

Special Issue

REPRESENTATIONS, HISTORY, AND WARTIME FRANCE

Introduction

Brett Bowles

Indiana University, Bloomington

In a 1989 article published by *Annales* under the title “Le monde comme représentation,”¹ Roger Chartier articulated a conceptual framework for bridging the gap that had traditionally separated the history of mentalities from social and political history. While the former field—pioneered by Georges Duby, Robert Mandrou, and Philippe Ariès in the 1960s—had legitimized the study of collective beliefs, anxieties, and desires as historical phenomena, the latter remained largely devoted to more concrete, easily quantifiable factors such as structures, institutions, and material culture. Drawing on the anthropological and psychoanalytical premises that had informed the work of Michel Foucault, Louis Marin, and Michel de Certeau, among others, Chartier emphasized the performative dimension of individual and collective representations in order to argue that they should be understood not only as evidence registering the exercise of social and political power, but as underlying catalysts of change in their own right. Like *habitus*, Pierre Bourdieu’s complex model of social causality and evolution, Chartier framed representation as a symbiotic “structuring structure” that deserved to sit at the heart of historical inquiry.

In retrospect, Chartier’s essay can be seen as marking a conceptual turning point for historians of France, particularly for those interested in the German Occupation and immediate post-war rebuilding between 1940 and 1946. Inaugurated by Henry Rousso’s seminal *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (1987), studies investigating the selective commemorating, remembering, and forgetting of the so-called “dark years” have continued to appear ever since, with increasing attention paid to literary, cinematic, and other narrative accounts of the period. Once dismissed as deformations of or foils to historical truths



detectable through other, presumably more reliable archival sources, today these representations are recognized as reflecting the same epistemological limitations and goals as any other document from the period. Following Paul Ricoeur's notion of "représentance,"² or the ongoing effort to adapt our image of the past to the ever-evolving needs of the present, scholars now assess such representations by weighing their authors' conscious agency and personal motivations against the collective social, political, material, and psychological conditions that inevitably interact with and alter that agency, both at the moment of production and later in time, as representations circulate and are appropriated by the public in response to shifting contexts and circumstances. In a 2012 seminar sponsored by the Association française de science politique, Chartier reaffirmed the legitimacy of this approach.

Les représentations qui fondent les perceptions et les jugements, qui gouvernent les façons de dire et de faire, sont tout aussi "réelles" que les processus, les comportements, les conflits que l'on tient pour "concrets." Le concept de représentation, en ses acceptions multiples, est l'un de ceux qui permet de comprendre avec le plus d'acuité et de rigueur comment se construisent les divisions et les hiérarchies du monde social. Et accepter que le discours historique lui-même est et ne peut être qu'une représentation du passé n'est pas détruire sa scientificité mais, au contraire, la fonder.³

Apart from their methodology, the four essays in this thematic issue exemplify two additional shifts in the historiography of the Occupation: first, an increasing emphasis on everyday life and its relation to state policies and discourses; second, a desire to move beyond the old collaboration/resistance dichotomy to map what Philippe Burrin influentially termed "accommodation," or the continuum of ethical ambiguities and practical compromises experienced by the silent majority of French men and women who avoided overt political engagement in favor of survival and the defense of personal interests.⁴ Echoing a well-established body of scholarship,⁵ the case studies presented here offer insight into the subjectivity of French citizens from differing backgrounds and the ways in which they adapted to pressures imposed by the Vichy regime, the German occupiers, and the provisional post-war government, as well as to conditions extending well into the Fourth and Fifth Republics.

In his rereading of the wartime diary authored by Héléne Berr, a Jewish student at the Sorbonne, Nathan Bracher argues that the text should be seen not simply as a record of personal experience, but as a precocious work of historical analysis that came to terms with the Holocaust as it unfolded and thus anticipated conclusions that would take professional historians and survivors decades to articulate. Sandra Ott reflects on the historical value of two additional narrative genres—Irène Némirovsky's autobiographical novel *Suite française* and post-Liberation court records—by comparing Némirovsky's female protagonist with an opportunistic female shopkeeper from Pau who, after cultivating a wartime relationship with an influential German officer, was tried and convicted of collaboration.

The second pair of essays focuses on the role that literary and cinematic representations played in shaping collective memory and retrospective ethical evaluation of French wartime conduct. Setting archival sources against Jean Dutourd's best-selling novel *Au bon beurre* (1952), Marcel Aymé's short story *Traversée de Paris* (1947) and its 1956 screen adaptation, Kenneth Mouré concludes that although they functioned as an evolving critique of the Fourth Republic's economic policies rather than as a means of working through the lived experience of the war itself, these fictionalized images of black-market food trafficking established a seductive myth that has remained firmly planted in public consciousness. My own essay, on Vercors' famous novella *Le Silence de la mer* (1941), takes a similar tack by showing how print, stage, and screen iterations have evolved over the last sixty years in response to the author's shifting ideological sensibilities during and after the war, the preoccupations of creative artists with whom he worked, and the political stakes attached to his portrait of passive resistance against the Germans.

This issue would not have been possible without the support of this journal's editor Herrick Chapman and managing editor Marie Desmarts, as well as the detailed and constructive feedback that all authors received from anonymous peer reviewers. On behalf of the other contributors, I have the pleasure of thanking them and hoping that our work will prompt further reflection on the value of narrative representations for understanding the history of wartime France and its place in collective memory.

Notes

1. *Annales ESC* 6 (1989): 1505–20.
2. See *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000).
3. The seminar topic was "La représentation politique: histoire, théories, mutations contemporaines." Chartier's full paper, "Le sens de la représentation," was published electronically at <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-sens-de-la-representation.html#nb1>.
4. Philippe Burrin, *La France à l'heure allemande* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).
5. See for example, John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Dominique Veillon, *Vivre et survivre en France, 1939–1947* (Paris: Payot, 1995); Marc Baruch, *Servir l'État Français: L'administration en France de 1940 à 1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Kitson, *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis: Complexités de la politique de collaboration* (Paris: Autrement, 2005); Shannon Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).