

Articles

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Public Memory of World War II in France from 1945 to the Present

Written by Daniel Bodovillé Translated from the French and Edited by Jean V. Poulard

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History and Memory

What happened in France during World War II has been clouded by the proclamations of certain “memories” on the part of French leaders and particular groups, often for political purposes. These memories are "souvenirs" that color what actually took place and thus do not necessarily correspond to the reality.

The problem of the credibility of memories starts with the fact that these memories are numerous, each one showing only a partial vision. Indeed, one person’s memory of an event is not necessarily the same as that of another who had followed the same event. While it may be impossible to attempt an exhaustive typology, it is important to understand first, that souvenirs and their re-interpretation by individual or collective memories differ depending on the persons or the groups and their relation to the event; second, that group memories are constructed, evolve, and eventually become competitive; and finally, that it is possible to write the history of these phenomena.

Memory gets its strength from the sentiments that it mobilizes: It puts the souvenir in the emotional and even the mythical and the sacred; it can be struck with amnesia; it is not really conscious of its successive embellishments and deformations; it is permanently evolving and susceptible to long latency and to sudden revitalization; it possesses also some astonishing richness (the strength of an experience, the restoration of the dominant representations of an epoch, the capacity to integrate).

Individual memories, group memories, which constitute the militant and driving element of the collective memory, and the memory scattered throughout the community are close to each other and interpret each other without ever merging together. They draw from the reservoir of direct or transmitted souvenirs and take from the stock of information received through channels having an official status (commemorations, education, media products, scientific debates, etc.) that they appropriate to themselves in a more or less explicit manner.

An inevitable competition exists between memory and history; between fidelity and “reconnaissance,”

on the one hand, and explanation and plausible truth, on the other. An absolute hierarchy must not be established among them (in one way or another) nor an impassable barrier between them. The point is that history is the will to understand, the making of a problematic narrative, the transformation in thinking of what is usually of the order of the affective and emotional experience or of the system of representations.

However, in the case of France, the history of the memories of World War II in the fifty years that followed is interesting to study because several memories have come into competition. Consequently, an entire generation, educated between 1945 and 1970, received a deformed vision of the historical reality--deformed by these memories.

Memories Based on the Resistance

Between 1945 and 1969, there was the construction of official memories based on the French *Résistance*'s fight against the Nazi occupiers. Indeed, at the end of the war, the memory of the Resistance offers a framework structuring the collective memory and the values of the French. The overall context is favorable: Until the end of the 1960s, a nearly unanimous reading of the Occupation predominates that is nourished by four factors

1. An effective take-over of the souvenir and commemoration by the Communist Party and the Gaullists;
2. The forceful manner in which General Charles de Gaulle affirms the national unanimity and the contribution of France to the victory over the Nazis;
3. The heroic vision that is circulated in a major way by publications and films;
4. The fort of Mont Valérien (where many Frenchmen were executed by the Germans) as a place of memory *par excellence* and the year 1964, the year of the transfer of Jean Moulin's ashes to the Panthéon, and the institution of a competitive examination about the Résistance and of the Déportation mark the apogee of the commemoration.¹



However, reality is more complex than it seems: The display of unanimity tends to deny the

specificity of the *Résistance*'s fight; the divisions of the Cold War have their echoes inside veteran associations or between them; the amnesties of 1951 and of 1953, or the ups and downs of the celebration of May 8 (not a holiday from 1945 to 1953, a holiday from 1953 to 1959, not a holiday from 1959 to 1981, a holiday since 1981) have offended a number of *Résistants*.² However, a certain tone predominates. The historian Henry Rousso in his book, *The Syndrome of Vichy from 1944 to Today*, coined a term for this tone - that of "*resistancialism*." This term refers to a myth that tends to minimize the French support of Vichy, to make the *Résistance* an object of memory, and to assimilate it to the whole of the nation.

The Gaullist Memory: The Myth of "All *Résistants*"

As early as the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944, at the Paris City Hall, General de Gaulle concocted the main lines of the Gaullist vision of the "dark years" in a few words:

Paris! Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred!
 But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its
 people with the participation of the armies of France,
 with the support and participation of the whole of France,
 of the France that fights, of the sole France, of the true
 France, of the eternal France.³

Thus, the terrible defeat of 1940 would be erased by the victory of the "armies of France," the FFL [*Forces françaises libres* - Free French Forces] and by a people unanimously involved in the *Résistance* under the direction of its chief, de Gaulle himself. It is clear that, with that famous speech, de Gaulle wanted to silence the years of the Vichy government, the purges and their excesses, Pétain and Laval, the ideological collaborators of the Nazis, and all other collaborationists.

What de Gaulle wanted to emphasize was the *Résistance* of all Frenchmen. This was done by different means. There was first a grandiose ceremony on November 11, 1945, at the Arc of Triumph.⁴ Around the monument were placed 15 catafalques containing the mortal remains of "official" victims of the war: two civil *Résistants* from inside France (a man and a woman), two concentration camp prisoners, one escaped prisoner shot and killed, one member of the FFI [French Forces of the Interior], and nine soldiers from different arms and places of operations. Soon a "cult" of the *Résistance* with its heroes, its memorials--the first rank of which included Jean Moulin and the fort of Mont Valérien--was created. The educational institutions participated in the development of this myth by "ignoring" Vichy or limiting its impact. The high point in this development was the transfer of the ashes of Jean Moulin to the Panthéon on December 19, 1964.⁵ For this occasion, André Malraux, the Minister of Cultural Affairs, said in a speech:

It is the reason Jean Moulin went to London. Not simply
 because there were French fighting men there....If he

did come to ask General de Gaulle for money and weapons, he came also to ask him for “moral approval.” The General then had assumed the *NO* of the first day...General de Gaulle alone could call on the movements of the *Résistance* to unite together with all the other fighters because it was through him alone that France was engaged in a lone fight.

From Malraux's assertion comes the following equation: “The *Résistance* is de Gaulle; de Gaulle is France; thus, the *Résistance* is France.”

In 1997, an explanation about the creation of the Gaullist myth was given by Olivier Guichard, a member of the *Résistance* and a Gaullist minister, in his deposition at the trial of Maurice Papon.⁶ Guichard said:

I would like to add a few words about what was the general state of mind about the problems that were posed at the Liberation and how the Vichy bureaucrats were kept in the new government. The General had at that moment, as ever since 1940, a limitless desire to protect the unity of the country at any cost. Thus was born the Gaullist myth: The Vichy regime had not really existed. It is with this myth, doubled by another myth--that the French won the war, that we have lived for a certain time....

We do not want to try the whole of France. He [de Gaulle] had denied the existence of Vichy to arrive at this result.

From 1940, from the time when the sovereignty of the country had disappeared on June 16, there was no longer a state. He [de Gaulle] had become its only representative....One could not indict the French in the name of a state that did not exist. This is a notion about which we have not thought much during many years and which was confirmed by presidents who succeeded each other until July 1995. [At that date, Jacques Chirac officially recognized the responsibility of France for the crimes perpetrated by the French State of Vichy.] All the Prime

Ministers of the General were involved in Vichy's administration, but it is as if Vichy never existed. It would seem to me to be regrettable to ignore the climate in which domestic problems were treated in comparison with the climate that General de Gaulle wanted to foster at that time.⁷

The fact was that many Frenchmen were satisfied with this version of history, and the French cinema industry contributed to it. One such example was René Clément's film, *Le Père tranquille*, which appeared on screens in 1946. It is a story about a man, a father, who partakes in the *Résistance* against the Germans without the knowledge of his family.⁸



The Communist Memory: The Myth of the “Party as Martyr”

When the Gaullist memory attempts to erase the Vichy episode from history and to put forward the *Résistance* of Free France from London, the Communist memory looks to celebrate the domestic *Résistance* against Vichy and the clandestine fight that took place on the ground by the “little people,” the working class, the ordinary people. Elites who committed treason and collaborated must be denounced. They must now be kept away from economic power.

The role of the Communists in the *Résistance* inside France itself is the foundation of the national legitimacy of the party. Beginning in 1945, and continuing into the present, this view has continued to fill pages of the party's newspaper *L'Humanité*. Indeed, many were the Communists who joined the underground (maquis) after the enactment of the STO (*Service du Travail Obligatoire* --Compulsory Work Service) on 16 February 1943.

However, the French Communist Party (PCF) must erase the 1939-1941 period and its support of the

Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 between Hitler and Stalin, something the Communists want to silence. This is why the PCF concocts the image of a “martyr party,” inventing the myth of the “75,000 Communists executed,” when in fact the total number of Frenchmen executed by the Germans is about 25,000!

Finally, when the mortal remains of Jean Moulin were interred in the Panthéon in 1964, *L'Humanité* celebrated the man of the left:

Jean Moulin in the Panthéon means that France is honoring the one who understood that, in his fight against Nazi power, the liberation of our people depended on their union, as in their fight against the power of money, their liberation depends on their union today. Jean Moulin in the Panthéon means that France bows before the first president of the CNR [National Council of the *Résistance*], whose program included the nationalization of banks and trusts.

The Forgotten of the “Resistancialism”

The “Withdrawn Memory” of the War Veterans and Prisoners of War

Is there in fact a memory specific to the war veterans and the prisoners of war? The French World War II veterans, by the millions, cannot glorify themselves with their fighting as the *poilus*⁹ of 1914-1918. Despite 190,000 killed in action, their image of vanquished makes them in fact anti-heroes. They symbolize the defeat of the 1940 army, the origin of the occupation. A country does not like vanquished soldiers! Thus, they remain very quiet, for they are the living proof of the greatest defeat in all of France’s history: They are thus condemned to be forgotten. Many of them were “prisoners of war” kept in *Stalags* and *Oflags*,¹⁰ a very large group, the largest in fact, and manifestly the most forgotten and despised by the collective memory. There were 1,850,000 prisoners in 1940. By 1944-1945, 940,000 remained incarcerated. Many of them were liberated only in 1944-1945, and 37,000 never came back, dying in captivity. One can consider as rather historically exceptional the collective incarceration of the country's youth. What impact did that have on them? Pacifism, rapprochement with Germany, Communist propaganda, Pétainism, shame, and retiring into one’s shell...?

Robert Franck, in an article of the journal *Cahiers français*, demonstrates that they show *poilus* characteristics in terms of value: fraternity, solidarity, and hatred of the German (at first) who had detained them forcibly, which was certainly amplified by the long incarceration. However, soon after the war, their associations were sold on the Franco-German reconciliation of the 1950s. But, unlike the *poilus* of 1914-18, their speech has been subdued. They suffered from the speeches and “preoccupations” of Vichy about them. It seems that the silence of “shame” was worse for those who

were liberated within the framework of the *Relève*.¹¹ It is the weight of the collaboration and of the Pétainism that extends to the “involuntary liberated.”¹²

For those who escaped and who sometimes (often?) joined the *Résistance* in 1942-43, the merit of the escape remains rather confidential. They also suffered from the “competition” of the deported-*Résistants*, whose conditions of internment were more “glorious” and harder--even though life in certain *Stalags* was particularly difficult.

It is symptomatic to see them rejected, at the end of the war, by the Associations of War Veterans from 1914-1918, and to regroup themselves in associations distinct from others. However, they were also divided according to their political convictions, which were very vindictive during the Cold War. It is symptomatic as well to see these same associations opening their doors later to prisoners of other wars--Indochina, Algeria--who have similar characteristics: no victory and a return to the homeland with the silence of the vanquished. Yes, there was a “withdrawn memory,” a withdrawal certainly imposed by the famous myths of the liberation: *Résistance* and final victory did not have a place for the vanquished of 1940.¹³

The Memory of the Deported to Concentration camps: “The Silence”

“Victims are always disturbing ... their complaints are tiresome for anyone who desires to find again the benevolent serenity of days as quickly as possible,” wrote Emmanuel Mournier in the *Journal Esprit*. The deported¹⁴ expressed with difficulty an exceptional experience. In fact, public opinion was not ready to understand or comprehend what appeared unimaginable, that is genocide and barbarism. Simone Veil says it well: “The reason the deported did not speak at the end of the war was that their story, because of its enormity, could not be heard, listened to, received.” The deported were victimized and reduced to silence in different ways. Nobody waited for them to organize the return to a normal political life.

They are also reduced to silence by the weight of words. On this point, an explanation is necessary. In 1945, the term “*déporté*” (deported) had only a fuzzy acceptance in the French lexicon. It is only gradually that the French, including their leaders, became conscious of the *categorical differences* that existed between those who returned from Germany, including the STO conscripts. The term “*camp de représailles*” (camps of reprisals), used in a speech, on May 23, 1945, by the Sub-Prefect of Reims, Pierre Schneiter, was not synonymous with concentration camp. Sometimes, the term “political prisoners” was used to designate those that we call today deported. But still in 1947, the term “*déporté*” was used to designate the workers sent to Germany by the STO. The differentiations appeared later.

The deported liberated from concentration camps simply did not have the physical strength to speak in public. Less than ten years after their return, the pathologic differences due to lack of food, fatigue, and cold were still visible. Of the 220,000 French deported, 38,000 returned; 2,000 to 3,000 died

within two months of their return. In 1954, of every 100 deported, only 12 were still alive. Thus, the deported were victims of their low number in the collective conscience of the time in contrast to the million prisoners of war and to the 750,000 who returned from conscripted work in Germany. The unspeakable also condemns them to silence: How can one make others understand the total violence of one day in a concentration camp?

Remy Roure, former prison mate of Charles de Gaulle in Germany in 1916, but also a great resistant under the name of Pierre Fervaque, “Companion of the Liberation,” wrote in *Le Monde* of April 25, 1945: “When one comes out liberated from a German concentration camp, ... one has the greatest need for silence.” Moreover, former deported, Bruno Bettelheim, who later became a psychoanalyst, observes that a feeling of guilt can appear among those who survived, who sometimes ask themselves why they came home while so many of their comrades died in the camps. It is easy to understand why the deported entered a world of silence.



A gap indeed exists between the return of the “deported” and the perceived chronology of the war in France. In the mind of the vast majority of the French of that era, the war *de facto* ended with the Liberation (30 August 1944 in Reims, 23 November in Strasbourg), thus, nearly a year before the return of the deported. Between the end of August 1944 and April-May 1945, the material and differential complaints had time to express themselves, and the questions of food distribution, even the floods of the Marne, took precedence over the fate of the “deported” who returned.

Those of the STO

The STO conscripts, those who were sent to forced labor in Germany, on whom there is the suspicion of cowardice, claim an equal status that the other deported deny them.

A total of 600,000 or 650,000 French workers were sent to Germany between June 1942 and July 1944. According to the *Fédération Nationale des Déportés du Travail* (National Foundation of Deported Forced Labor) founded in 1945, and having become in 1970 *Fédération Nationale des Victimes et Rescapés des Camps nazis du Travail Forcé* (National Federation of the Victims and Survivors of the Nazi Camps of Forced Labor), 60,000 died in Germany and 15,000 were executed by

firing squads, hanged, or decapitated for “acts of resistance.” Historians today think that these figures are exaggerated, and estimate that between 25,000 to 35,000 STO¹⁵ have nevertheless lost their lives in Germany. Their work in bombed war factories, often in awful conditions and under the frequent surveillance of the Gestapo, made in fact their rate of death greater than that of prisoners of war. A certain number were placed with artisans, the *Reichsbahn* (the German railroad), the post office, public services, or more rarely, in farms.

The exploitation of the French labor force by the Third Reich involved the conscripted workers (“the ‘*requis*’ of the STO”), but also workers who voluntarily left for Germany, attracted by some compensation or to have a parent liberated in return. These volunteers were treated neither better nor worse than the conscripted workers, but they contributed, in the general opinion after the war, to a frequent and unjustified lack of distinction between the conscripted workers and the volunteers. A quarter of a million prisoners of war were also required to work for the Reich starting in 1943, after having been “transformed” voluntarily or by force into civil workers.

In 1992, the French judicial branch forbid the associations of STO victims to use the official designation of “*déporté du travail*” (deported for work). Their reasoning was that there might be some confusion between the deportation that led to the death of *résistants* and Jews and others who were dispatched to do obligatory work.

All this has led to a sort of cold war between different war-related associations, or federations, as the French prefer to call these groups. There have been on-going debates over the memories. Didn't the STOs resist in some ways? Who among the Gaullists or the Communists were the first to be *résistant*? At what dates? Who paid the heaviest price to the repression?

The Vichyist Memory

The Myth of the Double-Dealing

At the end of the war, the political Right was heavily hit by measures of ineligibility: More than 150 Representatives (*Députés*) and Senators from the Center and the Right, as against 75 Radicals and 52 SFIO (Socialists). The daily press was monopolized by Communist, Socialist, and Resistance views.

However, starting in 1947, owing to the Cold War and the anticommunist upsurge, the Right began to recover. It developed the thesis that the defeat and the armistice were inescapable, and that Marshal Pétain resisted as much as he could the pressures from the Nazis and maintained an independent state apparatus. Conversely, the *Résistance*, infiltrated by the Communists, would have led France into a civil war.



On April 11, 1950, the great *résistant*, an important figure in the secret services of Free France, Colonel Rémy, extended a loyal hand “to the faithful followers of the Marshal, who, like him, put themselves spontaneously at the disposition of France.” He offered thus an unexpected gift to the supporters of the Marshal, who died on July 23, 1951, on the island of Yeu where he was imprisoned.

The legitimacy of Pétain was based on his appointment on June 16, 1940, as President of the Council of Ministers by President Albert Lebrun. After his appointment, Marshal Pétain declared: “*Je fais don de ma personne à la France*” (“I give myself to France.”) On July 10, 1940, he was given full powers by the two chambers meeting together as the National Assembly by a vote of 569 yes, 80 no, and 20 abstentions. These legislators were those of the National Assembly elected in 1936, the Assembly of the Popular Front! Later, except for the case of the Communists who were outlawed, Pétain not only maintained institutions, but did not create a single party like other dictatorships.

The “*Maréchalists*,” those who developed the Vichyist memory, relied heavily on Pétain’s declaration during his trial, on July 23, 1945. He said about the powers he was given: “*De ce pouvoir, j’ai usé comme d’un bouclier pour protéger le peuple français....*” (“I used this power as a shield to protect the French people....”) Thus, was created the myth of the double-dealing between Pétain, who would have been the “shield” protecting France from the Germans, while de Gaulle would have been the “sword” of the Allies. (The fact that Pétain was the Godfather of Philippe de Gaulle [the son of Charles de Gaulle] could have led to a conclusion that there was a secret “complicity” between them). Robert Aron furthered this perspective when he argued in his *History of Vichy* (1954) that Pétain's attitude “permitted France to survive while waiting for the outcome of the war between England and the Axis.”

The Memories Revisited

The Demythologizing of the *Résistance*

The phase of the construction of official and unofficial memories stops at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, with the arrival of a new generation to adulthood, the historical end of Gaullism, the decline of Communism, and the mutations of Jewish memory. In 1969, the documentary film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) coincides precisely with this revisiting of

memories. In this film, which was banned in France for a long time, Marcel Ophuls compiles testimonies, clips from French newsreels, and from German propaganda. It shows an occupied France, resigned, passive, collaborating. It shows that some Frenchmen, knowingly chose the Nazi camp. It reveals for the first time that, in fact, the choice between resistance and collaboration was not self-evident. Furthermore, it exposed the divisions among the French. Therefore, the French government did not want this sad image of France to be known by the majority of the French, and thus the ban on the showing of the film on TV until 1981. Other films have followed suit, and it can be affirmed that the cinema has largely contributed to this re-visitation of war memories.

The historical rereading of the “dark years,” begun at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, was then handed over to the teaching establishment at the beginning of the 1980s. As far as the *Résistance* is concerned, historians uncovered multiple divisions and rivalries among its different groups, and a certain number of polemics developed: Who “sold out” Jean Moulin? Was he a “mole” paid by the Soviets? Why did the *Résistance* let trains full of deported people pass by without doing anything? Did the Communist armed unit want to take over political power? This not very favorable context is further complicated by a series of polemics that affect the *Résistance* during the 1990s, especially again around the person of Jean Moulin.

The Knowledge of the True Face of Vichy

In 1972, the American historian Robert Paxton’s book *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* was translated into French (*La France de Vichy*) and published by Seuil in 1973. It shows that Vichy, far from being a shield against Nazism, did, in fact, insist with the Germans that they accept a policy of collaboration from the first months of 1940. Paxton relies heavily on German archives. He shows that it was Hitler, who would have refused the collaboration proposed by the Vichy government, which was sure of German victory. Furthermore, Paxton demonstrates that far from being a parenthesis in the history of France, Vichy has left a heavy heritage. Above all, Paxton illustrates Vichy participation in the repression of Jews.

Shattering the ideas accepted until then, this publication accelerated historic research on the period of Vichy and the Occupation (several hundred topics of dissertations). One can add to this more than 2000 newspaper articles in 1972 on the subject of the Touvier affair. Paul Touvier was in charge of the *milice* (French militia) created on January 30, 1943, by the Vichy regime. It fought against members of the *Résistance* and collaborated with the Gestapo. He was discreetly pardoned by President Georges Pompidou on November 23, 1971. These articles revived the memory of the Occupation.

The “Awakening” of the Jewish Memory

The 1960s mark a turning point and a rediscovery. The Eichmann¹⁶ trial in 1961 in Jerusalem opened the era of the witness-bearer of history. It reveals the attitude of the Jews themselves, and at the same

time it puts the state of Israel on the grounds of national pride. Then there is the Six-Day War of 1967. This war constituted a major historical point because of the anxiety that it provoked for the young state of Israel; it was a second decisive threat against Judaism.

The memory of the Genocide becomes a component of Jewish identity and demands its place in society. Then, a new era started near the end of the 1970s. A variety of reasons converge to liberate the words of the survivors and to invest it with a great responsibility.

The debate started with the showing of *Holocaust* (1978-1979) and then of *Shoah* (1985), and then the fight against the Holocaust deniers.

Conclusion

Thus, in France, from 1944 until the 1990s, the memory of the war years has constantly evolved, and 60 years after the end of the war, the 1970s and 1980s contributed to giving up the official memories and to rediscovering that period.

Despite that, despite the facts, the different myths--Gaullist, Communist, *Maréchalist*--continue to be conveyed in different strata of French society. The dark period of the war years continues to trouble the memory of the French because its mourning has never found closure.

¹Jean Moulin was a famous leader of the French Resistance. He was arrested in Lyon in June 1943, was tortured by Klaus Barbie, and died near Metz in a train bound for Germany. Moulin never revealed anything to his captors.

²May 8, of course, refers to the date the Germans surrendered to General Dwight Eisenhower in Reims in 1945.

³Excerpt from Charles de Gaulle's speech delivered at the Paris City Hall on August 25, 1944.

⁵The Panthéon is a former church in Paris where the "great men" of France are buried, including such luminaries as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

⁶Maurice Papon was convicted of crimes against humanity during his days as prefect of Bordeaux under the Vichy regime. He participated in the deportation of over 1600 Jews to German concentration camps.

⁷Quoted in the newspaper *Sud-Ouest*, October 17, 1997.

⁸While the title of this film has been translated into English as *The Father Alone*, a better translation would be "The Quiet Man."

⁹The name, meaning "hairy" was given to the World War I veterans because most did not shave in the trenches.

¹⁰Stalags were German prisoner of war camps for enlisted men; Oflags were for officers.

¹¹A Vichy program that called for volunteers to work in Germany, which would be rewarded by the liberation of an equal number of French prisoners of war. The program was a fiasco.

¹²“*Libérés malgré eux*”--literally “liberated despite themselves”. This is an expression that the author plays with, for the term “*Malgré eux*” was used to refer to people, especially Alsatians and Luxembourgers, who were forcefully incorporated into the German army.

¹³*Retour à la vie* [Return to Life], a French film, produced by Henri-Georges Clouzot, André Cayatte, Georges Lampin, and Jean Dréville, which is a study of the return to normal life of prisoners of war and of people deported to Germany.

¹⁴One point needs to be made here: The title “*Déporté*” is used by anyone in France who was sent to Germany during World War II. However, those who were sent to concentration camps have always argued that the title belongs only to them. Nevertheless, those who were sent to forced labor in Germany by the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO) still call themselves “*Déportés du Travail*.”

¹⁵Simple acronym to refer to those who were sent to do forced labor in Germany.

¹⁶Adolf Otto Eichmann was one of the most important organizers of the Holocaust.