

VOX POPULI, VOX DEI

LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE OF OCCUPIED FRANCE

Robert Gildea
(Oxford)

I am not a historian of early national America so it was an great privilege to have been invited to the Milan conference of 1996. I was asked to make some comments on the responsibility of the historian, which I hastily recomposed in the light of the ongoing debate one afternoon. As I was at that point about to go to France for a year to work on the German Occupation, I have thought best to represent my thoughts in the light of the thoughts that I had that year and that subsequently went into the writing of *Marianne in Chains* (Macmillan, 2002).

When I kept newts as a boy I learned that snails placed in the tank fulfilled the function of processing and cleaning the water. Years later, as a graduate student, challenged as to why I was devoting myself to historical research, I remember using the analogy of the snail to justify my endeavours: the historian was like a snail in the water-tank of the past, processing it and delivering a history that was purified of myth, legend and lie. In my own way I had come to the classic defence of history as a search for what really happened. My doctoral thesis, on education in nineteenth-century Brittany, was born of a desire to test the famous French myth that the republican school had waged a peaceful war in the nineteenth century against obscurantism and reaction and turned peasants into French citizens. To discover the truth I worked for a year in the archives of one Breton department and for six months in Paris. The doctorate completed I went back to study two more departments in different parts of the country in order to secure my conclusions, namely that the French provinces were not blank sheets of paper but deeply etched by the Reformation, Revolution and nation-building and that education projects from the centre were necessarily shaped and modified locally by pre-existing patterns. In support of my argument I compiled dozens of distribution maps of the location of lay and congregational schools, of the communes of origin of lay schoolteachers and priests, of Protestant and Catholic populations and of linguistic frontiers. I plotted a historical geography of France which articulated a 'weight of the past' that no reforms were ever able substantially to shift.

Subsequently I came to realize that this plotting of historical mindsets was far too deterministic. Even Marx argued that 'men make their own history, though not in circumstances of their own choosing'. For my next project on France I decided to explore how since the Revolution the French had not just been stamped by but actively constructed their own past, both as a nation and in various political, religious or regional sub-groups. I came to understand that as important as what happened was what was said to have happened and how it was represented. For narratives of the past, expressed in the act of commemoration, served a real function: to define groups, to impart solidarity to them and above all to legitimate them. I started to see French history in terms of competing collective memories or myths, emerging in various historical contexts and in turn shaping political events. 'There can be no objective, universally agreed history', I had the temerity to argue, 'and even if it were possible it would be of scant interest. What matters is myth, not in the sense of fiction, but in the sense of a construction of the past elaborated by a political community for its own ends'.

What was then forcefully brought home to me was that in the arena of competing myths some fared better than others. Some emerged victorious and sought to impose themselves as objective and universal truths, while others were defeated, marginalized or silenced. By and large in the creation of the French nation-state the myths of Revolution, unity and the secular state triumphed while those of counter-revolution, regionalism and Catholicism lost out. This was a long way round to discovering that at the heart of historical writing is power, that - to quote the old cliché - that history is written by the victors.

Embarking in 1996 on a subsequent project - France under the German occupation - I learned that it would probably be impossible ever to expose the truth of what really happened, so defended was it by the interpretations of rival camps who exercised a fierce censorship and were not prepared to give an inch. The dominant interpretation was that of the Resistance, which is still imposed by highly influential associations of resisters, relayed by monuments, museums, reviews and documentaries. This holds that under the Occupation the French divided into collaborators, who went along with the Germans and Vichy France, and resisters who said no from the first hour, and not only saved the honour of France but contributed significantly in a militarily sense to its liberation. General de Gaulle, who helped to develop this myth, told the French people that with the exception of a 'handful of wretched people' they had all behaved well under the Occupation and had nothing of which to be ashamed. In the last twenty years or so the evil nature of the Vichy regime has been underscored by

revelations of its role in the Holocaust: passing its own anti-Semitic legislation and lending its police to assist the Germans with the deportation of Jews. Generally a distinction is drawn between the regime, which was responsible for all this, and ordinary French people, who were innocent bystanders. They knew nothing about what was going on or, if they did, were more than happy to hide Jews on the run. If most of them did not do more for the Resistance it was because they were under the Nazi jackboot, suffering cold, hunger and fear.

There are thus three powerful images of the French which shape interpretations: the 'good French' who resisted, the 'bad French' who collaborated, and the 'poor French' who were victims. Historians are trained to challenge dominant interpretations and received ideas, but in the case of Occupied France he or she does so at their peril. For these interpretations are not simply academic: they express identity, solidarity and legitimacy and to question them is to invite the wrath less perhaps of historians than of interest groups who have invested their particular narrative with sectional and even national honour.

In the course of research I had recourse to three kinds of authority: archival records, local historians and survivors of the period who were ready to talk.

Archival records are what most historians feel most comfortable with: they are dated, signed and have a flavour of authenticity about them. Since I had chosen to do a case study of one part of France was indebted to local historians, some academic, some amateur, for familiarising me with the issues and sources they felt to be central. And of course, since the events I was studying were still only half a century away, I spent a good deal of time talking to old people about their experiences.

Each of these sources engaged my responsibility as a historian, but not each in the same way. The official sources are not fully accessible. The normal thirty-year rule governing the release of documents is raised to sixty or even a hundred years where they are deemed to contain 'information likely to harm private individuals or concern state security or national defence'. Special dispensation to inspect such documents may be granted on a file by file basis, if a 'scientific' case may be made, and half the files I consulted were governed by this system of restricted access. Final authorisation is granted by the Ministry of Culture, on the advice of the administrative, judicial or police service which deposited its files in the public archive and continues to exercise a *droit de regard* over them. When permission is finally granted it is done under strict condition that national defence, state security and the private interest of individuals will not be impugned.

Sometimes, inevitably, permission is not granted. In one department the prefect took three months to allow me access to any file requiring special permission. Why he was so reluctant can only be guessed at. The war had been difficult in that area. In 1941 the local German commander was gunned down by a communist hit squad that got off the train from Paris and then vanished. The German authorities, under pressure from Hitler himself, demanded the execution of 50 hostages at once and 50 more in 48 hours if the culprits were not found. While the Germans wanted to execute a cross-section of the community the Vichy authorities pointed them in the direction of communists that they had themselves interned. The issue of national defence and state security turns out in cases such as this to be rather the protection of the administration's reputation. There is ample internal evidence that the files have been weeded anyway, not least by the teacher of German in the local lycée who acted throughout the Occupation as the prefecture's official interpreter, and had a particular respect for the local commander who was shot. Having such obstacles put in one's way for reasons that purport to be objective and turn out not to be may encourage the historian to be critical of the conduct of the administration rather than sympathetic. The proviso about the interests of private individuals also poses problems. Should the names and deeds of those put on trial at the Liberation remain secret for ever more? Is the historian permitted to debate the crimes of Pétain and Laval but not of lesser fry? What of the woman who by dint of denunciation held the authorities of the small town of Chinon in thrall for a couple of years? Should her name ever be revealed? Here I confess that I went to Chinon and interviewed members of the Society of Friends of Old Chinon, discovered that she was long dead, childless and almost forgotten and decided to publish her name. Perhaps I did the wrong thing. Perhaps however the right of individuals to take their misdeeds to the grave has to be balanced by the right of the public to be given a fair and full account, sixty years on, of the German Occupation.

The question of responsibility towards local historians is complex in a different way. In my research I came across two kinds of historians: academics and schoolteachers who had the usual independent reflexes of the profession, and amateur historians who were personally implicated in the controversies of the local community. Though considering themselves to be objective, they may be considered suspiciously revisionist by the local resistance lobby, which may try to exercise a kind of censorship over their publications or cast suspicion on the accuracy of their findings. Among the documents showed to me by one local historian was a letter written to him in 1982 by the widow of the local head of the German military administration. She recalled that her husband had been welcome in the château of one of the

leading notables of the city, and had even given lifts to his mother, because of the shortage of transport. The local historian enjoined me on no account to reveal the name of the family, because evidence of such 'cohabitation' would surely be interpreted as 'collaboration'. The revelation would be traced back to him and put him in severe difficulty, not to say in danger of legal proceedings. I have not published the name of the family, but I have drawn attention to the incident because it reveals the constraints of what might euphemistically be called 'political correctness' under which they labour. This is not an isolated example. A local historian in another part of France informed me that the campaign of the resistance lobby in the 1960s to portray their activities in 1944 as crucial both militarily and psychologically had provoked private outrage and reference to the 'sense of horror' that the rather brutal activities of some of the resistance fighters had provoked among locals. He spent some time trying to find the exact phrase but then told me not to write it down. Naturally I will not give chapter and verse but do not feel that I am betraying anyone by relating the incident, because it sheds such sharp light on the objectivity or otherwise of local histories of the Resistance.

The greatest sense of responsibility I feel is towards those private individuals I have interviewed. Before I began research on this book I had never attempted oral history, not least because I never got beyond 1914. The first few interviews I undertook were disasters: I asked people specific questions such as what they remembered of the mayor of their city fifty years before and of course they remembered nothing. It was not that their memories were going, but they had not been interested in such details. So I simply let them tell their own stories and found that they talked about what had marked them: the injury or death of a loved one, the Germans who were billeted on them, what they did to relieve the boredom and anxiety. Sometimes, of course, they patterned their account on the model of the Resistance. A printer said that when the Germans arrived and threw cigarettes to the crowd one fell near him; he stamped on it and then spat on it. A noble who was then a boy said that he fired on the Germans from the battlements of the family château where they were billeted - with his water pistol. What struck with most people I interviewed however was their courage, their inventiveness and their loyalty to those around them. I would go as far as to say that my reinterpretation of France under the Occupation came substantially from listening to the stories of ordinary people. They tend to go against the grain of the dominant interpretation of the Resistance and demonstrate how partial a view it is. After all in most parts of France resistance meant very little before the summer of 1944 and even then concerned only a small minority. Was everyone else collaborating or

cowering in fear? People had to find ways of getting along with Germans who had come to stay and at least to start with were relatively 'correct'.

Marinette Rameau, who had a succession of German officers billeted on the family home in Angers, still fondly remembers the handsome, cultivated captain who in civilian life was director of the Fine Art School of Trier. Her anger was saved for the uncouth thugs of the Milice who trashed her home towards the end of the war. This account completely contradicts the scenario of *Le Silence de la mer*, a novella published in 1942, in which the girl does not even raise her eyes to the German officer lodging with her and her uncle. It shows how what is clearly a parable, a message about how people ought to behave and needs to be confronted by some evidence of how they did behave. Times were hard but the *années noires* were not always as grim as they have been made out to be in the literature that develops the image of the 'poor French'. André Roussel worked in his father's grocer's shop but at the weekend played the accordion in a dance band. Dancing was banned, not by the Germans but by Vichy, which considered that after the defeat, with a million and a half POWs, the country was in mourning. But did young people simply stay at home and watch the best years of their lives just waste away? Of course not, says Roussel, explaining how they organised clandestine dances taking care that they were not busted by the gendarmerie. One of my colleagues was convinced that this was a form of resistance and I put this question squarely to Roussel. 'The only thing that interested me was going out with girls and playing the accordion', he insisted. 'Those were the good old days'.

Towards the end of the Occupation, of course, things got a lot worse. The resistance took pot shots at German soldiers, sabotaged trains, and formed maquis in the woods and mountains. The Germans gave no quarter to 'terrorists' and if they could not find them exacted vengeance on local communities accused of harbouring them. Ariel Sharon and George W. Bush would understand perfectly. For a long time the dominant version of these events was that of the Resistance. But what of the local communities that suffered these collective reprisals? Did their version differ from that of the Resistance? Most people know the story of *Oradour-sur-Glane*, but there were dozens of communities where massacres happened. I have visited three or four of them and everywhere the impression is the same. At first there is a reluctance to criticise the Resistance for precipitating the reprisals, for it was fighting the good fight, but as one digs deeper incomprehension and pain begin to be expressed. I am escorted to cemeteries and monuments which are more eloquent than any words. Putting the Resistance in context, which is what historians are now asked to do, means understanding that heroism and suffering went hand in hand. Colleagues have pointed out to me the dangers

of being seduced by such tales. Clearly, in order to elicit meaningful responses from interviewees, one has to appear sympathetic to their story. There is obviously a danger that one will be drawn in and become uncritical.

Historians have a responsibility to give an equal weight to all the voices they hear, but given the power-relationships that operate in the telling of tales they must surely take care to give space to voices that for so long have not been heard. Recently I undertook an interview in the Auvergne where the marquis had mobilized in June 1944 and been attacked by the Germans, who inflicted a number of atrocities on surrounding villages. I was taken to one of these villages by a former maquisard to interview two old women and an old man who had witnessed the events and lost family members. The maquisard repeatedly took the dominant role in the conversation, imposing his heroic version of events. The women said very little but were eloquent about the suffering inflicted. I felt that in writing up the interview I had an obligation to give their views at least equal weight to that of the maquisards. Not all historians, of course, have access to living witnesses. But the record of those whose viewpoint has been drowned out is generally there for those who care to seek it out. I do not need to explain to American historians how long the voices of the blacks and native Indians were suppressed and how important it is now to make amends. It is not a question of 'going native' or of jettisoning familiar written sources. What I have learned about the responsibility of the historian is a readiness to listen to those who have had least to say and a preparedness to revise our analysis in the light of what we hear.