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THE LATEST CATASTROPHE

*History, the Present,
the Contemporary*

By HENRY ROUSSO

TRANSLATED BY JANE MARIE TODD

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In memory of Peter Novick

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INTRODUCTION

“You Weren’t There!”

The scene: the Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent (Institute of History of the Present Time), a unit of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). On that day in 1989, the director, François Bédarida, was presiding at a meeting devoted to preparations for an international colloquium to be held the next year on “the Vichy regime and the French.” A disagreement over content arose between him and two young researchers: the first was Denis Peschanski; I was the other. A renowned historian, the sixty-three-year-old Bédarida had lived through the Occupation as a student and Resistance fighter in the Témoignage Chrétien movement. Peschanski and I were both thirty-five and had committed ourselves to that institution, created a decade earlier to organize and develop a historiography of the contemporary. The discussion became heated, and tensions mounted. Suddenly, Bédarida exclaimed with authority and a touch of annoyance: “You didn’t live through that period, you cannot understand!” An abrupt silence fell, the participants hesitating between laughter and astonishment.

And yet there was nothing unusual about that remark in a laboratory where different generations worked side by side. Researchers who as adolescents or adults had lived through Nazism, World War II, decolonization, Stalinism, or the barricades of spring 1968—all episodes that, among others, formed the object of the institute’s research during that period—sometimes clashed with younger scholars, whose view of things rarely coincided with their elders’ experience, even when that experience was reinterpreted through the prism of a historian’s work. On that day, however, Bédarida’s reaction hit me hard. I suddenly found it out of place, almost absurd, given that “not having been part of it” was in principle a characteristic proper to

the historian. But the remark seemed all the stranger in that it resounded in a place that had taken up the task of working on the near past, defending the idea that such work was not only possible but also necessary at a scientific, political, and ethical level. And the foremost trait of the near past is precisely the presence of actors who have lived through the events the historian is studying and may be able to bear witness to them, to engage in a dialogue with younger people regarding already relatively distant episodes. Historians of the present time, if they have not directly experienced everything within their field of observation, can at least speak with those who have. They are witnesses to the witness. Historians may even be the first to speak to the witness, if they have taken the initiative to question him or her; or they may be the last to have been able to speak to the witness while he or she was still alive. Bédarida's reaction therefore made complete sense: of the historians present, he was the only one to have actually lived through the events under discussion and thus had an apparent advantage over everyone else, to which he laid claim and which he intended to make known.

For historians, coping with the exclamation that they are “not part of it” means learning to deal with two prejudices that are antinomic and at the same time well rooted in the public's mind. The first is that good history is possible only with the passage of time, or even that the historian cannot come onto the scene until all the actors being studied have already made their exit. In that conception of their craft, historians observe a bygone past, a history that is over; they act only in the time of the dead, even if, in so doing, they bring the dead back to life on paper. Over those who have come before, historians possess in this view the absolute advantage of claiming the last word, by virtue of an interpretation that purports to be objective, distant, and cool, of facts that have become historical because their effects have ceased to affect the present. That prejudice still had some legitimacy in the late 1970s, especially in higher education, where choosing to focus on contemporary history could mean giving up the prospect of a prestigious career: the real historian was personified by the medievalist or the modernist. The development or creation at that moment, everywhere in Europe, of institutions charged with working on the near past was an indication of a change in attitude in that respect. The second prejudice takes almost the opposite tack: it holds that experience prevails over knowledge, that historical narration will never really be able to replace direct testimony (*témoignage*), and that the professional's claim to tell the truth about the past is a scientific illusion.¹ It is the individual who took part who must first contribute in person to an authentic discourse about the near past, before yielding the

floor to others, who will have nothing more than traces and the direct testimony of others. Bédarida knew better than anyone the impact of that belief, since he was immersed in an environment where the war-veteran witness, the Resistance fighter witness, the former-deportee witness occupied a growing place in debates and controversies about the recent past. More precisely, this was a time when historians were beginning to become cognizant of the presence and contribution in the public space of these witnesses, moral figures and social actors who first made their appearance in the days immediately following World War I. Frictions sometimes arose between them and historians, even those who were close to the witnesses. The situation also gave rise to controversies among historians themselves, between—to take the two extremes—those who rejected a priori any evidential value to oral testimony and those who, on the contrary, felt an almost religious awe for the witness, especially the victim witness. Bédarida was thus in an ideal position to assess the difficulty of that confrontation between acquired knowledge and reconstituted memories, even as, by virtue of his life’s journey and his age, he was torn between these two major modes of representing the past. On that day in 1989, he forgot for an instant his professional habitus and gave free rein to his subjectivity, yet without ceasing to be a historian of the present time. More than that, he seemed to be intimating that the only true historian was one who had been a witness to the events being studied, thus adopting the same posture as the Greek historian Thucydides. The difference was that, during the events—the period of the French occupation—the young Bédarida could not have known that he would one day become a historian of that period. And there is a great distance between the direct and ingenuous experience of a historical moment and the production of an informed narrative of the event. It is one thing to observe one’s time consciously, with the aim of producing a narrative account, as Thucydides had done, and another to appeal to one’s memories of youth long after the fact and use them as elements in a credible historical narrative.

Although still somewhat green at the time, I began with that episode to understand that the history of the present time that we were purporting to found entailed an approach marked through and through by the tension, sometimes even the opposition, between history and memory, knowledge and experience, distance and proximity, objectivity and subjectivity, researcher and witness. All these cleavages can exist within the same person. Like other ways of doing history, that branch of the discipline must take into account different temporalities and a particular dialectic between the past and the present. The time it examines belongs primarily to the realm of the imagi-

nary. In the real, different generations, different perceptions of what is remote and what near, diverse approaches to what is experienced and transmitted, exist side by side. The present time is in that respect a scientific fiction, in the same sense that there are literary or legal fictions. Amnesty, for example, erases a prison sentence by a formal decision that functions “as if” the conviction had not taken place, but without seeking to efface the memory of the crime itself, even less to oblige the victim to forget. The fiction here makes it possible to act in the present—to forgive or to empty out the prisons—without being entirely dependent on the weight of the past, which in any case will continue to produce its effects. Historians of the present time, for their part, act “as if” they could seize hold of time as it passes, freeze an image, and observe the transition between present and past—slow down the process of time’s retreat and the oblivion that lies in wait for any human experience. The fiction consists, therefore, of not considering the present a single moment beyond reach, like Heraclitus’s river—into which one never steps twice—but of conferring on it a substantiality, a perspective, a time frame, as all historians engaged in periodization do. The difficulty is not insurmountable: even for contemporaries of the events studied, the present time cannot be reduced to a fleeting instant. Their consciousness, their unconscious (which supposedly knows nothing of time), and their memory confer on it a time frame, which is more a perception than a tangible reality but which alone allows them to give meaning to the events experienced. That time frame, that specific temporality, can be identified as a “contemporaneity,” a term that applies to everything we recognize as belonging to our own time, including the tradition, the traces, the recollection of bygone eras. Contemporaneity, as it happens, is not unique to recent periods. Since the first appearance of forms of culture, societies have lived in a present marked by the weight, sometimes the burden, of the past, a present open as well to the possibilities, even the uncertainties of the future. The perception of time, however, may well have evolved considerably. When historians observe a historical actor of that bygone past, they must constantly keep in mind the “having-been” of that actor, who lived and acted in a present time that no longer exists but that has to be reconstituted, as we are enjoined to do by an entire epistemological tradition from Raymond Aron to Reinhart Koselleck to Paul Ricoeur. The particularity of the history of the present time is that it takes an interest in its *own* present, in a context where the past is not over and gone, where the subject of one’s narrative is a “still-there.” Inevitably, there will be a few pitfalls.

It has been the ambition of the history of the present time, a movement

that arose between the 1950s and the 1970s (depending on the place) and that reinvented a tradition dating back to the Greek origins of historiography, to understand and overcome these pitfalls. The object of this book is to retrace the evolution, to grasp the driving forces, to explain the paradigms and presuppositions of that branch of the historical discipline, which within a few decades has moved from the margins to the center. Has the history of the present time really always existed? Does it have properties peculiar to itself, or is it only one aspect, without distinctive traits, of a general historiography? What changes occurred in the last third of the twentieth century that made it appear that the discipline as a whole had been transformed? Those are a few of the questions I wish to raise here. The notion of a history of the present time has found a place in the international historiographical landscape precisely because it has a history and specific characteristics that can answer questions both conjunctural and universal. Although its legitimacy has now been acknowledged, that form of history continues to give rise to reservations and criticisms, less about its feasibility as such (that was the case in the nineteenth century) than about the epistemological choices that a part of that movement has made in the last two decades. As I will show at length in this book, the term “history of the present time” is, in this sense, not the same as “contemporary history.” Every national tradition has its own way of characterizing the near past. That diversity reflects sometimes long-standing, sometimes recent traditions and different epistemological choices, historical objects, and stances in the public space. The polysemy of the notion of contemporaneity is not the least difficulty historians face, whether they are seeking to understand times past or their own time. That notion not only refers to a temporality, it not only signifies a proximity in time (and hence a curiosity about one’s own time); it also refers to other forms of proximity: in space, in the imaginary. The presence of the most remote past can sometimes have more weight than events closer in time. In addition, it is possible to have very little in common with one’s fellow living creatures and, on the contrary, a great proximity to ancestors of another time or even another place, assuming they are rediscovered and given an actuality in the present. That observation, apparently banal, raises countless questions. They are the object of this book, whose epistemological orientation is relatively well defined at both the intellectual and the institutional level: that of a history that has come face to face with the tragedies of the last century and, already, with those of this century, still in its infancy. That movement—or, rather, that practice of history—has attempted to outline empirically a way of doing and thinking about history when it reaches or even exceeds the limit of the comprehen-

sible and the acceptable. It can be found anywhere that the recent past has seared its brand into bodies, minds, territories, objects.

In an article published in 2006, the historian Antoine Prost proclaimed that “the history of the present time is one history among others,” denouncing a “pseudo-concept” forged for purely circumstantial reasons.² The astonishingly vindictive tone of this seven-page text lies in the claim that this movement, having won the battle of legitimacy, must now abandon the standard under which its victory was possible. No new banner is proposed, however, as if that branch of the discipline had to be dispossessed of its name and identity in the interest of epistemological imperialism, or perhaps out of resentment—neither of which is declared openly. And yet that historiographical practice does in fact possess a few singularities, which cannot be wiped out by the stroke of a pen. Of the four major periods of Western historiography—antiquity, the Middle Ages, the modern era, and the contemporary age—only the parameters of the last are constantly shifting and in dispute. Depending on the place and the national tradition, the contemporary may begin in 1789, 1917, 1945, or even 1989. As for its end date, it is by definition always moving, another banal but important difference. Of these four periodizations, contemporary history is the only one to be the object of recurrent disagreements, not about the interpretation of the temporal sequences themselves—there are debates about the end of antiquity or of the Middle Ages, just as there are about the beginning of contemporary history—but about its feasibility, its significance, even its name. Furthermore, the question “What does it mean to be contemporary?” belongs to an inquiry that arose in the nineteenth century and is not confined to historical reflection. It is pervasive in philosophy, anthropology, art history, and musicology, each of which uses the adjective “contemporary” in its own way. There is an epistemological question here on which historians must take a position, as I attempt to do here, by inquiring into the long evolution of a practice that purports to do the history of its own time; into the conjuncture specific to the twentieth century, which ultimately gave it a particular configuration; and, finally, into the variables and invariables that make it possible to identify the singularities of that way of thinking about history within the discipline as a whole.

Rather than take at face value the clichés that tell us time and again that “all history is contemporary” and that the practice dates back to the origins of

the discipline, I first seek to understand what the term “contemporary” and the notions of contemporary history or history of the present time might mean concretely over the *longue durée*, starting from my own experience (the study of the history and memory of major recent conflicts) and moving backward in time. Then I focus my attention on the twentieth century, which gradually saw the emergence of an institutionalized history of the present time, with its own methods, paradigms, debates, and detractors within a historical profession that has itself profoundly changed. My intent in that section is not to propose a scholarly history of contemporaneity, but rather to situate within the longest time frame possible the generally accepted hypothesis that contemporary history has been gaining prominence since the 1970s. I linger on the last third of the twentieth century, because there is currently a debate about whether it introduced a change in the “regime of historicity,” an expression that has become quite popular in French historiography in the last few years but is little discussed elsewhere. The term “historicity” (*Geschichtlichkeit* in German) came into being at the same time as the philosophy of history, within the context of the debate on historicism. Taken in its most basic meaning, it designates the specifically temporal—hence evolving, variable, limited, and mortal—character of human beings and societies and implies that the knowledge they may produce about themselves also has a limit, a finitude, especially when compared to traditional metaphysics. The meaning of the term changed at the impetus of anthropology, which designates by that term both “a wealth of events” (a phrase coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss) in a given society and a means of differentiating societies from one another, notably through the famous distinction between “hot” and “cold” societies, or between “cultures that move and those that do not.” Added to this meaning is the essential idea that historicity is a self-consciousness or a self-perception, a subjective image that human beings or societies have of their own temporal dimension. In the 1960s historians such as François Hartog and anthropologists such as Gérard Lenclud, themselves influenced by Marshall Sahlins, used the question of the “regime of historicity” to form a bridge between their two disciplines so as to put an end to a decade of contentiousness regarding the question of the historical versus the structural. The notion took on a broader sense within the context of the 1980s–2000s, when an intense debate developed about the respective place in present-day societies of the past, the present, and the future:

Consequently, the expression “regime of historicity” refers first—at least logically—to the type of relation that any society maintains with its past, to the way

it treats and deals with the past before using it (and in order to use it) and constitutes the sort of thing we call history—the way a society treats its past and deals with its past. In ascending order of activism in treatment: the way a society arranges the cultural frameworks that lay out the means by which its past affects it (beyond what the fact that it has a past implies for every society), the way that past is present in its present (more than it might necessarily be), the way it fosters or buries it, reconstructs it, constitutes it, mobilizes it, and so on. There would thus be an entire range of attitudes linked to cultural variability: in one place, the past is a *magistra vitae*, a “life guide,” in another, an unbearable burden, elsewhere, an inexhaustible resource, a rare asset. . . . The regime of historicity defines a culturally delimited, hence conventional form of relation to the past; historiography is one of these forms and, as a genre, an element symptomatic of an all-encompassing regime of historicity.³

That notion, beyond its theoretical interest, has sparked research on the history and sociology of memory, on the representations and uses of the past, on the history of history, since it postulates that not only are societies historical, but also that their way of thinking about themselves in time and space has a history, a variability. Hence the use of the term “regime,” which conjures up the idea of several different types of relation to time, which may follow one after another or may coexist in a single place or at a single moment. To work on regimes of historicity is thus not simply to focus on historiography—the evolution of historians’ writings—but also to postulate that the way of envisioning time, in this case the present time, constitutes an essential element for understanding a given society at a given moment. Hartog, for example, has recently developed the hypothesis that since 1989 we have been living in a “presentist” regime of historicity, which succeeded a “futurist” regime that began in 1789. The domination of the future as cultural horizon (progress, revolution, growth), including its worst variations such as totalitarian millenarianism, has been supplanted by the domination of the present: “without a future and without a past, [the present] generates from day to day the past and future it needs day after day and valorizes the immediate.”⁴ I share that view in great part, but with a few differences and variations, which I explain later in this book. They have to do with the link between presentism and the emergence of a new history of the present time, which I see less as a symptom than as a reaction, and concern the moment when one regime of historicity ceded to another: in my opinion, the evolutions in the relation to time in the Western world, and especially the question of contemporaneity, began in the 1970s (hence before the fall of the Berlin Wall) and can therefore be explained by factors other than the end

of the Cold War and of the Soviet system. Finally, though the present now indisputably constitutes a dominant and even invasive category, though it influences in particular the way we view recollections of the near past, it is nevertheless true that these recollections, that memory, unfold for the most part under the rather traditional regime of a burden of the past, a haunting past, even if the solutions proposed for facing them often entail a form of presentism.

In that respect, I was struck to discover—after others—the degree to which, since the French Revolution, the phenomenon of war has marked the historical time of the modern West. The frames of reference used by the actors and historians to delimit the contemporary era are usually the ends of wars or sometimes the beginnings of wars: the end of World War I, the end of World War II, the end of the Cold War, to which could be added the two major revolutions of 1789 and 1917, the first having led to a long string of wars in Europe, the second having resulted in part from World War I. At a deeper level, most of the ends of wars or revolutions gave rise to a strong increase of interest in contemporary history, when they did not purely and simply create a new regime of historicity (as after 1789). Interest in the near past thus seems ineluctably connected to a sudden eruption of violence and even more to its aftereffects, to a time following the explosive event, a time necessary for understanding it, becoming cognizant of it, but a time marked as well by trauma and by strong tensions between the need to remember and the temptation to forget. That, in any case, is the hypothesis I develop here, relying on the lapidary and compelling definition that all contemporary history begins with “the latest catastrophe,” or in any case with the latest that seems most telling, if not the closest in time.

When, then, does the respective present of an age begin? It begins with the latest constitutive event, the one that determines its existence. For a happy couple, the present originates on the wedding day. If we begin with that example, we could say that every present of a given age begins with the latest catastrophe. Granted, that term might mask the essential. Almost every people—to confine ourselves from this point forward to the history of peoples—has experienced the same latest catastrophe, World War II. But it is not the mere fact of having been subjected to catastrophes, however violent they may have been, that on its own marks the origin of the present. The present does not begin everywhere in 1945, but the present of the historical structure of those subjected to the catastrophe begins with it.⁵

In this text, which is rather difficult stylistically, the definition of the history of the present time—*Zeitgeschichte* in German—swings back and forth between a joke and an erudite assertion. Its author, Hermann Heimpel, was a member of the academic establishment of postwar Germany and, notably, the director of the Max Planck Institute for History in the late 1950s. His writings and life story illustrate the ambivalence of contemporary German historiography, which is undoubtedly the paradigmatic model for some of the problems I try to raise in this book. Heimpel, after demonstrating his allegiance to the Nazi regime and being named to the Reichsuniversität installed in Strasbourg after the defeat of France, was also one of the first after the war to confront the question of German guilt. He may even have contributed, in the 1950s and later, to forging the ambiguous concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the need to come to terms with the Nazi past, a notion that would occupy a central place in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany (I consider this point in chapter 3).⁶ In that sense, the term “catastrophe” has a long history in the post-Nazi context. It was used in the late 1940s to dilute the specific responsibilities of the Germans in a euphemism that encompassed both the victims of the Nazis and the suffering of the German people in general. In the 1980s it became widespread in its Hebrew version—*Shoab*—following Claude Lanzmann’s film by that name. It now designated the uniqueness and singularity of the extermination of the Jews, though without really managing to replace the term “Holocaust,” used in the English-speaking world. By imitation or in reaction, the word “catastrophe” subsequently spread as a means to designate the original and founding tragedy of the identity of certain peoples: for example, the Palestinian term *Nakba* refers to the mass expulsions of 1948.

The term “catastrophe” must therefore be understood here in its etymological sense, both as an “upheaval” and an “end” in ancient Greek, often with insurmountable consequences; but also, in Latin, as a “denouement” and “coup de théâtre” in the literary and dramaturgical sense of the term. That historiographical conception, the premises of which date back to 1917–18, emphasizes that the catastrophe is a provisional origin of a present time whose fleetingness it accepts. In that respect, it belongs to a discontinuous view of history, deviating from the logic of revolutionary modernity, which rested instead on the idea of a continuity, a linearity, a fulfillment, moving in the direction of progress in particular. But that modernity itself arose from a major rupture in the course of history, or at least Western history: “Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happen-

ings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end. . . . What the illuminating event reveals is a beginning in the past which had hitherto been hidden; to the eye of the historian, the illuminating event cannot but appear as an end of this newly discovered beginning. Only when in future history a new event occurs will this ‘end’ reveal itself as a beginning to the eye of future historians.”⁷

Granted, the notion causes a few difficulties, since it is unusual for a historical human catastrophe to be perceived unanimously and universally as such. At least it can be said that the catastrophes of the twentieth century that serve as our points of reference stem from a relatively novel situation: over time, both the victors and the vanquished of the two world wars ultimately came to believe that they were in the presence of calamities unprecedented in the history of humanity, even though the responsibility borne by each is sometimes still a matter of debate. In making that remark, I concur with Jean-Pierre Dupuy, whose defense of an “enlightened catastrophism” cannot fail to resonate with the view developed here. Parallel to the need to think lucidly in the present about future catastrophes, there may be a need to think just as lucidly, and just as much in the present, about the historical catastrophes of the recent past that served as a starting point: “It was in the last century that humanity became capable of destroying itself, either directly by nuclear war or indirectly through the deterioration of the conditions necessary for its survival. The crossing of that threshold had been in the offing for a long time, but it made manifest and critical what had until then been only a potential danger.”⁸

There is thus a certain consensus that the catastrophes of the twentieth century, and in particular World War II, inaugurated a new contemporaneity marked not by optimism, as some believed in the 1960s (they made the year 1945 the starting point for a new world full of promise: Europe, growth, peace), but rather by pessimism. That spirit of the time gives precedence, in the matter of collective memory, to the most lethal moments of the near past, those that have had the most difficulty “passing away.” The project of a new history of the present time has not been to go along with that obsessive, traumatic vision of the past, but rather to promote an understanding of it, to regard that history with detachment despite its persistence in memory. That historiography has had to provide interpretive keys, though these have often been incomplete and uncertain. It has had to confront the major phases of the anamnesis of the Nazi past and of the history of decolonization, even as it sought its own epistemological foundations. That is one of its principal characteristics and no doubt the greatest source of its fragility. Moreover,

by dating the present time from the latest catastrophe, we define the contemporary in structural terms (certain catastrophes have always punctuated historical time) as much as we delineate a particular conjuncture: our own regime of historicity is defined in great part by the difficulty of getting over the memory of the recent major catastrophes, hence of reestablishing a certain historical continuity of longer duration. That is the last point taken up in this book, in which I seek to understand the respective share of invariables that allow us to define “contemporaneity”—for example, the presence of living actors who can bear witness in person—and of variables, especially periodizations, that differ from one author, one culture, and one country to another and are often dependent on ideological or intellectual *a priori*s.

I first conceived of this book as a manifesto, an offensive. Over time, the project mutated into a more open inquiry. In this book, which is neither a treatise on epistemology nor a normative essay on the proper way to write history, I propose more simply a reflection on a certain way of thinking about the history of the present time. The book became possible only because of my practical research in the field and my habit of studying sensitive periods, which led me to regard my discipline in a particular manner. I do not claim in this book to represent all the possible modes for writing a contemporary history: it belongs to the very conjuncture it analyzes. I analyze present-day societies in terms of the relations they maintain with the past, on the basis of the historiographical situation in France, Germany, and the English-speaking world. For lack of time, space, and competence, I have been unable to include elements from Italian and Spanish historiography and from certain Latin American countries, whose situations fall to a degree within the perspective developed here. In all those places, contemporary history has assumed an incomparably greater role than it previously had, both in academia and in the public space. It now attracts a large proportion of the history students, courses in history, and resources allotted to the discipline as a whole in many countries. That was unthinkable thirty years ago, when the present time belonged almost exclusively, at best, to the other social sciences, and at worst, to enlightened journalism. In addition, recent history has attracted a growing number of writers, feature and documentary filmmakers, and artists of all sorts. Countless blogs, Web sites, and forums are devoted to it, from the wackiest to the best informed. That evolution signals the emergence of a new curiosity and of an expectation about the intelligibility of the recent past.

At the same time, the place of history in general has changed in nature. The notions of memory and heritage have invaded scholarship and the public space. Testimony has taken on the appearance of a social and moral imperative. To judge political crimes sometimes half a century old, temporal justice systems have been turned into “tribunals of world history.” Nation-states have devoted a great many resources and a good deal of energy to setting in place national or international “public policies of the past.” In the public mind, in ordinary language, the past has become a problem to be solved. It is now common to hear that societies, groups, or individuals must “face up to,” “confront,” or “cope with” the past; or that one must “come to terms with” or “master” the past. It is a strange metaphor when you think about it, since, literally, it means either that we put the past in a place that is in principle not its own, namely, in front of us; or that we constantly have our backs turned to the future in order to face the past, a concrete illustration of Walter Benjamin’s prophetic vision upon viewing Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*. Vis-à-vis history, and especially recent history, contemporary societies thus seem to maintain a relation deeply marked by conflict: personal or collective conflicts originating in insuperable traumas; wars of memory, public polemics, and scientific controversies, often all mixed up together. History no longer unfolds in the first place as traditions to be respected, legacies to be transmitted, knowledge to be elaborated, or deaths to be commemorated, but rather as problems to be “managed,” a constant “work” of mourning or of memory to be undertaken. That is how deep-seated the idea has become that the past must be wrested free from the limbo of oblivion and that only public or private mechanisms can exhume it. The past has thus become a substance that can and even must be acted upon, adapted to the needs of the present. It is now a realm of public action. The imperative for truth characteristic of the historical method has turned into a social imperative for recognition, into policies of atonement, apologies, and expressions of “repentance” directed at the victims of the recent major catastrophes. It is within that context that a new history of the present time has developed, one that—barely on its feet—is summoned to respond to the challenges of the anamnesis of a near past in its lethal version, to the need for atonement (involving the mass consumption of expertise), to the imperatives of an omnipresent discourse on “memory,” a term that has gradually lost some of its clarity even as the phenomenon has increased in importance. These historians of the present time, sometimes against their will, sometimes caught up in the exaltation of actions far removed from their training as detached observers, have themselves become actors in a history still being made.

CONCLUSION

In the Face of the Tragic

Qui peut dire où la mémoire commence
Qui peut dire où le temps présent finit
Où le passé rejoindra la romance
Où le malheur n'est qu'un papier jauni.

Who can say where memory begins
Who can say where the present time ends
Where the past will merge with the romance
Where misfortune is only a yellowed page.

LOUIS ARAGON,

“Les larmes se ressemblent,” *Les yeux d'Elsa*

In this book I have sought to strike a balance between permanence and a conjuncture, between an ahistorical definition of contemporaneity and its inclusion within a context. Several subjects of reflection have thereby emerged, which I shall address by way of conclusion.

Not surprisingly, the historical overview over the *longue durée* revealed that the idea of contemporaneity has undergone a profound evolution. Therefore we cannot be content with the cliché that “all history is contemporary.” Until the Renaissance and the emergence of a mediate knowledge, and probably even until the eighteenth century, the very idea of a recent history distinct from the rest was weak, since there was no clear separation between past and present. That does not mean, however, that there has been a continuous and immutable conception over several millennia of how to write about one's own time: the modalities, methods, and purposes for writing history changed considerably from one civilization to another. The conception of time as cyclical or as linear, the present viewed as the end of all things or as an eternal modality, the placement of the commonwealth, the lord, the sovereign, or providence at the center of the narrative: these are all profoundly different regimes of historicity. By means of a detour through a lengthy history, I have been able to identify—albeit fleetingly and breezily—a few permanent traits in the definition of one's own time, rather than simply indicate

in a rote phrase that the practice of contemporary history dates back to the most remote times.

Witnesses who see, witnesses who speak, witnesses who write, even if they are themselves historians, certainly play an essential role, since they are the first if not the only mediators. Stemming from—or, rather, associated with—that observation is the idea that memory also plays a primary role, since the “I-remember” exists prior to historical narrative, the “once-upon-a-time.” Here I follow in the tradition of Paul Ricoeur, who wrote: “As regards the reference to the past, we have no other resource but memory itself . . . we do not have something better than memory to signify that something took place, happened, occurred *before* we declare that we remember it.” In that view of the relationship between the past and the present, “testimony constitutes the fundamental structure for moving from memory to history.”²¹ But in the present time, these witnesses are not out of reach, they do not exist only through the imprint they have made, they are not only the past resuscitated. Unlike witnesses from the past, who will be brought back to life only through the traces that the historian or posterity exploits, these witnesses exist apart from and prior to any historiographical operation.

Another almost constant trait is that historians of the present time maintain conflictual relations with power, whether religious or political. By virtue of their art and later their profession, they were destined to anticipate the judgment of posterity, even to orient it, in the presence of those most concerned, who sought immortality in writing because they could not have biological immortality. As a result, these historians remained ineluctably caught up in a tension between freedom of written expression, to which they aspired almost naturally, and the need to bow to the prince. Until the eighteenth century, in fact, history was above all the history of the powerful or of divine will.

After the French Revolution, new categories of historical time arose. “History as such” was now perceived as an autonomous force detached from both divine providence and the sovereign’s actions. The “bygone past” was distinguished from the past in general and indicated a fracture, a “before” and an “after,” marked by the upheaval of 1789. A new historical sequence therefore made its appearance in modes of thought. Depending on the place, it would become widespread under the name *Zeitgeschichte* or “contemporary history.” A need was now felt to identify a new period after “modern times.” Before the Revolution, the use of the word “contemporary” was relatively uncommon, and it had many meanings, including the one Pascal gave to it: a presence of the immemorial past, which has withstood time without alteration. Seventeenth-century readers of the Old Testament were contempo-

raries of the Jews who received the Tablets of Law. After the Revolution, the word came into general use, but with a different meaning. History ceased to be entirely contemporary, since there was no longer any continuity between the past and the present. The contemporary period now designated a more limited, more visible sequence marked by singularities. At the same moment, still among the heirs to the Revolution, history gradually constituted itself as a profession. It even aspired to be a science: it promulgated detachment and objectivity and, in almost the same movement, came to look with suspicion on the possibility of writing about the recent past in the heat of passion, since that was precisely what one had to distance oneself from. What had previously been an uncontroversial element of historical reflection—consideration of the present, a present not detached from the past—was now problematic. That explains the exclusion, from the early nineteenth century on, of the history of the present time. But though not considered a field that could aspire to scientificity, it remained a category of reflection, education, and literature.

How to think about one's own time changed. A tension appeared between the need to write a history on the spot, to give meaning to the event that had just turned the old order of things on its head, to understand its underpinnings, and the impossibility of undertaking such a narration for lack of sources, detachment, and serenity. That dilemma (necessity versus impossibility), that opposition between those who aspired to get down to business immediately and those who denied them all credibility because time had not yet done its work, was concomitant with the advent of contemporary history. Hence the paradox of the methodological school, which rejected the scientific dimension of a potential history of the present time but practiced it *de facto* in education and through the publication of textbooks and mainstream works. The same attitude reappeared in the wake of—sometimes even in the midst of—all the catastrophes of the twentieth century. That was the case after 1918 and after 1945, both decisive moments in the constitution and subsequent institutionalization of a long-lasting, acknowledged, and yet still disputed (if not contested) history of the present time. That tension entailed two ways of confronting historical traumas, understood here as the delayed effects of an event that has caused a break, turned values upside down, and modified everyday life. Historical traumas leave lasting traces, sometimes psychic or physical wounds, both in individuals and within collectivities. There were those who advocated a waiting or cooling-off period, in order to best fulfill the criteria of impartiality. They rejected the very idea of a history of the present time, which seemed to them presumptuous, risky, polluted by contingency and the noise of the incidental. In a sense, they placed them-

selves on the side of a beneficial repression, an encouragement to forget, as it were, a fiction of science, sometimes a denial reflex. According to them, the material of history had to be cold, or at the very least cooled, like ashes. Then there were those who wished to dig through the smoking vestiges of the event, to interpret the first words of witnesses seeking to tell of the catastrophe when extreme experiences were at stake, who wished therefore to fulfill the expectations of those who demanded meaning in the chaos left by a war, a genocide, mass destruction. For them, the history of the present time was an intellectual, moral, and psychological need, which more or less assumed the risk of keeping the wound open and allowed for no waiting period prior to understanding and putting into words events perceived and experienced as unheard-of.

Since the Revolution, then, there seems to have existed a structural relation between the writing of a history of the present time and the existence of a historical trauma requiring an adaptation—more or less long, more or less thorough—by the societies concerned to the crisis that has occurred. The need to reestablish a temporal continuity after the break, the need to forge narratives, even antagonistic ones, that can give meaning to the fracture suffered or provoked, the recomposition of individual or collective identities by major historical catastrophes are processes inherent in the generations that follow “monster events.” In general, questions about contemporary history belong to that context. Such history, then, is not simply that of an “after”—an anachronistic position, which is that of all historians—but also of an aftermath. It is closer in time to the catastrophe and in any case much more present in the consciousness or unconscious of the actors, who have to deal with a past that is slow in passing away, and sometimes might not pass away at all. The aim of that history is not only to establish its distance from the traumatic event so as to be able to interpret it but, even more, to grasp its short- and medium-term effects, to forge the tools for interpreting its “afterlife,” that is, the prolongation of the initial shock and the way to adapt to it. From that standpoint, historians of the present time do not define themselves, or at least not exclusively, by the “objective” temporal proximity separating them from the event studied, but rather by their own capacity to create for themselves the proper visual and ethical distance needed to observe a time that is only partly their own.

If, then, there has been a contemporary history identified as such since the French Revolution, the actual practice of that history in recent years has been profoundly marked by a certain configuration. The components are

not new, but their combination is somewhat original. That configuration establishes a relationship between a series of elements in a reality that is all at once social, cultural, political, tangible, and concrete to concepts and notions developed by the social sciences, since history is not the only discipline at issue. These concepts include the event, testimony, memory, social demand, and “judicialization” (the consideration of historical events in terms of judicial categories). The order of these elements is not immaterial here. Some, such as the event, are characteristic of all historical writing; others, such as direct testimony, are constitutive of a specifically contemporary writing of history; still others, such as the increasing intervention of the law and the justice system in historical interpretations, belong to the most recent conjuncture.

The link between event and the history of the present time is neither new nor original. Initially, however, one had to fight against the excommunication of the event before one could confront the aftereffects of the major traumas of the twentieth century. Obviously, historians could not leave the century of wars, genocide, and totalitarianism outside the field of scholarly historiography. In addition, the event as it has been studied by historians of the present time in the last thirty years has little in common with the event of the “event-based history” formerly denounced by the *Annales* School and, moreover, largely constructed as an imaginary figure of the enemy to be defeated. On the one hand, it has usually taken the form of unprecedented catastrophes coming one right after another. Each time, there is the same need to understand how humanity was able to cross a new threshold of violence or destruction—after 1918, after 1945, even after 2001. On the other hand, in studying that event, historians have given precedence not only to how it unfolded and the way it was experienced by contemporaries, but equally to its consequences, its lasting effects, its memory. The attention paid, notably, to the aftermath of these catastrophes reveals events that possess an almost autonomous life in the social imaginary long after their apparent conclusion, sometimes with an increasingly tenuous relationship to the original events. From that point of view, the interminable and impossible completion of the French Revolution throughout the nineteenth century, the anamnesis of World War II in the last third of the twentieth century, and that of World War I at the dawn of the twenty-first serve as textbook cases.

The question of testimony is no more specific to contemporary history than is that of the event, since history is by definition a permanent dialogue between the living and the dead, one way among others of preserving their memory. Furthermore, a historical actor, before being a “witness,” remains

fundamentally a subject, which the circumstances, or the appeals of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, or those simply of a publisher, will transform into an expressive witness. Dialogues with the dead are not on the same order as those with the living and do not entail the same methods or the same ethics. In addition, twentieth-century history has seen the rise in power of a new figure of the witness and a new kind of testimony linked to the very catastrophes discussed throughout this book. Thinking has thus evolved toward a reflection on the victim and victimization, a central figure in the contemporary relation to the past. This is not only because the twentieth century was enduringly marked by suffering—it was the traumatic century par excellence—but also because our societies have responded to that suffering with policies of acknowledgment and reparations (especially of the material kind), which have granted actual political, legal, and social status to various categories of victims: displaced persons, political deportees, “racial deportees,” victims of the anti-Semitic laws, the dispossessed, the interned, officially recognized resisters, the “Righteous,” victims of forced labor, and so on. The infinitely complex elaboration of these categories, both on general principles and in their application *intuitu personae*, has in most cases required historical expertise in order to define the right to claim that status. Likewise, the enormous increase in the civil and criminal procedures intended to make amends for historical events sometimes several decades old has led to the enlistment of expertise of all sorts about past events, including historical expertise. As a result, the relation between historical actors and historians has changed in nature. It has become strained, and the old opposition between experience and knowledge has again reared its head. Actors erected into witnesses have claimed, sometimes in complete innocence, to speak in the name of an entire era, forgetting that even their most terrible and ineradicable experience was limited in time and space: those deported to Buchenwald cannot give an account of the experience of being at Auschwitz. And historians have sometimes forgotten that historical discourse consists of general statements that are often very difficult to apply to particular cases—hence the difficulty of inserting a flesh-and-blood accused (during the Eichmann or Papon trials, for example) into philosophical or historical categories. In fact, that opposition between witnesses and historians is not so simple, since some witnesses—in France, Daniel Cordier, Jean Moulin’s former secretary, who became his biographer—have unambiguously sided with the historians most suspicious of testimony. Academia has split in two: one part has developed a veritable ideology of testimony that glorifies the witness and the victim, considers their word sacred, and dis-

plays toward them a false humility. In my view, that attitude masks a scientific populism whose objective is not, like that of any populism, to defend the cause of the “forgotten of History.” Rather, there is a desire, more or less unconscious, to speak—loudly—in their place. Consider the virulence of the remarks made during recent historiographical disputes, especially in France, regarding the attitude of World War I combatants, or the heroization of the Resistance, or the scope of the colonial unthought and its connection to the immigration question. Not only do I reject that ideology of testimony, which appears in part to be the avatar of an ideological radicality that has lost its traditional historical frames of reference and is seeking new “wretched of the earth”; I also think that the real respect the historian owes witnesses—or rather, once again, historical actors—is to engage with them in a face-to-face encounter, a dialogue, whether friendly or polemical. That in no way prevents one from having respect for what they were in the past, yet at the same time it allows one full freedom to criticize their interpretations of history, including their own history.

We move almost naturally from the witness and the victim to “memory,” one of the late twentieth century’s buzzwords. Here again, all contemporary history is confronted with the actors’ recollections, with a living memory that may or may not find public expression and enter into competition with scholarly discourse. But the memory in question here, as we have seen, has been of a different nature, so much so that some have spoken in reference to the last third of the twentieth century of an “age of memory,” an inevitable consequence of the century of major traumas. Historians of the present time, somewhat more than others, have been confronted with the uncontrolled deployment of that notion, which ultimately subsumed all the other usual forms of relation to the past—history, tradition, heritage, myth, legend. They have therefore become particularly invested in a history of the uses and presence of the recent past, quite an illuminating example of how to establish one’s distance from an issue in the present. Let me insist, however, that historians’ studies on memory, while more or less dependent on the atmosphere of the time, on a preoccupation on the part of their contemporaries, have taken several directions, with different ramifications. I leave aside the oldest of these preoccupations, which rediscovers the notion of memory under cover of oral history, hence solicited testimony: it underwent a development after 1945 with the large-scale campaigns to interview U.S. veterans of World War II, then in the 1970s with collections devoted to English working-class memory (Paul Thompson), women’s memory (Luisa Passerini), and French Protestant memory (Philippe Joutard). Apart from

that trend, it is primarily the *lieux de mémoire* vein on the one hand, and that of “traumatic memories” on the other, that have had the most success in the last three decades. The first vein, inspired by the publishing venture that Pierre Nora devoted to France, which spurred German, Italian, Russian, Dutch, and Luxembourgish versions, is above all a rewriting of national history at one remove. It has looked analytically at the material and immaterial patrimony of each country. That patrimony was considerably expanded to include everything that, at one moment or another, may have constituted support both for a specific imaginary and for national character. For the most part, that way of envisioning the history of memory belongs to the register of positivity; that is, it tends to consider the past in terms of permanent behaviors, traditions, and habits of mind that establish a national identity. Citizens of the country under consideration can recognize themselves in that identity and draw resources from it. It does not concern recent history alone—far from it. Like Nora’s original model, it situates itself within a *longue durée* that more or less corresponds to the first appearance of national feeling. The second vein has to do primarily with studying the traumatic episodes of the recent past, often absent from the *lieux de mémoire* problematic, except in Germany. It has often been pointed out, in fact, that the two principal French debates about memory—that regarding Vichy and that regarding Algeria—were absent from the seven volumes Nora edited and published between 1984 and 1992, just when these debates were emerging in the public space.² Whatever the reasons, that absence casts into relief the difference between that current and the one that put its energies, sometimes to an excessive degree, into the history of the century’s “human infamy”: the two world wars, genocides, colonialism, and totalitarian systems, whose aftereffects, aftermath, and delayed effects became the obligatory subjects of major studies, even as a new history of the present time was taking root. That second vein accompanied and even structured the new historiographical field, which developed nearly everywhere in the world and, from the start, belonged to the register of negativity. It is a history confronted primarily with mourning, loss, resentment, and impossible atonement, imperatives to which historians, sociologists, or others engaged in that field could not really respond. Finding itself trapped, that history in response gave rise to conflicts, even a form of violence, which shows the extent to which distant observers probably (even certainly) faced the delayed effects of the original violence of the events they were studying. The project of Nora and his emulators leaned toward behavior therapies, which urge patients to look on the “sunny side” of their history; the other posture, by

contrast, placed itself within the purview of analytic therapy (though I cannot really say whether it occupies the place of the analyst or that of the analysand), which attempts to historicize trauma by retracing its development after the shock, by putting words to the wounds, by making historical discourse not a resource for one's identity, but a symbolic agency able to counterbalance the invasive imaginary of an identity founded on victimization.

Social demand followed from that development, since historians were faced with expectations of a new kind from a society grappling with profound questions about the recent past. The term "social demand" itself designates a problem encountered by all the social sciences, namely, more or less explicit expectations likely to translate into research, the impetus for which arises outside academia. Social demand is not simply expertise, another innovation that has affected historians in general and those of the present time in particular. The term "expertise" designates an aspect of social demand that enlists knowledge in the service of an action, public or private, and whose purpose is not only to understand the real, but to change it. It exists, therefore, only if there is in the first place a well-defined field of action in which actors clearly and explicitly express an expectation, as in the case of a judicial proceeding. Social demand in general may simply lie in the imagination of the researcher interpreting the ambient context. These notions have long been part of the epistemology of the social sciences, even of the sciences in general. The intense debate surrounding the question of historical expertise points to a redefinition under way of the relation between power, knowledge, and society. It is part of a shift in which influence has been transferred from traditional "intellectuals"—"legislators," as Zygmunt Bauman calls them, those who seek to guide the world—to "interpreters," "specific intellectuals," to use Foucauldian terminology, hence to experts who seek rather to understand, sometimes at the risk of losing their autonomy.³ If the historian too has become an "expert," it is because history itself, and specifically recent history, has become a field of expertise, a field of action within which certain social actors aspire to intervene retroactively on the past.

The last element in that configuration belongs to the same conjuncture. This is the tendency, recent and relatively novel, to make the past a matter of law, a field of intervention on the part of legislators and judges. Granted, that "juridification" (from "juridical") or "judiciarization" (from "judicial") of history is part of a general trend in contemporary societies, which increasingly ask the law and the justice system to intervene in fields where actions on their part were unusual in the past. In the case of history, it has assumed a particular importance: in the enormous increase in legal decisions con-

cerning historians' research, especially the defamation of living actors of the past; in the role that scholarly studies and researchers have played in defining and implementing new criminal charges, such as "crimes against humanity"; in the active part they have taken in establishing criminal, administrative, or civil responsibility for the great mass crimes, even to the point of intervening as experts or witnesses in the major trials of war criminals in Germany, Israel, and France; and finally, in the emergence of an original way of interpreting the past, which uses the law as a normative tool to define past events retroactively, such as the provisions against negationism or, in France, the passage of what have been called "memorial laws," official positions taken by lawmakers on more or less recent episodes (the Algerian war, colonialism, the genocide of the Armenians, the Western slave trade and slavery). That trend is one of the most striking political and social expressions of what I have described throughout this book: the weight of the tragic past in our societies; the will to make amends for that past in the name of a virtuous conception of memory, the witness, and the victim; the change in the social status of the historian; and the specificity of the history of the present time, which has been particularly affected by that intrusion of the law and the justice system in interpretations of the past.

An incidental question and a reproach sometimes heard: Has the history of the present time contributed to increasing the current divide between past and present? Has it encouraged the pervading presentism by focusing excessively on the present, misconstruing the dialectical connections existing between it and the past *at every moment* in history? Throughout this study I have attempted to show that, on the contrary, in both its epistemological premises and its actual achievements, the history of the present time has contributed to attenuating that divide as it took shape in the public space and in the public mind. On the one hand, that historiography forged its theoretical tools in the 1920s and 1930s, at the precise moment when that divide, which occurred with the Revolution and was formalized by the German and later the French positivists, was being attacked head-on by the Annales School and the defenders of a new contemporary history. The very definitions of that historiographical form, though they may have led to singular methods or positions, rest on the idea that the contemporary, just like any other period, belongs to history. It therefore enters the historian's field of observation on an equal footing, as in the other social sciences. The absence of a break is therefore a precondition. On the other hand, for

conjunctural reasons, in recent decades the history of the present time has been somewhat more sensitive than others to questions of memory, that is, to one of the forms that the presence of the past takes in our own time. And to study memory—its relation to other forms of representing or narrating the past, including scholarly history—is by definition to consider the strong bond that exists between the present and the past, and not only the recent past.

Both because of the particular conjuncture of the late twentieth century and the invariable traits of all contemporaneity, historians of the present time have had the task of accounting for two opposing movements at work before their eyes: first, the mutation of the present into the past; and second, the mutation of the past into the present. This is not a rhetorical game but an essential question that arises for all historians of the contemporary, though they do not have a monopoly on it.⁴

The mutation of the present into the past is simply the moment when a present event, process, or actor moves to a different temporal register. The transition can in itself be an abrupt and remarkable event, as in the performance of a memorable and remarkable deed or the death of a prominent figure. It will then be said that the deed or the figure will “go down in history,” an expression signifying here a form of immortality, an eternal presence in the collective narratives of the present and future. In that popular sense, “to go down in history” means to escape oblivion, to unite with an eternal present, to become inscribed in memory. This is a rather unusual phenomenon, however, and applies to only a few events or a few figures that have taken on an exemplary value. In most cases, the transition from the present to the past comes about more fluidly, often by almost imperceptible shifts. Except in the case of violent transitions—a war or a revolution—we move from one era to another without immediately taking stock of it, without having realized that one generation has gradually passed away and another has replaced it. That passing, in fact, is in good part a representation of time more than an objective element. To go down in history can thus signify a form of relative or definitive forgetting, a way of leaving the world behind, as in the American expression “I’m history.” For historians, that passing from the present to the past, far from being banal, takes on crucial importance. Not only do they experience it like anyone else; it is also part of their mission to identify it, analyze it, indicate the stakes involved. That, in fact, is what is specific to a history that purports to be of its own time and must also take into account the

time passing before one's eyes. And if by chance some historians are tempted to turn away their eyes, there are people nearby to call them back to order.

"We, the last survivors of the Holocaust, are passing away one after another. Soon History will begin to speak, at best, in the impersonal voice of researchers and novelists. At worst, in that of negationists, falsifiers, and demagogues. The International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims is a vital link in the transmission of our tragic legacy. If we fail to give it, collectively and judiciously, its rightful place in memory and education, as the core of the fundamental values of every belief system, spiritual or secular, the forces of darkness could again come back to haunt us."²⁵ These words were recently spoken by Samuel Pizar, a survivor of Auschwitz who, notably, testified at the Klaus Barbie trial in 1987. The remarkable thing about this position is that it places in opposition the experience of the witness and commemoration on the one hand (understood here as an emotional communion around remembrance of the event), and any form of representation of the past, historical or fictional, on the other. It almost suggests that these are scarcely different from negationism. In that view of things, the handover from the actor to the researcher is experienced as a loss, almost an injustice. Although a radical view, it expresses a feeling very widespread among former deportees, former resisters, and all those who have survived extreme experiences. Yet the idea that the passing away of the last survivors changes the perception of an event and gives historians complete latitude to exercise a monopoly to which they so ardently aspire did not arise at the moment when survivors were becoming increasingly rare because of their age. It dates back a long time. I was personally called out on that point in the late 1970s, practically from my first writings on the period—an experience that all historians working on sensitive events have undoubtedly had. The idea is therefore not an expression of a conjunctural phenomenon linked to a biological condition. Rather, it is a perception of time linked both to the extreme experience—deportation, torture—and hence to the lived past, and to the way our societies view the relation between the past and the present. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the shift from the present to the past has taken on a particularly problematic dimension, forcing historians to face dilemmas of unprecedented intensity. Once again, writing that history was both a pressing necessity and an absolute impossibility. The necessity was assumed right after the war, by both survivors and professionals (they are not mutually exclusive), and even allowed a new history of the present time to thrive. By contrast, the impossibility was not this time the methodological objection of a lack of

distance and hence a relative impossibility, but rather a radical impossibility: to write the history of the Holocaust was in some sense to kill off the memory of it. That is Pissar's position, but also, for reasons that are likely less pure of narcissistic considerations, that of Claude Lanzmann.

These positions in no way prevented a thriving historiography of the Holocaust: it is no doubt one of the most diversified and sophisticated historiographies in the field of contemporary history. But these questions and fears played an essential role in how that history was written and therefore in how any history of the present time coping with the tragic has been conceived. They are emblematic of the difficulty of imposing historical distance while the actors are still living and a fortiori surviving. Such a difficulty shows the extent to which the passing from the present to the past, from memory to history, from the truth of a lived experience to that of an elaborated knowledge, can be deeply felt as a loss to be mourned, almost an anticipation of death. Yet the very idea of such a clear-cut transition between present and past is an illusion. Many former deportees have lived long enough to see a number of Holocaust historians meet an early death; the succession of generations, being valid only in general, unfortunately does not always apply to individual situations. Likewise, many historians are far more affected by historical events for personal reasons than are some former survivors or actors, who have decided for reasons of their own to move on. It is therefore sometimes a rather pointless exercise to establish an opposition between "historians" and "witnesses." By contrast, the public and repeated expression of that opposition illustrates the difficulty of conceiving of that shift, as if it were necessary to stop time, to prevent the alterity of forgetting, to try to keep alive for as long as possible a present that is itself only the memory of a past now seventy years old.

In certain cases, that transition from the present to the past can also confirm the failure to turn a necessary truth into action, the tendency to leave it for the near future, hoping that the historian will be able to fulfill a mission that the contemporary has been unable to perform. Recently, the leftist Italian senator Luciano Violante, former president of the Anti-Mafia Commission and of the Chamber of Deputies, commented bitterly on the definitive dismissal of charges, on April 14, 2012, against all those indicted in the bombing in Brescia on May 28, 1974. That bombing, attributed to the Far Right, had killed eight and wounded about a hundred. Violante averred that it was now the historians' turn to speak out. Free of the necessity to present clear and case-specific evidence, they would be able in a more or less imminent future to read the documents differently and to say what the Italian jus-

tice system could not. Historians thus find themselves summoned in advance to take up the cause and speak a truth that the justice system was unable to formulate (despite several decades of proceedings) in the most perfect tradition of the “upstanding and terrible tribunal” of which d’Alembert speaks.⁶

Behind its apparent banality, the shift from the present to the past in reality constitutes one of the thorniest problems in the history of the present time in recent decades. It has given rise to many controversies, such as the one in the 1980s between the German historian Martin Broszat and the Israeli historian Saul Friedländer. Broszat, director of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, belonged to the Hitler Youth generation and was a leading proponent of the so-called functionalist interpretation of Nazism. Friedländer, a Holocaust survivor, had become one of the world’s leading experts on the subject. Let me simply recall, without reopening a case over which much ink has been spilled, that the controversy started when Broszat published an article entitled “A Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism,” asking that Nazism be treated like one historical object among others. He argued for a nonmoralistic and especially less rigid detachment, and proposed paradigms other than the ideological approach.⁷ Neutral in appearance, the term “historicization” concealed a number of ambiguities, as his opponent pointed out. Underscoring the risks of such an approach, Friedländer wondered about the notion of distance in the treatment of such a subject and consequently about the very limits of a history of the present time:

In my view, to put it briefly, this past is still much too present for present-day historians, be they German or Jewish in particular, be they contemporaries of the Nazi era or members of the second and perhaps third generation, to enable an easy awareness of presuppositions and of a priori positions.

One may assume that, more often than not, the historian approaching the Nazi era has not made it entirely clear to himself on what specific basis, from what specific motives, within which specific ideological context, he wishes to deal with it. What, therefore, is necessary for any kind of historical analysis is a fundamental self-reflective process, one whereby the historian remains aware that—whatever his feeling of objectivity may be—he is still the one who selects the approach, determines the method, and organizes the material according to some kind of agenda. What is true for any historical writing is decisive for the study of such an era. Writing about Nazism is not like writing about sixteenth-century France. The possibly mistaken assumption in the idea of historicization as analyzed here may well be that forty years after the end of the Third Reich, Nazism can be dealt with more or less in the same way as sixteenth-century France.⁸

What was remarkable about this controversy is that it was almost impossible to decide entirely in favor of one or the other protagonist. Broszat's position and his school of thought proved to be of great value, since it not only "unblocked" the history of Nazism but gave food for thought on how to treat the history of all criminal systems of still recent memory. In France, for example, it has been used for a history of the Occupation within a perspective less determined by political and ideological explanations.⁹ Friedländer's position has made it possible to perceive the risks that, in spite of everything, lay in "passing" too quickly from the present to the past, in letting objects cool off, in misconstruing the moral and ethical issues at stake in the construction of a historical problematic. Against the possibility of scientific excesses to which historians can easily succumb, he recalled that a controlled, self-reflexive subjectivity, a consideration of oneself and one's profession, was the only guarantee that historical writing would be able to reconcile critical thinking and responsibility. Both historians in their way showed the decisive role of scholarly discourses and writings in the transition from the present to the past. In this process, historians are not passive witnesses but rather prominent actors—hence the fears they rouse and the attacks of which they can sometimes be the object. It could be added that historians are far from alone in this: survivors, artists, writers, all readers passionate about history, and all spectators at a commemoration also participate in that "historicization," whose effects are feared and denounced in advance. Historicization, sometimes identified with "memorialization," is in itself a social phenomenon of a general nature, and every collectivity has its own way of inscribing the present time into a long-lasting narrative.

Finally, there is the question of that "still much too present" past. Did it remain equally weighty from 1945 to 1987? I have explained in other works that, on the contrary, the memory of that period went through different phases of presence and absence. At the time this controversy was taking place, the memory of the Holocaust had reached a new threshold, particularly with the release of the film *Shoah* and the fortieth anniversary of the fall of the Third Reich, as well as the convening of the Barbie trial in France in 1987. That anamnesis literally constitutes a *mutation of the past into the present*, a process of remembrance that is the exact opposite of historicization. Was the Nazi era at that moment a period that still belonged to the present, or was it, on the contrary, a past that had returned to the present? The same question could be asked about other historical examples. The important thing here is the existence of a collision between two opposite tendencies, with historians caught in the middle. The task at hand is no longer to

capture a linear movement, to understand a history in the process of being made, but to fight on two fronts: that of history and that of memory, that of a present we do not want to see pass away and that of a past that returns to haunt the present. The distinction between the two is sometimes elusive. The current history of the present time originated and developed within that uncertainty and instability. Observing my present time today, I see no reason why it should not persist on that path.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. [For the sake of consistency, I have translated the term *témoignage* as “testimony” throughout this book. As in English, *témoignage* refers both to testimony given in the courtroom and to the act of bearing witness (in a religious context, for example). It also has a broader sense, however: the French term can be used to describe a statement made by an interview subject or an eyewitness account of any kind.—*Trans.*]

2. Antoine Prost, “L’histoire du temps présent: Une histoire comme les autres,” in “Bilan et perspectives de l’histoire immédiate,” special double issue, *Cahiers d’histoire immédiate* 30–31 (Fall 2006–Spring 2007): 21–28. Prost’s position is the exact opposite of that of Reinhart Koselleck, who wrote that “*Zeitgeschichte* is a nice word but a difficult concept.” Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitgeschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 246.

3. François Hartog and Gérard Lenclud, “Régimes d’historicité,” in *L’état des lieux en sciences sociales*, ed. Alexandre Dutu and Norbert Dodille (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993), 18–38, at 26.

4. François Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expérience du temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003), 126.

5. Hermann Heimpel, *Der Mensch in seiner Gegenwart: Acht historische Essays* (1954; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 12. A lecture by Ulrich Raulff initially drew my attention to this text: see his *De l’origine à l’actualité: Marc Bloch, l’histoire et le problème du temps présent* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1997), 19. See also Hartmut Boockmann, *Der Historiker Hermann Heimpel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

6. Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

7. Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” in Arendt, *Essays on Understanding, 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), 319.

8. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé: Quand l’impossible est certain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 9.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Prost, “L’histoire du temps présent,” 21.

2. Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l’histoire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996).

3. Elements for reflection can be found, however, in Gérard Noiriel, *Qu'est-ce que l'histoire contemporaine?* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), which considers the subject in reference to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*. With Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia, I explored that subject during a multidisciplinary seminar in 2002 at the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent: "L'histoire du temps présent à l'épreuve du passé," along with historians of antiquity (François Hartog), medievalists (Michel Sot, Patrick Boucheron), modernists (Jacques Guilhaumou, Nicolas Leroux, Jean-Louis Fournel, Jean-Claude Zancarini), and contemporaneists (Robert Frank, Olivier Dumoulin).

4. That criticism is explicit in Prost, "L'histoire du temps présent," and even more so in Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999), especially in the introduction, titled "Pour une autre histoire du temps présent," a polemical argument that provides a critical view of the history of the present time as it was then developing, and to which I responded at the time: see my "L'histoire du temps présent, vingt ans après," in "L'histoire du temps présent, hier et aujourd'hui," special issue, *Bulletin de l'Institut d'histoire du temps présent* 75 (July 2000): 23–40. Let me note, with a touch of polemics in turn, that neither Prost nor Noiriel ever developed an analysis of the *longue durée* in their own works, which for the most part deal with the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, proof that the objection is mere posturing.

5. Hervé Lemoine, *La Maison de l'histoire: Pour la création d'un Centre de recherche et de collections permanentes dédié à l'histoire civile et militaire de la France*, status report (Paris: Ministère de la Culture, 2008), 9.

6. Jean Leduc, *Les historiens et le temps: Conceptions, problématiques, écritures* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 92ff.

7. Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980), 9–10.

8. Quoted in Leduc, *Les historiens et le temps*, 101.

9. Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

10. Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 16, emphasis in the original.

11. Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel, eds., *La Nouvelle Histoire* (Paris: Retz, 1978).

12. Jean Lacouture, "L'histoire immédiate," *ibid.*, 270–93, at 274.

13. Pierre Nora, "Présent," *ibid.*, 467–72, at 467.

14. Benedetto Croce, *Theory and History of Historiography*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: G. C. Harrap, 1921), 12 [translation slightly modified]. The essays composing this book were originally published in Italian in 1912–13.

15. Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.9.33, trans. E. W. Sutton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), 225.

16. Croce, *Theory and History of Historiography*, 19, emphasis in the original [translation modified].

17. *Ibid.*, 20 and 21 [translation modified].

18. Robin George Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 7. The first essay is devoted to Croce's book and was published in 1921.

19. Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 14–15, emphasis in the original.

20. *Ibid.*

21. François Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire: Ce que voient les historiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 68. Cf., by the same author, *Le miroir d'Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) and Herodotus's *Histories*.

22. Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire*, 77.

23. Catherine Darbo-Peschanski, "La politique de l'histoire: Thucydide historien du présent," *Annales ESC* 3 (May–June 1898): 653–75.

24. Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 1.1, ed. and trans. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3–4.
25. Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire*, 96.
26. *Ibid.*, 100.
27. Darbo-Peschanski, “La politique de l'histoire,” 658.
28. Thucydides, *War of the Peloponnesians*, 1.22, pp. 15–16.
29. Polybius, *Histories*, 12.28.2–5, trans. W. R. Paton (London: William Heinemann, 1922–1927), 4:403. See also Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire*, 120–21.
30. Denis Roussel, note to Polybe (Polybius), *Histoire*, ed. François Hartog, trans. Denis Roussel (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 837 n. 122.
31. Horace, *Odes*, 2.1, trans. James Michie, with the Latin text and an introduction by Rex Warner (New York: Orion, 1963), 101.
32. Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique*, 20–21.
33. Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), quoted in Leduc, *Les historiens et le temps*, 139.
34. Marc Bloch, *La société féodale* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1939), quoted in Jacques Le Goff, “Pour un autre Moyen Âge,” in his *Un autre Moyen Âge* (1977; Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 54.
35. Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, 289.
36. Alain Guerreau, review of Bernard Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*, *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 139, no. 2 (1981): 282–83.
37. Hanz-Werner Goetz, “Historical Consciousness and Institutional Concern in European Medieval Historiography (11th and 12th Centuries),” paper delivered at the Nineteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences, Oslo, August 6–13, 2000, theme 3: “The Uses and Abuses of History and Responsibility of the Historian, Past and Present,” <http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/m3a/m3a-goetz.pdf>, accessed in March 2011.
38. *Ibid.*, 7.
39. Guenée, *Histoire et culture historique*, 84–85. The abbé Guibert de Nogent's *Dei gesta per Francos*, written in about 1114, can be cited as an example: “Although I was unable to go to Jerusalem myself or to know most of the individuals and all the places in question here, the general utility of my work will not be diminished thereby, if it is certain that I learned the things I have written and that I will yet write only from men whose testimony is in perfect conformity with the truth.” Guibert de Nogent, *Histoire des Croisades*, book 4, in *Collections des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France depuis la fondation de la monarchie française jusqu'au 13e siècle*, ed. François Guizot (Paris: J.-L.-J. Brière Libraire, 1825), 112.
40. Remark reported by Nicolas Offenstadt in the obituary devoted to Guenée, *Le Monde*, October 2, 2010.
41. [The term *école méthodique* refers to a group of historians working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Charles Seignobos, Charles-Victor Langlois, and others) who emphasized the importance of good scientific methods in the writing of history—*Trans.*]
42. Krzysztof Pomian, “L'histoire de la science et l'histoire de l'histoire,” *Annales ESC* 5 (1975), repr. in his *Sur l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 141.
43. *Ibid.*, 148.
44. Frédérique Aït-Touati, *Contes de la Lune: Essai sur la fiction et les sciences modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 18. See the book review by Nicolas Correard, “L'hypothèse scientifique comme fabrique de la fiction: Poétiques du discours astronomique au XVIIe siècle,” in “Écritures du savoir,” special issue, *Acta Fabula*, <http://www.fabula.org/revue/document6947.php>.
45. Aït-Touati, *Contes de la Lune*, 150.
46. *Ibid.*, 154.
47. Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Le règne de l'histoire: Discours historiques et révolutions XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).

48. Eberhard Jäckel, *Umgang mit der Vergangenheit: Beiträge zur Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1989), 133–50, chapter titled “Begriff und Funktion der Zeitgeschichte,” quoted in Peter Schöttler, “La ‘Zeitgeschichte’ allemande, entre révisionnisme, conformisme et autocritique,” paper delivered at the international colloquium “Temps présent et contemporanéité,” Paris, IHTP, March 24–26, 2011. For France, see *Le Journal ou Histoire du temps présent; contenant toutes les Déclarations du Roy vérifiées en Parlement, & tous les Arrêts rendus, les Chambres assemblées, pour les affaires publiques. Depuis le mois d’avril 1651, jusques en juin 1652* (Paris: Gervais Alliot & Emmanuel Langlois, 1652).

49. Blaise de Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), § 437 (628), pp. 165–66. Depending on the edition, this passage occupies different places in the general organization of the paragraphs. It has received little comment by present-day historians and is almost completely overlooked by contemporaneists. The interpretation I give here is obviously very subjective.

50. Louis Marin, *Pascal et Port-Royal*, ed. Alain Cantillon et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 174–75, emphasis in the original.

51. On this point, see Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens et la monarchie*, 4 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

52. Pascal, *Pensées*, § 474 (633), p. 180.

53. Pierre Force, *L’herméneutique chez Pascal* (Paris: Vrin, 1989), 176.

54. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

55. Pomian, *Sur l’histoire*, 155.

56. Christian Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature: Histoire d’un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 151. The passage appears at the beginning of chap. 3, “Historiens du présent et pouvoir politique.”

57. *Ibid.*, 156.

58. *Ibid.*, 170.

59. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura E. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 4.

60. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 219.

61. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History (Grundriss der Historik)*, trans. E. Benjamin Andrews (Boston: Ginn, 1893), §73, p. 44.

62. Reinhart Koselleck, “Geschichte,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. O. Brunner, W. Conze, and R. Koselleck, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1975), 647–717 [my translation from the French version: Reinhart Koselleck, “Le concept d’histoire,” in *L’expérience de l’histoire*, edited with a preface by Michael Werner, trans. Alexandre Excudier with Diane Meur, Marie-Claire Hoock, and Jochen Hoock (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales / Gallimard / Seuil, 1997), 15–99—*Trans.*].

63. *Ibid.*, 28.

64. *Ibid.*, 41.

65. *Ibid.*, 38–39.

66. This passage is taken from an article that appeared in the *Mercure de France*, July 7, 1807, repr. in François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’Outre-tombe* (Liège, 1849), 2:102.

67. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, *La brisure et l’attente, 1930–1955* (Paris: Seuil / La Découverte, 1995), 113–14.

68. See François Hartog, Pauline Schmitt, and Alain Schnapp, eds., *Pierre Vidal-Naquet: Un historien dans la cité* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998).

69. Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, et al., *Le livre noir du communisme: Crimes, terreur, répression* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997). Quoted from the “Bouquins” edition (1998), 36.

70. *Ibid.*, 9–18.

71. Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire: Texte intégral d'après l'édition de 1765*, ed. Catherine Volpilhac-Augier (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996).

72. Jean le Rond d'Alembert, "Réflexions sur l'histoire, lues à l'Académie Française dans la séance publique du 19 janvier 1761," in *Oeuvres complètes de d'Alembert*, 4 vols. (Paris: A. Belin, 1821–1822), 2, pt. 1: 1–10. Text reproduced in *Réflexions sur l'histoire, et sur les différentes manières de l'écrire*, <http://www.eliohs.unifi.it/testi/700/alemb/reflect.html>, online edition by Guido Abbattista for *Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography)*, January 1997, emphasis in the original.

73. See Patrick Garcia and Jean Leduc, *L'enseignement de l'histoire en France de l'Ancien régime à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2003), 38–44. See also Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985; 1st ed. Frankfurt am Main, 1979). My thanks to Sylvie Aprile and Emmanuel Fureix for their advice on this period.

74. "Instruction relative à l'enseignement de l'histoire contemporaine dans la classe de Philosophie des Lycées impériaux," September 24, 1863, quoted in Garcia and Leduc, *L'enseignement de l'histoire en France*, 79.

75. Koselleck, *L'expérience de l'histoire*, 83.

76. Quoted *ibid.* In a discussion with two of his colleagues, Johann Georg Rist and Friedrich Christoph Perthes, Gustav Poel wondered about the possibility of writing, in about 1820, a "history of the European states."

77. Koselleck, *L'expérience de l'histoire*, 83 and 84. The aphorism may bring to mind Guenée's position cited above.

78. Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia, *Les courants historiques en France XIXe–XXe siècle*, rev. and augmented ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 12 [1st ed. Armand Colin, 1999].

79. Emmanuel de Toulangeon, *Histoire de France depuis la Révolution de 1789 écrite d'après les mémoires et manuscrits contemporains, recueillis dans les dépôts civils et militaires* (Paris: Didot, 1803), quoted in Sophie-Anne Leterrier, *Le XIXe siècle historien: Anthologie raisonnée* (Paris: Belin 1997), 20.

80. Numa-Denys Fustel de Coulanges, "Leçon inaugurale en Sorbonne" (1875), repr. in François Hartog, *Le XIXe siècle et l'histoire: Le cas Fustel de Coulanges* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 341–42; quoted in Delacroix, Dosse, and Garcia, eds., *Les courants historiques en France*, 76.

81. Madeleine Réberieux, preface to Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques* (Paris: Kimé, 1992), 54. Seignobos's text was originally published in 1897.

82. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die Aufgabe der Geschichtschreiber" (1821), translated as "On the Historian's Task," *History and Theory* 6, no. 1 (1967): 57. The line was borrowed by Leopold Ranke in 1824. It is the first sentence of the lecture that Humboldt, founder in 1810 of the University of Berlin (which now bears his name), delivered to the Prussian Academy.

83. Nora, "Présent," 467, emphasis in the original. Nora adopts the view developed in Charles-Olivier Carbonell, *Histoire et historiens: Une mutation idéologique des historiens français, 1865–1885* (Toulouse: Privat, 1976).

84. Cf. Noiriel, *Qu'est-ce que l'histoire contemporaine?*, 52.

85. *Ibid.*, 13. Noiriel takes up Louis Halphen's analysis in *L'histoire en France depuis cent ans* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1914), which shows that the new generation of historians took an interest first and foremost in the study of antiquity and the Middle Ages.

86. Llewellyn Woodward, "The Study of Contemporary History," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 1 (January 1966): 1–2. I shall return in the next chapter to the creation of this journal.

87. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3.

88. *Ibid.*, 37–38 and 34, respectively.

89. *Ibid.*, 75–78.

90. Halphen, *L'histoire en France depuis cent ans*, quoted in Noiriel, *Qu'est-ce que l'histoire contemporaine?*, 13.

91. Charles Seignobos, *La méthode historique appliquée aux sciences sociales* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1909), 2–3.
92. Droysen, *Outline of the Principles of History*, §5, p. 11.
93. Numa-Denys Fustel de Coulanges, *Questions d'histoire* (Paris: Hachette, 1893), 408. See also Leterrier, *Le XIXe siècle historien*, 282.
94. Fustel de Coulanges, *Questions d'histoire*, xv. See also Leterrier, *Le XIXe siècle historien*, 284.
95. Stéphane Mallarmé, “L’action restreinte” (“Quant au livre”), originally published in *Divagations* (1897), repr. in *Igitur; Divagations; Un coup de dés*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 265.
96. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press), 60. Cf. Werner Paravicini, “Nietzsche et les sciences historiques: Autour de la Deuxième considération intempestive,” *Francia* (Institut Historique allemand de Paris) 29, no. 3 (2002): 151–91.
97. On this subject, see the aforementioned studies by Gérard Noiriel, Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia; and Pascal Ory, *Une nation pour mémoire, 1889, 1939, 1989, trois jubilés révolutionnaires* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1992).
98. See Noiriel, *Qu’est-ce que l’histoire contemporaine?*, 14, which takes up the analyses of Carbonell in *Histoire et historiens*.
99. Victor Duruy, “Lettre au général Coffinières de Nordeck [director of the École Polytechnique]” (1862), repr. in his *Notes et souvenirs* (Paris: Hachette, 1901), 122–25, quoted in Leterrier, *Le XIXe siècle historien*, 239.
100. In 2009 Éditions des Équateurs began to reissue Lavissee’s *Histoire de France depuis les origines jusqu’à la Révolution*, with a preface by Pierre Nora.

CHAPTER TWO

1. See Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 112ff.; and Olivier Dumoulin, “Histoire et historiens de Droite,” in *Histoire des Droites en France*, ed. Jean-François Sirinelli, vol. 2, *Cultures* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 327–98.
2. Émile Durkheim, “L’Allemagne au-dessus de tout”: *La mentalité allemande et la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1915), 42; Henri Bergson, “Discours prononcé devant l’Académie des sciences morales et politiques,” speech delivered on August 8, 1914; Ernest Babelon, *Le Rhin dans l’histoire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1917–18); Pierre Vidal de La Blache, “La frontière de la Sarre d’après les traités de 1814 et 1815,” *Annales de Géographie* 28, no. 154 (1919): 249–67. For a general analysis, see Nicolas Beaupré, *Les Grandes Guerres, 1914–1945* (Paris: Belin, 2012).
3. Anne Rasmussen, “La ‘science française’ dans la guerre des manifestes, 1914–1918,” *Mots: Les langages du politique* 76 (2004): 9–23.
4. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 117.
5. J. Franklin Jameson, quoted *ibid.*
6. Cf. Michaël Bourlet, “Les officiers de la section historique de l’état-major de la Grande guerre,” *Revue historique des armées* 231, no. 2 (2003): 4–12. See also Agnès Chablat-Beylot and Amable Sablon du Corail, “Les archives de la Grande guerre: Mise en ligne d’un guide,” *Revue historique des armées* 254 (2009): 132–34.
7. Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande guerre: Essai d’historiographie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 16–17.
8. Quoted in Jules Isaac, *Jules Isaac, un historien dans la Grande guerre: Lettres et carnets, 1914–1947*, ed. with notes by Marc Michel, introd. by André Kaspí (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 302. The passage is taken from an unpublished proposal for a second volume of Isaacs’s memoirs (*Expériences de ma vie*), the first volume of which was published in 1959.

responsabilité, 93–110; Jean-Pierre Azéma, “La Seconde Guerre mondiale, matrice du temps présent,” in Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent, *Écrire l’histoire du temps présent*, 147–52.

46. Gonzague de Reynolds, “Où va l’Europe?” *La revue universelle*, August 15, 1938. My thanks to Fabien Théofilakis for bringing this text to my attention.

47. Cf. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Christian Ingrao, and Henry Rousso, eds., *La violence de guerre, 1914–1945: Approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux* (Brussels: Complexe; Paris: IHTP, 2002).

48. On that aspect, see the pioneering studies by Jean-Jacques Becker, and those published by the staff at the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, which opened in 1992, particularly Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14–18: *Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

49. See especially Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

50. Cf. Terkel, “*The Good War*.”

51. Thomas L. Friedman, “The End of the West?” *New York Times*, November 2, 2003.

52. See the Web site of the ZZf, <http://www.zzf-pdm.de>, accessed April 2, 2012. In the pages written in French, the ZZf is called the “Centre de Recherche sur l’Histoire du Temps Présent”; [in those written in English, it is the “Centre for Contemporary History”].

CONCLUSION

1. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, 26.

2. For the beginning of an explanation, at least a circumstantial one, see Dosse, *Pierre Nora*.

3. Michel Foucault, “La fonction politique de l’intellectuel,” *Politique-Hebdo*, November 29, 1976, repr. in *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, vol. 3, 1976–1979, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald with the collaboration of Jacques Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 109–14. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity, and Intellectuals* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

4. Here I have adopted a hypothesis formulated a few years ago within the context of a reflection on patrimony: introduction to *Le regard de l’histoire: L’émergence et l’évolution de la notion de patrimoine au cours du XXe siècle en France*, ed. Henry Rousso (Paris: Fayard-Monum, Éditions du Patrimoine, 2003), proceedings of the “Entretiens du Patrimoine” conference, 2001. This text has been reprinted in Vincent Auzas and Bogumil Jewsiewicki, eds., *Traumatisme collectif pour patrimoine: Regards sur un mouvement transnational* (Quebec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 2008), 13–21.

5. Samuel Pizar, “Auschwitz parle encore aux juifs et aux musulmans,” *Le Monde*, January 28, 2012. This article was published on the occasion of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust.

6. Cf. *Le Monde*, April 18, 2012. My thanks to Anne Pérotin-Dumon for drawing my attention to this article within the context of a seminar I conducted at the IHTP in 2011–12 on the relationship between history and justice.

7. Cf. Martin Broszat, “A Plea for the Historicization of National Socialism” (77–87), and Saul Friedländer’s reply, “Some Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism” (88–101), in *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon, 1990). See also the published correspondence between the two historians: Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, “A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism,” *New German Critique* 44 (Spring–Summer 1988): 85–126.

8. Friedländer, “Some Reflections on the Historicization of National Socialism,” 52.

9. François Bédarida and Jean-Pierre Azéma, eds., with Denis Peschanski and Henry Rousso, *Le régime de Vichy et les Français* (Paris: Fayard/IHTP, 1992).