One of the most important consequences of the selective memory constructed through the Nuremberg Trials and the trials held in various European countries was the introduction of a hiatus between the pre- and postwar periods: as if the end of the war in 1945 and the collapse of the new Hitlerian order and the different forms of Fascism had represented a kind of year zero for the European States. If the causes and reasons of many peoples’ and governments’ assent to totalitarianism had to be sought in the lack of confidence in parliamentary systems and the Liberal ruling classes that had become widespread throughout Europe in the 1930s, then, precisely for this reason, to underrate or, even worse, to ignore the historical link between the war of the 1940s and the two preceding decades would not fail to have negative consequences for public memory and historiographic understanding.

It is not mere chance that still today the nature of the Second World War, the significance of the opposing alliances in the conflict, and its epilogue are extremely controversial questions in the international debate, of which, though, almost the only aspect known in Italy is the translation of the most recent German discussion. And it should be noted that even that discussion is well known not for its important analysis of far-distant times (Meinecke and later the Fischerkontroverse of 1961) but for the recent and most ideologically inclined discussions, from the Historikerstreit of 1986–87 to the Nolte case of 1990, up to the 1995 debate on the role of May 8 and to the issue of the Hamburg Exhibition about the Wehrmacht.  

As regards the not-so-well-known history of the French debate—to which I have already referred in connection with the Klaus Barbie trial—I now propose a digression that lays no claims to being systematic or complete, but that can be useful in shedding light on the interwoven links, which also occurred in Italy as early as 1946–47, between the political use of the history of the war of the Resistance and of Republican Fascism, the political
and institutional history of the Republic, and the contradictions of Italy’s national identity.

Considering the events in France can be useful because also in that country the interwoven links between the paths of historiographic research, judicial practice and political conflicts have always been very close, particularly concerning the memory of Vichy and its role in French consciousness.

The historiography of Vichy can be briefly divided into three periods: the years from 1954 to 1968, which constitute the period dominated by the cultural mood of the Liberation; those from 1968 to 1972, which correspond to the sudden appearance of the new international historiographic research, which was freer from the dogmas of the postwar period; and finally the period that began in the 1970s of the development of a French historiography capable of no longer considering Vichy as a static and monolithic historical subject.

The first period was dominated by the work of Robert Aron, published in 1954, a classic example of a retrospective interpretation influenced by the too-recent memory of the Liberation, the obscuring of the political complexity of the first phase of the regime (from 1940 to 1942), and the pre-eminence accorded to the judicial sources of the purge trials. Aron’s analysis rested on four main pillars, which have for a long time been the mainstay of historiographic common sense: the existence of the National Socialists’ irrevocable Diktat; Vichy as a “shielding” regime, opposed to the Diktat; the secret double-dealing between Vichy and the Allies, and finally, French public opinion, essentially attentiste, that would have trusted Pétain but was ready to espouse the cause of the Allies, De Gaulle, and the French Communist Party.

Twenty-five years later, partial access to French archives, and above all to wartime German sources confiscated at the time by the Americans, enabled historians, especially the non-French, to undermine Aron’s paradigm, demonstrating that the regime, particularly in the first two years of its existence, had actively sought to go well beyond the limits of the 1940 Armistice and had established a voluntary collaboration—even though neutral—with the new Hitlerian European order. The very use that Vichy had made of its neutrality—for example, in Syria in 1941 and in North Africa in 1942—demonstrated the existence of an anti-Allied approach and the conviction of being able to pursue a national regeneration within the compass of a diplomatic compromise with a German victory, which then appeared irreversible. After all, as late as the mid-1970s, French public opinion maintained that those faced with the new Hitlerian order had only collaboration and resistance as alternatives. It is, above all, the merit of