

France: A Strange Defeat

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Le Suicide français

by Éric Zemmour

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Jacky Naegelen/Reuters

Éric Zemmour arriving at court for his trial on charges of inciting racial hatred, Paris, January 2011

1.

For three days the sirens never stopped in Paris. They began on the morning of January 7 right after two French Muslim terrorists infiltrated the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in the Marais and killed twelve people. A police dragnet spread out as the killers veered through the city before they escaped in the direction of Reims. The next morning a young policewoman was shot dead on a street near a Jewish school just outside the freeway ringing the city and again the police spread out. On January 9 television stations reported that another terrorist had taken hostages at a kosher grocery store near the Porte de Vincennes, and through the window of my office, which gives onto the Seine, I heard a steady stream of police and military vehicles rushing to the scene throughout the day. And then ambulances, which meant the news was not good.

Yet somehow it did not feel as if lightning had struck. Of course no one had predicted the spectacular assaults that took place. But throughout 2014 a series of disturbing events had in a sense primed the French public for them. Within days of the killings one began to witness a retrospective narrative developing, which suggested that “all the signs were there” but “they”—the government, the police, journalists—refused to recognize them. Untrue, but it is not a hard story to sell.

It all began in May when Mehdi Nemmouche—a Franco-Algerian petty criminal who had converted to radical Islamism in prison and then gone to Syria to join jihadist groups fighting there—walked into the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels and calmly murdered four people with an assault rifle and revolver. He had been inspired by Mohamed Merah, the terrorist who in March 2012 assassinated three Muslim French soldiers in Toulouse and Montauban, thirty miles away, then massacred a teacher and three students in a Jewish school in Toulouse. Merah’s last victim was a little girl, whom he turned toward the surveillance camera before shooting her in the head. The public’s response focused less on the victims than on the fact that Merah—who was killed by police while hiding out in an apartment in Toulouse—was then celebrated as a hero on social media by French Muslim sympathizers.

The battlefield successes of ISIS last summer brought more reasons to worry, as news reports circulated about devastated French families whose children, boys and girls, many recent converts, were leaving France to join jihadist forces. Four young men from one French country village, for example, were killed in Syria in a single week in October. The most dramatic case was that of Maxime Hauchard, a twenty-two-year-old convert from a small Norman village, who, along with another French convert, was spotted in an ISIS video in November participating in the slaughter of eighteen Syrian soldiers and an American aid worker. A few weeks before, an experienced French mountain travel guide was captured by jihadists in Algeria’s Djurdjura Mountains while going to visit friends. He was shown in a video kneeling and wearing a blue T-shirt, and then we see his severed head. He was the sixth such French victim over the past five years.

Just before Christmas the French public was again put on edge. One Saturday a Muslim convert whose Facebook page was full of radical Islamist material walked into a police station outside of Tours crying “*allahu akbar*,” pulled out a long knife, and stabbed three policemen, nearly killing one, whom he may have been trying to behead. He was shot and killed. The next day a Muslim man with severe psychological problems and screaming the same thing drove into a Christmas market in Dijon, killing one person and wounding a dozen more before trying, unsuccessfully, to commit suicide. The following day another mentally unstable man babbling something about the children of Chechnya did the same thing in Nantes, killing a shopper at the market and injuring many more. The holidays were quiet, but one week into the new year the three French-born Muslim terrorists struck in Paris.

This cascade of events is largely why the killings provoked more horror than surprise in France: they “fit” into something already there. An additional reason is that for the three previous months a highly polemical debate had been taking place about a right-wing book that offered a grandiose, incendiary, apocalyptic vision of the decline of France in which French Muslims play a central part. Though it was only published in October, Éric Zemmour’s *Le Suicide français* was the second-best-selling book in France last year, and the most argued over. It is one of those political tracts that seems to be printed on litmus paper, its meaning and force changing depending on whose hands are flipping the pages. Already the terms *zemmouriste*, *zemmourien*, and even *zemmourisation* have entered the political lexicon.

Never was a book better timed. For those who had already adopted Zemmour’s vision as their own, everything we have since learned about the Paris assassins—their petty crimes and drug dealing, their troublemaking in schools, the failure of teachers and social workers to help them, their contempt for the law, their embrace of fundamentalism and devotion to jihadism, their heartless filming of their murders and delight in committing them—serves to confirm that the country is mortally ill and its institutions in decay. For those who resist his vision, or what they imagine it to be without having read *Le Suicide français*, the book can only serve the explicitly xenophobic National Front and its president Marine Le Pen, who polls suggest would come in first if a presidential election were held today. A prophet, or He Who Shall Not Be Named? In either case, one cannot understand the French reaction to the present crisis without understanding the phenomenon of Éric Zemmour.

2.

Zemmour is less a journalist or thinker than a medium through whom the political passions of the moment pass and take on form. The son of North African Jews, he began his career writing editorials for *Le Figaro*, then started appearing on television and radio where he would give intelligent and unpredictable commentary on the issues of the day. Though clearly on the right, he seemed like a fresh, affable voice, an *épateur* of the Voltairean sort in a new, McLuhan-cool style.

That Zemmour is no more. Today he is an omnipresent Jeremiah who telegraphs the same message, day in and day out, on all available media: *France awake! You have been betrayed and your country has been stolen from you.* But his populism is nothing like that of the Poujadist movement of the 1950s or of Jean-Marie Le Pen today. He is a genuine intellectual—or what you might call a counterintellectual of the sort the French right produced in the interwar years and who sees others in his guild as the country's prime traitors. He is well educated, literary, stylish, light on his feet, a happy warrior who never raises his voice even when delivering bad news. And in *Le Suicide français* there is a lot of it.

It is a steamroller of a book. There are seventy-nine short chapters, each devoted to a date supposedly marking France's decline. (Chapter title: "See Lisbon and Die.") Zemmour does not transform them into a continuous narrative or even try to explain how they are connected. The connections are meant to be felt; he is a master of affect. Revisiting so many Stations of the French Cross sounds unbearable, but it is a testament to his skill as a writer and slyness as a polemicist that the book works.

The list of catastrophes and especially betrayals is long: birth control, abandonment of the gold standard, speech codes, the Common Market, no-fault divorce, poststructuralism, denationalizing important industries, abortion, the euro, Muslim and Jewish communitarianism, gender studies, surrendering to American power in NATO, surrendering to German power in the EU, surrendering to Muslim power in the schools, banning smoking in restaurants, abolishing conscription, aggressive antiracism, laws defending illegal immigrants, and the introduction of halal food in schools. The list of traitors is shorter but just as various: feminists, left-wing journalists and professors, neoliberal businessmen, antineoliberal activists, cowardly politicians, the educational establishment, European bureaucrats, and even coaches of professional soccer teams who have lost control of their players.

Some of the chapters are, as the French say, *hallucinants*—unhinged. Those devoted to Vichy have attracted the most criticism. Zemmour is angry with Jacques Chirac for making his famous speech in 1995 apologizing for France's complicity in the murder of its Jewish citizens during the Occupation—a cowardly act, Zemmour snaps, that turned "the Shoah into the official religion of the French Republic."

In a similar vein he attacks Robert Paxton, the American historian of Vichy and the Jews, who he claims singlehandedly turned the French against their history by dismantling the narrative of French innocence and resistance that De Gaulle constructed after the war to restore the country's pride. One can argue about the uses and misuses of De Gaulle's account, but Zemmour goes further, insisting that Vichy actually tried hard to save French Jews, which it did by coolly sacrificing foreign ones—a claim that numerous historians were quick to refute. It is so untenable that even Florian Fillipot, the modernizing vice-president of the National Front, dismissed Zemmour, declaring on television that "there is nothing, absolutely nothing from Vichy experience to defend. Vichy was not France, France was in London. It was the Resistance that saved the Jews."

Chapters like these make Zemmour sound like a mere crank. But in the others he scores enough genuine points that a sympathetically inclined reader will soon be prepared to follow him into more dubious territory. He is not the sort of demagogue who nails his theses to the door and declares, "Here I stand, I can do no other." Zemmour is more fluid, his positions and arguments constantly being refreshed, like a webpage, with new facts and fantasies. This creates a trap for his critics, who have obligingly jumped in. Not content to expose his exaggerations and fabrications, their instinct—a deep one on the French left since the days of the Popular Front—is to denounce anything someone on the right says, so as not to give comfort to the enemy. Their thinking is: if it is four o'clock, and Éric Zemmour says it is four o'clock, it is our duty to say it is three o'clock. Which guarantees that twice a day he will be able to look at his sympathizers and say, "You see what I mean?"

Zemmour's views are simply too eclectic to be labeled and dismissed *tout court*. And they can be surprising. Like everyone on the French right, he is a self-declared patriot nostalgic for national grandeur, and his prose turns purple

whenever he quotes from De Gaulle's speeches or recounts the triumphs of Napoleon. But high on his list of national traitors is the French business class. He scolds CEOs who have outsourced jobs or planted box stores in exurban areas, effectively killing commerce in small towns and villages, whose streets have emptied, leaving only juvenile delinquents. He charges bankers and financiers with betraying workers and the nation by pushing for full European integration and abandoning the French franc.



Abbas/Magnum Photos

A demonstrator with an issue of Charlie Hebdo at the march against terrorism, Paris, January 11, 2015. The cartoon on the cover shows a Jew, a Catholic, and a Muslim demanding that "Charlie Hebdo" must be veiled!

He makes much of the fact that, as others have noted, the images on the euro currency lack any historical or geographical references. One sees only bridges that connect nowhere with nowhere, and architectural elements that float in vacant space—apt metaphors for what has happened to the European nation-state. The Revolution, which freed France to determine its own collective destiny, has finally been reversed by Brussels. "The aristocratic Europe of the past and the technocratic oligarchy of today have finally gotten their revenge on the incorrigible French."

Arguments like these can be found in the countless left-wing antiglobalization pamphlets that fill the tables of French bookstores today. But Zemmour tosses them into a mix with more familiar right-wing arguments, like his attacks on the Sixties generation for promoting radical feminism and defending large-scale immigration. He insinuates that all these things are connected. A decade ago he published a broadside titled *Le premier sexe* about how feminism confused gender roles and emasculated men. In *Le Suicide français* he attacks feminism for how it affects women, arguing that it just liberated men from marriage and responsibility, leaving large numbers of women as divorced single mothers who age and die alone—stock arguments on the American right, but also among some post-Sixties feminists.

But Zemmour is driving in a very different, nativist direction. Every since their loss in the Franco-Prussian War, which was ascribed to cultural and physical weakness, the French have been obsessed with their birthrate. Today it is relatively high by European standards, but appears—the government refuses to collect statistics on ethnicity—to be sustained by higher rates among families of North and Central Arab African immigrant "stock." This has become a major obsession

on the radical right, whose literature is full of predictions of an imminent *grand remplacement* that will silently turn France into a Muslim country through demographic inertia.

Zemmour never mentions this theory, he simply drops a quote from a speech made by former Algerian president Houari Boumediene in 1974, proclaiming that the southern hemisphere would conquer the northern one through immigration and reproduction: “The wombs of our women will bring us victory.” Due to feminism, Zemmour implies, the wombs of white women have shriveled up. And due to multiculturalism, the flood of fertile immigrants is allowed to continue. This is one more reason why French Muslims should be considered, as he has recently been saying, “*un peuple dans le peuple*”—a classic motif of European anti-Semitism that he has readapted to meet the present danger.

The French term for multiculturalism is *anti-racisme*, and its history is wrapped up with the development—and decline—of the left. Writers like Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, who came from the left, have long argued that left-wing activists made a disastrous mistake in the 1970s by abandoning the traditional working class, which was offended by the culture of the Sixties, and turning toward identity politics. Deserted, the workers turned to the National Front and adopted its xenophobia; in response, the left formed organizations like SOS Racisme that defended immigrants and fended off any criticism of their mainly Muslim culture.

The republican picture of a France that could and should turn peasants and immigrants into equal citizens was replaced by the picture of a racist nation that after repressing its colonial subjects abroad consigned them to an underclass at home. By now, so the argument against the left goes, this antiracism is the central dogma of mainstream politics, and has stifled the will to integrate Muslims from immigrant backgrounds into French society, with disastrous results—first and foremost for Muslim youth. Worse, it has stifled open discussion by stigmatizing as racist anyone who raises questions about these developments.*

Finkielkraut has made this strong case but in a tragic register recently in *L'identité malheureuse*. Zemmour adopts a prosecutorial tone, and one thing becomes very clear the deeper one gets into his book: he does not give a damn about his Muslim fellow citizens. He has contempt for them—and wants his readers to share his view. It is one thing to say, as former president of SOS Racisme Malek Boutih has, that the antiracist rhetoric of victimization has blinded the French to the real threat of fundamentalist Islam brewing in the poor urban areas. It is quite another to dismiss out of hand, as Zemmour does, the enormous independent effects of poverty, segregation, and unemployment in making people in those areas feel hopeless, cut off, angry, and contemptuous of republican pieties. The *quartiers* in which they live are modernist architectural disaster areas, brutal in appearance and run down, and far from the few jobs the French economy generates. Incarceration policies throw young offenders in together with seasoned criminals, including jihadist recruiters, and once they have records they are nearly unemployable. Dropout rates are high, which is why one sees teenage boys milling about on the streets during the day, causing trouble.

The list of policies that contribute to all these conditions—and, if changed, might help to ease them—is long. And France could change them while at the same time policing the streets, maintaining authority in the classrooms, and teaching the republican values of laicity, democracy, and public duty—which one would think Zemmour would favor. But for a demagogue like him it is important to convince readers that the rot is too deep, the traitors too numerous, for a patchwork of measures to have any effect. To follow his suicide metaphor, it would be like devising an exercise regimen for a patient on life support. On the book’s last page we read that “France is dying, France is dead.” There is no final chapter on what is to be done to revive it. He leaves that to his reader’s imagination.

Successful ideologies follow a certain trajectory. They are first developed in narrow sects whose adherents share obsessions and principles, and see themselves as voices in the wilderness. To have any political effect, these groups must learn to work with other sects. That’s difficult for obsessive, principled people, which is why at the political fringes one always finds little factions squabbling futilely with each other. But for an ideology to really reshape politics it must cease being a set of principles and become a vaguer but persuasive outlook that new information and events only strengthen. You really know when an ideology has a grip on someone when he takes both A and not-A to be confirmations of it. American conservatism followed something like this trajectory over the past fifty years, as distinctions between the old right and neoconservative intellectuals disappeared and a common, flexible *doxa* developed that could serve unreflective politicians and media demagogues alike.

The French right may be advancing on that trajectory today. Those on the right include pro-European businessmen, anti-European and anti-American Gaullists, traditionalist Catholics opposed to abortion and gay marriage, poor working-class whites who live uneasily next to poor Muslims, and, at the extreme fringe, nativists who want to expel those Muslims. On particular policies, their views are by and large incompatible.

But Éric Zemmour has made a large gift to the factions of the right with *Le Suicide français*. He has given them a common set of enemies; he has given them a calendar of the enemies' crimes; he has made them feel that there must be some connection between those crimes; and he has stirred them to an outraged hopelessness—which in politics is much more powerful than hope, as the current American president has learned. If the different parts of the French right still have trouble working together, they have just received a vision of France that they can all subscribe to. This at a time when the country is trying to wrap its collective mind around one of the great tragedies and challenges in its recent history.

After the collapse of the Maginot Line in 1940 and the quick end to the *drôle de guerre*, the great question in France was how to explain what Marc Bloch called “a strange defeat.” A similar exercise in retrospective prophecy has now begun and French journalism is focused on little else. What is extraordinary about Éric Zemmour's book is that it was published before the terrorist attacks, but can now be—and is being—read as the chronicle of seventeen deaths foretold. Yes, the publication of *Le Suicide français* was well timed, at least for its author. For France, not so much.

—Paris, February 19, 2015; this is the second of three articles.

* See my article “[France on Fire](#),” *The New York Review*, March 5, 2015. ↩