

# Historians and Collective Memory

TED WEEKENDS

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Joshua Foer shows that even ordinary people can perform extraordinary feats of memory. He cites the historical precedent of the ancient Romans who didn't have printing presses and couldn't look things up. They had to rely on memory.

The Roman example is telling, but historians nowadays tend to be interested in different facets of memory, especially "collective memory" and its mirror image, forgetting. Among other things, we want to know how a society or community's memory of important events changes over time. Those changes often involve forgetting what we once knew -- or thought we knew.

For example, the Yale historian, David Blight, has shown that during the first 50 years after the Civil War, the majority of white Americans largely forgot the harshness of slavery and came to remember the institution as relatively benign. A southern, romanticized version of slavery took shape thanks to a proliferation local Civil War museums and the desire of political and cultural elites to forge reconciliation between the North and the South. The popularity of 'Gone With the Wind' rode the crest of this southern memory wave.

Although the benign memory of slavery persisted in some quarters, it mostly evaporated during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. By highlighting the racism and discrimination still rampant in postwar America, civil rights leaders encouraged their fellow citizens to recall the racism and injustice of the past. The Antebellum South lost its Romantic sheen, and Americans "remembered" certain realities of slavery that had long been forgotten or suppressed.

If our own collective memory of slavery returned with a vengeance in the 1960s, France veiled its memories of slavery until the late 1990s. Only then did a series of books, films, and TV programs remind people that France's Caribbean colonies produced some of the harshest slave systems in the world.

Harsh as well was the Vichy regime that governed parts of France during the Second World War. But much of that harshness sank into an Orwellian memory hole during the years following the war. Leading politicians, historians and journalists depicted Vichy as having shielded French men and women from the Germans rather than collaborating with them. Forgotten were the roundups and deportations of Jews (except by the victims' surviving family members and friends), the abundance of French internment camps, and the ugly anti-Anglo-American propaganda that spewed from the regime.

General De Gaulle and his colleagues, no friends of the Vichy government, nonetheless played down its crimes

after the war in an effort to rebuild national unity.

Thanks in part to the general but also to a slew of historians, the dominant postwar memory of the wartime period turned on the notion that only a tiny elite of collaborators worked with the Germans while most people resisted the occupation in ways large and small.

Not until the mid-1960s did historians and Jewish leaders begin to remind their compatriots that more than 75,000 Jews faced deportation and that virtually none came back. But the collective memory of Vichy-as-shield dissipated only when a 1972 book by Columbia University's Robert Paxton demonstrated that Vichy leaders asked to collaborate with the Germans in hopes of gaining a privileged place in a Nazi-dominated postwar Europe. Films like *The Sorrow and the Pity* focused on the collaboration, so much so that aspects of collective memory changed 180 degrees.

By the 1980s, it seemed that large numbers of French people had actively collaborated and almost nobody resisted. Recently, the popular film *La Rafle* (*The Roundup*, 2010) has tried to restore the older memory that only a small group collaborated and most ordinary people resisted -- or at least rejected -- what the Nazis were doing in France.

As best as historians can establish, the truth is that only modest numbers of people actively resisted or openly collaborated. Most did what they had to do to get through the war. Some committed small acts of defiance while others endorsed the apparent traditionalist values of the Vichy regime, at least for a time. But as *La Rafle* suggests, the historian's role in shaping collective memory can be temporary at best.

But perhaps not in the case of Father Patrick Desbois. A French priest and former history teacher, Desbois has spent the past dozen years identifying unmarked and unacknowledged mass graves of Jews and Roma in Ukraine. He has discovered 800 extermination sites in what he calls the "Holocaust By Bullets" and filmed riveting interviews with elderly eyewitnesses who remained silent for more than 70 years about what they saw close-up as children. A tacit agreement never to speak of these murders, in which a great many Ukrainians participated, meant that their often extraordinarily detailed, emotionally charged memories had never before been tapped. Father Desbois's films are painful to watch, but we can imagine that the 2,500 people who willingly spoke with him were relieved to finally voice awful memories long suppressed but hardly forgotten.