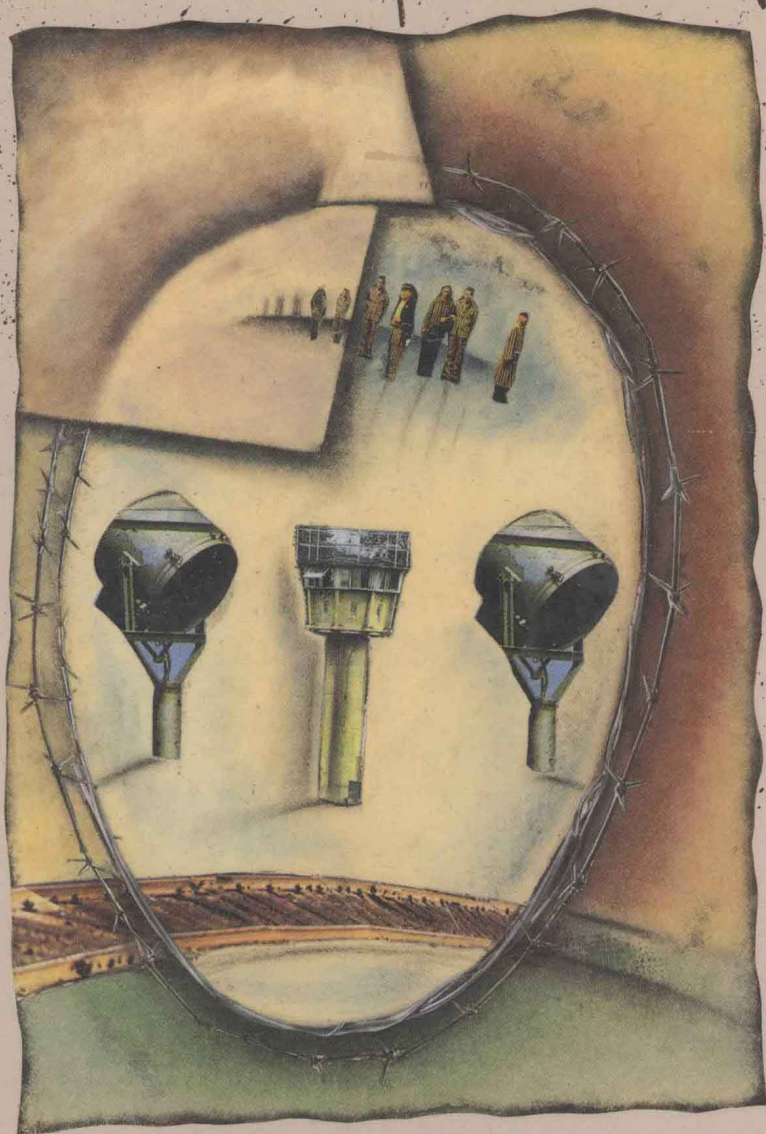


ASSASSINS ... of MEMORY

ESSAYS ON
THE DENIAL
OF THE
HOLOCAUST



by **Pierre Vidal-Naquet**

Translated and with a foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York

Columbia University Press wishes to express its appreciation for assistance given by the government of France through Le Ministère de la Culture in the preparation of the translation.

Columbia University Press
New York Chichester, West Sussex
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Les Assassins de la mémoire: "Un Eichmann de papier et autres essais sur le révisionnisme." (c) Editions La Découverte, 1987.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vidal-Naquet, Pierre, 1930—
[Assassins de la mémoire. English]
Assassins of memory : essays on the denial of the Holocaust /
Pierre Vidal-Naquet ; translated and with a foreword by
Jeffrey Mehlman.
p. cm.—(European perspectives)
Includes index.
ISBN 0-231-07458-1
ISBN 0-231-07459-X (pbk.)
1. Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)—Errors, inventions, etc.
2. Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)—Historiography.
I. Title. II. Series.
D804.3.V5313 1992 940.53'18'072—dc20 92-
26654
CIP

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Assassins of Memory

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In memory of my mother,
Marguerite Valabrègue

Marseilles, May 20, 1907–
Auschwitz, June 2 (?), 1944

Forever young

Foreword

Jeffrey Mehlman

The term *intellectual*—with its resonances of political commitment and progressivism, its refusal to be confined by the bounds of any guild-defined discipline or genre—is one of the linguistic legacies of the Dreyfus Affair, and it seems (at least) doubly fitting to recall that fact in approaching the work of Pierre Vidal-Naquet. For he is not only one of the masterly renewers of French classical scholarship, an innovator in the heuristic inclusion of the insights of structuralism in our understanding of ancient Greece, but also the author of a number of books revealing—and denouncing—the systematic use of police and army torture during the Algerian war.¹ Vidal-Naquet, that is, in his willingness to take on the political—and military—establishment, is an intellectual in the grand (and perhaps waning) tradition that can be dated to Zola’s “Manifeste des Intellectuels” of January 14, 1898.²

If the reference to the Dreyfus Affair seems *doubly* appropriate in the case of Vidal-Naquet, however (and here we approach the subject of *Assassins of Memory*), it is because as heir to a Dreyfusard family of assimilated Jews, he has always remained something of a child of the Affair. Prefacing Michael Marrus’s history of Jewish assimilation in the last years of the nineteenth century, he confesses to reading it as something of a family history.³ Indeed, he observes that “it was with the example of the Dreyfus Affair in mind, that, years later, as an adult, but not without illusions,” he embarked on the polemical activity that marked his engagement in the “Algerian affair.”⁴

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The Dreyfus Affair, which was marked by anti-Semitic riots in every major French city, was of course the near civil war into which France was plunged in the course of the struggle to reopen the case of Alfred Dreyfus, an army captain (and assimilated Jew) unjustly sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island for high treason. It has been interpreted by Hannah Arendt, among others, as a dress rehearsal for the catastrophe that was to befall European Jewry under Hitler.⁵ Indeed, without an awareness of the Affair it is impossible to appreciate the historian's grim quip that if, in 1925, one were to have predicted the massacre of six million European Jews within twenty years, the only intelligible response, beyond the shock of initial disbelief, might well have been: *Ah! ces Français*. . . . Vidal-Naquet himself is too much the historian to be willing to read back the events of the 1940s into those a half-century earlier.⁶ And yet one is hard put to read the moving excerpt which he has quoted from his father's diary for the date September 15, 1942, without hearing the bitter lesson Alfred Dreyfus—had he been a bit more lucid—might have derived from his own ordeal: "I experience as a Frenchman the insult visited on me as a Jew; and it is frightfully painful for me to acknowledge it (but I have promised myself total frankness): this blight on France's reputation has snuffed out the love I bore my country. I believe quite firmly today, since a distinction has been made between 'us' and France, that France was 'us' and I shall turn away from her, however awful the rift within me, if, as the sneers of the masters of the hour contend, France finds its embodiment in 'them' and not in 'us.'"⁷ It is perhaps the imperfect tense—the present belief that France *was* us—which is most wrenching. Vidal-Naquet's parents were deported during the Occupation.

We approach the subject of *Assassins of Memory*, for it too hinges on what Vidal-Naquet rightly identifies as another linguistic legacy of the Affair, the word *révisionnisme*. At the end of the nineteenth century, the term referred to the movement pressing for a judicial review or reopening of the Dreyfus case. Its adepts were popularly known—and frequently excoriated—as

révisionnistes. If Vidal-Naquet has subtitled his book in French "Essays on Revisionism," it is because that term has resurfaced in French life, and is identifiable as the movement to revise historical understanding of a specific crucial episode: the Nazi destruction of the Jews of Europe. A few chronological notes will help situate this latter-day "revisionism."

In the fall of 1978 the French weekly *L'Express* ran, without editorial comment, an openly anti-Semitic interview with Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, one of the villains of Vichy France and, from 1942 to 1944, its Commissioner for Jewish Affairs.⁸ Darquier's principal point was summarized in the magazine's headline: "Only Lice Were Gassed in Auschwitz." Speaking from the comfort of exile in Madrid, Darquier implied that the Nazi "genocide" was in fact a—typical—Jewish hoax. France had not seen anti-Semitism of so crude a stamp since the war, and the result, as Jean-François Revel has suggested, was something of a "national psychodrama."⁹ French anti-Semitism, the role of French collaborators, but also the "Jewish question" in general became topics on the public agenda.

It was on December 29, 1978 that *Le Monde*, with some embarrassment, yielded to the legal pressures of an iconoclastic professor of French literature, Robert Faurisson, who had been attacked in the paper several years earlier, and published his article entitled "The Problem of the Gas Chambers or the Rumor of Auschwitz."¹⁰ The title itself bespoke a substantial advance in the sophistication of those prepared to deny the genocide. The phrase "the problem of the gas chambers" was in fact a borrowing from the respected thesis of Olga Wormser-Migot, *Le système concentrationnaire nazi*; the implication was that the "problematic" status of the gas chambers was not an invention of Faurisson's own, and that he was merely raising a perceived problem to a new level of awareness.¹¹ "The rumor of Auschwitz" deliberately echoed another phrase, "the rumor of Orléans"; this was a much commented on case in the 1960s involving an alleged white slave trade, run by Jews, in the provincial city of Orléans. The Orléans trade in prostitution turned out to

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be a fantasy fueled by vile prejudice—but so, suggested Faurisson, was the much repeated “legend” of the gas chambers.

Faurisson’s argument lay in positing that the technological requirements for mass gassings were totally incompatible with the installations described by numerous witnesses, and would have resulted in a “catastrophe” for those administering the gas chambers themselves. Moreover, since numerous eyewitness reports had already been discredited, on what basis could one accept *any* such testimony? The hell of Auschwitz, for Faurisson, was that of a protracted typhus epidemic: whatever gassing (of lice)—or cremation (of infected corpses)—may have been going on at Auschwitz was part of an effort to control that epidemic.

Finally, what was most distressing about Faurisson was the tone of his conclusion: “Nazism is dead, quite dead, and its Führer along with it. What remains today is the truth. Let us dare to proclaim it. The nonexistence of the ‘gas chambers’ is good news for beleaguered humanity. Good news that it would be wrong to keep hidden any longer.” For where Darquier appeared to be delivering his message out of festering rancor and anti-Semitic fury, Faurisson pretended to be an evangelist, a bearer of good tidings. He would subsequently write to *Le Monde*: “If through some misfortune the Germans had won the war, I suppose their concentration camps would have been presented to us as reeducation camps. Contesting that presentation of the facts, I would no doubt have been accused of being objectively in the service of ‘Judeo-Marxism.’ I am neither objectively nor subjectively a Judeo-Marxist or a neo-Nazi. I have admiration for those Frenchmen who fought bravely against Nazism. They defended the right cause. Today, if I affirm that the ‘gas chambers’ did not exist, it is because the difficult duty of being truthful obliges me to say so.”¹² The tone was at once scholarly and seductive, and yet the political implication of Faurisson’s case was plain: the villains of the historical episode which only recently in France, following broadcast of the American television film, had come to be referred to as the Holocaust, were not

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the Nazis but the Jews. In a radio interview of December 17, 1980, the professor from Lyon, residing—as if by provocation—in the city of Vichy, had summarized the upshot of his conclusions: “The alleged Hitlerian gas chambers and the so-called genocide of the Jews form a single historical lie whose principal beneficiaries are the State of Israel and international Zionism and whose principal victims are the German people, but not its leaders, and the Palestinian people in its entirety.”¹³ It was that statement which eventually led to Faurisson’s conviction by the first chamber of the Paris Court of Appeal on April 25, 1983, not for the falsification of history, but for the maliciousness with which he had reduced his research (which was said to be serious) to offensive slogans.¹⁴ It was indeed, to use the language of the second Dreyfus trial, as though he had been found guilty “with extenuating circumstances.”

Thus did the revisionist thesis about the Judeocide make its way into French public awareness—through the grand gateway of France’s newspaper of record. A rebuttal of the initial article, entitled “An Abundance of Evidence,” by Georges Wellers of the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, appeared along with it. But that format contributed to the appearance that there were two sides—“revisionist” and “exterminationist”—of an argument, either of which reasonable men might entertain. And since Wellers had a clear institutional investment in his side of the argument, the scales—to the uninformed—might appear to tilt in favor of the apparently neutral Faurisson. In any event the equivalent space granted to both positions was a major coup for the “revisionists.” The appearance of “reasonable doubt,” in this case as in others, was a decisive achievement. By 1983 *Le Monde* would be running an article headlined “Academics Confront Each Other over the Faurisson Case.”¹⁵ It was at about that time, moreover, that France’s pioneer gay liberationist, Guy Hocquenghem, could preface a book on the Nazi persecution of homosexuals by writing: “This book is our anti-Diary of Anne Frank. At a time when French intellectuals debate the question

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of whether or not there had been an extermination through gassing, it vividly reveals a far more important mystification [*truquage*] in the hagiography of anti-Nazism.”¹⁶ The mystification would be the claim that the Jews suffered a worse fate than the gays under Nazism. But in the process of saying as much, Hocquenghem endorsed in passing the notion that the gas chambers themselves were a hoax. In a single stroke, with an assist from Faurisson, gay liberation, in the voice of one of its principal French spokesmen, had managed to turn—however fleetingly—anti-Semitic. The “question” of the gas chambers had infiltrated still another register of discourse. If it was surely an exaggeration to pretend with the revisionists that the gas chamber “question” had become a “touchstone” of French culture, it was nonetheless a telling sign of the times that a philosopher as attuned to the winds of change as Jean-François Lyotard could fix on the revisionist debate as the prime example of the language game he began thematizing as *Le Différend*.¹⁷

It was in the face of what many thought could only be a dishonorable debate that the French historical establishment closed ranks in a collective declaration, written by Vidal-Naquet and the historian of anti-Semitism Léon Poliakov and published in *Le Monde* on February 21, 1979. Its conclusion read: “The question of how *technically* such a mass murder was possible should not be raised. It was technically possible because it occurred. This is the necessary starting point for all historical investigation of the subject. It has fallen to us to recall that point with due simplicity: there is not nor can there be a debate over the existence of the gas chambers.”

Two other aspects of Faurisson’s activities should be mentioned in this context. The first concerns the disastrous turn taken by Faurisson’s personal fortunes in the wake of the notoriety he achieved. It soon became impossible for university authorities in Lyon to ensure his physical well-being and he was forced to leave his academic post. He was involved in numerous lawsuits and claimed to have suffered in his health as a result. Access to the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine,

which had sustained his research, was denied him. The second concerns the surprising political support he received from an unexpected quarter: the extreme-left group known as La Vieille Taupe [Old Mole], which recognized in Faurisson's position an ideological bombshell, and in the much touted volume of documentation he was prepared to adduce, no doubt, a touchstone of authentic materialism. We shall return to the rationale of Faurisson's supporters on the far left shortly. For the moment suffice it to say that one of the major turns in what became known as the "Faurisson affair" occurred when his book—*Mémoire en défense: contre ceux qui m'accusent de falsifier l'histoire; la question des chambres à gaz*—was published by La Vieille Taupe (re-constituted as a publishing house specializing in "revisionist" literature) with a preface by none other than Noam Chomsky.

Chomsky was in all probability drawn into the affair by way of his own critique of the use the Western media had been making of Pol Pot's massacre in Cambodia.¹⁸ Régis Debray, in discussion with Chomsky, had put it as follows: "The West's best propaganda resource is Pol Pot's regime. We needed that scarecrow."¹⁹ For Hitler too, after all, serves as something of a "scarecrow" for liberal democracies, and the conflation of the two cases, as Alain Finkielkraut has suggested, seemed particularly apposite. It was not for nothing that the back cover of Faurisson's book featured a photograph of American Congressmen gawking reverently at what historians have now determined could *not* have been a gas chamber at Dachau.²⁰ But Chomsky's preface—which is discussed at some length by Vidal-Naquet—did not mention Cambodia. Nor did it support Faurisson's position on the gas chambers. Indeed, Chomsky claimed to have scant familiarity with Faurisson's work. The preface was offered instead under the title "Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression."²¹ It was in large part a disquisition on the apparent French inability to assimilate a basic civil right, which in the United States had long been regarded as a fundamental achievement of the eighteenth century. The French intelligentsia seemed to subscribe to "a vicious campaign

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of harassment, intimidation, [and] slander” against the Lyon professor in an “attempt to silence him.” But “for those who have learned something from the eighteenth century (say, Voltaire), it is a truism, hardly deserving of discussion, that the defense of the right of free expression is not restricted to ideas one approves of, and that it is precisely in the case of ideas found most offensive that this right should be most vigorously defended.”²²

Vidal-Naquet’s response to Chomsky concerns an apparent whitewash of Faurisson’s activities (as a “relatively apolitical liberal”) incidental to the linguist’s defense of the right to free speech. But those arguments—against Chomsky, and more fundamentally against Faurisson and the revisionists—are best followed in the detail of Vidal-Naquet’s text. What will perhaps be most interesting to an American readership is a tone—between rage and pessimism—characterizing this work. It is best exemplified by the surprising section in the “guise of a conclusion” to the volume’s titular (and final) essay. For it gives to this record of Vidal-Naquet’s decade of sparring with the revisionists something of the disenchanted quality of a journal. That concluding section consists for the most part of a translation of a celebrated and cynical tango by the Argentine poet E. S. Discépolo. Entitled “Cambalache,” it evokes a kind of leveling of all values in the moral and intellectual junkshop (*cambalache*) the twentieth century has become. In the Argentine’s words:

Todo es igual!
Nada es mejor!
Lo mismo un burro
que un gran professor!

(All is the same / Nothing any better. / A donkey the same / As a great professor!) A bizarrely pessimistic conclusion indeed for the “gran professor,” fighting the good fight, in whom many may be inclined to see Vidal-Naquet himself.

I confess that it was that aberrant ending to his book that I

found most intriguing. Here then are three speculations on the enigma of what Vidal-Naquet himself hesitates to call a conclusion. First, one should consider that by intellectual temperament Vidal-Naquet is anything but a defender of orthodoxies, and can only have been irritated by the discursive position into which the Faurisson affair seemed to have forced him. One of his more interesting essays in *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent*, for instance, resorts to a structural analysis of the historian Josephus in order to discredit the efforts of Yigael Yadin to shore up through archaeology what can only be termed the Zionist myth of another Jewish catastrophe, the mass suicide at Masada.²³ And yet here he was, the skeptical historian all but forced by a bogus debunker into the camp of the dogmatists. *Cambalache!*

A second basis for Vidal-Naquet's dispirited conclusion may pertain to a work (in manuscript form) invoked on several occasions in the notes of *Assassins of Memory*. The book contains several warm references of indebtedness to Arno Mayer and what was to be his future publication, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The "Final Solution" in History*.²⁴ Now Mayer's controversial work, which appeared with a blurb by Vidal-Naquet, advanced the thesis that the "Judeocide" was in large part the—gradual—result of Nazi frustration at the failure of Germany's Eastern campaign. He in no way denied the Nazi extermination of the Jews. And yet the "revisionists" A. Butz and P. Rassinier—referred to as "skeptics"—had made their way into Mayer's bibliography.²⁵ Mayer's take on them was in certain respects uncompromising: "The skeptics, who are outright negationists, mock the Jewish victims with their one-sided sympathetic understanding for the executioners. They are ill-disguised anti-Semites and merchants of prejudice, and this morally reprehensible posture disqualifies them from membership in the republic of free letters and scholarship."²⁶ The passage reads as though it had been dictated by Vidal-Naquet. Butz, who teaches computer science at Northwestern University, wrote a review denouncing Mayer's history as "shoddy."²⁷ In *his* review, Faurisson, however, for

whom this entire matter has taken on a distasteful air of academic gamesmanship, could not help fixing with utter delight on two passages in Mayer's book. The first began: "Sources for the study of the gas chambers are at once rare and unreliable," and ended: "There is no denying the many contradictions, ambiguities, and errors in the existing sources."²⁸ This was a far cry from the title of the article in *Le Monde*, "An Abundance of Evidence" by Georges Wellers, with which the anti-revisionist camp initially responded to Faurisson's piece in the same newspaper. Coming from an author whom Faurisson could not help touting as "Pierre Vidal-Naquet's friend," Mayer's statement could only have the appearance of a carefully hedged concession.²⁹ The second passage reads as follows: "At both camps [Auschwitz and Majdanek], the line between egregious exploitation and outright exterminism kept wearing thin. Indeed, ultimately the execrable living, sanitary, and working conditions in the concentration camps and ghettos took a greater toll of life than the willful executions and gassings in the extermination centers."³⁰ Here too the willingness to affirm that disease and exhaustion (which presumably characterize all wars) exacted a greater toll among Jews than outright murder could be read as a concession—however carefully qualified—to the "revisionist" position. My interest here is not in affirming (or challenging) the accuracy of Mayer's argument, but in gauging the toll that the Princeton historian's book, when it finally did appear, can only have taken on the Frenchman's spirits. *Cambalache*, then, again.³¹

But perhaps the major justification for Vidal-Naquet's oddly dispirited pseudo-conclusion lay in an awareness of what a bizarrely exact parody of Dreyfusard "revisionism" twentieth-century French "revisionism" had become. Faurisson's stance was that of a member of a small group challenging a theologically based error. Providentially, the television miniseries *Holocaust* came to consecrate the fate of the Jews under Hitler in theological terms. (Before its broadcast, the term generally used in France was *genocide*.) And from the revisionist point of view the gas chambers functioned as the holy of holies of that reli-

gious construct. (Are there grounds, then, for excluding the Holocaust from the *religious* curriculum of American Hebrew schools?) Faurisson's language, moreover, is that of the positivist; he is endlessly calling for the opening of archives and the engagement of debate. He can be perversely resourceful in disqualifying the documentary evidence marshaled by his adversaries on internal grounds. (The doubts he has cast on the authenticity of parts of *The Diary of Anne Frank* appear, initially, to have convinced Vidal-Naquet himself.) He greets the copiousness of the evidence marshaled against him as a fraudulent joke. For better or worse, this was the initial ambience of those fighting—during the heroic phase—for a judicial review of the Dreyfus case. Moreover, Faurisson's efforts to exonerate the Nazis have increasingly taken the form of a judicial effort to defend himself. The title *Mémoire en défense* is eloquent in this regard. Whereas Vidal-Naquet is left dispirited at the end of his volume as to the future prospects of truth, Zola's great slogan has fallen—diabolically—into the adversary camp. "Historical truth is on the march," writes Faurisson, and "one is hard put to see who might stop it."³²

With Faurisson having staked out a "revisionist" position so uncannily parodic of Dreyfusard "revisionism," Vidal-Naquet, perhaps France's quintessential heir to the Affair's noblest legacy, finds himself at times in the depressing discursive stance of those, at the end of the century, who were busy closing ranks against the slandered captain. The refusal of open debate—lest it grant a shadow of legitimacy to the other side; lest, that is, the Judeocide fall into that media void in which pro and con end up being mere echoes of each other—is understandable.³³ Yet it opens Vidal-Naquet up to the charge of having written a book about (and against) arguments which he claims to regard as beneath serious consideration. Whence a tendency to drown the other side in stridency and insult (the idea that a debate would be "obscene," knowledge that Faurisson is an anti-Semite, etc.), a venting of outrage at being expected to *prove* what is already *known*. Moreover, the statement—in the historians' manifesto in *Le*