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Title: “Inconsistency: Discussion of Vichy France and Its Role in the Holocaust by French Presidents”
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Andrea Ritter is an IPFW senior who will be graduating in May with a Bachelor of Arts in French. Her research paper won the Sharon Alt Piepenbrink Award for best history paper of 2010. Starting in the Fall, she will be pursuing a Master of Arts in Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she plans on continuing her research on French Jewish Studies. After graduate school, she plans on either working at a museum or continuing on to a Ph.D program to become a college professor.

Abstract

On August 25, 1944, Charles de Gaulle delivered a speech in Paris marking its liberation from Nazi occupying forces. In this speech, de Gaulle declared that Paris was liberated “with the support of all of France” and of the “singular France.” These words established the myth that there was one France and that all of France fought in resistance against Nazi Germany; however, these words omitted the presence and influence of Vichy France, the government voted into power on July 10, 1940 that collaborated with Nazi Germany in deporting 76,000 Jews to camps throughout Europe. De Gaulle’s established narrative and omitted narrative have influenced the way in which French presidents have discussed World War II and the Holocaust during their presidencies. In analyzing public statements and private materials authored by these presidents, an inconsistent pattern has taken shape. The first three presidents after World War II, Auriol (1947-1954), Coty (1954-1959), and de Gaulle (1959-1969), did not discuss Vichy France. However, de Gaulle altered the pattern placing a wreath on Pétain’s grave on the anniversary of the Armistice marking the end of World War I, therefore emphasizing Pétain’s status as a World War I hero and downplaying his status as the former leader of Vichy France. Pompidou (1969-1974) discussed Vichy France at a press conference, but only from the perspective as a conflict between its own citizens and the Nazis. D’Estaing (1974-1981) took after de Gaulle by placing a wreath on Pétain’s grave. Mitterrand (1981-1995) continued the tradition of placing a wreath on Pétain’s grave, but in addition believed that France did not need to offer an apology for Vichy France’s actions. Acknowledgment of Vichy France’s collaboration with Nazi Germany by a president was marked by Chirac (1995-2007) through a speech marking the 53rd anniversary of the Vél d’Hiv round up, in which 13,000 Jews were deported by Vichy France and Nazi Germany. However, Sarkozy (2007-present) returned to de Gaulle’s narrative by commemorating 35 young Resistance fighters who had been executed by the Gestapo through a speech given on the day Sarkozy took office. Focusing on the government side of commemoration offers a prism to examine the way in which a country deals with its history. It adds another perspective into the study of French memory, which has affected the way in which French presidents have addressed its Vichy past.

List of French Presidents
2. René Coty (January 16, 1954-January 8, 1959)
8. Nicholas Sarkozy (May 16, 2007-present)