

Laurent Joly, *La falsification de l'histoire. Éric Zemmour, l'extrême droite, Vichy et les Juifs* (Paris: Grasset, 2022), pp. 136.

by Valeria Galimi

Published in the weeks leading up to last May's French presidential election campaign, Laurent Joly's volume focuses on the most prominent figure in the cultural landscape of the French (extreme) right, Éric Zemmour. The son of Algerian Jews, Zemmour is a columnist for the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, a publicist and the star of a highly successful TV show. He was already known for his sexist views in his book *Le premier sexe* (2006) and for the volumes *Le suicide français*, published in 2014, and *Destins français*—A reinterpretation of the history of France—in 2018.

A paperback edition of the book *La falsification de l'histoire* was published in January 2023 with a new preface by the author that takes into account his election results as candidate, about seven percent below what was expected given Zemmour's media ubiquity in the campaign. Beyond the election results, what deserves attention here is the re-construction and revising of the public discourse on the past that the journalist of the daily *Le Figaro* has been carrying out for some time now, in order to promote his racist, Islamophobic and anti-immigration agenda, as well as the circulation and distribution of these buzzwords in French public opinion.

Laurent Joly, a specialist on Vichy's anti-Jewish policies and the French right,<sup>1</sup> analyzes Zemmour's choice to use distorted interpretations of the past, in particular regarding the memory of Vichy, the figure of Pétain, and State antisemitism. He convincingly argues, that “never, in a hundred and fifty years, in our Republic, on the eve of significant elections, has the far right seemed so strong, made so much noise. Rarely in a period of peace has the national political system appeared so fragile” (p. 9). It should also be noted that in 2022, five years after the elections that first pitted Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen against each other, the latter's victory seemed possible for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> One may recall, among others, the volume *L'Etat contre les Juifs* (Paris: Grasset 2018), and the recent *La rafle du Vel d'Hiv* (Paris: Grasset, 2022)

Joly investigates the transformations of the French far right, and its xenophobic and sovereigntist identity content to which Zemmour contributed. He takes a long-term look starting from the history of right-wing cultures between the late 19th and 20th centuries; if Gérard Noirel has already pointed out the similarities with another late 19th century polemicist, Édouard Drumont, it is in the wake of the culture of Action Française and the “integral nationalism” advocated by its founder Charles Maurras that Zemmour fits in. Appropriately, the author points out that “curiously enough, this filiation with Maurrasian thought and strategy has often been ignored, belittled or misunderstood” (p. 13). The other aspect to be noted, typical of Zemmour’s public discourse, is his abundant use of history, in continuity with the Maurrassian tradition; consider, for example, the success of *Enquête sur la monarchie* published in 1924, in which the founder of Action française interprets the history of France as destined toward an inexorable decline due to post-revolutionary “democratic and republican disorder.” Indeed, the journalist of *Le Figaro* presents himself as a historical truth-seeker counteracting an instrumental and propagandistic reading of the past. While the themes he touches on in his speeches are varied—he has, for example, returned to the Dreyfus affair, advancing doubts about Dreyfus’ innocence—Zemmour mostly focuses on Marshal Pétain’s policy against Jews. In particular, he calls into question, and considers criminal, the choice—initiated with President Chirac’s speech on July 16, 1995—to recognize the role of the French state in the Shoah. “Revisiting the history of the *années noires* is an indispensable element of the cultural revolution he intends to impose in order to have his program accepted,” Joly notes (p. 37); the aim is to rewrite the history of Vichy primarily to reunite French right-wingers.

In the first chapter, the author quickly traces Zemmour’s political and cultural references as the basis of his populism-tinged “ethnic nationalism,” and then moves on in the second chapter to examine how Zemmour went to the source of the rupture between the Gaullists and the extreme right-wingers, namely the memory of collaboration and the Resistance, in other words, the Pétain-De Gaulle *querelle*. For several decades, the Gaullist-inspired conservative right had kept its distance from the French extreme right, embodied first by Jean-Marie Le Pen and then by his daughter Marina.

Zemmour defends Pétain’s actions with arguments used by the Marshal himself during his trial in 1945, namely that of having used the choice of the armistice as “a

shield (*bouclier*) to protect the French people.” This interpretation was later re-proposed by Robert Aron’s well-known volume *Histoire de Vichy*, published in 1954, which corroborated the thesis that Pétain avoided the “Polonization” of the country with his choice of State collaboration. Aron proposed that the myth of the *bouclier*, represented by Pétain and the *épée*, on the other hand, was represented by De Gaulle: “both were equally necessary to France.”<sup>2</sup> Zemmour, then, in his articles and television broadcasts, takes up Aron’s thesis extensively, and indeed speaks of an intimate connivance between De Gaulle and Pétain.

The other argument taken up by Aron concerns the supposed choice to have sacrificed foreign Jews in order to protect French Jews, a thesis refuted by later historiography beginning with the volume by Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, published in 1981.<sup>3</sup> Joly also recalls an academic “forerunner,” François-Georges Dreyfus, who in 1990 published a *History de Vichy* edited by Perrin, which reiterated the *bouclier* thesis represented by Pétain. Dreyfus, like Zemmour, took cover behind his Jewish origins in order to claim objectivity against Pétain and Vichy.

Calling into question the Vichy regime’s responsibility regarding discrimination against foreigners and Jews who were considered “undesirables” ultimately leads to the normalization of the measures of exception and, therefore, to making the current policy proposals against immigration acceptable. To this end, Zemmour proposes a fierce critique of what he calls the Paxtonian *doxa*: that is, the recognition that the choice of the Vichy regimes to collaborate with Nazism was made in order to build an anti-democratic and illiberal “National Revolution.” Such a view, now shared by historiography and public opinion finds its origins with the book of American historian Robert Paxton, published in France in 1972.<sup>4</sup> In particular, according to Zemmour, “Paxton’s mistake is the general mistake today, which is to think that there is a connection between the anti-Semitic laws of October 1940 [...] and the final solution and the extermination of the Jews. Now this is false” (p. 93). However, the connections between the measures taken by Vichy and the deportation of French and foreign Jews have been established by scholars for more than three decades, as has the fact that about three quarters of

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy* (Paris: Fayard, 1954), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy et les Juifs* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-44* (New York: A. Knopf, 1972).

them escaped arrest thanks to the partial help of the French population. Despite this, Zemmour proceeds systematically with falsifications, omissions and manipulations of sources.

The last point to emphasize is that, in France, falsifying history to refute the responsibility of Vichy in the Holocaust is a crime of negationism, punishable by the Gayssot law passed in 1990. Among the many criminal proceedings against Zemmour for racist and anti-Islamic expressions since February 2021, the 17th Chambre Correctionnelle in Paris acquitted the journalist in the first instance, while in 2023 the journalist will face eight court proceedings for racist pronouncements in previous years.

In conclusion, Joly's little book is a useful study of the tradition of French right-wing culture to which Zemmour belongs; for his success—beyond the election result—we must blame a media system that puts historians and polemicists on the same level, where knowledge and expertise is not recognized, but rather despised. “Zemmour's triumph”, Joly tells us, “resides in a profound relativism, in the air of the times, which authorizes one to say everything, to contest everything, to make everything the same” (p. 126). On the other hand, he adds that there is a certain intellectual laziness that goes too far in the opposite direction towards simplification, as in the case of President Macron's latest speech, in which only the French seem to be responsible for the Holocaust, without Nazis being in the picture. To counter this danger of simplistic reductions of a very complex issue there remains—only and above all—the accuracy of historical research and its appropriate communication.

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