

Mitterrand's myopic hindsight

The worst thing about the discussion of Vichy raging in France is not the past, but the return of that past today, writes Jacques Cheminade.

The context for Jacques Cheminade's analysis is the publication in France of Une Jeunesse Française: François Mitterrand, 1934-1947, by Pierre Péan. The book is being touted as a major exposé of the Vichy past of President Mitterrand, although the author had Mitterrand's full cooperation. Mitterrand, who took office as President in May 1981 and was reelected for a second seven-year term in 1988, is very ill with cancer. He recently defended his past in an hour and a half long interview on television, with France 2 network executive Jean-Pierre Elkabbach.

"Vichy" of course refers to the 1940-44 period, when the Nazis had invaded France and installed a puppet regime to rule the occupied part of the country from Vichy, under World War I hero Marshal Philippe Pétain. The honor of France was upheld after the French government capitulated, by the Free French who fought under Charles de Gaulle against the Nazis.

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In the face of today's pressing challenges, France, one of the world's leading industrial powers, is throwing its passions into looking backward to its past. The debate galvanizing the French elites is whether President François Mitterrand has been able to clear himself of imputations made against his honor, not because of decisions made in the exercise of his office, but because of his posture during the Vichy period.

The terms of the debate have trapped everyone, as if François Mitterrand had been able to make the French share his fascination with his own fate and his physical death. The spectacle of a figure out of a novel agonizing at the head of the state, like some prince from the *Ancien Régime*, covers up the weakened role of France in current history and the impotence of its leaders. Instead of a tragic vision of history based on necessary breaks with the past in the name of transcendent values—the vision of the wartime Resistance and everything that General de Gaulle embodied—we have "literature" in the worst sense, reduced to the feeling-states of an individual, to the linear perspective of a character being shaped by the whims of circumstances.

Nothing is more destructive for a people than this taste for dead things wrapped in half-lies, the very spirit of Vichy, which causes that people to no longer believe in itself. Both sides are hypocritical, both complicit in a degrading game between a pack of hounds and its quarry. If the game is allowed to continue, before long in France, "work" will mean deportation, "country" occupation, and "family" mere dotting; just as today "socialism" means monetarist gibberish, and "Gaullism" reheated leftovers.

Vichyism is an evil from which to extract French society, but to be serious, France must acknowledge the insidious evil which joins it to the present. It was from this point of view that *Nouvelle Solidarité* published "Socialist Vichy" in 1981 [reprinted in *EIR* of Sept 8. and Sept. 15, 1981], laying out not only François Mitterrand's past, but the presence of this spirit of the past in the discussion of "Socialist" policy. The very people who claim to be indignant today, had accused us of the worst forgeries.

The first lie was to act as if there had been, on the one hand, an official policy followed from 1981 on, and on the other hand, the personal history of François Mitterrand: In the obscure and deep unity of reality, the two become confused. It would be too easy—and relatively less serious—if there had only been a network of friends around the head of state, born under the sign of the *cagoule* [hooded cape—emblem of a terrorist organization active 1935-40] and the *francisque* [war hatchet emblem adopted as symbol of the Vichy regime 1940-44].

For example, the very idea of "solidarity" in 1981 was, from the outset, imbued with the Vichy spirit, since it was never conceived as properly raising each person's living standards by surplus production by all, but as relying on dividing up the world's existing resources. Similarly, the notion of "labor" is conceived from the outset as a simple, remunerated occupation—and not as an activity involved in ever-more productive technologies—which has led to a progressive adaptation to an environment of malthusianism, as shown by the constant growth of unemployment.

Vichy, yesterday and today

During his recent interview on the France 2 television network, the President flattered himself that he and those in his "camp"—a feudal expression—had put the best face

possible on the most severe economic crisis since 1929. This is exactly typical of the Vichy reflex: Given the circumstances, make do as best you can. From this standpoint, any regime could be almost excusable. What didn't cross the President's mind for an instant is the fact that he has to throw his very fate into this crisis, taking it on by risking his power in the affray, rather than claiming to live with it. Might not one say, without stretching the point, that Pétain attempted to make his national revolution by accepting the unacceptable fact of the Nazi occupation, just as François Mitterrand and his camp have tried to govern as socialists by accepting the unacceptable fact of absolute deregulation, social Darwinism, and a global system of exclusion?

This perspective broadens and "makes real" the Vichy question and allows us to specify with what and with whom France must break, going far beyond the historic personage of François Mitterrand.

The fundamental Vichy mentality consists of taking over the monopoly of morality and overthrowing it; in acting within the tragedy while rejecting the break with history; and in trampling on real values, while reaffirming them in speeches at every opportunity.

That is how to look at the affirmations of François Mitterrand, to the extent they bear upon our current history, to the extent that his journey is presented as a "normal" French youth for the 1930s and '40s. This is not to condemn or absolve a man, but to gauge the example to young people today, that they may use it to serve truth and justice, and not to build a career.

The historical facts are the following:

1) François Mitterrand came to Vichy at the beginning of 1942, where he was employed, without any double game on his part, at the Legion of Combatants and Volunteers for the National Revolution—this very "National Revolution" which he assures us today that he never frequented. The Legion was created in August 1940 by Xavier Vallar, an ex-Cagoulard [terrorist] and future Commissar General on the Jewish Question. In this organization, Mitterrand was assigned to the documentation service, which was, in fact, an intelligence service where, according to Mitterrand's account (but, he says, for the good cause of the Resistance), they made up "files on Communists, Gaullists, and those who were considered anti-nationalists."

2) He met Pétain on Jan. 14, 1943, in the company of others when the French prisoners of war were being reclassified and resettled. The Francisque, the highest decoration of the Vichy regime, which he must have requested and accepted, was assigned to him between February and April 1943, and awarded in late spring or early summer 1943, that is, before he left for London.

3) In February-March 1943, Mitterrand broke with the Vichy regime and joined up with the Giraudiste tendency of the Resistance, who were anti-Gaullist and anti-communist, ideologically very close to the National Revolution of Mar-

shal Pétain, but who fought—and courageously—against the invader. It was only after de Gaulle definitively pushed Giraud aside, at the end of 1943, that Mitterrand, like all the other Resistance members, accepted de Gaulle's leadership.

4) François Mitterrand was, from 1947 on, surrounded by two formerly close collaborators of René Bousquet, who had been secretary general of the Vichy police from April 1942 to December 1943. These are Jean-Paul Martin (director of the Office of Director General of the National Police in 1943) and Pierre Saury, who became a member of Mitterrand's staff when he was a minister in the Fourth Republic, while the other was his deputy in Nièvre.

5) Mitterrand met with René Bousquet "a dozen times" between 1949 and 1986, viewing his visits as honorable since, in June 1949, the High Court of Justice had acquitted the latter—although ruling his actions as regrettable—because of his "outstanding services to the Resistance."

Mitterrand's main assertions are:

1) Vichy was a "mass of confusions" and I was working within circles who opposed the Nazi occupiers, while never adhering to the ideology of the National Revolution.

2) "I knew nothing about the anti-Jewish laws."

3) René Bousquet was acquitted by the High Court, which was otherwise severe and found others guilty. I broke all relations with him in 1986, when specific accusations were made against him about his role during the occupation.

4) "I went from the right—where I was situated, determined, a product of my surroundings—to the left. Far more numerous are those who took the opposite route."

In all conscience

The argument at best reveals a startling legalistic candor, at worst a low-grade cynicism. Judge for yourself:

1) As historian Zeev Sternhell wrote in *Libération* on Sept. 13: "It is not possible that a man with Mitterrand's intelligence did not understand the Vichy regime. Mitterrand was working inside the regime, inside an intelligence service. The Legion was, in 1941-42, until the creation of the militia in 1943, an essential Vichy propaganda instrument—and hence of the 'national revolution.' One of its leaders, François Valentin, denounced 'stateless Judaism,' and one of his posters bore the inscription: 'Against the Leper Jew. For French Purity.' As for the Francisque, Mitterrand responds: 'I wore it, that's true. It was an object of jokes. This insignia helped me to travel without hindrance.' All the same, let's not confuse the greatest honor Vichy could bestow with a license to travel."

Mitterrand's letters, which are available, as well as several articles he wrote between December 1942 and March 1943 prompted Claire Andrieu to say, in *Le Monde* on Sept. 16, that he was in fact situated among the "hard-core Pétainistes." Mitterrand wrote for *France, Revue de l'Etat Nouveau*, created by his friend Gabriel Jeantet, a former Cagoulard and mission chief in Marshal Pétain's cabinet, and spoke about

“150 years of errors” in our history—since the Revolution—echoing the 1939 slogan of Action Française. In March 1943, he evoked a small German village he had seen in 1941 when he was a prisoner of war, where a “harmony of the soul and the senses” reigned, attributable to “the regime’s enormous architectural and urbanistic effort.” It may be possible to be politically innocent, but surely not at that point. In March 1943, in an article in *Le Métier de Chef*, the journal of the Compagnons de France, an organization of the new regime, he celebrated the “sensual reality of my soil.” We ourselves have identified this mystique in his later writings, so celebrated in 1981, when he wrote without any change in sentiment: “I lose my way in the France of concrete.”

2) As for the anti-Jewish laws in Vichy, this is very simple: Mitterrand is lying, since he could not have not known. Simply, beyond doubt, the aid he was able to provide the prisoners of war from the post he occupied seemed more important to him, judging from the “compartmentalized mentality” so typical of Vichyites.

On June 2, 1941, the statute against the Jews was made public, prescribing the registration of all Jews in France and completed by a series of German ordinances. That was when the Jewish Files were set up at the police prefecture. On Dec. 12, 1941, a thousand French Jewish notables were arrested and interned at Drancy. The first convoy of deportees left Drancy for the extermination camps on March 27, 1942.

On July 16, 1942, on orders from René Bousquet and with help from the file-keeper on Jews, 4,500 French police officers rounded up 13,000 men, women, and children and herded them into the Vel’d’Hiv’ stadium, the first step toward deportation. On Dec. 11, 1942, a Vichy law introduced the name “Jew” on identity cards and ration cards. Wearing the yellow Star of David was imposed on May 29, 1942 on orders from the Germans in the occupied zone. But Mitterrand had gone to Paris between then and spring 1943. So, he could not have “known nothing” about these laws. Remember that every Vichy official—and that includes Mitterrand—had to fill out files establishing that they were not of Jewish origin.

3) Mitterrand said of Bousquet: “He wasn’t a fanatical Vichyite, the way he’s presented. He was a man with exceptionally broad shoulders. I thought he was rather nice, direct, almost brutal.” (This last word reveals a strange fascination.)

In fact, René Bousquet’s role in Vichy was known, and well known in Paris, by everyone who frequented him between 1949 and 1986, and this does not mean just François Mitterrand. In *Vichy and the Jews*, historians Robert Paxton and Michael R. Marrus recalled the accords between Bousquet and SS General Oberg, leader of the Reich Central Security Office, in reaching this conclusion: “Without these accords, the Germans would never have been able to deport as many Jews from France as they did.” According to the minutes provided by the Germans of a working meeting

between René Bousquet and some Nazi officers on July 2, 1942, “Bousquet declared himself ready to have arrested, throughout French territory and in the course of a unified action, however many foreign Jews we should want.” On the morning of July 17, 1942, the second day of the Vel’d’Hiv’ roundup, the account of a Franco-German meeting underscored: “The representatives of the French police expressed, several times, the desire to see the convoys headed for the Reich to also include children.” In a circular from Aug. 30, 1942, René Bousquet incited the departmental prefects in the free zone to “pursue and intensify police operations under way” against “foreign Israelites.”

Therefore, why was the benevolence of the High Court of Justice—to which François Mitterrand pointed with pride—shown in June 1949 to the benefit of a man with such a heavy past? Was this past unknown? Certainly not.

In 1949, the High Court—at a time when the Gaullists were no longer in power and the Communists were the designated enemy—was dominated by political friends of François Mitterrand and René Bousquet! It was far removed—and therefore Mitterrand’s commentaries on its “severity,” which sought to make its clemency verdict credible, hold no water—from the purge climate which prevailed in the immediate wake of the Liberation. The acquittal of a man always supported by the radical and radical-socialist networks of the Southwest was politically predictable. One jury member was Jean Baylet, owner of *La Dépêche du Midi*. When Baylet died in an accident in 1959, René Bousquet came onto the administrative advisory board of *La Dépêche du Midi*, becoming the driving force of the Toulouse daily in the shadow of Mrs. Baylet. Her son, Dep. Jean-Michel Baylet, was a minister in the leftist governments of François Mitterrand after 1981. *La Dépêche du Midi* was a principal center of opposition to General de Gaulle between 1959 and 1968—along with Bousquet—and of support for candidate François Mitterrand in the 1965 presidential elections and for the Federation of the Democratic and Socialist Left, including René Bousquet and Robert Hersant among its sympathizers.

4) Let’s skirt the fact that Mitterrand denied on television that he participated in demonstrations of the “right wing of the right” or the “nationalist right” (they rarely use the term “extreme right” for him) during the 1930s, after he openly admitted to Pierre Péan in *Une Jeunesse Française* that he was among the demonstrators. Let’s skirt the fact that he remained involved in the “nationalist right” far longer than the “two weeks” that he admitted to Mr. Elkabbach. Much more important, for us, is that his very passage from “right” to “left” was not very obvious. The assertion rests on the circular reasoning that “Socialist” policy between 1981 and 1994 has been “Socialist” and “on the left.” But this is meaningless. In order to be “on the left” or “on the right,” one must at least have some free will, which has been absent in France for over 20 years. The socialist governments, in the spirit of Vichy, simply adapted themselves to circumstances,

just as did their “right” opposition. Qualify this opposition any way you like, it is still an adaptation to injustice and collaboration with the international system of Margaret Thatcher and George Bush, which established itself during the Mitterrand years.

Stooge of the Anglo-Americans

What is most serious is that no one in France’s political *nomenklatura* said anything, because, up to today, the unwritten rule of social and political success is that there is no other acceptable, possible route, aside from adaptation and collaboration. Here we see the return of the spirit of Vichy.

And that sheds light on the itinerary of François Mitterrand and the “Bousquet affair.” François Mitterrand took the path of a certain section of the French bourgeoisie, always ready—as we said in 1981—to rally around Anglo-American geopolitics.

At the time of the Pétain-Churchill accords (between the end of 1940 and the end of 1942, cf. Louis Rougier *Mission Secrète à Londres*), François Mitterrand was close to Marshal Pétain. When General Giraud was in favor with the Anglo-Americans, he joined him. Then, finally, he submitted to de Gaulle, when there was no one else. Under the Fourth and Fifth Republics, he always took anti-Gaullist and anti-communist positions, and never went against London or Washington. As President, he got along with George Bush very well and, ultimately, took part in his Persian Gulf war.

He became a Resistance fighter in 1943, along with those who certainly did not want France to become a German colony, but for political, and not moral, reasons. Although they did not lack courage, political calculations and ambition were the major motivations, and passion for their country and its historical mission played a minor role.

René Bousquet, who certainly was not a “fanatical Vichyite,” and otherwise wasn’t even an anti-Semite, belonged to the same tendency, although he had a more exposed position in it. He was anti-Gaullist, anti-communist, and close to the very pro-British “radicalism” that many share, including in the heart of “Gaullism.”

This is not to downplay René Bousquet, because what he did was abominable. It is to tell the truth about a patch of French history. It is clear that the famous “outstanding services rendered to the Resistance” by Bousquet, which the High Court referred to in its 1949 ruling, had been on its radical fringe, often Freemasonic and always pro-English. It might be very interesting to examine the documents or testimony that the High Court heard to confirm the existence of these services.

Paul Thibaud, former editor of *Esprit*, wrote in an article for the journal *Le Débat*: “The innovations credited to Mr. Mitterrand (decentralization, European integration, predominance of international law, monetary rigor), have in common being encumbrances to the capacity to govern. Mitterrand loves power, not governing.”

A trip to two cities: Beijing and Nanjing

by Margrett Lin

Before I recently embarked on a visit to two cities in China, my readings of China’s modern history suggested that the course of the last 200 years, especially of the last century, was one of endless disasters for China, to a degree comparable to Europe torn by two world wars.

Chinese began this century with fights against “foreign devils”—eight western powers looting the Middle Kingdom with drugs and guns. In 1911, Dr. Sun Yat-sen and his associates abolished the corrupt and decadent Qing Dynasty, but their dream of an independent republic was broken by the warlords who were backed by foreign governments.

This period led up to a direct, massive invasion by the Japanese in 1937, which only ended in 1945. For the next four years, China remained a battlefield in which Mao Zedong’s communist army drove Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist (KMT) forces from Nanjing (the Southern Capital) to the island of Taiwan.

In the first half of this century, more than 20 million Chinese died in wars.

The horrors did not stop on the mainland. Mao took power in 1949 in Beijing (the Northern Capital), and took tens of millions of lives as a result of his insane economic policies, such as the “Great Leap Forward” in the late 1950s, and radical political movements, such as the “Great Cultural Revolution” of 1966-76.

From 1949 to 1976, it is believed that at least 30 million Chinese died in the Korean War, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution.

It is only against this bloody background that some Chinese could feel that the last 15 years were even, except for the unforgettable Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, “an era of development.”

Indeed, after touring Beijing and Shanghai, one would have little doubt that there have been many attempts to modernize some regions, if not the whole country.

As a first-time visitor rides from Beijing’s Capital Airport to downtown on a newly built, six-lane highway surrounded by forests of skyscrapers, he will have the impression of wandering in a European metropolis. On the ring roads, small trucks, yellow cabs, and shining sedans buzz around; the nearly 1 million vehicles in the city create traffic snarls reminiscent of dragons creeping across the intersections.