National Memory:
The Duty to Remember, the Need to Forget

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The French are very quick to accuse one another of having a special aptitude for forgetting embarrassing episodes in their history, of having short memories. The real problem, however, is not forgetfulness. It is that different elements of the French nation simply cannot agree on which parts of French history should be stressed. Yet these adversaries all seem to agree that there should be only a single, certified National Memory—their own, of course. This struggle over which memories should make up the French psyche reflects a hard-to-accept historical reality: Throughout much of its past, France, more than most other countries, has been engaged in actual or cold civil wars punctuated by more or less long periods of national reconciliation that have required a need to forget.

At least that is what a succession of recent French leaders, including four very different presidents of the Fifth Republic (Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, and François Mitterrand), have maintained, explicitly or implicitly. Their appeals to national unity, implying the sacrifice of certain grievances, have inevitably met with protests from groups who have felt that they were being asked to give up pieces of their collective memory. Hence a host of “Lest we forget”-style appeals to remembrance from Royalists, Gaullists, Communists, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Algerians, and so on.

Yet to observe these calls to remembrance essentially involves dwelling on painful recollections, not pleasant nostalgia. Even exercises in nostalgia seem to turn rapidly into references to collective trauma. “Songs of the Liberation,” a month-long series of daily radio programs broadcast in Paris in the summer of 1994, featured a detailed commentary on how all the expressions of joy or evocations of faraway places were nothing more than attempts to forget the horrors of the German occupation. The title of the memoirs of the late Simone Signoret, movie star and godmother of a generation of human rights activists, sums it up nicely: *Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be.*

When memory is that painful, it is hardly surprising that people would sometimes simply prefer to forget. Another title, *Forgetting Our Crimes: National Amnesia, a French Specialty?*, expresses the widespread perception that the French have not yet come to grips with certain aspects of their history. The book may be new, but the theme certainly is not. For years, many foreigners, including a number of Americans, have gleefully joined French commentators in accusing the French of being unable to accept their past. The most recent debates concern the Vichy government’s collaboration with Nazi Germany and the French army’s commission of atrocities during the Algerian war.

Paradoxically, these debates come amid a series of high-profile commemorations ostensibly designed to celebrate national unity: the Bicentennial of the French Revolution, the Millennium of the French monarchy, the Centennial of the birth of Charles de Gaulle, and
the fiftieth anniversaries of D Day and the Liberation of Paris.

This recent spate of commemorations has been accompanied by a cult of national heritage, known as le Patrimoine, in which even the Nazi bunkers of the Atlantic Wall have been classified as historic monuments. France now has some 40,000 officially listed historic monuments, with some 900 new sites added each year.

Places of Memory

This new sensitivity has produced a new concept—"places of memory"—which has been embodied in a seven-volume historical work of the same name. Conceived by historiographer Pierre Nora, this collection of essays is a solemn monument in its own right. For Nora, places of memory are not only the obvious sites and monuments, such as village war memorials, the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux, the Eiffel Tower or the Panthéon, the republican mausoleum serving as a pendant to Saint Denis Cathedral, the resting place of French kings. Places of memory are also defined as the famous moments in French history expressed in textbooks, proverbs, folktales, and songs, including the national anthem, "La Marseillaise." Nora's definition even embraces the classic Tour de France bicycle race, the French language itself, and culture-defining literature, above all Marcel Proust's exploration of memory, The Remembrance of Things Past.

Nora notes that every French person is aware of the evocative powers that Proust attributes to the madeleine, regardless of whether or not they have personally tasted the cake or, for that matter, read the book. "It's like the metric standard. It is enough to know that it exists; people don't need to actually go see it." As a symbol of memory, Proust's novel has achieved totemic as well as literary value. Nora concludes that memory is a synonym for national identity. He is concerned not with the spontaneous, natural memory of the individual but with the memory inculcated in each generation and cultivated for later generations through an institutionalized approach to folk memory.

The Germans who occupied Paris during the Second World War must have had an instinctive understanding of the relationship between memory and national identity when they decided to melt down almost all the bronze statues in the French capital except those of French heroes, such as Napoleon and Joan of Arc, who fought the English.

Few of the melted statues were replaced after the war, so squares such as the Place Victor Hugo still have "memory holes" where statues used to be. Meanwhile, more recent statues made to honor men not universally accepted as heroes—Alfred Dreyfus, the Popular Front's Socialist Léon Blum, leftist premier Mendès France—have been relegated to obscure locations that are surely not places of memory.

Besides, statues and larger monuments no longer seem to be the favored expressions of permanent commemoration. The latest trend runs to costly memorial museums with interactive electronic displays, notably, the massive Memorial for Peace in Caen; the World War I Historial on the site of the Battle of the Somme; the World Peace Center in Verdun; the History Center of Resistance and Deportation in Lyon; the Resistance museum at Vercors; a new remembrance museum at Oradour, a village where the retreating SS systematically killed all the inhabitants they could find; and the Memorial Museum of Izieu, where the Gestapo arrested forty-four Jewish children for deportation to Auschwitz. None of these new places of memory commemorate happy events, a reminder of the truism that happy countries have no history.

Open Wounds

French self-flagellation over its modern history concerns episodes that proceed in a straight line from the beheading of King Louis XVI during the French Revolution to the present. Not that there are not plenty of prerevolutionary events that remain unresolved in the French psyche, for example, medieval carnages such as the destruction of Provencal culture by the northern powers during the thirteenth-century crusades against the Albigensian and Cathar heretics, or the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Protestants in 1572. In the 1930s, French political scientist André Siegfried demonstrated that the southern tradition of voting for the far Left was traceable to the perhaps subconscious desire of the Provencal people to defy a northern authority that had never made amends for the horrors perpetrated against their real or imagined ancestors.

Henry Rousso, author of The Vichy Syndrome, notes that the study of "the history of memory" in France stresses "profound crises of French unity and identity.... Those crises feed upon one another, with the memory of each preceding crisis playing a role in the next: the French Revolution in the Dreyfus Affair, Dreyfus in Vichy, Vichy in the Algerian war, and so on."

Indeed, it may be argued, French memories are not too short but too long. I recall meeting a descendant of Georges Clemenceau, the leading World War I ally of England, France's former hereditary enemy, against Germany, its more recent hereditary enemy. Speaking