

TESTIMONY/DOCUMENT

Pascal COPEAU, former member of CNR*, speaking at a university seminar (1974)

Maybe there are still a few things for me to say. To firstly thank the teacher Henri Michel who had the courage to organise this meeting which could have ended in a battle. I have recently been told that a historian or sociologist, I don't know exactly which, said at a similar conference that memoir writers were really annoying and it was the worst thing when they started writing history.

I believe this is a small part of the difficult position that we find ourselves in. I would like to briefly address my comrades from the Resistance, to ask them to be a little more tolerant with regard to the choices faced by History. Because in any case, that's what is going to happen. Of course they can refute any historical study, but in the end they cannot prevent what will remain in History. What will become the account of what occurred will not match what they believe happened. Because when we try to write down what we remember, we realise it is really difficult to have complete honesty and to not, in hindsight, arbitrarily reconstruct a kind of justification for our efforts. In fact, it is something we gradually create over time. I would also like to address young people, in particular young people who have done us the honour of writing our history. I do want to tell them that their theses and their reports have sometimes seemed to me to be a little detached, under the pretext of historical objectivity. But maybe that is because it is difficult to imagine themselves in such situations. I often invite them, even if they are writing on a very specialised topic, to always remember that Hitlerism was the most barbaric endeavour, the most vile enterprise to prevail in the history of the world, in the history of humanity. It seems to me this has not been said often enough, and it should be said. The real meaning of that era is actually the fight for freedom, and we don't think about that. You can naturally record very impersonal impressions and that basically is the start of our protest, because we did resist. Of course, I do not at all agree with some of my friends who, with a kind of hyperbole, readily argue that anyone who was not part of the Resistance was a 'collobo', a collaborator, to use the term often used at the time. I also really want to add that this was, as some say, a time of the sorrow and the pity. These are beautiful words, I cannot deny it. But I also ask you, young people, to remind yourself that the time was above all, and one is unfortunately always a little grandiose when one talks about it, but it's the truth, this was above all a time of torture and death.

So please forgive our vulnerability because we are speaking as survivors, maybe a little erratically. And if it is the case that there are quite a few survivors to speak, that shows we were so young at that time, some of us even children, and for the most part we were innocent. We did what we could to build a secret life, an underground life of honour since all, or most, of the leaders of France had resigned. So, dearest young researchers, when we find our life in your studies, it seems a little impersonal to us. But have no fear, and pardon me if I seem grandiose again, but I say, do not be afraid to dip your pens into the blood. Behind every abbreviation that you explain with all your learning from books, there are some of our friends who are dead. In reality the organisation was not some kind of fine edifice that you could rely on, it was a weak spider web and we, like an unwearied Penelope, we spent our time circling around it by bicycle. Or, whenever we could we repaired the spider web, patched it up, put back the threads, to revive men where they had fallen. So, the fact that we still had time to

argue among ourselves, to sometimes even tear ourselves apart, that also shows that we were young, and that the battles reflected something ... [continued]

**CNR (Conseil National de la Resistance) was an organisation formed when eight key resistance groups joined together in 1941 to oppose the Nazi occupation of France, and to also plan for reforms in France after liberation in 1945.*

**The Liberation of France, International conference (Paris, 28-31 October 1974)
Committee for the History of the Second World War, Paris, CNRS Publishers, 1976, pp
951-952.**