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Review of Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*

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Pierre Vidal-Naquet. *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust.* Transl. Jeffrey Mehlman. (*European Perspectives: A Series in Social Philosophy and Cultural Criticism*, Lawrence D. Kritzman and Richard Wolin, Eds.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. Pp. 191. Cloth $27.50.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet, according to the dust jacket of this book, is a "renowned historian of the ancient world and the author of numerous books on Greek drama, mythology, economy, and society." He is director of the Centre Louis Gernet de Recherches Comparees sur les Societes Anciennes at the Ecote des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Operating as a public intellectual who has undertaken to acquaint himself with the details of the Final Solution—"the subject is not so difficult as to preclude one's apprising oneself of it in short order" (1)—Vidal-Naquet emerged in the 1980s as one of France's most prominent and effective debunkers of Robert Faurisson, Paul Rassinier, Arthur Butz, and other Holocaust deniers. This volume brings together five essays, ranging in length from four to sixty-five pages, originally published in France between 1981 and 1987. Mehlman's translation has preserved the rhetorical and moral force of Vidal-Naquet's writing.

The uncomfortable predicament of all serious scholars and critics who aspire to debunk so-called revisionism is trying to shovel away the manure while avoiding the smell. Vidal-Naquet emphatically dismisses the notion that he is "answering" the deniers, or "entering into a dialogue with them" (xxiv), an approach that could be exploited by deniers seeking intellectual legitimation. But it is impossible to refute arguments without engaging them, so Vidal-Naquet devotes significant sections of his essays to a close reading of denial texts in an effort to expose fallacious logic, contradictions, decontextualizations, mistranslations, and outright fabrications. Appended to the first essay is a chemical analysis of Zyklon B contributed by a Swiss scientist, which Vidal-Naquet invokes to disprove Faurisson's claim that the gassings at Auschwitz-

Birkenau were physically impossible. Vidal-Naquet might not have "enter[ed] into a dialogue" with the deniers, but he has entered into their discourse in order to refute them on their own terms.

A second chief goal of these essays is to analyze the cultural and ideological matrices that give rise to Holocaust denial. As a phenomenon of the extreme right it is not difficult to understand or to explain. In Europe denial serves the ends of "an extreme rightwing that sees itself as heir to Nazism and dreams of its rehabilitation" (90), while in the United States it is an instrument of a peculiarly American neofascist synthesis. As these essays originally appeared before the *Historikerstreit* really heated up, Vidal-Naquet has only a few observations on potential connections between Holocaust denial, Holocaust minimization, and the Holocaust-relativism promoted by Ernst Nolte and others. These tendencies, Vidal-Naquet makes clear, have not been the exclusive preserve of the extreme right. Two factors have made them appealing to the far left: anti-Zionism (which often dissolves into anti-Semitism) and a desire to obliterate historical (hence moral) distinctions between democrats and fascists. In France, one of the leading producers of denial literature has been La Vieille Taupe, a publishing house whose politics Vidal-Naquet characterizes as "anarcho-Marxist" (9).

The most powerful, and arguably most deeply personal, essay focuses not on a Holocaust denier *per se,* but rather on the distinguished iconoclastic linguist Noam Chomsky, whom Vidal-Naquet depicts as a fellow traveler. In 1980 Chomsky contributed a preface to a new denial treatise by Faurisson, claiming that he was defending only Faurisson's academic freedom and not endorsing his views. Vidal-Naquet regards this assertion as disingenuous. How, Vidal-Naquet asks, can Chomsky confidently dismiss the accusation that Faurisson is an anti-Semite even while he admits that he has little knowledge of Faurisson's work? (66) According to Vidal-Naquet, Chomsky depicted Faurisson not as an enemy whose right to express repugnant ideas should be defended, but rather as a "relatively apolitical sort of liberal." Addressing himself directly to Chomsky, Vidal-Naquet exclaims: "You did not have the right to take a falsifier of history and to recast him in the colors of truth" (71).

The passionate *engagement* of these essays may say as much about the modalities of public intellectual life in France as they do about Holocaust denial. Readers interested primarily in the latter will find much that is useful for understanding the motives, arguments, and methods of deniers. But they may also find Vidal-Naquet's essays at times frustratingly unsystematic, polemical in style, and obscure. I would recommend that the unacquainted turn to Deborah Lipstadt's *Denying the Holocaust,* a systematic and up-to-date monograph, before taking on Vidal-Naquet.

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