

**A Forgotten Zone of Memory?  
French Primary School Children and the History of the Occupation**

*Colin Nettelbeck*

A child is never the author of his own history. I suppose this is well known.  
Sebastian Barry

Who could forget the excruciating moment in Louis Malle's 1987 cinematic masterpiece, *Au revoir les enfants*, when the young protagonist, Julien Quentin, betrays his friend Jean Bonnet-Kippelstein to the Gestapo? In a split second, innocence is forever lost. Lost unfairly, to be sure, because Julien has no intention of betrayal: on the contrary, the film makes clear that the real traitor is the ill-treated kitchen hand, Joseph, and it is only Julien's anxiety for his friend's safety that makes his eyes flick towards him. But the glance is immediately noticed and acted upon by the Gestapo chief leading the raid on the little provincial Catholic school where a number of Jewish children have been hidden. Kippelstein and his fellow refugees are rounded up, along with the priest-headmaster, and they are taken away, never to be seen again. We know how intensely Malle felt about this film, and how strong its autobiographical base is; much has been written, too, about the emblematic value of this work in the story of France's coming to terms with its treatment of the Jews during the war.<sup>1</sup> What has not been noted, however, is how rare a piece of testimony it is: not in respect to the Jewish question, which has by now received quite rich coverage, but as a portrayal of the wartime lives of ordinary school children, especially primary school children.

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip French, ed., *Malle on Malle* (London, 1993); Pierre Billard, *Louis Malle: le rebel solitaire* (Paris, 2003); Alain Kleinberger, "Patrick Modiano, co-scénariste de la mémoire historique, à propos de *Lacombe Lucien* (Louis Malle 1974)," in *Modiano ou les intermittences de la mémoire*, Anne-Yvonne Julien, ed. (Paris, 2010), 447-64.

There is as yet no historical overview of the experience of French primary school children during the Second World War. Since the landmark work of Robert Paxton in 1972,<sup>2</sup> the process of exploring the French experience of the Second World War has been a phenomenon of extraordinary proportions that even today, almost seven decades after the events, seems to continue unabated. In France itself, scholars like Pascal Ory, Jean-Pierre Azéma, Henri Rousso, the Bédaridas, the Cointets, Bernard Comte and Annette Wieviorka have been leaders in defining the parameters of a field that is now universally accepted as being extraordinarily multi-faceted and complex.<sup>3</sup> Outside of France, interest has been particularly intense and sustained in Britain where, among others, historians H. R. Kedward, W. D. Halls, Hilary Footitt, Robert Gildea and Julian Jackson have all made major contributions to the understanding of the period.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, the work of Laura Lee Downs and Sarah Fishman, also among others, has continued to enrich that understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Although work continues across all the major aspects of the field and is likely to do so for some time to come, many of these have now received significant attention. The military and political aspects of the period have been thoroughly analysed, including now the diversity of experience in France's different regions.<sup>6</sup> France's role in the Shoah, and the more general experience of France's Jews, since the seminal work of Paxton and Marrus,<sup>7</sup> have also had detailed coverage<sup>8</sup> – and as Nadine Fresco's recent book shows, any sort of serene closure in this field seems remote.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of the roles of the Church – the hierarchy, the parish priests, the multitude of lay organisations – is by this stage well understood by historians, if

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (London, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> The following references are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide an indicative contextual sketch of the range of work occurring. Pascal Ory, ed., *La France allemande, 1933-1945* (Paris, 1995); Jean-Pierre Azéma, *De Munich à la Libération, 1938-1944* (Paris, 1979); Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, eds., *Vichy et les Français* (Paris, 1992); Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, eds., *La France des années noires* (Paris, 1993); Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (Paris, 1987); Renée Bédarida, *Les Catholiques dans la guerre 1939-1945: entre Vichy et la Résistance* (Paris, 1998); Jean-Paul Cointet, *La Légion française des combattants, 1940-1944: la tentation du fascisme* (Paris, 1995); Michèle Cointet, *L'Église sous Vichy 1940-1945: la repentance en question* (Paris, 1998); Bernard Comte, *L'Honneur et la conscience: catholiques français en Résistance, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1998); Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> H. R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France: A Study of Ideas and Motivations in the Southern Zone, 1940-1942* (Oxford, 1978); *ibid.*, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944* (Oxford, 1985); *ibid.*, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford, 1993); W. D. Halls, *The Youth of Vichy France* (Oxford, 1981); Hilary Footitt, *War and Liberation in France: Living with the Liberators* (Basingstoke, 2004); Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation, 1940-1945* (London, 2003); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Children in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham, NC, 2002); Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945* (New Haven, 1991); *The Battle for Children: World War Two, Youth Crime and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Kedward's *In Search of the Resistance* and Gildea's *Marianne in Chains*.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus, *Vichy and the Jews* (New York, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> The untiring work of Serge Klarsfeld is especially notable and well known, but there is a multitude of other work. See Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz: le rôle de Vichy dans la solution finale de la question juive en France, 1942* (Paris, 1983), and *ibid.*, *Le mémorial des enfants juifs déportés de France* (Paris, 1994); but also, for example, Anne Grynberg, *Les Camps de la honte: les internés juifs des camps français, 1939-1944* (Paris, 1991); Lucien Lazare, *Le Livre des justes* (Paris, 1994); Gérard Gobitz, *Les Déportations de réfugiés de Zone Libre en 1942* (Paris, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Nadine Fresco, *La mort des juifs* (Paris, 2008).

not by the general public.<sup>10</sup> A similar situation pertains for important social groupings such as youth (adolescents and young adults)<sup>11</sup> and women,<sup>12</sup> and for modes of cultural expression such as literature<sup>13</sup> and cinema.<sup>14</sup>

This paper, which forms part of a much larger project, will explore two matters: the first will argue the inherent importance of what is described as “a forgotten zone of memory”; and the second will seek to explain why historians thus far have not given it the attention it deserves. The conclusion hypothesises that this neglect may well constitute a significant strand of explanation for the historical blockage that Rousso and Conan style “a past which will not pass,”<sup>15</sup> and posits what might be done to rectify the situation. It will be remembered that Rousso’s thesis, first developed in *Le Syndrome de Vichy* and continued in his work with Conan, is that the traumatic, highly charged and conflictual nature of the French experience of the war has made historical reconstruction extraordinarily difficult; in turn, the absence of any generally accepted holistic narrative and the enduring presence of competing memories and myths has resulted in a collective cultural obsession with the period. Subsequent historians have generally acknowledged the validity of this overview, recognising that only patient sifting through different aspects of the experience (perhaps together with the passing on of those who continue to foster entrenched and passionate memories) can lead to “normal” historicisation. The present project follows this line, but with the additional possibility that opening up the phenomenon of primary school children’s experience, thus far elided by historians, may contribute quite dramatically to exorcising this impasse.

### The Importance of the Children and Their Experience

Between 1940 and 1944, in any given school year, there were five million children undertaking primary education in France: four million of them in state schools, and a million in the private (principally Catholic) system.<sup>16</sup> Aged between 6 and 14, they thus belonged to one or other of the groups that Susan Suleiman describes as being “old enough to remember, but too young to understand,” or “old enough to understand but too young to be responsible.”<sup>17</sup> In purely demographic terms, this is a group of

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Bernard Comte, *L’Honneur et la conscience*; Michèle Cointet, *L’Église sous Vichy*; and Vesna Drapac, *War and Religion: Catholics in the Churches of Occupied Paris* (Washington, D.C., 1998).

<sup>11</sup> For example, W. D. Halls, *The Youth of Vichy France*; Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children*.

<sup>12</sup> See Margaret L. Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance* (New York, 1986); Hélène Eck, “Les Françaises sous Vichy: femmes du désastre, citoyennes par le désastre,” in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 5, *Le XXe siècle*, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, eds. (Paris, 1992), 185-211; Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* (New York, 1995); Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy et l’éternel féminin* (Paris, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Attack, *Literature and the French Resistance: Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms, 1940-1950* (Manchester, 1989); Colin Nettelbeck, “Getting the Story Right: Narratives of the Second World War in post-1968 France,” in *Collaboration in France: Politics and Culture during the Nazi Occupation, 1940 – 1944*, Gerhard Hirschfeld and Patrick Marsh, eds. (Oxford, 1989), 252-93.

<sup>14</sup> Evelyn Ehrlich, *Cinema of Paradox: French Filmmaking under the German Occupation* (New York, 1985); Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Sylvie Lindperg, *Les Écrans de l’ombre: la Seconde Guerre Mondiale dans le cinéma français, 1944-1969* (Paris, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Henry Rousso and Eric Conan, *Vichy: un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Figures from Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l’enseignement et de l’éducation, tome IV. Depuis 1930* (Paris, 1981), 166.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 182.

conscious young people who, conservatively, made up at least 12 per cent of the population, and, although they could not in any reasonable way be held responsible for the national trauma, they were clearly a significant part of it, and their case for a place in the overall narrative is surely compelling. Beyond their sheer numbers, these children were quite explicitly given the status of being the embodiment of the future of the nation, as Judith Proud and Sarah Fishman have rightly stressed.<sup>18</sup> They were, in other words, directly inscribed into the very structures of the national self-image, and it is hard to see how any history of the French war experience could hope to be complete without taking into account who they were and the forces that shaped them.

It is perhaps more telling still that the very same group, a dozen years after the war, comprised a considerable proportion of the young people surveyed by Françoise Giroud for *L'Express*, a survey published under a title that became a historical landmark: *La Nouvelle Vague*.<sup>19</sup> They were by then aged between 18 and 25, and, once again, they were seen as a generation incarnating the nation's future. As Richard Jobs puts it in his study of the youth phenomenon in post-Liberation France: "This group of young people carried with it France's aspirations and opportunities for change, renewal, and rejuvenation."<sup>20</sup> They were people whose promise for national recovery and development was not only recognised, but trumpeted. As such, their experience and memory is an element of continuity between the Occupation years and the years of momentous change that affected France in the 1950s and 1960s and hence crucial subjects for a better understanding of that transition and the subsequent social and cultural evolution. The fact that today they are aged from their early 70s to about 80, if they are still alive – and many of them indeed are – indicates the existence of a precious historical resource and an urgent project for the gathering of testimony.

Historically, the question of whether the Vichy period should be considered in continuity with the rest of French history or rather as some kind of hiatus is still something of a hot topic; and it is one that has featured centrally in the debates around national identity that have pervaded French culture over the past half-century. This is another area to which greater knowledge of this particular generation will contribute. We know how slow it has been for the Gaullist version of history to lose its dominance: de Gaulle's insistent, but surely knowingly perverse, position that the Pétain government and the armistice it negotiated were illegal and resisted by the vast majority of the French people has been tenacious, to say the least. It was, after all, only in 1995 – fifty years after the Liberation – that Jacques Chirac, as president of the Republic, finally acknowledged that Vichy was a part of French history and not apart from it and that its crimes were something for which France as a nation could and must be held accountable. And even then, this declaration was far from winning universal assent, as the enduring presence of the political extreme Right has demonstrated.

To a certain extent, the hesitation is understandable because to press the continuity argument is to run various risks: opening the door to a "*banalisation*" of Vichy, tempting the rehabilitation of figures such as Pétain and even Laval, minimising the repressive nature of the regime and, as a corollary, downgrading the value of the Resistance. Such tendencies could bring comfort to outright negationism

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<sup>18</sup> Judith K. Proud, *Children and Propaganda* (Oxford, 1995), 7-8; Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Françoise Giroud, *La Nouvelle vague: portraits de la jeunesse* (Paris, 1958).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Stanford, 2007), 7. Jobs offers an extremely detailed and useful analysis of the widespread phenomenon of polling young people in the post-Liberation period.

such as that of Rassinier and Faurisson,<sup>21</sup> not to mention the political ambitions of Le Pen and his successors in the *Front National*. Yet surely this confusion of truth and passion argues all the more strongly for closer scrutiny of available evidence, rather than neglect of it.

Some considerable progress has been made in identifying and accepting continuities in the area of the arts, especially in the cinema.<sup>22</sup> It is now widely recognised that the Vichy period, despite the German presence and in part because of the American absence, was a crucible for both policies and artistic practice that reinforced the strengths of the French film industry of the 1930s and underpinned – and continues to underpin – those of the postwar period. Such recognition is much less the case in the social and political arenas, and yet the continuities represented by the French primary school system is surely every bit as demonstrable as what we find in the cinema.

The evidence for this is overwhelming. Antoine Prost's authoritative work on the evolutions in the French state system shows it,<sup>23</sup> as does Michèle Cointet's study of the Catholic system. Cointet is particularly effective in her demonstrations that the various reforms attempted by successive education ministers of the Vichy government were mostly unsuccessful.<sup>24</sup> In fact, apart from the areas of Alsace and Lorraine annexed into the Reich (and subjected to a German curriculum), French primary education was fundamentally stable across both the occupied and free zones and remained so even after the full occupation of the country in November 1942. That such a level of stability could be maintained in a wartorn environment is surprising, but there are at least three factors that help explain it. The first is the inherent strength and inertia of the system itself, which, with minor reforms, had been in place since the beginning of the Third Republic. The second is the largely ineffectual and fragmented approach of the Vichy government in the education field: between 1940 and 1944, education did not even always have full ministry status, and there were no fewer than six different men in charge.<sup>25</sup>

The third factor, and perhaps the most important, was the relatively "hands-off" nature of Germany's attitude towards its rule of France. As Mark Mazower ably shows,<sup>26</sup> the Germans wanted, and needed, a high degree of stability among the French population, and primary school education seems to have benefited from this policy as much as the "business as usual" approach in the entertainment industry.<sup>27</sup> Mazower rightly warns that this apparent permissiveness cannot be readily explained by the collaborationist positions of the Vichy government: it was not simply a reward for compliance. From the German perspective, "collaboration" did not mean any kind of equal participation in a common future; and for the defeated French, collaboration was as much a means to create an internal authoritarian regime as it was an attempt to secure a margin of independence vis-à-vis the occupying forces. Rather, the multiple levels of confusion that Mazower defines as the key characteristic of the German Occupation of France, as well as the contortions of internecine conflicts on both sides

<sup>21</sup> See Nadine Fresco, *Fabrication d'un antisémite* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *15 ans d'Années Trente: le cinéma des Français, 1929-1944* (Paris, 1983); Alan Williams, *Republic of Images*; Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930-1960* (Bloomington, 1993); Colin Nettelbeck, "Narrative Mutations: French Cinema and its Relations with Literature from Vichy towards the New Wave," *Journal of European Studies* 37:2 (2007): 159-86.

<sup>23</sup> Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement*, passim.

<sup>24</sup> Michèle Cointet, *L'Église sous Vichy*, 112-35.

<sup>25</sup> Michèle Cointet, *L'Église sous Vichy*, 104-10.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London, 2008), 416-45.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Gilles Perrault, *Paris sous l'Occupation* (Paris, 1987), 175-208.

– among the various German agencies as well as among the numerous French factions – led not in a carefully managed, but in a rather haphazard way to France becoming such a “special case” in Hitler’s empire of conquered nations.

To be sure, there were some changes to the History curriculum to eliminate references to Germany judged to be insulting and to include more about the Middle Ages and the nation’s great kings; there was some tinkering with the one-lesson-per-week (out of a total of 30 class periods) “moral” education program; there was also the (shameful) removal of particular textbooks written by Jewish authors.<sup>28</sup> In terms of extra-curricular activity, greater emphasis on sport,<sup>29</sup> and on holiday camps for both state and Catholic schools,<sup>30</sup> seems to indicate an intention to insulate primary school children from the turbulence of the times. Nonetheless, in its fundamentals, the curriculum of the *certificat d’études primaires* was essentially maintained. Perhaps the most significant change in relation to primary education under Vichy was a reform of teacher training – *instituteurs* being widely blamed for weakening the morale of the nation via the pacifist and secularist ideology of the all-powerful *Syndicat National des Instituteurs*; but the timing of this reform meant that it could have little or no impact on the experience of wartime school children.<sup>31</sup>

Thus far, it has been argued that the absence of the experience and memory of France’s wartime primary school children from historical accounts of the period is a grave omission for two reasons. The first is historical and concerns the elision of a substantial slice of reality; the second is historiographical and concerns the potential consequences of the omission on the way in which the history of the period is conceived and written. It is time now to concede – albeit with the aim of reinforcing the argument – that we are not faced with an entirely blank slate, and that our historical ignorance of these children is not complete. What do we know?

On the most general level, there is a small amount of overlap with W.D. Halls’ work on youth in Vichy France, especially for the older (twelve- to fourteen-year-old) primary school pupils. There is serious and extensive ongoing historical work on Jewish children.<sup>32</sup> Jewish childhood has also been the subject of many memoirs,<sup>33</sup> of major literary works such as Georges Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (Paris, 1975), or Eric-Emmanuel Schmidt’s *L’enfant de Noé* (Paris, 2004), and of many notable films, from Claude Berri’s *Le vieil homme et l’enfant* (1967) to Richard Dembo’s *La maison de Nina* (2005). The focus in these, however, is on Jewishness rather than on more general aspects of childhood or schooling, and this tendency is followed by Susan Suleiman in her analyses of the work of Perec and Raymond Federman.<sup>34</sup> There are some solid historical data on the ways in which non-Jewish French children suffered from material impacts of the war, such as food deprivation,<sup>35</sup> the German massacres in Oradour or Maillé,<sup>36</sup> and allied bombing.<sup>37</sup> Sarah Fishman’s

<sup>28</sup> Judith K. Proud, *Children and Propaganda*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot, *Sport et éducation sous Vichy, 1940-1944* (Lyon, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Children in the Promised Land*, passim; Vesna Drapac, *War and Religion*, 178ff.

<sup>31</sup> For an account of these changes, see Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l’enseignement*, 199-212.

<sup>32</sup> In the fifteen years from Klarsfeld’s *Mémorial* to Fresco’s *La mort des juifs*, the list is a long one.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Claudine Vegh, *Je ne lui ai pas dit au revoir* (Paris, 1979); Jean-Marie Lustiger, *Le Choix de Dieu* (Paris, 1987); Anne-Lise Stern, *Le Savoir-déporté* (Paris, 2004); Maurice White, *Vive la France?* (Ely, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Susan Suleiman, *Crises of Memory*, passim.

<sup>35</sup> Alain Drouard, *Une Inconnue des sciences sociales: la Fondation Alexis Carrel, 1941-1945* (Paris, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley, 1999); Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains*, 327ff.

project on juvenile delinquency concentrates on adolescents, but offers a useful framework for considering younger wayward children during the Occupation and also furnishes valuable bibliographical information for scarce documentary evidence on the wartime experience of primary school children.<sup>38</sup> Vichy propaganda efforts towards children have also received some attention.<sup>39</sup> All of this is helpful, but it is surely not insignificant that the bulk of such work remains marginal to the experience of the great majority of children aged between 6 and 14 who, across France, from 1940 to 1944, peopled the nation's primary schools.

### Why Have They Been Forgotten?

In his introduction to *Vichy et les Français*, René Rémond makes a crucial point about how much research on the Vichy period has evolved over time, gradually overcoming the simplifications of what he terms the “times of polemics and direct conflicts.”<sup>40</sup> The reach and power of the national trauma was matched by levels of collective memory loss and collective memory repression that only slowly gave way to a more open attitude, a willingness and ability to confront the complexities of the historical pain. Rémond uses the framework of two major conferences, one in 1970 and the other in 1990, to make his point, noting that the major difference was the account not taken in the first, but underscored in the second, of France's treatment of its Jews. But we can add that, even in 1990, little work had yet been done on the experience of more than 50 per cent of the French population, namely the women, and there was, at that time, still a long way to go in respect to the issues involving the more than 80 per cent who were baptised Catholics.<sup>41</sup> These are telling examples and are far from being the only ones; they offer a context in which the absence of primary school children from the national historical narrative is less surprising, though not a justification for it or for its continuation.

Despite the evolution signalled by Rémond, it is perhaps inevitable that the historiography of the Occupation period remains strongly based on the notion of conflict: not just the various levels of conflict persisting after the Armistice between France and Germany, but also the multiple conflicts *within* France: most obviously between collaborationist and resistance forces, but also, among others, between Vichy and the Paris ultras, between different segments of the Church, and among the different resistance tendencies. This was a time of severe fracture and splintering, and for the historians, as much as for those who had lived through the period, it was impossible to see any way forward without apportioning responsibility and blame. Rémond, in suggesting in 1992 that the time of polemics and confrontation was

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<sup>37</sup> Jill Sturdee, “War and Victimisation through Children's Eyes: Caen – Occupation and Liberation,” in *The Liberation of France: Image and Event*, H. R. Kedward and Nancy Wood, eds. (Oxford, 1995), 297-309; William Hitchcock, *Liberation: The Bitter Road to Freedom, Europe, 1944-1945* (London, 2009), 19-59.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children*, passim.

<sup>39</sup> Judith K. Proud, *Children and Propaganda*, passim.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, eds., *Vichy et les Français*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> The 80 per cent is a conservative figure: in 1997 still, 45 million of the total French population of 57 million were baptised in the Catholic faith. See the Conférence des Évêques de France, *L'Église catholique en France* (Paris, 1997), 415. As already suggested, a great deal of work has occurred in these areas since 1990. It is worth noting that for both women and Catholics, the issue of whether and to what extent experience and choices were shaped by gender or religious affiliation has been an important factor in the research.

somehow over, was being optimistic: the “normalisation” process has been much more incremental.

Now, in relation to the conflict model, primary school-age children are a bad fit, and it seems likely that this is a further reason why they have been ignored. Adults – and to a considerable extent adolescents – were able to take sides, and many did make life-defining choices in respect to their situation: they used the black market or actively avoided it; they undertook resistance activities or collaboration; in the case of Jews, they chose or not to wear the obligatory yellow star.<sup>42</sup> By contrast, and by definition, children of primary school age were more innocent. They constitute a group somehow outside the conflictual model out of which so much of the historical narrative has developed. This has been, overwhelmingly, a narrative dominated by heroes, victims and perpetrators. As has already been suggested, it is when children can be readily seen as *victims* that they have most often been given a place in the history of the period: Jewish children, those affected by food shortages, those massacred by the Charlemagne Division in Oradour, those who suffered in the unintended “collateral damage” caused by the Allied bombings across Normandy. Once again, this approach simply leaves out the experience of the vast majority of children.

Another impediment to the integration of children’s memories into the overall narrative comes through the norms of family loyalties and the social structures – particularly strong in French society – of the Occupation period and the years following. In Jean-Louis Bory’s classic novel *Mon village à l’heure allemande*, the village primary school-teacher, shortly before his brutal assassination by a local member of the *Milice*, wonders about the extent to which his charges have already lost their innocence because of exposure to the corruptions of black-marketeering and the value-shaking violence of their surroundings.<sup>43</sup> Whether this was the case or not, what we do know – and Robert Gildea’s study of the Touraine provides several examples of it<sup>44</sup> – is how frequently children, in the Liberation and post-Liberation periods, were drawn into perpetuating the conflicts besetting their elders. Their personal memories and experience – and their very innocence – were obscured through roles thrust upon them, or which they subsequently chose through a sense of family duty or social pressure. Antoine Prost underscores the power of parental authority: “Children owed them obedience, and obedience without rebellion or reservation.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of being simply children, with their own memories, many became “children of resistance heroes” or “children of collaborators,” with the attendant obvious connotations of pride or guilt and shame.

### **Is Lost Innocence Retrievable?**

It is hard to imagine that this overlaying of personal memory by a stereotyped and often faulty collective memory has not been a significant factor in the well-documented inertia affecting France’s struggles to deal with its recent history. Concomitantly, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that, in the ethos of the accelerated individualism following the war, the kind of schizophrenia created among those former primary school children by the heady mix of repressed individual memory and

<sup>42</sup> See Claude Lanzmann, *Le Lièvre de Patagonie* (Paris, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Louis Bory, *Mon village à l’heure allemande* (Paris, 1945), 284-85.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains*, passim.

<sup>45</sup> Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l’enseignement*, 126.



imposed collective memory might well have a place in the identity uncertainties that have bedevilled France throughout the postwar period.

The question remains what can be done about it. Has the “forgotten zone of memory” fallen into oblivion forever – an irreversible “au revoir les enfants”; or can historical work restore it to its rightful place *within* the collective memory? And if so, how might this be done? I would argue that not only *can* it be done, but that it *must* be done if our understanding of the Vichy period is to have lasting credibility. Moreover, as has already been suggested, because of the age today of those whose experience is at stake, there is considerably urgency: for while much will be able to be learned *about* these people from a study of archival materials, as well as the (relatively rare) memorial and fictional accounts, only a significant dose of oral history would allow us to develop an understanding of how their own perceptions of their experience fit into the way in which the history has so far been constructed. “Vaste projet, comme dirait l’autre,” both in view of all the difficulties associated with oral testimony and because of the hugely diverse geographical and social ranges of people to be interviewed – but one that must surely be considered as important as any other in Vichy and Occupation history.

The methodology of such a study would perforce be complex. Gildea has demonstrated that it is not hard to find subjects willing to be interviewed about the war,<sup>46</sup> and my own initial explorations have confirmed this: almost every person in the relevant age group that I have approached has proven positively eager to tell his or her story. Difficulties lie rather in the need to ensure coverage of the diversity of experience and in the range of archives to be accessed,<sup>47</sup> but also, particularly, in the inherently problematic nature of oral history,<sup>48</sup> which is of course exacerbated by the now advanced age of the potential participants. That much having been said, it is possible to imagine questions that would guide subjects towards the rediscovery of their personal experience. What was their family situation? Where did they go to school? Was their schooling interrupted (for example by the *Exode* of 1940 or by the generalised Occupation of November 1942)? Who were their teachers? Who were their best friends? What games did they play? Were they hungry? Can they remember the words of *Maréchal nous voilà*? And so on. In fact, such a list of questions has been trialled quite successfully with a small group of volunteer subjects, who found that by concentrating first on their direct experience, they were better able to distinguish between it and things they had been told or had learned later. One eminent literary historian has actually been moved to undertake a formal memoir.<sup>49</sup>

Can we predict with any certainty what would emerge from mapping the experience of wartime French primary school children? We can expect very great diversity in the individual stories, but at present we simply do not know enough to anticipate any particular patterns. We can also expect to reach a much more accurate understanding of the extent to which Vichy policies were actually applied in various regions, of the workings of the school inspection processes, and of the ways in which schooling served, for children, as a stabilising force during these troubled years. Above all, we would have, for the first time, the possibility of creating a narrative of

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains*.

<sup>47</sup> National and regional education authorities (state and Catholic), teachers’ and former teachers’ associations, to name just two large groups.

<sup>48</sup> A good idea of the range of problems involved can be constructed from a reading of Annette Wievioka’s very specific *L’Ère du témoin* and the more wide-reaching Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> It is not possible at this stage to identify the person.

the Occupation years that gives appropriate space and voice to the millions of primary school children who were historically present, but whom existing accounts have virtually excised. Furthermore, the historical restitution of what was seen and protected as the nation's future would, at the very least, produce a critical new dimension in our understanding of the historical blockage that has troubled and puzzled historians for more than half a century. It would in particular provide a better context for comprehending the situation of those children who, Jewish or otherwise, were indubitable victims. And it would cast new light on the development of France's postwar period – including such episodes as May 1968 – through its analysis of key formative forces in those people who as children were described as embodying France's future and who went on to become many of the actual builders of that future.