably smaller and shallower. Asking why the Parisian historical establishment missed the target concerning the most crucial theme of the history of the twentieth century is the first step in provoking the kind of change that, to borrow from French terminology, could be genuinely revolutionary.

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<sup>45</sup> Johann Chapoutot, 'Retour sur un succès de librairie', *Etudes, Revue de culture contemporaine*, Nov. 2021, <http://www.revue-etudes.com/article/retour-sur-un-succes-de-librairie/23853>.