
EXPLORATIONS

A Note on Vidal-Naquet

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Pierre Vidal-Naquet is a leading French classicist who has been engaged in some of the momentous political events of our day, both as a protagonist and as a writer. He was in the vanguard of the opposition to the Algerian war, which he wrote *Torture: Cancer of Democracy* (1963); he participated in the events of May 1968 and with Alain Schnapp coauthored *The French Student Uprising* (1971); and he collaborated with the American resistance to the Vietnam war.

Recently, scholarly interests led Vidal-Naquet to study early Jewish history, notably to critically reexamine the Masada epic and *The Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus (see Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent*, 1981). Paradoxically, it was not his Jewishness that prompted him to plunge into the Jewish past. As he himself insists, it is the scholarly study of ancient and recent Jewish history that transformed him, the son of an old and thoroughly assimilated French-Jewish family, into a Jew "by volition and of critical reflection."

Accordingly, his article "A Paper Eichmann?" predates the terrorist attack outside the synagogue in the rue Copernic in October 1980. This incident was only the most notorious and widely publicized of a series of anti-Semitic excesses in France, where the political murder of Henri Curiel, a Franco-Egyptian Jew of leftist persuasion who labored for Arab-Israeli peace, also remains unsolved. As a seasoned historian, Vidal-Naquet knows that although anti-Semitism is never innocent, it assumes diabolical proportions only in times of political, economic, and social stalemate or unsettlement. Because the present or near future may be or become such a time he considers it important to confront the self-styled "revisionists" who pretend to use the canons of scholarly research and historical debate to deny not just the infernal use of gas chambers but also the systematic extermination of European Jewry by the Nazi regime and its accomplices. Through close analysis Vidal-Naquet demonstrates that the arguments and findings of

these French revisionists, who have their counterparts in the United States and other countries, are inspired and guided *not* by the reasoned and scrupulous search for historical accuracy, but by thinly disguised political and ideological passions of illiberal vintage.

It is worth noting that the self-declared revisionists of all countries claim Paul Rassinier as their mentor. He was a French high school teacher of history and geography of leftist learnings who spent nearly two years as a political prisoner in Buchenwald and Dora. In his writings Rassinier was among the first to question the existence of the gas chambers and to charge the survivors with exaggerating Nazi atrocities: *Le Mensonge d'Ulysse* (1950); *Le Véritable Procès Eichmann* (1962); *Le Drame des juifs européens* (1964). Certainly Robert Faurisson hails Rassinier as a pioneer not only in his articles and interviews, but also in his most recent *Mémoire en défense* (Paris: La Vieille Taupe, 1980), which was published three months after Vidal-Naquet's article. This latest broadside seeks to distort and whitewash the all-important diary of Johann Paul Kremer. As a doctor assigned to Auschwitz, Kremer was both a participant in and an observer of the selection process in the second half of 1942. Regrettably, Faurisson's new book has an unconscionable preface by Noam Chomsky that is being used to legitimate Faurisson as a bona fide scholar of the Holocaust. As an unqualified civil libertarian Chomsky claims—disingenuously—that he has not read the book he is prefacing! Vidal-Naquet forcefully criticizes and refutes Chomsky in Appendix II ("*De Faurisson et de Chomsky*") of his *Les Juifs*.

It is inevitable that with the passage of time the "final solution"—not unlike all previous and future willful human massacres—will be desacralized and historicized, and both Jews and Israelis will be denied their claim to the monopoly of martyrdom in the twentieth century. But because of the ever latent anti-Semitism throughout Christendom and the fierce anti-Zionism throughout much of the Third World, it is important that this historicization take the form of a responsible and pondered—not a bogus—revisionism, which is inherent to genuine historical discourse.

Vidal-Naquet is painfully aware of the deep ideological undercurrents and acts of anti-Semitism in France. Edouard Drumont (1844-1917) rests peacefully at Père Lachaise. In this history-soaked cemetery his tombstone ostentatiously hails him as the "distinguished author of *La France juive*," the infamous two-volume anti-Semitic polemic published in 1886 that sparked political anti-Semitism in France and beyond. Moreover, the Vichy regime, inspired by Drumont and his epigones, conspired in the "final solution" by sending between 65,000 and 80,000 Jews to their deaths.

But there is also another side to France's relationship to the Jews. After all, it was the French Revolution that first proclaimed and decreed their emancipa-

tion. In addition, the Dreyfus affair cut two ways: while this anti-Semitic outrage in Europe's pioneering democratic and liberal republic incited Theodor Herzl to issue his manifesto of secular Zionism, eventually it also rallied France's forces of progressive enlightenment for a successful defense of a forlorn Jewish captain, thereby marking one of the greatest moments in the emancipation and assimilation of Jews in modern European history. No less important, until recently France was the first and only Christian nation to have a Jewish prime minister, and Léon Blum left to his country a legacy of humaneness comparable to the one FDR left to America.

In other words, France has a highly complex relationship with its Jewish community, and the fervor of Vidal-Naquet's essay stems from his informed and lived sensitivity to this tortured history. It will not do to charge the government of Valerie Giscard d'Estaing with visceral anti-Semitism for making overtures to the PLO and for pursuing an independent policy in the Middle East, even though some of the elements of Giscard's conservative coalition historically have been prime champions of religious and racial prejudice. Not unlike the governors of other Trilateral countries, the governors of France are desperate to secure safe supplies of oil. Furthermore, besides following these dictates of crude material interest, the French government is torn by internal cross-pressures. The Fifth Republic is the home of at least 600,000 Jews, among them 300,000 of North African origin, and they constitute the third largest Jewish diaspora after America and Russia. But France also has a population of no fewer than 1.2 million North Africans of Moslem faith who, incidentally, suffer many of the same economic and social indignities as the blacks in the United States. Accordingly, the French government may be said to be buffeted by two compact ethnic minorities: a Jewish community that supports the state of Israel, and an Arab community that sympathizes, with an equal fervor, with the Palestinian diaspora. It is a measure of Vidal-Naquet's scholarly and moral probity that he exposes the dangers of the resurgence of political anti-Semitism, as exemplified by the writings of the spurious revisionists, while at the same time speaking out on the plight of the Arab minority in Israel and the exiled Palestinians abroad.