Books

French Preoccupation

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Starting with his first book in 1966, Robert O. Paxton, Mellon Professor Emeritus of Social Science, substantially changed our understanding of how France reacted to the German occupation during World War II. As historian Sarah Fishman said, “When we think of Vichy, it is pre- and post-Paxton.”

In this recent essay, excerpted from the book *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination,* Paxton tells how his childhood interest in France developed into the studies that became part of France’s national debate about its past.

A smallish town in the Virginia Appalachians might seem impossibly remote from France. Even so, France was actively present in my hometown in the 1930s and 1940s. Lexington is a college town. Two professors of French were frequent dinner guests of my parents. My piano teacher and church choir director, another frequent dinner guest, had studied in Nadia Boulanger’s famous summer course at Fontainebleau. A Catalan painter, Pierre Daura, had met a Virginia girl at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and married her. Exiled from Franco’s Spain, the Dauras made their home at St.-Cirque Lapopie in the département of the Lot. When war broke out in 1939, they resettled in the countryside near Lexington. My father, a lawyer, helped Pierre Daura with his citizenship papers. The Dauras were joined for a while by their brother-in-law, the better-known French painter Jean Hélion. I still have the copy of Hélion’s memoirs that he inscribed to my mother.

The isolated local intelligentsia of my parents’ generation in American small towns valued [the idea of] France as an indispensable link to the cultivated outside world. The two world wars made France still more salient for my parents’ generation and for my own as well. My parents were grieved by the defeat of France in 1940 and supported Roosevelt fervently in his struggle to overcome isolationism and contribute to the defeat of Hitler.

The D-Day landings took place just a week before my twelfth birthday. I followed the liberation of France on maps at school and at home, in the evening around the radio with my parents. Our interest in the Normandy landings became more personal when a cousin, John Paxton from Kansas City, stopped by on his way to board a troopship in New York. Almost everyone knew someone fighting in France.

In 1948 my parents sent me to the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire for my last two years of secondary school. Exeter brought Europe decisively into my universe. My teachers at Exeter, like most in their profession, took it for granted that familiarity with European history and culture defined an educated person.

It was at Exeter that I began to study French. I recall quite clearly my mother's assertion that French was the language that opened up the greatest literary and cultural riches. Fortunately I had two master teachers of French in secondary school and college, Paul Everett and Francis Drake. Both swept their classes along with an infectious enthusiasm for mastering the pronunciation of u and for La Fontaine.

The summer after my graduation from Exeter, in June 1950, my father took the whole family to Europe. London was the principal destination, as my parents wanted to commune with their English roots. It was unthinkable to miss Paris, however. We spent a week at the Hotel Lutetia without having the slightest idea about that hotel's sinister role as Gestapo headquarters during the occupation or about the dramatic scenes of reunion that took place at the Lutetia when the survivors of the Nazi camps returned in 1945.

The France that attracted my attention existed largely in my mind, of course. I had been taught that France was preeminently the country where intellectuals are most prized. Everyone I knew who had spent time in France took this idea for granted. I had absorbed from parents and teachers the notion that Europe was at the center of the globe, the place where Western civilization began and where it was most completely developed.

I must admit that my image of the Europe I wanted to study was not entirely favorable. Growing up during World War II and studying World War I and the sad failure to follow it with a lasting peace, I came to feel that Europe had betrayed its brilliant possibilities and succumbed to nationalism, dictatorship, and war. I wanted to find out what had gone wrong.

That interest ripened in college. I majored in modern European history at Washington and Lee University and at Oxford. Afterwards, in September 1958, I entered the doctoral program in European history at Harvard.

My choice of Vichy France as the subject of my doctoral dissertation came about only later, at the end of a circuitous, accident-filled route. When I departed for a research year in Paris in September 1960, I had something else in mind. In 1960 the French Army was in a state of open revolt over the fate of French Algeria. After six years of inconclusive French military action against the Algerian independence movement, President Charles de Gaulle had opened negotiations with Algerian representatives. Much of the French colonial population in Algeria, supported by a substantial part of the officer corps, refused to accept any negotiated settlement. They threatened to overthrow the French Republic in order to keep Algeria French. I wanted to study historically how the professional culture of the French officer corps had been formed.

It occurred to me that learning how French officers were socialized at the French military academy at Saint-Cyr (the French West Point) would help explain their solidarity as a professional corps and their sense of mission to save an abstract France from France’s actually existing government and citizenry. I was rebuffed, however, when I went to the French Army’s archives in the château of Vincennes, in the Paris suburbs, to explain my project. All the archives of the military academy at Saint-Cyr, I was told, had been destroyed by American bombers in 1944. No serious research could be done on my subject.

Raoul Girardet, of the Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris (known as Sciences Po), the most thoughtful scholar of French military institutions and attitudes, had agreed to give me informal advice on my dissertation. I told him that my subject was impossible. Since French military society interests you, he told me, why not study the officer corps during the German occupation of 1940–1944, that most fascinating and painful moment when French officers were seeking their legitimate chief. Was he at Vichy, in the person of Marshal Pétain? Or was it General de Gaulle in London? Or General Giraud in Algiers?

If I wanted to study the Armistice Army of Vichy France, M. Girardet said, he could put me in touch with General Weygand, French commander-in-chief in June 1940 and after that the Vichy government’s minister of defense.

That sounded like a good idea to me. By October 1960, I was launched on a doctoral dissertation on the Armistice Army of 1940–1944 and, without knowing it, on a lifetime's engagement with Vichy France.

That year of research in Paris, from September 1960 to August 1961, constituted my first real immersion in French society. My Washington and Lee classmate Jean-Marie Grandpierre kindly took me under his wing and introduced me to his friends in Paris. My French improved greatly under their merciless scrutiny.

At work, I interviewed about thirty retired colonels and generals. The conversations were invariably fascinating and sometimes tense. Not only were the defeat of 1940 and the German occupation extremely touchy subjects; the Algerian War was also devouring everyone's attention. One of the officers I interviewed, Colonel Charles Lacheroy, disappeared underground as a militant of "l'Algérie française" soon after our conversation in February 1961. At the other extreme, Air Force General Pierre Gallois understood that even to win such a war would do France more harm than good.

After I returned to the United States in August 1961, my undergraduate classmate Henry Turner, completing his doctorate in German history at Princeton, alerted me to the existence in the National Archives in Washington of thousands of microfilm reels of archives captured from the German Army in 1945. As Turner suspected, they contained fascinating documents concerning German officers' contacts with the Vichy French Armistice Army.

The German archives gave my work an entirely new dimension. A further year immersed in them enabled me to present a much more complete and nuanced account of Vichy-German relations.

My first book, *Parades and Politics at Vichy*, was published in 1966. I did not expect it to be translated into French, and it was not. Indeed, it was barely noticed in France. Its existence was noted in three lines in the *Revue française de science politique*, in a list of recently received books that would not be reviewed.

My study of the Vichy officer corps, however, led imperatively on to a sequel. I had discovered that the common French understanding of the Vichy regime was not supported by what I had found in the German archives and other contemporary documents. Whereas the standard view since the 1954 publication of Robert Aron's classic *Histoire de Vichy* held that all initiatives during the occupation years came

from the German side and that Vichy mainly reacted, the German archives showed that Vichy had enjoyed a certain autonomy during the first year. It had used this margin of maneuver to pursue vigorously its own dual project: the National Revolution at home and, abroad, a policy of neutrality upheld by an effort to keep both Axis and Allied armies out of the French empire ("défense tous azimuts"). Reports from Vichy by American diplomats, consulted in the National Archives in Washington, confirmed this interpretation. I embarked with mounting excitement on a general study of Vichy France.

My second book appeared in the United States in 1972 as *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944*. One of my Harvard mentors, the master analyst of French politics Stanley Hoffmann, generously offered to find me a French publisher. Gallimard turned me down, but Les Editions du Seuil decided to take the risk. My editors at Le Seuil were keenly aware that my book, since it was in such flagrant contradiction to received views, would be scrutinized minutely. Many of my assertions inspired incredulity. Le Seuil feared, quite legitimately, for its reputation. Therefore my editors assigned one of their younger colleagues, Michel Winock, along with the young historian Jean-Pierre Azéma (whose mother was doing the translation) to review my text. Winock and Azéma went over my manuscript line by line and sent me numerous queries. I was able to justify most of my assertions with documentary evidence.

I was grateful for their care, for a furor arose when Vichy France was published in French translation as *La France de Vichy in 1973*. While many of the newspaper reviews were favorable, *La Revue française de science politique* was quite negative, as were many former Vichy officials and supporters. Approval from newspapers and doubt from academia was the opposite of what I had expected. Nor had I expected the French public to seize on this book with such intensity. I found myself swept up in a violent debate. I had to defend my conclusions in many public appearances and in discussions on radio and television.

After 1973, therefore, my relationship with France changed. I was no longer an anonymous graduate student preparing a thesis or an unknown American assistant professor. I was now someone who had written a notorious book.

My French readers were divided. Whereas many of them — usually the older ones — found my book farcically wrong and profoundly wounding, others — especially younger people — were convinced by my interpretation. Over the years, I had the

immense satisfaction of watching the first group diminish and the second expand. As serious research on Vichy got underway in France in the 1970s and swelled to a flood after a new law in 1979 began to open the French archives, an emerging school of French contemporary historians tended to confirm my views. Some particular points were criticized: John Sweets and Pierre Laborie, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, found in their studies of particular localities that popular enthusiasm for the Vichy regime was less broad and less enduring than I had said. By and large, however, the new French scholarship accepted the internal origins of the National Revolution and the autonomy and vigor of Vichy's initiatives.

I was not the first person to undertake scholarly research on Vichy. The German historian Eberhard Jäckel and two French scholars, Yves Durand and Henri Michel, had preceded me. I had several advantages, however: a fresh point of view, distance that passed in France for objectivity, and the formidable heavy artillery of the German archives. Moreover, it was my good fortune to appear on the scene just as the events of 1968 produced a generation of young readers who rejected their elders' comfortable fictions and who were eager for a fresh look at France during the German occupation. For whatever reason, after 1973 my professional life was indissolubly linked to the flood tide of French national debate about the occupation years, and this tide would carry me along up to retirement and beyond.

I have now been visiting France for fifty-five years. In the last two decades I have spent between two and three months in France each year. My wife, Sarah Plimpton, an unconditional Francophile, had bought a tiny garret apartment in the Marais years before we met, and we spent our summers there. I wrote in the salon, she painted in the bedroom. In 1992 we fixed up a small stone barn near Cluny where we could escape from the noise and heat of Paris to a more bucolic work setting. Our lives have thus become deeply involved in the delights and pains of a second home in France. We have struggled to persuade ferrets to leave and plumbers to come.

So why France? The reasons have evolved and expanded over the years. The ties are multiple. First I came to visit. Later I came to study. Still later I came to prepare myself to write and teach young Americans about the history of France and of Europe in the twentieth century. After 1973 I came to participate in debates about Vichy, to defend my interpretation, and to work on new books. Finally, after all, I came in order to enjoy the pleasures of the table, the artistic treasures, the landscapes, and the friendships to be found in France. Now I have acquired a peculiar identity shaped simultaneously by deep Appalachian roots combined with

active involvement, professional and personal, in France.

After a time I no longer felt completely at home in either the United States or France. I came to inhabit a new continent of my own making, somewhere between the two, in an imaginary mid-Atlantic space. I did not consider my mid-Atlantic identity a liability. I thought of it more as a liberation than a constraint. It enabled me to move about freely in both the European space and the American space without ever becoming enclosed in either one.

Just as the France that had caught my adolescent attention existed largely in my mind, I came to understand that I, too, existed partly in the French imagination. On bad days I felt that it was hard for me to be perceived in France as an individual, so strong is the assumption, even among some otherwise sophisticated French people, that all Americans conform to one simple type.

I believe that French perceptions of the United States have improved since my first regular stays in the 1960s. I do not mean that they have become more favorable (why should they?) but that they are now based on more information and are more nuanced. A great many more French people, especially young people, have traveled or studied in the United States, where their presuppositions were tested against direct observation. In my own professional life, the most significant improvement in French reactions to the United States has been the wide opening of French academic life to outsiders. When I was a young assistant professor in the 1960s, many French academics ignored American scholars. Today American scholars of France enjoy fruitful cooperation and warm friendship with French colleagues.

On the American side, the common stereotypes seem to me to have evolved less. American stereotypes of France go back at least to Jefferson and Adams. The theme of French decadence was reinforced when American soldiers encountered ubiquitous bars and legal bordellos in 1917. The newer theme of French ingratitude began over war debts in the 1920s and was solidly entrenched in the 1960s during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle: we saved them twice, the logic went, so they owe us subservience.

The simplistic portrayal of one or the other as inherently evil or good makes a healthy relationship impossible. Having devoted a large part of my professional career to studying France in its darkest moment since the Black Death, I am sometimes asked if this has given me negative feelings about the place. No, I say,

there was always the other France, the France of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Resistance.
From my mid-Atlantic vantage point, I can see things to deplore and reasons for hope on both sides.

Adapted from Paxton's essay "A Mid-Atlantic Identity," from Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, edited by Laura Lee Downs and Stephane Gerson, published this year by Cornell University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*



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