In societies coming to terms with historical injustices, public apology has emerged as a powerful force. This is particularly true of France in the 1990s, where the state has served as a catalyst for a multifaceted apology trend within civil society for the persecution of Jews in France during the Second World War. Following President Jacques Chirac’s official apology in 1995 for the Vichy regime’s anti-Semitic policies, various civil groups stepped forward to address their specific wartime pasts. This wave of repentance at the turn of the millennium, together with a multitude of international acknowledgments for past wrongdoing, demonstrates that apology is decidedly in “l’esprit du temps.”

“The age of apology is distinguished by its unparalleled commitment to remove the past as an obstacle to productive and peaceful intergroup relations,” argue historians Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn. “Although they obviously do not erase or undo what has already happened, apologies can amend the past so that it resonates differently in the present for those who feel aggrieved by it or responsible for it.” Along with reparations, historical commissions, and court trials, apology emerged on a global scale at the end of the twentieth century, to the extent that a new academic field has sprung up: Reconciliation Studies. Scholars have suggested several reasons for this international wave of public, official, and collective apologizing: the collapse of communist dictatorships; the challenge against “racial hierarchies that sustained empires”; a new international focus on morality; a revised understanding of universal human rights, state sovereignty, and international law; a willingness of state actors to show feelings of caring and regret and to view apology not as a weakness but a manifestation of strength; the globalization of memory in the post-cold war era; the democratization of history; the decline of the nation-state and of raison d’état; and increased demand for recognition.
by past victims. According to two sociologists studying the phenomenon, apology is rooted in the very structure of modernity, with its freedoms and individualism but also its networks of relations, which oblige guilt for choices of action or inaction. French political scientist Philippe Moreau Defarges writes, “The time of repentance is that of another perception of history”: one that will no longer be written by the winners, the powerful, and state authorities, but by previously ignored, dominated, and excluded peoples.

In addition to these transnational factors, particular developments in France prepared the ground for the emergence of public apologies in the 1990s. The expansive historiography of the Vichy era and the media-saturated trials of Vichy bureaucrats established the responsibility of the state and certain segments of French society for the passage of racial laws and the deportation of Jews. The extent of Vichy collaboration in the Final Solution has been fully documented for several decades. The consensus today is to view the Vichy regime as fully complicit in the legal, social, and physical separation of Jews from the French national community. Renée Poznanski, among others, has offered a vivid description of the gradual identification, exclusion, spoliation, internment, and deportation of Jews in wartime French society. 76,000 Jews were deported from France, of whom 2,500 returned.

But before this history became known in the 1970s, several myths dominated French thinking: the Gaullist “resistantialist” myth that France was a nation of resisters; the “parenthesis theory” alluding to the exceptionality of the Vichy regime in French history; and the argument that French anti-Semitic policies and actions were imposed by the Nazi occupants. These myths were finally broken down, and a new era of memory work began during the 1970s, which historian Henry Rousso initially designated a period of “obsession” with French guilt, and which, after having observed its endurance into the twenty-first century, he relabeled one of “anamnèse progressive,” a gradual re-establishment of memory consisting of three strands with distinct chronologies: politicized re-readings of the dark years, the predominance of the Shoah, and an internationalization and judicialization of memory.

This context weighed heavily upon the apology trend. As a long series of fiftieth anniversary commemorations of World War Two ran its course in the early 1990s, questions about the past continued to be raised by filmmakers, television producers, novelists, historians, journalists, and memoirists. Amidst this surge, the remembrance of Jewish deportation took center stage in public debate, particularly in the shadow of several high-profile court cases trying wartime actors accused of crimes against humanity. After Klaus Barbie, the Gestapo chief of Lyon, was tried in France in 1987 and the efforts to bring to justice Vichy police chief René Bousquet and his aide Jean Leguay were aborted by their deaths, two Frenchmen were finally brought to trial and found guilty for crimes against humanity: Paul Touvier, former chief of intelligence of the milice in Lyon, and Maurice Papon, secretary general of the Gironde prefecture during the war. Rousso has termed these trials “une seconde
dépurations," with the first purge having taken place immediately after the Liber-
ation. Papon's trial in 1997-1998 for his role in the deportation of 1,690 Jews from Bordeaux was significant in that the defendant was not a zealous milicien but a public servant. As a result, his case came to symbolize a trial, not of an individual, but of the French state as a whole and its administrative role in the Holocaust.

In addition to the growing memorialization of Vichy and the legal context of the 1990s, scandals about the legacy of Vichy emerged constantly, followed by public demands for reckoning. Pierre Péan's 1994 biography of President François Mitterrand revealed sensational information about the socialist leader's flirtation with an extreme-Right league while he was a law student in the 1930s, his decoration by Vichy authorities in 1943, and his postwar friendship with the accused René Bousquet. Revelations that the city of Paris still possessed Jewish property that had been “aryanized” during the Occupation and that French national museums still held thousands of art works stolen from Jews in France during the war led state authorities to review their records and initiate restitutions. In addition, a “Jewish card file” created by the Paris police during the war was found in the archives: the discovery of French fingerprints on anti-Semitic policies shocked public opinion and led to the creation of an historical commission and to facilitated access to wartime records.

These developments paved the way for apology to become a key tool in a national healing process: an interconnected triptych of apology, court trials, and reparations to address the Vichy past in 1990s France. This essay focuses specifically on the dynamics of apology, marked by the expansion of the practice of atonement into the public sphere. One of the unique characteristics of this phenomenon is the transfer of apology from the official level to the level of civil society. Triggered by President Chirac's official apology, various French groups and institutions publicly addressed their pasts and took responsibility for the particular roles that their predecessors played in fostering wartime anti-Semitism. The apologies of the French state, the Paris law bar, the French Catholic Church, a Paris police unit, the Order of Doctors, and the Council of State command individual and chronological analysis, for they coalesced into a memorial wave across French society whose momentum, marked simultaneously by ritualization and growing weariness, rolled and crested as the century drew to a close. Some of these apologies were more “successful” than others, but taken as a whole the apology trend testifies to an historical moment in which French society engaged with its past in a novel way. How much can verbal declarations of regret reconcile France with another dark period in its twentieth-century history? A second part of this essay examines demands for a French apology for crimes committed during the Algerian War. In the late 1990s, the wave of apology shifted direction to gather in its wake the Algerian question as the next historical object of reckoning.
State Apology: A Radical Departure from the Past

When Chirac was elected to the presidency in May 1995, succeeding Mitterrand’s fourteen-year mandate, he marked his arrival to power and distinguished himself from his predecessor with several brash moves. In addition to relaunching nuclear test blasts in Mururoa and slashing the budget to qualify for the euro, Chirac became the first French president to acknowledge French responsibility in the Holocaust. On 16 July 1995, the fifty-third anniversary of the “Vélodrome d’Hiver” tragedy—when French authorities rounded up 13,000 Jews in this former bicycle stadium in Paris, subsequently interned them in concentration camps, and ultimately deported them—, President Chirac officially recognized the French state’s role in the Final Solution.

Chirac’s statement of recognition radically departed from prevailing official attitudes toward the Vichy past. Chirac admitted French guilt and took responsibility for its “collective fault”: “France, land of the Enlightenment and of Human Rights, land of hospitality and asylum, France, on that day, committed the irreparable.” Chirac alluded to a sentiment of indebtedness to Jewish victims: “We have an immutable debt toward those left unprotected by France.” He concluded with a warning against future injustice and a hope for an open, tolerant France: “Let us know how to learn the lessons of history. Let us refuse to be passive observers or accomplices of the unacceptable.”

It may seem paradoxical that it took an heir of Gaullism to finally shatter the myth of Vichy’s historical parenthesis by taking official responsibility for Vichy crimes, but historian Peter Carrier argues that Chirac reasserted “a strong sense of nationhood and national continuity” in his apology and thus merely revised Gaullist doctrine: “Whereas de Gaulle is reputed to have denied the legitimacy of the Vichy state in legal terms (‘null and void’), Chirac denied Vichy in moral terms.” In his declaration, Chirac specifically distinguished another France, a France that “had never been at Vichy [. . .] but was] alive and thriving in London,” a France that “saved three-quarters of the Jewish population.” Carrier contends that Chirac “scored a political success” that won “broad consensus” because it distilled images of a negative Vichy with such affirmations of positive republican values. Chirac was also careful to emphasize that the French deviation from human rights had been influenced by the context of defeat and occupation: “Yes, the criminal folly of the occupant was seconded by the French, by the French State.” Several analysts noted how such emphases diluted the impact of Chirac’s apology by perpetuating the conceptual distancing between Vichy and the Republic. Henry Rousso, for his part, congratulated Chirac’s careful rendering of the historical complexities of the period.

This momentous apology was part spontaneous gesture of a new president and part explicit response to a lobbying effort aimed at Chirac’s predecessor. Since 1992, various individuals and groups, including the coalition Comité Vél’ d’Hiv’ 42, had campaigned publicly for President Mitterrand to make an...
official proclamation that the French state at Vichy was responsible for crimes against Jews during the war. An initial petition, signed by over 200 intellectuals and artists, supported and published by *Le Monde*, gathered momentum by 1994. Mitterrand consented to attend the July 16 ceremony at the former site of the Vél’ d’Hiv’, to make July 16 a national day of commemoration for racist and anti-Semitic persecutions, and to commission a monument for the site, but he reaffirmed in 1994, “I will not apologize in the name of France. The Republic has nothing to do with that. I believe that France is not responsible.” Mitterrand’s compromised personal history is one factor that prevented him from leading the nation to come to terms with the past, and generational change in leadership also explains the paradigm shift in 1995. Only seven years old at the beginning of the Second World War, Chirac was free to apologize without risking his personal career. As historian Raoul Girardet has asserted more generally, Chirac could only benefit from taking a moral stand against others’ failings.

While it is difficult to measure how this official apology responded to and satisfied a “social demand” for reconciliation with the Vichy past, it was certainly a perfectly timed move finely tuned to the zeitgeist. Juxtaposed against Mitterrand’s refusals and reactive half-gestures, Chirac’s precise inventory of French responsibilities, full apology, and appeal to avoid similar injustices in the future satisfied a majority of the French: a poll conducted a few days after the ceremony at the Vélodrome d’Hiver revealed that 72 percent of those polled approved of Chirac’s declaration, indicating that the positive reception of apology went well beyond Jewish circles. Moreover, debates over the Vél’ d’Hiv’ monument and commemoration “were not confined to any one association or social sphere, or to intellectual, political, and artistic circles, but involved the numerous mediating institutions implicated in their construction, including the mass media, political parties, parliamentary committees, pressure groups, several associations, and educational establishments. They therefore broadened opportunities for both the active and passive participation of the public in these debates,” asserts Carrier, who also claims that the years-long petitions, debates, and media coverage leading up to and following the apology amounted to “a form of commemoration in their own right.”

If apology constitutes an “acknowledgment of the human dignity and moral worth of victims,” as theorists of repentance generally argue, it is not surprising that Chirac’s speech engendered a positive response among French Jews. Jewish leaders, including the chief rabbi of France, Joseph Sitruk, Henri Hajdenberg, president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France (CRIF), and Serge Klarsfeld, president of the Association of Daughters and Sons of Deportees, saluted Chirac’s declaration. Among Jewish intellectuals, Alain Finkielkraut and Blandine Kriegel commended the initiative, but Claude Lanzmann raised questions about the artificiality of apology. For the author of the film *Shoah*, official recognition voided remembrance of its true content. Lanzmann reminisced that before July 16 had been designated a
national holiday, “the ceremonies at Vél’ d’Hiv’ had warmth: people who gathered there fervently shared a very strong memory, like a shared secret. Now there are dignitaries sitting on government-issue chairs reading ministerial speeches. It is what Flaubert in Madame Bovary called ‘the mechanical genuflection of hurried parishioners’.”

Just as Mitterrand and Chirac danced revealingly around the Vichy-as-continuity-or-break issue in their statements over Vél’ d’Hiv, political reaction to the state apology proved that a consensual vision of the Vichy past had not yet been achieved. Rather, the Manichean divide between True France and Vichy France was forcefully reiterated in the political arena, but not necessarily along party lines. Old-guard Gaullists as well as Mitterrandists shared a concern about describing precisely who was guilty. Some of Chirac’s fellow party members, sensitive to defending the Gaullist heritage, rejected his apology. National Assembly President Philippe Séguin refused to link the Vichy state with the French nation and repudiated an admission of collective guilt; deputy Pierre Mazeaud argued that the French Republic had continued to exist in exile in London under de Gaulle; and deputy and former resistant Jacques Baumel complained that Chirac’s apology diminished the legacy of the resistance. In the Mitterrandist camp, former Minister of Culture Jack Lang, Socialist party national secretary Claude Bartolone, and deputy and former Secretary of War Veterans Louis Mexandeau similarly insisted that the only guilty party was the Vichy regime and not the French Republic. Yet Lionel Jospin, socialist leader in the post-Mitterrand era, seconded Chirac’s apology, as did other socialists such as former Minister of Justice Robert Badinter, and former Prime Minister Michel Rocard. So too did the head of the French Communist Party, Robert Hue. On the extreme Right, by contrast, National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen vehemently rejected any notion of French collective responsibility and claimed that Chirac’s declaration dirtied the honor of the nation. Le Pen further accused Chirac of using the apology to pay an electoral debt to French Jews. These strong political responses to Chirac’s declaration attested to what one commentator has called “stubborn ideological contentiousness and … persistent efforts to make the memory of the past subservient to present political agendas.” This divisiveness among political spokespeople, therefore, contrasted with the overwhelmingly positive reception of Chirac’s apology among the wider public, as revealed in opinion polls.

Whereas apology constitutes a public recognition that victims did not deserve to be treated as they had been, the goal of reparations is to restore victims to their status and condition prior to the offense by making up for the losses they bore. The French state apology contributed to a new social climate in which the question of financial reparations to Jewish victims and their descendents became possible, even though, according to French law, Chirac’s unprecedented admission of guilt on behalf of the state engendered no liability that necessarily led to compensation. Instead, the centralized state effort at restitution and reparation that began in 1997 was the result of
two other forces: a series of national scandals exposing incomplete postwar restitution notably regarding spoliated works of art and Parisian apartments, and most especially an international mobilization originating with class-action lawsuits filed in the United States by survivors and their descendants seeking compensation for Holocaust crimes mostly in Germany and Switzerland but also in France. In response to these pressures, in January 1997, Prime Minister Alain Juppé announced the creation of a commission. Completed under Prime Minister Jospin’s term, the Matteoli Mission documented hundreds of thousands of instances of Jewish spoliation in France during the war, offered compensation of 1 billion francs to orphans of Jewish deportees, and created a memory foundation with 1.4 billion francs to provide assistance to Holocaust victims and heirs in need. Under legal duress, French insurance companies and financial institutions restituted an additional 22.5 million dollars as part of an agreement signed between France and the United States. Together with apology, the Matteoli Mission demonstrated a commitment on the part of the French state—in a time of political cohabitation—to address the Vichy past once and for all.

The links between the state apology and the judicial reckoning of the Papon trial were obvious to many. Journalist Laurent Greilsamer of Le Monde viewed the court ruling that had finally allowed the Papon trial to occur after decades of legal wrangling as a radical shift: “France no longer has the same regard for its history since Jacques Chirac publicly recognized its immutable debt towards Jewish deportees from France. The long parenthesis of the Gaullist mythology, which overestimated resistance France to better hide collaborationist France, is over. Officially.” Yet at the same time, Chirac’s apology reduced the stakes of the Papon case. The trial would no longer serve as the principal means of coming to terms with the Vichy past in the 1990s, since apology and reparation constituted new forms of redress. Papon’s lawyer was quick to seize on this shift to benefit his client by arguing that apology should substitute for judicial process and that Papon should not have to stand trial. These debates posited two views: on the one hand, the official state apology constituted a final resolution of the past. On the other hand, Chirac’s apology could be seen as a beginning, a point of departure leading from state recognition of official complicity in the Holocaust to a more extensive examination of collective responsibility within French civil society.

Apology’s Civil Turn: Professional Recognition of Responsibility

In April 1997, former Minister of Justice Robert Badinter published a book documenting the French legal profession’s role in the Holocaust. It told the story of how the French law bars carried out Vichy’s exclusionary legislation establishing a 2 percent quota on Jewish lawyers. French lawyers evaluated the personal, professional, and military credentials of their Jewish colleagues and
decided whom to ban from law practice. Badinter summarized the complacency of the legal community toward Jews: “Throughout it all, in the countryside as well as in Paris, not at any moment ... was a single protest made against the exclusion of Jews from the Bar ..., not a single declaration of principles formulated, not a single gesture of solidarity offered to fellow colleagues who would be thus eliminated.” Lawyers’ precipitous, active response to Vichy’s exclusionary legislation can be explained by the widespread belief of professional overcrowding that permeated the law profession in the twenty years prior to the war. Among other factors, the anti-Semitic quota was seen by many lawyers as a felicitous chance to reduce competition.

A mere few weeks after Badinter’s book appeared, the Paris bar issued a resolution recognizing the injustices committed toward Jewish and foreign lawyers during the war. Mentioning the historical evidence presented in Badinter’s book, the leadership council of the Paris bar admitted that contrary to its mission, bar members helped implement the laws of 1940 and 1941 excluding Jews and foreigners from practice. The recognition concluded, “Conscious of its responsibilities to the history of the bar, the Council bows its head to those who had been victims.” The Paris bar also signaled to the press that it would open its archives. Liberalization of archive access, however, has not yet happened.

Although the apology was not representative of the entire French legal profession, the Paris bar was by far the most prestigious and important bar in France, whose actions had affected the greatest number of Jews during the war. Unlike many of the apologies that were to follow from other civil groups in France, the Paris law bar’s declaration did not engender any discernable negative reaction either from within the profession (perhaps, albeit, due to lawyers’ signature discretion) or from without (likely because the law bar represents an exclusive “society” with arcane honor codes that preclude outside judgment). Furthermore, public apology was still a novel phenomenon and had yet to provoke exasperation from some corners of French society. At the same time, no other law bar came forward to second the apology from Paris. Only one individual, a former president of the Bordeaux law bar, made a public plea to his colleagues to repeat the Paris bar’s gesture, a few months later in the midst of the Papon trial in Bordeaux, but to no avail. With limited access to law bars’ archives, it remains unknown if an apology was even discussed in other law bar councils.

The facts presented in Badinter’s book were not entirely new. Compared to scholars who had begun to examine the wartime moral collapse of the French legal profession in preceding years, and who had indeed prepared the terrain for lawyers’ bracing look at their profession’s past faltering, Badinter had the gravitas to attract significant media coverage of his publication, which may have served to nudge his law bar into action. A former president of the elite Constitutional Council and a prominent member of the Paris bar, he had earned fame for abolishing the death penalty in France in 1981 as minister of justice.
Coming to terms with the past was also finally easier because, like Badinter, most practicing lawyers of the 1990s had begun their legal careers after the war, and thus had not participated in or witnessed the implementation of anti-Semitic quotas. An additional factor explains why the legal profession was the first civil group to face its Vichy past and take responsibility for its predecessors’ actions in the wake of Chirac’s collective apology. Looming on the legal horizon was the trial of Papon, which would raise new questions about the links between justice and history. Because institutions often apologize “in order to restore an institutional reputation … or to defuse a volatile situation,” the lawyers’ initiative was likely motivated in part by a desire to face the past on their own terms before being dragged into it by the media covering the Papon trial.

Lawyers’ recognition of past failings—their self-described mission is to serve the rights of man and to protect the oppressed—was matched by a more activist role in contemporary moral legal issues. In early 1997, for example, the Paris bar intervened several times in parliamentary debates over immigration to demand the removal of measures that infringed on the rights of foreigners guaranteed by the constitution. The urban riots of autumn 2005 brought lawyers to take public stands, either as individuals or via associations such as the Syndicat des avocats de France and the Conseil national des barreaux, to criticize the imposed state of emergency, the proposed expulsions of foreigners, and the poor results of policies to integrate minorities. A quick glance at the website of the Syndicat des avocats de France will show that legal support for immigrants and foreigners is one of this group’s defining leitmotifs, if not its raison d’être. The bar apology for anti-Semitism can therefore be analyzed as “an act of discourse that modifies a situation.” It signified a broad evolution of the legal profession away from its conservative past toward an identity more steeped in the post-1989 human rights culture. At the same time this strand of social activism can trace its ancestry in part to the Resistance in the legal profession, however diverse and diversified that resistance had been.

Catholic Repentance for Passivity

Bishops representing the French Catholic Church offered an apology to the Jewish community in a solemn commemoration at the site of the former Drancy camp outside Paris on 30 September 1997, a week before the opening of the Papon trial. A “declaration of repentance” was pronounced by Bishop Olivier de Berranger of the Saint-Denis diocese, where the Drancy camp had existed, and was signed by all bishops whose diocese had housed an internment camp controlled by Vichy. With no media pomp, words held center stage at the ceremony, which was followed by separate religious observations by bishops and rabbis.

For what did the Catholic Church repent? Whereas the French state and the Paris law bar apologized for active participation in the Holocaust, the
French episcopate apologized for not having raised its voice against persecution, for its silence and passivity. No official protest was ever made by the Catholic Church against the two Statutes of the Jews in October 1940 and June 1941. Silence was the French Church’s response to discriminatory legislation and mounting social exclusions. Only after the very public roundups in the southern zone of France in the late summer of 1942 did any Church official publicly denounce the treatment of Jews. Although a handful of bishop-resistants emerged in the late years of the war, only six of seventy-six bishops ever spoke out publicly against Vichy’s anti-Semitism. Factors that prompted the Catholic Church’s embrace of Vichy’s “National Revolution” included the return to conservative religious values and the restoration of the Church’s prestige (concretized by the restitution of religious teaching in public schools and of Church property appropriated since 1905). The bishops’ apology in 1997 directly criticized the Church’s loyalty to the Vichy regime: “In their majority, the spiritual authorities, entangled in a loyalism and docility going well beyond traditional obedience to established powers, remained stuck in an attitude of conformism, prudence, and abstention.”

The bishops’ speech exceeded Chirac’s declaration in candidness and set the benchmark for future apologies. It specifically acknowledged the Church’s silence in the face of anti-Semitism: “In February 1941, 40,000 Jews were interned in French camps, while … the Church hierarchy was concerned about protecting its own faithful and maintaining its institutions. … Facing the breadth of the drama and the extraordinary character of the crime, too many pastors of the Church, by their silence, offended the Church itself and its mission.” An explicit connection was made between past and present clergy members: “It is our Church, and we must recognize that ecclesiastical interests interpreted in an excessively restrictive manner came before the commandments of the conscience and we must ask ourselves why.” Furthermore, the bishops linked the Church’s failure during Vichy with centuries of Christian anti-Judaism: “On this soil flourished the venomous plant of hatred for the Jews.” The declaration concluded: “This failing of the Church of France and its responsibility toward the Jewish people are part of our history. We confess this sin. We beg forgiveness of God and ask the Jewish people to hear these words of repentance.”

Not unexpectedly, the bishops’ declaration was heavily imbued with religious language. A cynical view points to the stiff, literary, and almost medieval evocation of the word “repentance,” as one writer suggested that the Church had chosen it carefully in order to distance the wartime acts from the present Church. Yet the bishops’ apology used the terms “sin” and “repentance” as concepts that apply to both individuals and institutions. As such, the significance of the declaration resides in its blunt criticism of the Church as an institution and of its leaders as a group, creating the conditions for a thorough “examination of its collective conscience.”

The French Catholic Church’s apology is best understood in the context of three distinct evolutions. First, the Church’s repentance reflected the new
contours of memories of Vichy in French society. Second, it can be viewed in the perspective of transnational Catholic calls for repentance. The French declaration was a response to the Vatican’s signal for national Churches to reconcile with communities who had suffered from Catholic intolerance. The Polish and German episcopates had already set such an example for the French Church, and Swiss bishops followed in the year 2000. Third, the apology testified to a transition toward greater social activism on the part of the French Church during the 1990s. For example, French bishops responded swiftly and decisively to two eruptions of anti-Semitism in close proximity to their apology: an anti-Jewish analysis of the Old Testament in a bible translation published by two French priests, and Abbé Pierre’s support for Holocaust-denier Roger Garaudy. French bishops also asked the Vatican to withdraw its support of the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz. Like the legal profession, the Church had begun to criticize harsh policies toward immigrants, and it drew up a document about immigration for Catholic parishioners entitled “A Call to Live Together.” This progressive stance reflected the French Church’s commitment to apply the lessons of Vichy to contemporary human rights abuses. One framer of the Church apology, Bishop Berranger, noted the precedent set by public repentance: “If we repent for what happened under Vichy, it is also in order to think, for example, about what is currently happening in Algeria, in East Africa, about everything that, in the West, can lead to denials of the conscience. The Church must speak out. No matter what the situation.” Several years later, the Church reasserted its resolution. On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 2005, the Conseil d’Églises chrétiennes en France (an assembly of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches) issued a declaration affirming its commitment to fight anti-Semitism: “Christian memory and Church repentance can not erase what people have inflicted on the Jewish people. … We ask all churches never to stop their denunciation of all forms of anti-Semitism. … We must remain vigilant.” The promises of a “fragile but irreversible Judeo-Christian reconciliation” were renewed by religious leaders via common charitable initiatives. And the Catholic episcopate, along with Protestant and Orthodox Christian leaders, quickly and publicly protested the restrictive immigration policies proposed by the French government in the wake of the November 2005 urban riots.

How was the Church apology received? The French Jewish community’s formal acceptance validated it symbolically. CRIF president Henri Hajdenberg, for instance, responded to the bishops at the Drancy ceremony, “Your request for forgiveness … can not help but to be heard by victim survivors and their children.” Jean Kahn, president of the Central Consistory of France, welcomed the apology despite its tardiness and its limited number of signatories. For his part, former chief rabbi of France René-Samuel Sirat found it theologically impossible to grant forgiveness on behalf of the victims: “Pardon can not be given by those who were not offended. … The
request for forgiveness is pronounced, but there is no response. We are simply witnesses of this act.”

General public opinion was also favorable to the bishops’ repentance. In a poll taken a few days afterward, 45% of the French approved of the declaration, while 41% declared themselves indifferent and 9% disapproved. With one year’s distance from the event, 68% of French polled said the bishops were right to apologize and 24% disapproved. How can we account for this crystallization of sentiment, apart from typical polling pitfalls? To an optimistic observer, the growing popular approval for the Church’s repentance suggests that the passage of time allows apologies to breathe into their full potential for reconciliation, whereas the increase in disapproval may reflect mere annoyance with the close attention paid to the Vichy past by 1998. In any case, the high approval ratings demonstrate that apology was not just an affair between victims and perpetrators but affected the whole of French society.

At the same time, attitudes among practicing Catholics indicate a divided reaction. Whereas the Catholic press was unanimously supportive of the repentance, some parishioners expressed hostility in their correspondence with the clergy. Common criticisms postulated that the Church’s apology overshadowed Catholics’ rescue efforts during the Occupation, and that the Church would be weakened by focusing on its mistakes. Among 165 letters sent to Archbishop of Paris Jean-Marie Lustiger shortly after the apology, only eleven were positive, whereas forty-eight were unequivocally hostile, eleven denied responsibility, and thirty-eight evoked the importance of the resistance. One reporter remarked on the lack of discussion about the bishops’ declaration at the parish level, pointing out that at Sunday mass in three churches in the Brittany region, no mention at all had been made of the recent apology. Were parish priests continuing their tradition of silence, he wondered? Several bishops recognized from these reactions that they had more work ahead of them to undo the centuries of anti-Judaism on both sides of the pulpit.

Against the view that French institutions apologizing for wartime wrongs had purposefully waited for protagonists to die off so as to distance themselves from their past, Étienne Fouilloux, historian of the Church, observed, “Even though the Church could have spoken out fifty years ago, it is not so late either: the university, the magistrature, the medical order ... also have something to say along the lines of what the Church pronounces today. The state did so, recently and with difficulty. The Church’s gesture is part of a movement of general recognition that I esteem important for Jews and that I hope will take on even greater scope.” Fouilloux was not the only one to call for other civil groups to follow the Church’s lead. Henri Hajdenberg publicly expressed the hope that similar engagements would be taken by other professional organizations and by state institutions such as the police, the Councilors of State (who put into technical application the Statutes of the Jews and other exclusionary legislation), magistrates (who interpreted the statutes), and professors (who taught the statutes in their law courses). Novelist and
member of the Académie Française Bertrand Poirot-Delpech also called on state organs, in particular the university (which had implemented the Vichy dictate of a 3 percent quota on Jewish students), to imitate the Church’s apology.\textsuperscript{93}

**Police Embrace the Ritual of Apology**

Immediately following the French Catholic Church’s repentance, a labor organization of police officers stepped forward to apologize for the active collaboration of the French police in the rounding up and deporting of Jews during the war. The ritual of public apology in France was by now well established. First, the Syndicat national des policiers en tenue (SNPT) issued a press release recognizing the guilt of its predecessors under Vichy and expressing its “eternal regret.” Second, the group offered an apology in an organized ceremony at the memorial of the Unknown Jewish Martyr in Paris with representatives of the Jewish community in attendance. Third, the speech act contained specific acknowledgment that 4,500 Parisian policemen participated in the Vélodrome d’Hiver roundup and that throughout the war the French police served as a zealous executor of state policies of internment and deportation. Finally, the police union requested pardon from French Jews for the actions of their predecessors “in the name of the republican policemen that we represent, so that never again will men let themselves commit such acts of barbarity.”\textsuperscript{94}

The apology was limited, however, because the SNPT was a small union of a minority of Parisian police officers and therefore could not be considered to represent “the French police.” Its apology was also diminished by strong dissent that it provoked from parts of the police corps. Another police union, the SGP-CUP (Syndicat général de la police-Centrale unitaire de la police), whose membership counted the majority of Parisian uniformed police officers, characterized the SNPT gesture as “incoherent”: “It is stupid and borderline dangerous to equate collaborators with resisters and traitors with patriots by assuming a collective responsibility of the ‘police institution’.\textsuperscript{95}

The police apology was therefore not an example of a widespread outpouring of remorse. Nevertheless, the verbal and ceremonial recognition of guilt was significant for several reasons. First, as the SNPT noted, the role of police personnel in the persecution of Jews in Vichy France was direct and physical, in contrast to Maurice Papon’s bureaucratic paper-pushing. The police apology thus constituted a straightforward acknowledgment of the strong-arm actions most commonly associated with the Holocaust in the public mind. Second, as an organ of the state, police were theoretically “covered” by the official apology offered by Chirac, yet this group nonetheless chose to embrace the ritual therapy of apology. Finally, the apology translated into a contemporary agenda: around the same time, the SNPT pursued and gained the legal right to bar a National Front member from its police union.
Turning the Unread Page in Medicine

The penetration of apology into civil society also reached the French medical profession. At an annual meeting on 11 October 1997, the Order of Doctors issued a declaration of regret for discrimination against Jewish doctors during the Vichy period. Protectionist and xenophobic sentiment had culminated during the war in a hasty adoption of anti-Semitic and antiforeigner regulations. Like lawyers, it was doctors themselves, through their professional Order, who put into practice the Vichy regime’s 2 percent quota on their Jewish colleagues. The medical declaration took place during the first few days of the Papon trial, and the date was not lost on Jews: 11 October 1997, a Saturday, was Yom Kippur, the day of pardon. In a “symbolic request for forgiveness in the name of the medical community” extended to Jewish doctors, president of the Order Bernard Glorion admitted, “Colleagues became guilty, voluntarily or not ... [and] had to participate in this sad and shameful operation of discrimination and exclusion. ... We can only regret and repudiate with gravity and humility.” He concluded, “It is up to us today in the name of the medical community to remind all those who succeed us that our duty, their duty, will be never to yield to the temptation of exclusion and never to accept, even by our silence, any discrimination or rejection of any group.” The apology was complemented by a promise of transparency: the Order announced that it would open its archives to the public; something historians had requested for years. At stake was the release of internal records that would elucidate denunciation and exclusionary practices within the medical corps. It was reputed that sacks filled with thousands of letters from French doctors denouncing colleagues as Jews, foreigners, and charlatans were found after the war and subsequently burned in an effort to rebuild the nation. The surviving records of the Order had never been made public.

The Order’s apology contained several weaknesses. Ambivalent references to doctors who “voluntarily or not,” “had to participate” in anti-Semitic actions constituted a significant abdication of responsibility. The “duty to remember” invoked by Glorion only called for remembrance of the “admirable and anonymous behavior of doctors who, risking their lives, obeyed their duty and assisted the sick and often their fellow colleagues” and not of excluded Jewish doctors. The apology was further undermined by an artificial distancing between past and present: the declaration asserted that the Order of Doctors was refounded after the Liberation and was therefore a completely distinct institution from the wartime Order. In these ways, the Order’s statement maintained ambiguity and reiterated a pattern of denial, making it a classic non-apology. The tainted origins of the Order—created by the Vichy regime after decades of medical lobbying (partly for the purpose of excluding unwanted social categories from the profession)—had been a source of illegitimacy for the postwar medical profession. Many of the same doctors who had participated in discriminatory policies and collaborative activities during the war persisted in Order leadership roles after the war.
The most serious problem was that the Order of Doctors—whether conceived as an institution, an ensemble of individuals, or their elected leadership council—did not support the apology. The representatives of the medical institution did not debate, approve, or publicize their president’s initiative. The Order’s monthly journal made no mention of the apology in the months preceding or following it, and no sign of it appears on the institution’s website. If this medical “apology” was so half-hearted and instantaneously forgotten, what had engendered it in the first place? President Glorion was under outside pressure to do it, records indicate, and he doubted that collective agreement could be achieved through internal debate. Also, the previous apologies of other civil groups subjected the Order of Doctors to institutional peer-pressure in the 1990s climate of memorialization of Vichy: there was a sense that, however perfunctory, some gesture had to be made. An editorial in Le Monde had called precisely on the Order of Doctors to follow the reconciliatory initiatives of the Church and Paris law bar. And Minister of Health Bernard Kouchner had insisted publicly, “I am impatiently waiting for this declaration from the doctors.” Only institutional cleansing performed through memory work, apology, and mourning, Kouchner provocatively argued, could permit the Order to reclaim its dignity.

For many doctors, however, the apology felt neither cleansing nor dignified. Physicians’ letters to the editors of medical journals provide evidence of acerbic dissent. One doctor from Versailles, for instance, had “had enough of these mediatized-epileptic tremors over the Second World War. I was not there. I did not do anything. So leave me alone. … Collective responsibility does not exist.” The claim that some doctors assisted Jews figured prominently among medical reactions to the apology. For example, a seventy-six-year-old member of the Order’s departmental council of the Seine, a former resistant and current member of the Front National party, rejected the apology because he claimed that many of his colleagues had protected Jewish doctors during the war. Another doctor verbalized his indignation: “What would all the big names in French medicine who fought against the invader and who constantly risked their lives to save Jewish lives think of this ‘repentance’?”

Nor were local Order leaders initially cooperative in the national directive to open archives. The vice-president of the Gironde Order’s departmental council proclaimed, “It’s very late, too late. We should have opened the drawers in the 1950s. To do so today is to attack the memory of those who had taken on responsibilities and whom we are incapable of judging outside of the context of the period.” According to the president of the Northern Order’s departmental council, there was nothing of interest in the archives. The archives of the national Order have since been placed in the Ministry of Health collection at the French public archives and made accessible, but the archives of the departmental Orders, arguably the most important since they contain the original decision-making over Jewish quotas whereas the national archives contain records only of the appeals to those decisions, are scattered and as a general rule poorly conserved.
Nonetheless, positive reaction to the apology surfaced within the French medical profession as well. Despite disappointment over the hedged language, Jewish doctors expressed overall satisfaction.\textsuperscript{111} Several medical journals followed up on the apology by investigating the history of the profession under Vichy, thus filling the informational and memorial void created by the Order’s stunted declaration of regret.\textsuperscript{112} As one journal put it, “Zealous and obedient creature of Pétain ... the Order was subservient to the regime. The departmental medical council leaders were the perfect implementers of the exclusionary laws.”\textsuperscript{113} For some, the apology came as a long-awaited reckoning: “Fifty-seven years! We had to wait fifty-seven years for the Order to beg forgiveness.”\textsuperscript{114} Some doctors sought to link the apology to contemporary French debates about immigration and public memory. The Committee of Foreign-Diploma Doctors, for instance, drew a comparison between wartime exclusion and current discrimination against foreign doctors.\textsuperscript{115} In a letter to the editor of a medical journal, one doctor expressed hope that a similar process of acknowledgment would be undertaken for acts of torture committed during the Algerian War.\textsuperscript{116}

Since its Vichy origins, the Order of Doctors has had a conservative reputation both for its role in sociopolitical affairs (its fight against the legalization of abortion, for example) and for its internal governance (its favoring of colleagues over patients in medical disputes). But it has nonetheless evolved in recent years toward more open and democratic ways, especially under the presidency of Glorion.\textsuperscript{117} His recognition of medical anti-Semitism during Vichy can be viewed as part of this evolution. A recent instance may attest to doctors’ renewed post-apology commitment to tolerance: doctors were one of the more active professional groups to protest against Jean-Marie Le Pen, “a carrier of xenophobia and exclusion,” during the second round of the 2002 presidential elections.\textsuperscript{118}

“In principle, institutions, like men, hate to be wrong, and thus public acts of contrition remain relatively rare. This is what makes them valuable,” remarked a medical observer.\textsuperscript{119} Ultimately, however, the Order of Doctors’ apology proved to be abortive. Although it stimulated discussion of the Order’s past ex post facto, the declaration was ambivalent, unrepresentative, and it conveyed the impression that it was reluctantly given. Conflicts were buried anew with no final sense of reconciliation.\textsuperscript{120} One doctor’s frustration summed it up: “This individual and timid ‘repentance’ is not enough. ... The Order wants us to ‘turn the page’ that no one has read yet.”\textsuperscript{121}

**Short of Apology, State Institutions Acknowledge Their Pasts**

The wave of repentance for Vichy injustices took one of the most prestigious state institutions in its wake. The Conseil d’État is the highest administrative court in France. It is consulted for interpretation of legislative texts and is responsible for elaborating laws into applicable decrees. At issue was the role played by the French positivist legal tradition in the legitimization of wartime
exclusionary laws. In a seminal article, legal scholar Danièle Lochak argued that the French judiciary system during Vichy interpreted anti-Semitic law under the guise of neutralism. Accordingly, French jurists’ resolute commitment to objectivity blinded them to the ethical and human consequences of discriminatory legislation. Their elaboration of legal doctrine and jurisprudence also served to normalize anti-Semitic law as a legitimate discipline with its own set of legal experts.  

This critical view of the French judiciary during the war made its way into the leadership of the Council of State in 1997. During a colloquium on the Conseil d’État and regime change in French history—one theme of the celebration of the Conseil’s second centenary—a member of the Conseil d’État recognized the institution’s legal conformism under Vichy and admitted that its councilors had interpreted anti-Semitic and xenophobic laws in a rigidly Cartesian manner, occasionally demonstrating an unmistakably discriminatory bent in their opinions. Indeed, one French legal scholar has documented that most Conseil d’État members during Vichy never tried to impede or stall the application of anti-Semitic law and in fact widely approved its content. In its defense, however, the Conseil d’État’s recognition also asserted that its jurisprudence tended to be more liberal after 1942 and that its margin of maneuver under Vichy authorities was particularly narrow.

As was true of some of the other institutions examined above, internal reactions among members of the Conseil d’État were split over the acknowledgment of the Conseil’s Vichy record. Some members deemed it courageous and honest and suggested that the institution could in fact have done better to counter anti-Semitism, whereas others expressed outright anger that the issue had been aired at the colloquium.

The declaration was not quite an apology. Had it been voted by the members of the Conseil d’État and issued by its president, it would have constituted a more representative and authoritative recognition of responsibility. Instead, it was issued by the president of the finance section, Jean Massot. Although the report had been initiated by the vice-president of the Conseil and was researched by a committee, it was delivered without consultation of all the members of the Conseil d’État. Different in nature from the more repentant tone of some previous apologies, this gesture nonetheless represented a breakthrough for the French judicial system. Because the Conseil d’État is one of the grand corps of the French state, like the police it, too, was theoretically covered by Chirac’s official 1995 apology for Vichy. Rather than considering the Conseil d’État exempt from historical reckoning, however, Massot stressed the influence of Chirac’s apology on the institution’s desire to come to terms with its own past.

The Conseil d’État’s revisiting of its history was also perceptible in its involvement in the Papon trial. Following Papon’s condemnation for crimes against humanity, the Conseil d’État determined that the French state was obliged to pay half of Papon’s legal fees owed to victims because the “acts and actions of the French government, which did not directly result from the con-
straints of the occupier and which were independent of the personal actions of Maurice Papon, enabled and facilitated operations that constituted the prelude to deportation.”126 By rendering the Fifth Republic financially accountable for actions of the wartime administration, this ruling put legal teeth behind Chirac’s symbolic recognition that the Vichy regime was not a parenthesis in French history.

The Conseil d’État was the last state institution to engage in declarative recognition of its Vichy past. Yet performative apology was not the only avenue for state or civil institutions to address their respective histories. At the end of the 1990s, the creation of historical commissions to research institutional activities during Vichy coincided with the apology trend. For instance, the Ministry of Youth and Sports established an historical commission in 1997 to examine its role in propaganda and collaboration.127 Often, such historical commissions were created under mounting threats of bad publicity or legal actions. A more powerful state institution, the Caisse des dépôts et consignations, responsible for managing “aryanized” Jewish assets in France during the war, under pressure from the Matteoli Mission hired historian René Rémond to head a committee to study its Vichy past and held a colloquium in November 2001.128 In response to lawsuits alleging complicity in crimes against humanity, the French national railroad company (SNCF) initiated a research colloquium in 2000 to examine its involvement in the deportation process,129 although the SNCF’s leadership has adamantly refused to apologize despite one plaintiff’s dogged insistence on a verbal recognition of responsibility.130 For its part, the magistrature had already organized an investigative colloquium in 1993 entitled “To Judge under Vichy.”131 The momentum for inquiry has not waned at the start of the twenty-first century: straddling the divide between civil service and intellectual corps, French ethnographers also assembled a conference on their Vichy past in 2003.132 Like trials, institutional historical commissions brought academics and apologizers into a close relationship that has been criticized by proponents of maintaining a scholarly distance from current events. The rise of the “historian-expert” in the 1990s dismayed several members of the historical profession who resented the transformation of scholarship into narrow expertise to be put to use in trials and commissions.133 Despite this controversy over intellectuals’ role, the apology trend both benefited from and elicited new scholarly inquiry.

**Apology: Between Past and Future**

The French wave of apology for World War Two injustices ended with the acknowledgment of the Conseil d’État. Public satiation served to brake the phenomenon. While several of the apologies received minimal publicity, those offered by Chirac and the Catholic Church attracted saturation-level press coverage. One observer bemoaned, “I repent, we repent. … It is currently
the most common verb in the French language. The churches, the doctors, and the police parade and contrive. We are now waiting for the postmen, the train conductors, and the truck drivers to join the great self-flagellating movement. ... Me, too, I ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness for not wanting to repent.”\textsuperscript{134} After the first few public acknowledgments of responsibility, apologies became perceived by some as empty words and routinized display. As one French political scientist put it, “Repentance is not a miracle remedy. It is also fundamentally ‘impure,’ inseparable from power struggles, weighted with ulterior motives and calculations. ... In the end, everything gets old; what was originally a solemn gesture becomes mechanical over time.”\textsuperscript{135}

A comparison of the apologies for Vichy anti-Semitism reveals that some were more successful than others. Dissent over apologies, in the case of the Order of Doctors and the police union notably, weakened their impact. The authority of the issuer of the apology counted for a lot. All of the apologies except for Chirac’s state apology were criticized for not being representative enough: the Catholic Church apology was not signed by all bishops; the lawyers’ apology only concerned Paris; the apologies of the doctors and the Councilors of State had not been debated and voted in advance. Yet individuals played significant roles in making apologies happen: Chirac and Badinter in quite daring fashion, Bishop Berranger working quietly but instrumentally, and Dr. Glorion meekly so. If apology is a meaningful speech act, then language is a key element of comparison: Chirac spoke of “collective fault” and “immutable debt”; the Catholic bishops “confessed,” “begged forgiveness,” and made an act of “repentance”; the Paris law bar recognized its “responsibility” and “bowed its head” to victims; and the police and the doctors expressed “regret.” The safe term “recognition” was also used by most of these groups.

Apology has its limits. As in the case of the Order of Doctors, apology is often an imperfect means to clarify historical truths and heal wounds. In contrast to the Church repentance that drew a clear link of solidarity between past and present members of the religious institution, Glorion maintained the version that Vichy was a parenthesis in French medical history. Apologies never guarantee dispersion of myths about the past. Bad apologies, if they re-solidify falsehoods, can be worse than none at all.

Apology obviously does not inoculate a society against future injustice and prejudice. Philippe Sollers was not the only one to note that there was still plenty of anti-Semitism in post-apology France, for example.\textsuperscript{136} But apology can reassure descendents of victim groups that they are no longer vulnerable and can remind the rest of society of the need for wariness. As Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn argue, apology can also be “an opportunity to re-imagine identity, not to change the past, but to change the way groups and their members stand in relation to it.”\textsuperscript{137} In many of the civil cases studied here, apology coincided with renewed commitments to social activism in defense of human rights. Most everyone would agree that post-apology behavior is an important measure of the sincerity of an apology. This is in fact what makes apologies
forward-looking. They can enable people to shift their attention from the past to the present and to overcome the tyranny of memory.

Apology has also fostered the integration of Jewish memory into the French national historical narrative. The Shoah is no longer external to the classic dichotomy between resistance and collaboration but rather part and parcel of the French wartime history. Tony Judt even argues that France’s coming to terms with its complicity in the Final Solution has constituted nothing less than the foundation of a European future: “It is not that France behaved the worst. It is that France mattered the most. ... Until France could look its past in the face, a shadow would hang over the new Europe.” But this achievement has hardly put an end to controversy. The focus of apologies on the hitherto neglected Jewish experience has not only been seized upon by the National Front, but it has also provoked scholars such as Eric Conan and Henry Rousso to warn against the “temptation of ‘judeocentrism,’ which seeks to reread the entire history of the Occupation through the prism of anti-Semitism.” But such misgivings appear to have remained a minority view. When polled in October 1998, 58 percent of French people (and a higher percentage among 18-24 year-olds) claimed that discussion of the extermination of Jews during World War Two “was not excessive.”

Judt furnishes a long view: “The first post-war Europe was built upon deliberate mis-memory—upon forgetting as a way of life. Since 1989, Europe has been constructed instead upon a compensatory surplus of memory: institutionalized public remembering as the very foundation of collective identity. The first could not endure—but nor will the second. Some measure of neglect and even forgetting is the necessary condition for civic health. To say this is not to advocate amnesia. A nation has first to have remembered something before it can begin to forget it.”

The Apology Model Applied to New Historical Objects

By the end of 1997, several arguments against public apologies had been articulated: that contemporary actors cannot apologize for the actions of predecessors; that institutions cannot be guilty; that individuals cannot apologize for a collectivity. The argument that “apologies have their place, but they cannot be substitutes for action,” was expressed scathingly by a philosophy professor who labeled repentance a gratuitous “rip off” serving as a screen against truth and reparations, especially in the case of colonialism. Others denounced the inconsistency of the apology trend: Why were apologies only being offered for certain injustices? Such criticism led to a phenomenon of “victim competition” and to the politicization of apology as an ideological gesture. This occurred notably when, in response to the publication of The Black Book of Communism, the political Right opposed the focus on Vichy with a competing narrative of communist criminality. The far-Right National Front went so far as to demand from French Communists an apology for
Stalin’s crimes. The overwhelming focus on Vichy alone bothered several intellectuals. Historian Raoul Girardet warned against “selective repentance,” whereas writer François Maspéro urged the French to pay attention also to current events for which they might have to apologize in 2040.

The social demand for apology did in fact reach beyond the issue of Vichy to other episodes of the French past. In 1998, at the centenary of Émile Zola’s “J’accuse” in January, the Catholic journal _La Croix_ apologized for anti-Semitic discourse in its pages during the Dreyfus Affair. In February, the treatment of indigenous populations came to the forefront of the apology agenda when New Caledonia demanded repentance from France for its brutal conquest of the island in 1853.

The one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in France in early 1998 also prompted calls for a state apology, and although no official apology has been offered, significant actions, imbued with a language of regret, have been taken to acknowledge French participation in the slave trade. On 10 May 2001, the French parliament voted slavery to be a crime against humanity, and in 2006 on the same day, Chirac inaugurated an annual commemoration of slavery and its abolition. Chirac’s speech followed a similar structure to that of his 1995 apology for Vichy: he recounted slavery’s pervasion in society, delimited its evils, drew explicit links between slavery and its legacy of contemporary racism, promised new efforts to fight against forced labor, expressed pride that France was the first country in the world to recognize slavery as a crime against humanity, and, while strongly emphasizing the need to face the mistakes of the past frontally, reaffirmed that “the Republic was born with the fight against slavery: 1794, 1848: The Republic is abolition. We are the descendents of these republicans.” Not quite an apology, this ceremonial declaration was, according to Chirac’s own words, a commemoration of a “tragedy” and “the entire French nation’s participation in a prise de conscience.” Yet it was clear to many that, for better or for worse, the spirit of apology had permeated into new areas of the French past.

**From Vichy to Algeria**

By 2006, the Algerian past has undeniably replaced Vichy as the preeminent historical passion in French society. Much scholarship has already been published about “the end of the amnesia” over the Algerian War, both documenting and contributing to the memorial trend. Layered upon the fast-growing historiography of the Franco-Algerian war, revelations about wartime incidents ignited several scandals in French society since the 1990s, demonstrating that known history had not yet completed its transformation into understood history embedded in the collective French consciousness. The most provocative of these scandals was the publication of retired general Paul Aussaresses’ memoirs justifying the use of torture and summary executions by French troops in...
Algeria during the war. In addition, Louisette Ighilariz’s account of being tortured and raped by French authorities and Raphaëlle Branche’s doctoral thesis defense about French torture in Algeria synchronically made this issue surface anew. “If the French state has yet to take responsibility,” argued historian William Cohen, “the debate over torture during 2000-2001 laid the foundation, it appears, for voicing some sort of public contrition for the horrors perpetrated in Algeria.”

Scholars have stepped up research and urged political leaders to make redress. Referring directly to Chirac’s apology for Vichy anti-Semitism as a model, a dozen prominent French personalities, including an important contingent of Communists or ex-Communists and a handful of intellectuals, publicly petitioned the president and prime minister to acknowledge and condemn past French practices of torture in Algeria. Despite the pressure, neither President Chirac nor Prime Minister Jospin satisfied these demands for responsibility-taking and apology.

Their reluctance is comprehensible. How can French leaders apologize for acts of torture or other excesses without addressing the overall pursuit of the war to retain Algeria, as well as the entire colonial enterprise? Further, President Chirac himself served as a young lieutenant in Algeria during the war, a fact that, analogous to Mitterrand’s resistance to accountability for Vichy, could explain much of Chirac’s reluctance to repeat his own bold Vichy apology. And finally, in addition to the usual explanations for resistance to a public apology—ideological posturing, electoral politicking, fear of reparations and court trials—an important obstacle to apology involves rival interest groups. Compared to Vichy, the Franco-Algerian past consists of more multifarious memories that compete in metropolitan France today: pieds noirs, beurs, harkis, Algerian immigrants, war veterans. Those who lived the war—harkis, repatriated French, and ex-conscripts, for example—do not package as neatly into good guy/bad guy categories as the protagonists of World War Two tended to, and furthermore they constitute important electoral constituencies, as revealed by the fiasco of the 23 February 2005 law mandating the teaching of the “positive role” played by France in North Africa. Was the December 2002 inauguration in Paris of a national memorial of the Algerian War and of the Moroccan and Tunisian conflicts—in honor of the more than 22,000 “soldiers who died for France in North Africa almost a half-century ago”—meant to placate veterans before political leaders could apologize in their name? Chirac’s historic presidential visit to Algeria in March 2003 encouraged hopes for a French apology to its former colony but ultimately only produced a “declaration of friendship” between the two countries, which has since foundered after the February 2005 law. In many ways, regarding Algeria, the reverse of the commonplace holds true. It is not so much that the past influences the present but rather that the present weighs on competing views of the past, as twenty-first-century France contends with a number of challenges: integrating North African immigrants and their descendants, managing diplomacy with Algiers, and governing its overseas departments and territories.
Historian Claude Liauzu analyzes the current crisis in French society over the Algerian past: “This malaise of the State is the ransom for a long official silence, which in the last few years has ceded to an accumulation of disorderly initiatives.” These steps began in June 1999, when Parliament declared the Algerian conflict a “war,” officially ending a state denial that had never held sway in French public opinion. And in reaction to the Aussaresses scandal, Prime Minister Jospin authorized the opening of national archives pertaining to the Algerian War. But philosopher and social critic Christian Delacampagne argued that since the facts of French injustices have already been well documented by historians, Jospin’s gesture was meant to distract attention away from the calls for apology. Short of an apology to harkis for having abandoned them after the war, the French state has made some amends: material reparations and a national day of commemoration for harkis on 25 September 2001. The law of 23 February 2005 will go down in history for its infamous injunction to teach the “positive role” of colonialism, but what has been forgotten amidst the clamor is that the law, officially titled “loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés,” was addressed not only to pieds noirs but to harkis as well. The operative word being “recognition” (reconnaissance), the text did not satisfy leftist parliamentarians’ demand to employ the term “responsibility” for the French abandonment of harkis, to the great disappointment of harki associations. The debates over this law exemplify the competing claims for memory of the Algerian War, elucidate the high degree of memory’s politicization, and suggest that an apology is still far from consensual. Yet at the same time in early 2005, there was evidence of official France’s readiness to confront the reality of the Algerian past. The French ambassador to Algeria, Hubert Colin de Verdière, recognized the French “massacre” (his term) of tens of thousands of Algerians in Sétif, a small city in eastern Algeria, in May 1945, which was a reprisal for the Armistice-Day Algerian rebellion that had killed 109 French persons. The Ambassador’s characterization of the French repression as an “inexcusable tragedy” led Algerian groups to amplify their demands for a full official apology from France for the war. These examples, despite the sense of “two steps forward, one step back” that they convey, demonstrate that small recognitions emanating from French authorities have fed hopes for larger ones. While public or popular memory of the Algerian War has been robustly informed by historiography, the media, and literary and filmic representations, and official memory has followed suit since the 1990s through the posing of plaques, commission of monuments, debates over commemoration days, historical commissions, and the opening of archives, a verbal official apology has become the benchmark for reconciliation over Algeria.

Apologizing for Vichy paved the way—discursively, socially, and politically—for an apologetic engagement with France’s colonial past. As Henry Rousso has pointed out, the Algerian War, like Vichy, was “characterized by domestic strife, a tarnishing of the French image of guardian of human rights,
and a decisive decline in French power.”172 Often the two histories intersected, for instance, when revelations about Papon’s role as Paris police prefect in the 1961 massacre of Algerians surfaced during his trial as a Vichy bureaucrat for the deportation of Jews. Indeed, Benjamin Stora and William Cohen have asserted that the Papon trial and the 1999 recognition of the Algerian “war” crystallized the shift in French society away from remembering Vichy toward remembering Algeria.173 While there is no preordained threshold of how much a society can deal with its various pasts at a given moment, memory of the Algerian War emerged more forcefully after public preoccupation with memories of Vichy had subsided in France. Of course, debates over French actions in Algeria were far from new in the 1990s; they had begun during the war itself. And historians have long since exposed the “massive and widespread” practice of torture perpetrated by the French military and approved by the highest echelons of political authority during the war.174 But the memory of the Algerian War, and the torture issue in particular, took an apologetic turn only after a language of repentance had been established by the debates over Vichy. Standards for reconciliation over Vichy were then applied to Algeria.

As of this writing no official public apology for French acts, including torture, committed during the Algerian War has been made. Yet a French apology to victims in Algeria might not be far off, in part because of the normalization of apology and its perceived benefits as a means of mourning the past and ameliorating the future. And already the Algerian past has maintained a sustained presence in French public space for several years, something that had been the case for Vichy’s memory before its apology turn. If the factors that led to the Vichy apology provide a roadmap toward an apology for French crimes in Algeria, the following circumstances have yet to be assembled: mobilized pressure groups focused tenaciously on an apology for a specific injustice from the highest French authority, favorable political circumstances such as a new president with a strong majority, and an approaching anniversary (2012 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s end).

Now that demanding an apology had become a firmly rooted practice in French public discourse, an apology for Algeria from a French head of state will not take society by surprise as Chirac’s Vichy apology did. On the contrary, the state may need to catch up with public opinion: 56 percent of French surveyed in 2001 were in favor of an official apology.175 But because the state apology for Vichy anti-Semitism triggered a wave of repentance throughout French society, civil groups wishing to make amends for their particular Algerian pasts also may be awaiting a cue from the state. Neither the military and law enforcement establishment, nor any corporatist group that actively or passively enabled colonial injustices to occur—lawyers and judicial bodies enacting discriminatory legislation, doctors dealing with injured victims of repression, missionaries—has preempted the state in an apologetic gesture regarding Algeria.

A consensus has grown that an apology would improve Franco-Algerian relations and enhance the integration of Maghrebins immigrants and their
descendents in contemporary French society. An apology would thus help to reshape the identities of vulnerable population groups by publicly recognizing that “the culture of the victim group is not now, and never was, morally inferior to that of the offender group.” The chronic problems of integration in contemporary France ultimately trace their roots back to the “primal scene” where the trauma of torture and rape took place during the Algerian War. North African immigrants and their descendents in France are the living reminder of decolonization and its unresolved conflicts. Indeed, “the colonial ties still bind.”

Yet concomitant with a growing consensus that apology can foster a redefined multicultural France, expressions of exasperation about the “repentance” phenomenon and “anti-French racism” have emerged, especially during the commotion of the “positive role” law. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, courting the far-Right for the 2007 Presidential elections, criticized the “irrepressible trend of systematic repentance” and inquired sardonically, “One day will we apologize for being French?” Socialist presidential contender Ségolène Royal also called for lucidity over repentance. Former president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing deplored the “wearisome and repetitive anti-French attacks” in debates over slavery and colonialism. Once committed to undoing the law, Chirac tendered that, on the contrary, Republican values of tolerance oblige an accounting of the “shadowy zones” of French history, and he specifically reminded citizens of his 1995 Vél’ d’Hiv’ apology as an example, thus drawing parallels between the Vichy and Algerian pasts while trying to earn some political mileage from his prior presidential record.

France facing its Algerian past, albeit slowly and with difficulty, signifies a new market for apology in a postcolonial context. The market is also a globalized one: the demand for a wide range of apologies for historical injustices has increased significantly on the world stage since the 1990s. France is not the only nation to be called to task for its colonial history. At the United Nations World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001, the European Union applauded nations that had made apologetic declarations for colonialism and slavery and called on others to do so.

**Conclusion**

The Vichy and Algeria syndromes in contemporary France provide a unique opportunity to understand the impact of apology on a society struggling with its history. If strictly used as a process of *judgment*, public apology can appear as a limited, mechanistic condemnation of the past without any far-reaching pedagogical dimension. In fact, many in France have objected to this perfunctory *devoir de mémoire* performed through public atonement. Historian Jean-Pierre Rioux found only formalism in repentance: “Making apologies does not connect history to our lives and hardly returns the French community to a
place of self-confidence. Memorial piety and judicial interpellations seem to be neither consoling nor prophylactic. … If it is accepted that the more we confess, the better we will become, it is because we lack the force to reformulate an identity enlightened by experience."185 This may be a valid critique of the ritualism and political correctness of the apology trend. Yet this criticism focuses solely on apology as condemnation and contrition and remains blind to the important hermeneutical potential embedded in this practice: a process of critical inquiry, which can “raise the moral threshold of a society,” as Roy Brooks, a scholar of reconciliation, claims.186 Despite its limits, civil society’s embrace of apology for Vichy anti-Semitism can ultimately be seen as introspective and demystifying, allowing French society to “move on” in a cleansed way. Compared to only ten or fifteen years earlier, court trials, historical commissions, monetary and symbolic reparations, the inauguration of commemorative days, and the revision of textbooks in the 1990s all testify that the apology trend coincided with a profound and manifold reexamination of the past in France. As such, apologies for Vichy were most effective when they combined both critical inquiry and judgment, thereby engendering a healthier relationship between past and present, between the duty of memory and the necessary travail of forgetting.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation, ed. Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn, copyright 2006 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University, all rights reserved.


12. Philippe Moreau Defarges, “Le temps de la repentance,” *Cahiers français: La mémoire, entre histoire et politique* (July-August 2001), 44, 46-47. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.


22. “Pour la première fois, un président français reconnaît la responsabilité de la France dans la déportation et l’extermination de juifs pendant la seconde guerre mondiale,” *Agence France Presse*, 16 July 1995 (can be accessed from AFP’s online database, which is available from LexisNexis).


24. Ibid., 74, 89.


27. Quoted in Jean Baptiste de Montvalon, “M. Chirac reconnaît la faute collective
commise envers les juifs,” Le Monde, 18 July 1995. For in-depth accounts of
the mobilization for this apology, see Carrier, Holocaust Monuments and National Memory
 Cultures; Wieviorka, “Deportation and Memory: Official History and the Rewriting
of World War II,” in Thinking about the Holocaust After Half a Century, 273-99
and chap. 1 in Conon and Rousso, An Ever-Present Past.
1995; “M. Badinter approuve la prise de position de M. Chirac sur Vichy,” Le Monde,
30. Carrier, Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures, 229, 4. See also pages
71-74, 156-57.
of Social Philosophy 33, 1 (Spring 2002), 69.
32. Félix Chiocca, “Une juste réparation morale,” Témoignage Chrétien, 21 July 1995;
“Le président du CRIF salue le discours que l’on n’attendait plus,” Le Monde, 18 July
1995.
36. Jean-Baptiste de Montvalon, “La controverse provoquée par François Mitterrand
s’estompe dans les rangs du Parti socialiste,” Le Monde, 8 October 1997; Pascal Virot,
“Déportation: les propos de Chirac sèment la discorde au sein du PS,” Libération, 20
July 1995; “Les propos de M. Chirac sur Vichy divisent le Parti socialiste,” Le Monde,
position de M. Chirac sur Vichy,” Le Monde, 26 July 1995; Le Monde, 8 October
1997. Conan and Rousso (An Ever-Present Past, 42) and Carrier (Holocaust Monu-
ments and National Memory Cultures, 63-64, 90) note that Jospin’s stand on the ques-
tion was equivocal.
38. “Jacques Attali crédite Jacques Chirac d’une image de dynamisme et d’action,” Le
Monde, 19 July 1995; Robert Badinter, “L’État criminel,” Le Nouvel observateur, 2
August 1995. Ironically, Badinter had previously defended Mitterrand’s stance
against apology and would later play an instigating role in the Paris law bar apology.
40. Christiane Chombeau, “M. Le Pen accuse M. Chirac de salir la nation,” Le Monde,
20 July 1995.
42. Nathan Bracher, “La Mémoire vive et convulsive: The Papon Trial and France’s Passion
for History,” The French Review 73, 2 (December 1999), 323.
(Spring 2000), 16.
44. Chiocca, “Une juste réparation morale.”
45. In American common law, an admission of guilt carries legal force; this is less true
in French civil law. Carrier stresses that the Comité Vél’ d’Hiv’ 42 “demanded a purely verbal form of reparation as a symbolic act by the head of state” (his emphasis) (Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures, 74), although activist Serge Klarsfeld has led a multipronged quest for reconciliation including both symbolic and material acknowledgement.


54. For an account of difficult or impossible access to Paris and other law bar archives in France, see Liora Israël’s 2004 report for the CNRS and Justice Ministry’s GIP-Mission de recherche Droit et Justice entitled “L’épuration des barreaux français après la seconde guerre mondiale,” 10-15.


60. See www.lesaf.org.


87. Jullien, “Une très discrète ‘repentance’.”


101. See *Conseil National de l’Ordre des Médecins*, http://www.conseil.national.medecin.fr (14 February 2003 and again 1 June 2006). Note, however, that a 2004 presentation by the Vice President of the Order, Dr. Jean Pouillard, entitled “Historique de l’Ordre National des Médecins, 1845-1945,” which was presented at the Société Française d’Histoire de la Médecine on 15 May 2004, appears on the Order’s website. In a single paragraph on the anti-Semitic exclusions under Vichy, this report...
reproduces several common postwar justifications: that the exclusion of Jews from medicine was imposed from the state, that the Order implemented the exclusions “without overzealousness,” and that the Order Council did not protest the anti-Semitic laws because it was “caught in the stranglehold of Vichy.”

110. Henri Nahum was the first to publish from research in both the national and the departmental archives: La Médecine française et les juifs.
112. For example, see the dossier “Les médecins de Vichy,” Impact médecin hebdo, 10 October 1997.


137. Barkan and Karn, “Group Apology as an Ethical Imperative,” 27.


140. Conan and Rousso, An Ever-Present Past, 198.


142. Judt, Postwar, 829.

149. Girardet, “Repentances sélectives.”


Donald Reid, Pierre Goldman: From Souvenirs obscurs to Lieu de mémoire

Pierre Goldman was born to Jewish resisters in France in June 1944 and lived with the inability to match his parents’ achievements during the war. Although a secondary figure in soixante-huitard movements, his trials for murder in the early 1970s made him a central figure in post-soixante-huitard activists’ reflections on their situation. This essay examines Goldman’s sui generis efforts to establish his identity as a resister and a Jew, his central role in his generation’s attempts to define their relationship to the society they wished to change, and his place in the succeeding generation’s efforts to differentiate themselves from the generation of their parents, Goldman’s generation.

Keywords: Pierre Goldman, Resistance, anti-Semitism, memory, gauchisme

Julie Fette, Apology and the Past in Contemporary France

In societies coming to terms with historical injustices, public apology has recently emerged as a potent trend. This is particularly true of France, where the state served as a catalyst for a wave of public apologies for acts of intolerance committed during the Second World War. Following Jacques Chirac’s 1995 official apology for Vichy’s anti-Semitic policies, various groups in civil society publicly atoned for their particular Vichy roles in discrimination against Jews: the medical profession, the law bar, the Catholic Church, and the police. How does public apology, as distinct from court trials, historical commissions, and reparations, affect contemporary France’s reconciliation with its past? This article also analyzes how apologizing for Vichy has created demand for an official French apology for the Algerian War. By 2006, the politics of memory in French society decidedly shifted attention from Vichy to post-colonialism: in both cases, the apology turn imposes new dynamics of remembering and forgetting.

Keywords: Vichy, memory, apology, Algerian War, anti-Semitism

Éric Godelier, La naissance d’un géant: Arcelor-Mittal (1948-2006) [in French]

In 2006 a terrible fight pitted two steel makers, Mittal and Arcelor, against each other. Understanding the dynamic of this enormous takeover requires a historical perspective. The structure, business strategy, and corporate governance of these groups evolved over a long period of time. This article explores the conflict in the context of the history of French steel industry. An examination of Usinor, moreover, as the ancestor and creator of Arcelor, can reveal a lot about the political, social and economical influence of steel makers in French society. Understanding the conflict also calls for an analysis of how a large company could change its corporate culture. Instead of reducing corporate culture to individual or collective “values,” as Edgar Schein did some time ago, this article explores Usinor’s culture as a system of representations, material elements, technologies, products and ways of doing and thinking.

Keywords: Corporate culture, steel, business history, paternalism, globalization