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VICHY. A “BROKEN” MEMORY OF AN AMBIGUOUS PAST

ABSTRACT:

The French cultural and political space is constantly torn by the traumatic past of Vichy. This memory is both omnipresent and conflicting: it emerges as a "syndrome of Vichy" (Henry Rousso). Whenever important issues arise in contemporary debates (society or nation, equality or hierarchy, state or individual), the memory of Vichy recurs. It is often used to delegitimise opponents of the Republic or to discredit political adversaries, regardless of the political camp to which they belong. The 2022 presidential campaign has demonstrated the topicality of this phenomenon. What is the specificity of this “lieu de mémoire”? Is it a French particularity?

This lecture traces the evolution of the “Vichy memory” in a historical perspective. The aim is to understand the reasons behind the French people's "difficult reconciliation" with their past and the persistence of competing myths that have prevented the forging of a lasting, accepted representation. Indeed, it was only in 1995 that Jacques Chirac officially acknowledged the Vichy regime's policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany and its many crimes. This historic speech marked an important turning point in the context of public memory. However, numerous elements of this ambiguous past are still vulnerable to a process of appropriation and instrumentalisation.