

## **Gaston Bergery and the Political Composition of the Early Vichy State**

**Diane N. Labrosse, Concordia University, Montreal**

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**Q. How have the historical interpretations of Vichy changed since 1945 and what was the impact of Robert Paxton? What is the current state of Vichy historiography?**

A. Vichy historiography has changed greatly since 1945. Traditional French post-war accounts tended to suggest that the French had been a nation of resisters, fully supportive of Charles de Gaulle but dominated by Nazi Germany after the French defeat of 1940. The Vichy regime, headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain, and acting as the so-called ‘shield’ to de Gaulle’s ‘sword’, was thought to have acted to protect France as best it could under the rigid conditions of the armistice by playing a ‘double game’ with the Germans.

Most of the blame for shameful collaborationist activity of the Vichy government was accorded to Pierre Laval and a handful of fascist politicians who were said to have hijacked the republic in the interests of instituting a right-wing quasi-fascist authoritarian state after the shocking fall of France in 1940. These select individuals, acting under absolute German domination, were blamed for French collaboration with Nazi Germany. This view of Vichy, which was underscored by the pervasive image of the great and heroic French resistance – led domestically by French Communists and externally by de Gaulle and his Free French forces – reached its apex under de Gaulle’s presidency in the 1960s and was underscored by a number of French historians. Notably, the Vichy regime’s anti-Semitic policies and its arrest and deportation of at least 70,000 Jews, most of whom perished in German concentration camps, were, with few exceptions, largely ignored. In effect, Vichy was assumed to be a historical anomaly – a foreign-dominated period that should be viewed as distinct from the larger continuities of French history.

However, the ‘myth of the Resistance’ was destroyed in the 1970s. While several scholars in France and North America had already started to prod the history of Vichy France, it was the 1972 publication of Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* which forever altered Vichy historiography. It is impossible to overstate the historical importance of Paxton’s book; indeed, historians speak of the ‘Paxtonian revolution’ in Vichy studies. Using captured German archives and the relatively few French sources available at the time, Paxton effectively re-wrote the history of Vichy. He suggested that collaboration was a French, rather than a German policy, and that France, not Germany, determined a great deal of Vichy policy. Paxton buried the myth of the small band of right-wing Vichy collaborators who had hijacked the French Republic. He argued, quite successfully, that Vichy had initially appealed to a large number of French politicians from across the political spectrum. Rather than representing a right-wing coup against the state, the Vichy regime had been legally created by the vast majority of the French parliament in the early summer of 1940. Paxton rejected the distinction between

the 'good' Pétain and the 'bad' Laval and clearly tied the Maréchal to Vichy policies. He also focused upon the efforts by the Vichy regime to use the French defeat as an opportunity to entirely rebuild and recreate the French state and society. In this sense, Vichy and its 'national revolution' became an integral part of French history. Finally, Paxton clearly identified the anti-Semitism of the Vichy state and blamed Vichy officials for the arrest and deportation of Jews. (He and his co-author Michael Marrus further developed this topic in their book, *Vichy France and the Jews* (1981).)

One should also mention Marcel Ophuls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), a documentary which was completed in 1971 but was not broadcast in France until a decade later. It offered a view of French citizens who were anything but active resisters. 'Attentisme' is the usual word that is used to describe the policy of the French who are depicted in the film. Other French films followed that offered critical interpretations of the Vichy period and thus the traditional interpretations of Vichy. While Paxton's work was greeted with some hostility on the part of established French historians (see, on this, John Sweets, 'Chaque livre un événement: Robert Paxton and the French, from "briseur de glace" to "iconoclaste tranquille"', in Fishman, *et al.*, *France at War: Vichy and the Historians*, pp. 21–34), it also spawned a renaissance in Vichy studies. A generation of historians turned their attention to the political processes of Vichy, the role of the *Milice* under Vichy, the nature of French fascism, the role of Maréchal Pétain in the creation of Vichy, Vichy propaganda, the nature of French collaboration under the German Occupation, the social origins of collaborators and resisters, Vichy anti-Semitism (Serge Klarsfeld was instrumental in forcing the French Government to address the treatment of Jews under Vichy), the victims of Vichy state persecution, official and public 'memory' of the Vichy period, and the French colonial empire under Vichy. Recent works by Henry Rousso, Philippe Burrin, Jean-Pierre Azéma, Denis Peschanski and many others have continued, with the addition of thirty years of historical work on Vichy and declassified Vichy files, to historically locate Vichy in the larger spectrum of French history and to anchor the origins of Vichy in the turbulent period after the First World War. Julian Jackson's (2001) *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944* offers the best and most recent post-Paxton synthesis of new scholarship.

**Q.. Who was Gaston Bergery? What was his political background and how was he involved with Vichy?**

A. Gaston Bergery was the author of the founding document of the Vichy State – the Bergery Declaration of 9 July 1940 that called for the national revolution of France on authoritarian grounds. He went on to serve as Vichy Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Turkey. His involvement in the Vichy state is a matter of some historical importance since Bergery had been strongly identified with the political left for most of the 1920s and 1930s. Born in 1892, Bergery had volunteered for service in the First World War, was wounded and highly decorated. Following the war, he was part of the Secretariat of the Versailles Peace Conference and Deputy Secretary-General of the Commission for Reparations. He served as a delegate to the London Conference in 1924 and was chief of staff at the Foreign Ministry under Edouard Herriot, after which he became an attorney at the Paris Court of Appeals specializing in private international law. From 1928 to 1934

he was a Deputy from Mantes (Seine et Oise) as a member of the Radical Party. He quickly became known as one of the 'Young Turks' in the left wing of the Radical Socialist Party who wished to revolutionize it and rid it of its ossified leaders. He, like many of his colleagues, was disgusted with the corruption of the French state. He became a vocal and important critic of the French parliamentary system and French politicians as well. Bergery's trenchant and often searing criticisms of French politics earned him the respect of a number of intellectuals and thinkers from across the political spectrum, many of whom came to think of him as a new and dynamic type of leader who was capable of leading France at a time of domestic and international turbulence. For all of his promise, however, by 1939 Bergery had risen no higher than Deputy in the French parliament

For most of the 1930s, Bergery was involved in the left-wing fight against Fascism. Following on the heels of the Amsterdam-Pleyel meeting in 1933, he went on to found, with a number of left-wing intellectuals, the *Front commun* against Fascism. At this stage of his career he was known for his leftist political leanings, his intense pacifism, and his strident anti-fascism. Disenchanted with the ideological sterility and inertia of the Radicals, Bergery resigned from the Party in 1932. In 1934, after the Daladier government's incompetent handling of the 6 February anti-parliamentary street riots, Bergery resigned from the Chamber of Deputies and started what became known as the *Frontiste* party. Frontism began as an anti-fascist, anti-trust, and pacifist movement and soon added militant anti-Communism to its guiding principles. Bergery assumed editorial control of the party newspaper, *La Flèche*, which had begun as the organ of the *Front commun*. At its height, it had a circulation of 60,000 and was read by a good number of intellectuals and politicians of all political colours. In 1936 Bergery was elected as one of the few Frontiste Deputies in the Chamber and became a bitter opponent of Léon Blum's Popular Front government, which he found to be weak both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. At this point Bergery's anti-Communism became more strident. He gradually came to perceive Stalinist Russia as a dangerous totalitarian power. He actively denounced the Moscow show trials and ran into heavy opposition from the Communist and non-Communist left. He resigned, with a group of influential dissenters, from the influential *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* in November 1937 in protest against that organization's refusal to recognize the political realities of Soviet Russia and the show trials in particular. Bergery continued to criticize the weakness of the French state and parliament and the corruption of French parties in particular. From 1938 onwards, he proposed a number of peace plans for Europe based upon the redrawing of the map of Eastern Europe as it had been constituted by the Treaty of Versailles. His calls for revision of the borders of Europe met with approval from a number of notable political thinkers of the time, many of whom contributed actively to *La Flèche*. He supported the Munich Agreement and escalated his calls for peace as war approached. In August 1939 he joined the pacifist *Comité de liaison contre la guerre*, which had been formed in the Chamber by 15 deputies who were politically diverse but were united in their opposition to war.

Bergery was one of the few Deputies to vote against war credits in September 1939. After the Fall of France, he collaborated with the early Pétainist government, composing the Bergery Declaration, and writing a few of Pétain's speeches. By late summer 1940 his direct involvement in the politics of the Vichy state was over. He was more or less shut out of the political process of the new state, which under the tutelage of

Pierre Laval, in particular, took on the aura of the exact political corruption against which Bergery had railed for a decade. Bergery's ambassadorial posts in Moscow and Ankara took him away from the domestic concerns of Vichy.

**Q. Why was he put on trial?**

A. Bergery was charged with 'treason with the enemy' for his activities during the Vichy period and as Vichy ambassador. His close relationship while in Turkey with German Ambassador Franz von Papen, in particular, was the subject of much investigation. Bergery mustered a good number of prominent defenders and strong evidence and was acquitted. Interestingly, he wanted to be tried by the state since he thought that a trial was the only manner in which he could clear his name (and even with a clear recognition of the questionable processes of the trials of the post-war purge or *épuration*). While he ran for office in 1956 and wrote a number of articles for *Paris-Presse l'Intransigeant* in 1957–58, he more or less vanished from the political scene and returned to his law practice.

**Q. What does his role during the Second World War tell us about the nature of the Vichy state?**

A. Along with the overwhelming vote (569 to 80) on 10 July by the Third Republic's government to grant new constitutional powers to Marshal Pétain, the Bergery Declaration stands as a clear reminder that many in France were dissatisfied with the French Third Republic, and that even the remnants of Léon Blum's 1936 Popular Front government were willing to dismantle the apparatus of the republican state. Even if one allows for the shock of the catastrophic French military defeat of May 1940, the actions of the last Third Republic government speak volumes about the possible options that faced those leaders. The Declaration appealed to those of the left and the right for whom the Third Republic had become a corrupt and sterile regime. It is the Bergery Declaration that indicates the extent to which French intellectuals and politicians had come to loathe the perceived weakness and sterility of the Third Republic. Bergery's strange political career adds nuance and depth to the history of Vichy France, and suggests that the Vichy state contained a far more tangled and complex set of historical and political factors than has hitherto been recognized. Many historians have suggested that by 1940 Bergery had become a fascist, a left-wing fascist, a *jacobin*, or part of the 'fascist drift' of France. Other dismiss him as a mere political opportunist and dandy who lost out in his bid for power in the summer of 1940 and was offered the humbling ambassadorial postings as a means of saving face. In fact, Bergery had an impressive career in foreign relations from 1919 to 1940 and was ideally suited to deal with the nuances and intricacies of French foreign policy between 1941 and 1944. The bigger issue regarding Bergery and Vichy is the question of the political composition of the early Vichy state. Bergery offers definitive proof that the Left was indeed present and active in the first few months of Vichy. In this respect, Vichy can be seen as one in a series of political upheavals in French history when the state was re-made after a time of war.

**Key publications by Diane N. Labrosse**

Diane Laborsse is finishing her dissertation on 'Gaston Bergery, the French Left/Right Political Dichotomy, and Vichy France' (York University, Canada). She is writing *The Rise and Fall of the Vichy Regime* in France for Greenwood Press and is the author of a forthcoming article on Gaston Bergery and Vichy.

### Further reading

Several Roundtable Reviews on H-Diplo, which are accessible at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/>

See, in particular, the following roundtables:

Joel Blatt (ed.) *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghan Books, 1998).

Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944* (Oxford, 2001).

Simon Kitson, *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis, 1940–1942* (Éditions Autrement, 2005).

H-France reviews, many of which concern Vichy, can be found at the following location: <http://www3.uakron.edu/hfrance/reviews/list.html>

### Selected books

Jean-Pierre Azéma, *1940: L'Année terrible* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).

Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, *Le régime de Vichy et les français* (Paris: Fayard, 1992).

Marc Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'État français: L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

Philippe Burrin, *La Dérive fasciste: Doriot, Déat, Bergery, 1933–1945* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings (eds), *L'Empire colonial sous Vichy* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004).

Jean-Paul Cointet, *Histoire de Vichy* (Paris: Plon, 1996).

Michèle Cointet-Labrousse, *Vichy et le fascisme: Les hommes, les structures et les pouvoirs* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1987).

Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l'an 40*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Politique étrangère de la France: L'abîme, 1939–1944* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1986).

Sarah Fishman, Laura Lee Downs, Ioannis Sinanoglou, Leonard V. Smith and Robert Zaretsky (eds) *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). The Introduction (pp. 1–9) by Sarah Fishman and Leonard Smith very clearly explains the Paxton effect and legacy. See Part 1, 'Vichy France and l'ère paxtonienne', pp. 13–57, for the Paxton legacy on French studies and the entire book for the current (as of 2000) state of Vichy historiography.

Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation of France 1940–1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001).

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- John Hellman, *The Knight Monks of Vichy France: Uriage, 1940–45*, 2nd edn (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
- William D. Irvine, 'Politics of human rights: a dilemma for the Ligue de Droits de l'Homme', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 20(1): 5–28.
- Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
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- H.R. Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
- Robert Paxton, *Vichy France 1940–1944: Old Guard and New Order*, 3rd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
- Denis Peschanski, *Vichy 1940–1944: Contrôle et exclusion* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1997).
- Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal 1940–1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
- Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave 1933–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
- Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France*, 3rd edn (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2000).
- John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
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- Olivier Wieviorka, *Les Orphelins de la République: Destinés des députés et sénateurs français (1940–1945)* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).
- Limore Yagil, 'L'Homme nouveau' et la révolution nationale de Vichy (1940–1944) (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1997).