

Natalie Gill

## **The Faurisson Affair**

### **Holocaust Denial and the French Left**

On December 28, 1978, the headline, “The Gas Chambers Did Not Exist,” ran across the French daily *Le Monde*. Robert Faurisson, a professor at the University of Lyon II and a fervent Holocaust denier, authored the article. He intended to pronounce the “good news” to the world, claiming that after years of relentless investigation of the “rumor of Auschwitz,” he could confidently assert that the world stood before an enterprise of historical lies: there was no Jewish genocide<sup>1</sup>. A scandal erupted in France, provoking a range of responses: from an impassioned rebuttal to a defense of the freedom of speech to an outright attack on Faurisson’s critics. However, less shocking than Faurisson’s crackpot theories was the support he garnered from a milieu of the radical French Left. While hardly surprising to find such sentiments on the far Right, it seemed atypical to find them on the Far Left, given the historical claims of the Left to support oppressed and minority groups. However, in France, since the end of World War II, denialism had found an equally strong support on both the far Right and the far Left. This meant that French denialism during the latter half of the twentieth century comprised more than neo-Nazis on the Right seeking to rehabilitate a glorious, but defeated Germany. Rather, in the decades following the war, Holocaust denialism found an equally warm welcome on the revolutionary, extreme Left.

Why was a margin of the French Left enamored by theses that served neo Nazi purposes? Existing scholarship has pointed towards the uniqueness of French intellectual

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Faurisson, “Les chambres à gaz,” *Le Monde*, December 28, 1978, final edition.

life and how it produced and fostered the growth of varying interpretations of twentieth century ideologies. For example, Robert Wistrich has identified how “the presence and fusion of Marxist-Stalinist, Trotskyite, Althusserian, Gauchisme, semi-anarchist leftism, existentialism, structuralism, postmodernist and other ideologies<sup>2</sup>” resulted in Holocaust denial. For example, Alain Finkielkraut has observed how anti-capitalists refused to fall into the trap of giving preference to one capitalist regime: Hitler’s Germany was no worse for the Jews than the West for the proletariat.<sup>3</sup> In the same manner, Valerie Igounet has noted the third-worldism of Leftist Holocaust denial: the minimalization of Nazi crimes allowed for the continued culpability of the West and Western style democracy<sup>4</sup>. Individually, certain ideologies prevented their adherents from recognizing the singularity or the existence of the Jewish genocide. Blended together, they rendered possible a “more intellectually coherent, if perverse form of Holocaust denial ...in the Left.<sup>5</sup>”

Similarly, Henry Rousso emphasized the influence of twentieth century culture upon the French Left. He argued that the 1968 student protests inspired a culture increasingly amenable to conspiracy theories and devoted to challenging all myths. Through this lens then, it would seem entirely plausible that a Jewish or Western conspiracy could have constructed a genocide myth in order to monopolize the history of the war and serve Israeli or Western interests. Deborah Lipstadt also noted distinct aspects of French intellectual culture, notably certain extremist tendencies in the French

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*, (New York: Random House, 2010) 300.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, *The Future of a Negation: Reflections on the Question of Genocide* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> Valérie Igounet, *Histoire d'un négationnisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 2000) 15.

<sup>5</sup> Wistrich 300.

Left<sup>6</sup>. In *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, she sought to explain the willingness of certain French intellectuals to defend the denialists.

However, rather than stress the culture of 1968 or the conglomeration of ideologies in France, she pointed towards an “absolutist commitment to the liberal idea of dialogue,” which caused “its proponents to fail to recognize that there is a significant difference between reasoned dialogue and anti-intellectual pseudoscientific arguments.”<sup>7</sup> Lipstadt explained that some members on the French Left didn’t simply defend the free speech of the denialists, but condemned those historians who declined to debate with them. For Lipstadt, these intellectuals understood free speech in a Manichean light: rather than acknowledge the difference between scholarly disagreements and perversions of truth, they equated a refusal to debate with the deniers with an oppression of basic liberties.

Substantial scholarship is available to explain why Robert Faurisson proved attractive to certain groups on the Far Left in 1978. Yet, the historiography of the reactions of French intellectuals and historians to the Faurisson affair is sparse. I hope to fill this gap in the literature with my research. In the following pages I will explore the varied responses of the French Left to the Faurisson Affair including impassioned rebuttals of Faurisson’s denialism, defenses of his freedom of speech, and outright support of his theories. To do this, I will address the following questions: What arguments did leading denialists use to deny the Holocaust or certain aspects of it, like the existence of the gas chambers? What part did radical Leftist ideologies play in the formation of denialist arguments? Did Holocaust denialism ever become more than an

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Rousso, “The Political and Cultural Roots of Negationism in France,” *South Central Review* 3, no. 9 (Spring 2006), 67-88.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Free press, 1993) 25.

expression of a lunatic fringe on the far Left in France? Did it ever attain respectability in the political and intellectual mainstream? How did French intellectuals and members of the Left respond to Holocaust denialism? Through this discussion, I hope to offer insight into the mechanics of the French Left in the late 1970s and early 1980s: what did the Faurisson Affair reveal about the nature of the French Left during this time? To what extent did extremist ideologies dominate historical discussion in France? How did French liberals understand Holocaust deniers and their radical brethren?

Before, I delve into an explanation of my research, it is necessary that I provide a definition of denialism, as well as explore the notion of historical truth and falsehoods. According to Robert Wistrich, Holocaust denial “is a postwar phenomenon at whose core lies the rejection of the historical fact that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis during World War II.<sup>8</sup>” Holocaust denial attests that:

“the extermination of the Jews never actually took place: the German authorities never planned to kill the Jews of Europe, and they never built or operated any death camps in which Jews were gassed. Most revisionist accounts rarely put Jewish losses between 1939 and 1945 above 300,000 persons, and these deaths are usually blamed on wartime deprivations, hardship and disease.<sup>9</sup>”

Additionally, in this paper, I will abstain from describing Holocaust deniers as “revisionists.” Rather, I will use the term denialism, as explained by Deborah Lipstadt:

“The deniers’ selection of the name *revisionist* to describe themselves is indicative of their basic strategy of deceit and distortion and of their attempt to portray themselves as legitimate historians engaged in the

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<sup>8</sup>Robert Solomon Wistrich, “Introduction: Lying About the Holocaust,” in *Holocaust Denial: The Politics of Perfidy*, ed. Robert Solomon Wistrich (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2012) 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional practice of illuminating the past... on some level revisionism is what all legitimate historians engage in...interpretation always involves some constant “re-visioning” of the past...But it is built on a certain body of irrefutable evidence: Slavery happened; so did the Black Plague and the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup>”

Thus, the term denialism rather than revisionism better represents the phenomenon of Holocaust denial.

### **Robert Faurisson and the Faurisson Affair**

When *Le Monde* published Faurisson in 1978, they did not intend to endorse his denialist beliefs. For years, the newspaper categorically ignored or rejected Faurisson’s repeated requests for publication. Yet a series of events in earlier months forced the journal to rethink its previous approach to the denialist. In October 1978, Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, the Commissioner for Jewish Affairs under the Vichy Regime shocked the nation when he declared to the French magazine *L’express* that only lice were gassed during the Holocaust<sup>11</sup>. Two months later, Faurisson’s revisionism spilled from university scandals to local, then national press, when *Le Matin de Paris* profiled him<sup>12</sup>. Two weeks later, *Le Monde* obliged Faurisson as they never had before: they printed his thesis across the pages of the most widely read newspaper in France. In a prefatory article, the editors explained their decision. They wanted to prevent their audience, particularly the youth, from fantasizing about the nature of a forbidden conversation. “Our readers must judge

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<sup>10</sup> Lipstadt 20-21.

<sup>11</sup>Louis Darquier de Pellepoix in “A Auschwitz, on n’a gaz que les poux,” *L’express*, October 28, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Matin de Paris*, “Les chambres à gaz n’existe pas,” November 1, 1978.

the piece for themselves,” they declared<sup>13</sup>. In the following weeks myriad furious responses flooded *Le Monde*. The Faurisson Affair had begun.

Who was Robert Faurisson? Prior to proclaiming the “good news to humanity,” or the inexistence of the gas chambers, Faurisson was a respected figure in French academia. He had earned a post at the University of Lyon II as a professor of literature and his poetry analyses won praise for their originality from critics and notable French reviews, such as *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise*. To his poetry, Faurisson applied a method of hypercriticality that questioned the minutest details<sup>14</sup>. He approached his denialist research in the same vein. For example, while in his poetic analyses he drew significance from the individual letters of each word, in his Holocaust denial, he claimed to not “refute psychological, literary and historical aspects, but physical absurdities,” which were so serious that they undermined the integrity of Holocaust historiography and revealed its wholly dishonest nature<sup>15</sup>. These “physical absurdities” ranged from the use of a vacuum in the attic where Anne Frank hid to how, as noted in her diary, the Frank family could have obtained grapes in Amsterdam during the month of July. According to Faurisson, such discrepancies inevitably led the careful reader to conclude the diary was a forgery. Thus, what mattered to Faurisson was not how testimonies complemented established historical fact, but how he could challenge an entire body of research through refutation of a selection of phrases.

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<sup>13</sup> Editors, “Les chambres à gaz,” *Le Monde*, December 28, 1978, final edition.

<sup>14</sup> Valérie Igounet, *Robert Faurisson : Portrait d'un négationniste* (Paris : Denoel, 2012) 171

<sup>15</sup> Robert Faurisson, *Is the Diary of Anne Frank Genuine?* (Torrance, California: Institute for Historical Review, 1985) 7.

In the early 1960's, Faurisson began to interest himself in the "Holocaust question,"<sup>16</sup> although, the first strains of French denial had appeared over a full decade earlier. In the 1950s, neo-fascist Maurice Bardèche spearheaded the denialist movement on the far Right, while former camp deportee, Paul Rassinier provided a pacifist, anti-Western ideological refutation on the Left. In fact, Rassinier deeply influenced Faurisson's denialism. Faurisson had struck up a correspondence with Rassinier in 1964, with the aim of refining certain precisions in his theories.. Rassinier encouraged the development of Faurisson's denialism, confirming the necessity of his "research" into the Holocaust question. Later, Faurisson described the works of Paul Rassinier as having illuminated "the question of knowing if it (the Holocaust) was a pure and simple fable."<sup>17</sup>

In 1978, Faurisson officially revealed his thesis at a national history colloquium in Lyon on "Churches and Christians of France during the Second World War."<sup>18</sup> Following the conclusion of the seminar, "The Persecution of Jews and Reactions of Christians During the War," Faurisson rose to speak. He announced to the audience that Paul Rassinier had been correct when he called for a new perspective of the "problem of the gas chambers." Although cries of protest interrupted his monologue, he had succeeded in publicizing his Holocaust denial in an academic context. During the following months, Faurisson sent his thesis to several journals and newspapers in France. The tracts, signed with the noted "For Publication," reiterated his diatribe that the massacres of the gas chambers were a historical lie.<sup>19</sup> *Le Matin de Paris* received the letter and dispatched a

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<sup>16</sup> Igounet, *Robert Faurisson: Portrait d'un négationniste* 99

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* 100.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* 178.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 179.

journalist to write an article on Faurisson. On November 16, they published his profile on a full page, titled, “The Gas Chambers Did Not Exist.”<sup>20</sup>

Two weeks later, Faurisson opened his article in *Le Monde* by assuring the reader that only years of personal reflection and relentless investigation of the rumor of Auschwitz allowed him to conclude that the world stood before an enterprise of historical lies. According to Faurisson, several essential inexactitudes in the testimony regarding and evidence of the gas chambers hinted towards the likelihood of their falsification. For example, he argued that it would have been physically impossible for two thousand people to cram into the two hundred meter chambers as described. Furthermore, he claimed that if the Nazis indeed used Zyklon B to gas prisoners, they would have killed themselves in the process of attempting to remove the bodies or ventilate the room. Instead, he persisted, the only purpose the gas chambers could have served was to delouse the camp. Additionally, in one of the most crucial aspects of his denialism, he insisted that a generation of historians misinterpreted Nazi intentions: the confessed plans for a final solution referred to the deportation of the Jews to the East, not their extermination<sup>21</sup>.

Faurisson employed several techniques to dismiss any testimony attesting to the existence of gas chambers. First, he insisted that any confessions regarding the gas chambers, such as those of the Nazi doctor Johann Kremer, were obtained by Allied torture. Testimony obtained under these circumstances, was never “true or sincere,” because a conqueror had “extract(ed) them from a completely destroyed conquered

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<sup>20</sup> “Les chambres à gaz n’existent pas. »

<sup>21</sup> Faurisson, “Les chambres à gaz.”

man.<sup>22</sup>” Through one succinct phrase, Faurisson eliminated an entire body of testimony that compromised his theory of the gas chambers. Secondly, he claimed that all references to Nazis policies of extermination had been misinterpreted. For example, “special action” referred to extra cleansing for the extremely dirty and ill inmates, while the “final solution” implied the deportation of Jews to the East<sup>23</sup>. Thirdly, he explained away the massive number of deaths reported in the camps as produced by typhus epidemics and hardships from camp conditions. European Jews became another casualty of war, rather than the target of distinct racial hatred. Finally, if these techniques failed him, Faurisson simply ignored or dismissed as false all evidence inconsistent with his denialist theories. For example, he ignored the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the unit responsible for the killing of vast numbers of Jews, as well as the fact that had the Nazis used the gas chambers simply to exterminate the camp fleas, according to his logic they would have still put their lives in danger when they attempted to ventilate the room<sup>24</sup>.

In several paragraphs, Faurisson’s article in *Le Monde* exemplified his years of “research”. He asserted the reasons for which the gas chambers could not have existed and assured the reader that Nazi Germany never engaged in genocidal behavior. It is evident that Faurisson would quickly gain support on the Far Right. Yet, why did French revolutionaries Pierre Guillaume and Serge Thion gravitate towards him? Furthermore, why did the American linguist Noam Chomsky and the French intellectual Jean Gabriel Bedit Cohn attack Faurisson’s critics? The following section will explore the appeal of

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Faurisson, “Right to Reply,” *Le Monde*, February 21, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> Faurisson, “Les chambres à gaz.”

<sup>24</sup> Lipstadt 10.

denialism to the Far Left as well as how two intellectuals transformed the issue into one of free speech.

### **Pierre Guillaume and La Vielle Taupe**

Certain members on the margins of the French Left responded positively to Faurisson's denialism. Pierre Guillaume, a political extremist who ascribed to a revolutionary Marxism, was one such person. In 1967, Guillaume founded the library *La Vielle Taupe* to diffuse ultra Leftist thought, with the ultimate aim of creating a revolutionary organization. In 1968, he discovered the works of the Holocaust denier, Paul Rassinier, and a decade later, he began to publish Robert Faurisson<sup>25</sup>. A foundational document of the library titled, "From Exploitation in the Camps to Exploitation of the Camps" evinced the compatibility of Holocaust denial with the determined ideological worldview of the ultra-Leftists. The essay supported a materialist reconstruction of World War II in which the crimes of capitalism and Western style democracy eclipsed those of Nazi fascism. The Holocaust had once proven to be a stumbling block for their revolutionary worldview; if racial hatred and conspiratorial paranoia had exterminated six million Jews, then capital was not the quintessential criminal. Paul Rassinier and Robert Faurisson removed this stumbling block: they reduced the Jewish genocide to a trivial consequence of war between capitalist nations, rendering the political potential of fascism and national-socialism banal in comparison to the oppressive capitalist conspiracy.

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<sup>25</sup> Igounet, *Robert Faurisson: Histoire d'un négationniste*, 25.

The pacifism of Paul Rassinier deeply shaped the thought of *La Vielle Taupe*. The core of Rassinier's denial lay in the argument that: "No ill that war claims to do away with is as bad as war itself."<sup>26</sup> Regardless of intention or perpetrator, war was an illegitimate crime. Thus, despite German aggression and intention, their culpability for the war only paralleled that of Allied involvement. In this vein, *La Vielle Taupe* arraigned the hypocrisy of the Allies. Guillaume and his followers insisted that while England and America charged the Nazis with crimes against humanity, they disregarded their own bellicosity that had produced "the murders of Hamburg, Tokyo, Dresden, the atomic bombs."<sup>27</sup> Additionally, *La Vielle Taupe* argued that the Allies justified themselves by exaggerating German sadism. They sought to "control the official history" in order to mask the extent of their own horrific war crimes. For example, *La Vielle Taupe* members believed the West had arbitrarily estimated the number of Jewish deaths and falsified the real purpose of the gas chambers in the death camps. Additionally, they viewed the Nuremberg trials, not as an effort for the Allies to render justice unto the architects of genocide, but rather as an attempt to legitimize Allied aggression by indicting various Nazi leaders. In this manner, *La Vielle Taupe* first inculpated the West, while minimalizing the crimes of the Nazis. Ultimately, the shared guilt of the war left only one identifiable criminal: capitalism. Capitalist interests, not pugnacious aspirations led the world to war.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Rassinier, *Debunking the Genocide Myth: A Study of the Nazi Concentration Camps and the Alleged Extermination of the European Jewry*, (Los Angeles: Noontide Press, 1978) XI.

<sup>27</sup> La Vielle Taupe, "De l'exploitation dans les camps à l'exploitation des camps," *La Guerre Sociale*, 9-31. <http://www.vho.org/aaargh/fran/archVT/vt97/gsl.html> (accessed July 3, 2012).

To solidify the logic of their Holocaust denial, the radicals needed to do more than confirm the bellicosity of capitalist states. They also needed to eliminate other facts that did not coincide with their materialist logic, namely racial and political motivations. To do this, they insisted upon a materialist view of the camps. The Nazis did not construct the camps to house large populations deported based on race, creed, political affiliation, or sexuality. Rather, they employed camps because prisons were full, costly, and furthermore, they needed manual labor to fuel the war. Thus, the mechanics of capital resulted in the creation of camps, not the intentions of a totalitarian state. *La Vielle Taupe* continued to justify the camps by adding that often states at war needed to neutralize certain dangerous populations, such as the Jews, that outnumbered the people of the nation and threatened their unity. Moreover, all capital systems had at a point used the camp system; it was not “an invention of Nazism or Stalinism.”<sup>28</sup> For example, they cited that during the Algerian war, French author Alex Moscovitch had suggested a deportation of Algerians in France to counteract the violence of the Algerian National Liberation Front. The fact that Moscovitch did not represent all French voices nor the fact that France inevitably did not deport or murder millions of Algerians hardly influenced the revolutionary claims. The comparison was again drawn: the Allied intention and violence differed little from the Germans, the ultimate criminal again was capitalism.

In the late 1970s and early 1980’s, a milieu of the French Left espoused theories of Holocaust denial. More widely, this represented a tendency within French radicals to adhere to the totality of anti-capitalist, anti-Western thought. While such ideologies hardly represented the French Left as a whole during this time, it is significant that such

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<sup>28</sup> *La Vielle Taupe*, “De l’exploitation dans les camps à l’exploitation des camps.”

thought continued to appear in public political discussions. Indeed, in 1978, Pierre Guillaume and *La Vielle Taupe* evinced the lingering presence of unwavering radical worldviews in French intellectual life.

### **Leftist Support: Noam Chomsky, Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit, and Serge Thion**

Guillaume and his followers were not the only members of the French Left to engage with Robert Faurisson. In 1979, *Le Monde* published a declaration by thirty-five historians that decried his lies. However, the statement irked several prominent members of the French Left who perceived it as a diatribe against intellectual dissent. In published essays and letters, intellectuals like Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit, Serge Thion, and American Noam Chomsky accused the French of suppressing free speech. For these men, freedom of speech, not denialism, was the essential issue in the Faurisson Affair. Their condemnations paid little attention to the anti-Semitism of Faurisson's texts and instead focused upon the reaction of those French intellectuals against him. Unlike for their liberal peers, the real victim of the Faurisson Affair was not the memory of exterminated Jews, but Robert Faurisson, a persecuted intellectual. Although the three expressed their support for Faurisson, their motivations differed from those of Pierre Guillaume and members of *La Vielle Taupe*. For them, the importance of Faurisson's denial lay not how it allowed them to continue to believe in a determined material logic, but how the Affair had highlighted the totalitarian tendencies of aspects of Western society. For Chomsky, the culprit was the French intelligentsia, for Cohn Bendit it was the Jewish community, and for Thion it was Western imperialism. Their varied approaches contributed to the

creation of a cohesive Leftist support of Robert Faurisson, in which Faurisson was the oppressed and his critics were the oppressor.

The most prominent defender of Robert Faurisson was the American linguist Noam Chomsky. In 1979, Chomsky, a self-described anarchist syndicalist who strongly opposed the Vietnam War and U.S. involvement in Cambodia, signed a petition in support of Faurisson's right to free speech in the face of legal action against him. Several French historians, such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet, protested Chomsky's involvement, citing intellectual irresponsibility on the part of the linguist. In response to the criticisms directed against him, Chomsky penned the essay, "Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression," which Faurisson later used as an introduction to his book, "Defense of Memory: Against Those Who Accuse Me of Falsification of Memory."<sup>29</sup> The premise of Chomsky's essay was that the Manichaeism of French intellectual life had produced a semi-totalitarian atmosphere in which France not only failed to protect civil liberties, but also violated them.

First and foremost, Chomsky wanted to impress upon the reader the absurdity of the Faurisson Affair. He emphasized the elementary nature of his remarks that were to be "so simple (he) ask(ed) of any reasonable person to forgive (him)."<sup>30</sup> The Manichaean worldview of many French intellectuals inhibited their ability to defend the most basic civil liberties. From the outset, then, Chomsky established that the central issue not denialism, but "the right of free expression, of ideas, conclusions, and beliefs."<sup>31</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> Noam Chomsky, "Some Elementary Comments on the Rights of Freedom of Expression," in Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en défense : contre ceux qui m'acusent de falsifier l'histoire : la question des chambres à gaz*, (Paris: Seuil, 1980), IX

<sup>30</sup> Chomsky IX.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

importance was not Faurisson's ideas, "of which (he) (didn't) know much," but the violation of his privacy, his banishment from French universities, and his subjection to incidents of street violence. He argued, these were symptoms of a French tendency towards totalitarianism and an environment in which "rational discourse (was) a strange and intelligible pastime."<sup>32</sup>

To further explain how France typified the way in which a totalitarian state controlled free speech, he drew a comparison between Soviet dissidents and Robert Faurisson. Chomsky explained that when he signed a petition in favor of a Soviet dissident, little criticism arose because the state used these petitions to achieve its political ends and assert itself against Soviet power. Realpolitik and continental interests, not humanism, motivated these protests. However, when he signed a petition in favor of Faurisson, he challenged the "officially approved doctrine," and so segments of the intelligentsia, who blindly supported the Soviet dissenters, did "not perceive any need to take the stance accepted without question."<sup>33</sup>

Although Chomsky prefaced the essay with the affirmation that he was only defending the right to expression, he expressed doubts regarding Faurisson's supposed anti-Semitism. In the majority of the text, he refrained from addressing the direct denial, citing that he did not "know much of it." Yet, at the end of the essay, Chomsky affirmed that from what he had read, he found:

"no evidence to support (the) conclusion...nor...credible evidence in the material that (he) had read concerning him, either in the public record or in

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<sup>32</sup> Chomsky XII

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, XIV.

private correspondence. As far as (Chomsky) can determine, he is a relatively apolitical liberal of some sort.<sup>34</sup>”

Despite his original claim that he would not address Faurisson’s anti-Semitism, he continued to in order to further indict the French intellectual class. Aware that some schoolmates recalled Faurisson articulating anti-Semitic sentiments in the 1940’s, Chomsky shot back that the French should apply similar standards to themselves, “asking, for example, what their attitude was towards the French war in Indochina, or to Stalinism decades ago.<sup>35</sup>”

Chomsky conceptualized the Faurisson Affair as the persecution of a dissenting intellectual from a totalitarian state and a hypocritical intelligentsia. Jean-Gabriel Bendit, a French militant for alternative education and brother of the famed Danny the Red of the 1968 student protests, continued in the same vein as Chomsky. However, rather than highlight the totalitarian tendencies of France, he specifically noted the oppressive nature of the Jewish community and Jewish history. He began an article in the French left-wing newspaper, *Liberation*, by asserting that:

“There was once a time where anti-Semites challenged all testimony, historical research coming from a Jew...But, today, we begin to see the inverse phenomenon: any Jew, any man even of the Left, of the extreme Left, rejects any and all testimony, any historical research, coming from an anti-Semite..and worse, declares any research anti-Semitic, which in regards to the camps on different points has questioned what has become the quasi official truth.<sup>36</sup>”

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<sup>34</sup> Chomsky XIV.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit, “Question de principe,” *Liberation*,” March 5, 1979, Final edition.

In two sentences then, Cohn Bendit reversed the role of the anti-Semite and the Jew: the anti-Semite became the persecuted, the Jew the persecutor. Thus, in his opening sentences, he laid out the outline of his defense of Faurisson, who, like the Faurisson of Chomsky's imagination, was to become the victim of a totalitarian, Jewish truth.

Like Chomsky, Cohn Bendit addressed the notion of free speech, yet the crux of his argument remained the politically oppressive nature of the Jewish community. Although he expressed his disdain with the French intellectual community, whom he claimed were "monstrous" because they refused to engage with Faurisson, his article never wholly departed from his belief that the Jewish community monopolized a historical truth. He wondered if Faurisson were correct in denying the existence of the gas chambers: "Would Nazism cease to be a horror, then? Would it become justifiable?"<sup>37</sup> Yet, his question was clearly more political than philosophical. He continued directly into an expression of anti-Zionist sentiment:

"It would take too long...to study all that for the last thirty years has been justified in the name of the fight against Nazism...the millions of Jewish deaths are constantly used like a counter argument to any criticism of the politics of the state of Israel, for example."<sup>38</sup>

Although Cohn Bendit did not declare his overt support for denialism, he certainly dabbled in denialist logic. Just as *La Vielle Taupe* argued that the Allies controlled the official truth of the war in order to justify their bellicosity, so did the Jewish community use the history of the Holocaust to legitimize any questionable Israeli political actions. Cohn Bendit concluded the essay, by returning to the notion of freedom

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<sup>37</sup> Cohn Bendit, "Question de principe," Final edition.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

of speech as oppressed by both the French intelligentsia and the Jewish community. He closed that he: “refuse(d)...to accept what they have done to men like Rassinier and Faurisson...of whom the trial of the latter seems to remind me more of the Inquisition than a fight against a return to the worse.”<sup>39</sup>”

Leftist Serge Thion undoubtedly agreed with Cohn Bendit’s comparison of the Jewish and historical communities objection to Faurisson with the religious repression of fifteenth century Spain. Thion, more famed than his peer, known for his Left wing views on French international politics, particularly on the war in Cambodia, was often published in respectable, mainstream French journals like *Esprit*. In 1980, Thion involved himself more directly than Chomsky or Cohn Bendit when he published a collection of Faurisson’s essays in a book entitled, *Political Truth or Historical Truth?*<sup>40</sup> Whereas Chomsky and Cohn Bendit restricted their support to the confines of articles, why did Thion was driven by a devout third worldism, which manifested itself as a conspiratorial understanding of Western society. Thion laid out two distinct arguments in support of Faurisson in his lengthy introduction to the denialist essays. Like *La Vielle Taupe*, he first hinted towards the high probability of the West having constructed a history of the genocide in order to disguise its own imperialist crimes. Then, similarly to Chomsky and Cohn Bendit, he cited totalitarian aspects to Western society, namely the attempt to oppress free speech.

Above all else, Thion maintained no crime surpassed that of Western imperialism. Like *La Vielle Taupe*, he insisted that Allied propaganda largely exaggerated Nazi crimes,

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<sup>39</sup> Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit, “Question de Principe.”

<sup>40</sup> Serge Thion, *Vérité historique ou vérité politique: Le dossier de l’affaire Faurisson: la question de chambres à gaz*, (Vielle Taupe, 1980.)

and that the imperialist powers orchestrated the Holocaust to hide the atrocities they committed. He cited contemporary American and French propaganda regarding the wars in Vietnam and Algeria as proof of a Western willingness to manipulate public opinion<sup>41</sup>. Thion further condemned Western governments for stripping Faurisson of his basic liberties. Thion claimed that Western governments attempted to block Faurisson from his research because his work questioned their entire system of power. Fear of dissent drove them to strip Faurisson of his basic liberties<sup>42</sup>. Thion concluded, as did members of *La Vieille Taupe*: the Jewish genocide was another means of justifying a war of several first world countries against another.

Despite several points of concordance between Thion and *La Vieille Taupe*, Chomsky, Cohn Bendit, and Thion represented a different form of Leftist support for Faurisson. While Guillaume and his followers used Faurisson to rejuvenate their anti-materialism through a concrete Holocaust denial, Chomsky, Cohn Bendit, and Thion used the Faurisson Affair to criticize different aspects of Western culture, namely the Manichean nature of French intellectual life, the oppressive actions of the Jewish community, and Western imperialism. Yet, although they refrained from absolute support of Faurisson, they nonetheless, by their respectable statuses, awarded him an amount of mainstream legitimacy he would not have attained from the margins of Pierre Guillaume's bookstore.

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<sup>41</sup> Thion, 31-32.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

## **The French Historical Community, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Annie Kriegel**

Despite certain Leftist support for Faurisson, his denialism repulsed the majority of the French Left. Three different responses demonstrate how the mainstream Left understood the crisis of Holocaust denial and how they responded. A historians' declaration in *Le Monde* identified the need to prevent the perversion of truth, historian Pierre Vidal Naquet deconstructed the mechanics of denialism, and historian Annie Kriegel pointed towards the problem of French anti-Semitism.

On February 19, 1979, *Le Monde* published a declaration against Faurisson signed by historians and intellectuals: Philippe Ariès, Alain Besançon, Robert Bonnaud, Fernand Braudel, Pierre Chaunu, Monique Clavel-Levéque, Marc Ferro, François Furet, Yvon Garland, Jacques Julliard, Ernest Labrousse, Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Pierre Levéque, Nicole Loraux, Robert Mandrou, Claude Mossé, Roland Mousnier, Jacques Néré, Claude Nicolet, Valentin Nikiprowetzky, Evelyn Patlagean, Michelle Perot, Léon Poliakov, Madeline Reberiouxn Maxime Rodinson, Jean Rougén, Lilly Scherr, Pierre Sorlin, Lucette Valensi, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Paul Veyne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Edouard Will<sup>43</sup>.

The declaration, written by Leon Poliakov and Pierre Vidal-Naquet first identified the crude nature of Holocaust denial: “To support that Zyklon B only exterminated lice, it is necessary then to accept that the Jews, the Gypsies, the Slavs, and the men exhausted by the work camps, were only fleas.<sup>44</sup>” In order to prevent the dehumanization and to “prevent the memory of what men did from fading with time,” the qualification of the

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<sup>43</sup> Pierre Vidal Naquet and Léon Poliakov, “Les camps Nazis et les chambres à gaz,” *Le Monde*,” final edition.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

historian mandated that he or she respond in some way<sup>45</sup>. A moral imperative, not an academic disagreement fueled the historians' response<sup>46</sup>.

In order to prevent the perversion of truth, the historians listed the honest facts that constituted the Holocaust: how many were killed in both collective exterminations and political assassinations, the limitless evidence of this fact established by testimony of the deported and administrative documents of the Third Reich, and finally the fact that Hitler ordered the extermination. Through a summation of Holocaust research, the historians disproved the theories of Faurisson by pointing to their absurdity in the face of massive evidence. Furthermore, they added that while: "A testimony, a document, can always be questioned... it is not possible to suspect a gigantic ensemble of concordant testimonies, emanated from people of all professions, of all levels of education, testimonies that as produced in justice at court trials."<sup>47</sup> Thus, they concluded their defense of historical truth by pointing towards Faurisson's blatant disregard for historical evidence.

The historians concluded the essay by emphasizing the futility of engaging in a historical debate with Faurisson or with any that would refute the reality of a genocidal event.

"Each is free to interpret a phenomenon like the Hitlerian genocide according to his philosophy... Each is free to imagine or to dream that these monstrous facts never occurred. Unfortunately, they did occur and no one can deny their existence without insulting the truth. It is not necessary to ask how, *technically*, such a massive murder was possible. It was possible technically because it happened. Such is the point of departure for all historical investigation on this subject. The truth

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Vidal Naquet and Léon Poliakov, "Les camps Nazis et les chambres à gaz."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

appears to us rather to remind simply that: there is not, there cannot be a debate on the existence of the gas chambers.<sup>48</sup>”

In 1980, Pierre Vidal Naquet wrote an additional essay in *Esprit* entitled, “A Paper Eichmann.”<sup>49</sup> In the essay, Vidal Naquet addressed two central aspects to the Faurisson Affair: the denialism of Faurisson and the involvement of Chomsky and Thion. Vidal Naquet first deconstructed the mechanics of denialist literature, which he observed “does not concern the war, but the study of contemporary mentalities above all since the 1960s.”<sup>50</sup> Denialists did not aim to uncover historical truth, but rather justify their contemporary politics through historical revisionism. He then identified key denialist lies and through what methods Faurisson and his acolytes established them. For denialists: there was no genocide or gas chambers, the final solution was simply the expulsion of the Jews, the number of victims was smaller than the “official” truth told, Germany was not responsible for World War II, and the real enemy of the 1930s and 1940s was the Soviet Union<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, he noted, denialists relied upon certain techniques to support their theories. They refuted all testimony by a Jew as fantasy or a lie and held that all testimony gathered before the liberation was a rumor. Furthermore, any documents with first hand information was forged or tampered with. Finally, anything that might prove the falsifiers wrong simply went unacknowledged or was ignored<sup>52</sup>.

Vidal Naquet then addressed the role of Noam Chomsky and Serge Thion in the affair of whom he accused of intellectual irresponsibility. The problem for Vidal Naquet

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Pierre Vidal Naquet, “A Paper Eichmann,” in *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Vidal Naquet and Poliakov, *Les camps Nazis et les chambres à gaz.*”

<sup>51</sup> Vidal Naquet, “A Paper Eichmann,” 17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* 21.

was how Chomsky, “a man of prestige,” and Thion ignored the widespread impact of their support in order to express their disdain with aspects of Western society. Chomsky had minimized the anti-Semitism of Faurisson and Thion had presented him as a dedicated researcher. In this way, Vidal Naquet believed the two offered a grain of legitimacy to the Holocaust deniers. For Vidal Naquet, the problem was not only the denialism, but how some of his contemporaries responded. He concluded to Chomsky that: “You had the right to say: my worst enemy has the right to be free... You did not have the right to take a falsifier of history and to recast him in the colors of truth.”<sup>53</sup>

The same year, historian Annie Kriegel commented upon the affair in an essay for the journal *Commentaire* titled, “Historical Truth and Political Lies: Deviations and Revisions of anti-Semitism.”<sup>54</sup> Like the historians of *Le Monde* and Pierre Vidal Naquet, she expressed the utmost disgust for Faurisson. However, unlike her peers, she more specifically addressed the response- or lack of response- of the mainstream Left to Faurisson.

Before addressing Holocaust denial, Kriegel criticized the prevalence of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism across the spectrum of the French political Left. She pointed to the way in which the communist newspaper, *Humanité* repeatedly denounced any suspicion of anti-Semitism, but granted only a single line or a fragment of a sentence about a Palestinian attack in Israel. Yet, the striking aspect to her opening is not why she criticized French communists, but why she included general anti-Semitism in an essay on Holocaust denial. It is clear that Kriegel found the need to contextualize Holocaust denial

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<sup>53</sup> Vidal Naquet, “A Paper Eichmann,” 71.

<sup>54</sup> Annie Kriegel, “Vérité historique et mensonge politique : Diversions et révisions sur l’anti-semitisme,” *Commentaire* 12, Spring 1980, 551-556.

in the larger issue of French anti-Semitism on the Left. For her, Holocaust denial was not a disease, but the symptom of one. A revolutionary supporter of Faurisson, like Guillaume, was thus not an anomaly for Kriegel, but a representation of certain tendencies of the French Left<sup>55</sup>.

The reaction of the French Left to Faurisson deeply disturbed Kriegel. More specifically, she was appalled by what she perceived of as the silence of the French Left in the wake of the Faurisson scandal. She specifically disparaged the way in which anti-Semitism was spiritedly denounced when espoused by the extreme Right, but “no determined rejection nor censure” followed when certain members of the French Left produced virulently anti-Semitic documents. *Le Monde*, for example, had published an advertisement for Thion’s book, *Historical Truth or Political Truth*, which supported Faurisson’s efforts to delve into the supposed “Holocaust Question”. According to Kriegel, no objection from the intellectual community followed. The French Left, would passionately rebut hints of anti-Semitism on the Right, but would stand in silence before the conspiratorial theories expounded by their members of their own political family. Thus, for Kriegel, the issue of denialism became secondary before the passivity of the French Left in the face of public anti-Semitism. Ultimately, their silence and inaction allowed theories of Holocaust denial to be heard and reheard<sup>56</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempted to provide insight into the significance of the Faurisson Affair by exploring two of its major components: Holocaust denial and the French Left. I first

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<sup>55</sup> Kriegel.

<sup>56</sup> Kriegel.

sought to explain the genesis, elements, and promises of Holocaust denial in the 1970's, by addressing these questions: What arguments did leading Holocaust deniers use to deny the Holocaust? What part did radical leftist ideologies play in the formation of denialist arguments? Did Holocaust denial ever become more than an expression of a lunatic fringe? Throughout the paper, I also attempted to explore the Faurisson Affair through the prism of the French Left, namely: What did the Faurisson Affair reveal about the nature of the French Left? To what extent did extremist ideologies dominate historical discussions in France? How did liberals understand Holocaust denial? What values appeared to be more deeply rooted in France?

Although the first strains of French Holocaust denial, authored by Paul Rassinier and Maurice Bardèche, first appeared during the 1950s, it was Robert Faurisson, who, by his status as a French academic, successfully publicized denialism nationally. Faurisson argued that he had proven the inexistence of the gas chambers by documenting discrepancies in key texts. Faurisson rejected mass evidence that suggested otherwise by insisting that most testimony was obtained under torture, mistranslated, misinterpreted, or simply forged. Faurisson first propogated a pseudo scientific denial of the Holocaust, but it was with the help of certain French Leftist radicals, namely Pierre Guillaume and members of *La Vieille Taupe*, that his theories blossomed into a more “intellectually, if perverse,<sup>57</sup>” form of Holocaust denial, accessible to a wider range of political thought. For example, where Faurisson maintained that the Holocaust was a constructed story, *La Vieille Taupe* explained who constructed it and why. According to *La Vieille Taupe* the West exaggerated Jewish losses to demonize the Nazis, justify their own bellicosity, and

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<sup>57</sup> Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*.

thus, exculpate themselves. However, with their reputation as radicals, *La Vieille Taupe* could hardly legitimize Holocaust denial in the hearts of the French. But, the intervention of prominent intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, Serge Thion, and Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit might. The manner in which they defended Faurisson and the way in which Thion and Cohn Bendit insinuated a far-reaching conspiracy, contributed to the legitimacy of Faurisson and his theses. Holocaust denial in France, aided by the force of a strange marriage of extremist thought on the Left and the Right, and the involvement of prominent intellectuals, thus became a public debate in the 1970's and 1980's.

In this paper, I also aimed to highlight different patterns in French Left thought during this time. Existing scholarship corresponds with central themes during the Faurisson Affair. Robert Wistrich, Alain Finkielkraut, and Valérie Igounet have correctly pointed towards the presence of different twentieth century ideologies in French political discussions. Anti-capitalism, Marxist revisionism, and third-worldism each played a role in the development of Leftist Holocaust denial. Furthermore, as Lipstadt astutely noted, debates among French intellectuals often tended towards Manicheanism. Thion and Bendit Cohn, through absolutist notions of free speech, rather than recognition of the difference between “reasoned dialogue and anti-intellectual pseudoscientific arguments,” propagated the notion of Faurisson as the defenseless victim of an omnipotent Western and Jewish oppressor<sup>58</sup>. Henry Rousso's observation of a penchant for conspiracy theories also rings true, as evinced by the essays of Thion, Bendit Cohn, and *La Vieille Taupe*. In sum, certain twentieth century ideologies influenced the way in which some

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<sup>58</sup> Lipstadt 25.

marginal and prominent mainstream intellectuals conceptualized the Holocaust and the controversy surrounding its denial.

But, plainly not all French intellectuals lost themselves in radical logic. Indeed, Pierre Vidal Naquet and Annie Kriegel amongst other historians staunchly defended liberal notions of historical truth against virulent assaults by Faurisson and his supporters. Vidal Naquet understood Holocaust denial as a deeply political and dehumanizing phenomenon. By deconstructing its methods and constructions, he pointed towards the danger it posed to collective memory and contemporary thought. He equally scrutinized members of his own political family, namely Chomsky and Cohn Bendit, citing their intellectual irresponsibility. In this way, he acknowledged problematic trends within French intellectual thought. Annie Kriegel similarly defended notions of free speech, emanating traditionally liberal values. Yet, Kriegel indicted the French Left more extensively than Vidal Naquet. She argued that the anti-Semitism of the mainstream French Left was equally suspect. For Kriegel, the anti-Semitism of men like Serge Thion was overt and crude, but the silence of the French Left in the face of Thion's perverse inquiries was insidiously dangerous. What could transpire in the future if the supposed defenders of French liberalism refused to reject public expressions anti-Semitism?

Thus, a range of French thought presented itself in response to the Holocaust denial of Robert Faurisson. Anti-capitalism, Marxist revisionism, and third-worldism manifested itself in the essays of Pierre Guillaume, *La Vieille Taupe*, and Serge Thion. Thion, Jean Gabriel Cohn Bendit, and Noam Chomsky emanated anti-Western sentiment that accused France and the Jewish community of totalitarian tendencies. Conspiratorial theories also saturated the thought of extremist Leftism. But, reversely, mainstream

intellectuals demonstrated their devotion to liberal values. It is of significance that thirty-five historians in *Le Monde*, as well as others who authored their own essays, articulately opposed Faurisson through well-constructed, historically sound arguments. What was the nature of the French Left at the time? It is clear that one answer does not suffice: extremism certainly did not constitute its entirety, but extremist tendencies did taint Left-wing assertions of liberalism.

Future research should more thoroughly investigate the implications and repercussions of the Faurisson Affair in France. Indeed, an affair that threatened to rewrite history, justify the murderous policies of a fascist regime, and deny the genocide of six million Jews, as well as the environment that produced it or stood in silence before it deserves further attention.

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