



The All-too-brief Existence of the Maison de l'Histoire de France: a Wasted Opportunity

Etienne François (Professor Emeritus of History at the Free University of Berlin and the University of Paris-I (Panthéon-Sorbonne))

Abstract

Launched during the 2007 Presidential campaign by Nicolas Sarkozy, then candidate, the project of creating a museum of French history, after tentative beginnings, started 2010 taking on a more definitive shape. A scientific advisory committee worked on defining its profile and the new institution was set up in Paris in January 2012. But its existence was short due to the fact that the new political majority decided, after having won the Presidential and legislative elections in the Spring of 2012, to shut the project down. Where did the idea of a « Maison de l'Histoire de France » come from ? Which debates did the project arouse ? Which orientations were drafted by the scientific committee ? How can one explain the sudden decision to close the project down ? Those are the questions addressed in this paper.

A hesitant start to a political project

The Maison de l'Histoire de France (House of French History) was first mentioned by presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy during the spring 2007 election campaign, set as a goal of his new government in autumn of the same year, following his election as president, and officially established as a 'public institution' by decree on 22 December 2011, but had its existence suddenly cut short following the change in presidential and parliamentary majorities in spring 2012. Its dissolution was announced in August 2012 and the official decision was published the 24th of December.

What prompted the French Presidency to launch the plan for a Maison de l'Histoire de France? How did it gradually progress from a plan to initial implementation? How did people view and receive this new plan? Why was it necessary to wait four years between the initial decision and the official establishment of the new institution? Lastly, why was the institution closed down so soon after its creation? These are the questions that this short article seeks to answer.

Similar to the project to create a 'German Historical Museum', launched by Chancellor Helmut Kohl immediately after he came to power, with the museum being established in 1987, and the project for a museum about the Warsaw uprising of 1944, promoted by the Polish President, Lech Kaczyński, with the museum opening in 2004, the project to create a Maison de l'Histoire de France was, like all initiatives of this kind, highly political.

It is therefore no surprise that it made its first appearance during the presidential election campaign in spring 2007. During that election campaign, which was marked by the clash between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, the topic of national identity, the exaltation of patriotism and references to history were of central importance, as is often the case in France, and the two candidates vied with each other in this arena, which is as sensitive as it is inspiring. It was against this background that a cultural heritage official at the Ministry of Defence, Hervé Lemoine, took the initiative to write to Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign team and suggest that he create a museum or house of French history. In the final weeks of the election campaign, the team reconsidered this suggestion and publicly announced it as one of the future presidency's 'major projects'. Once the elections (presidential and legislative) were over and the new government had been formed, a mission statement sent jointly on 20 November 2007 to the Minister for Culture and Communication, Christine Albanel, and to the Minister for Defence, Hervé Morin, entrusted them with the task of devising 'the project to create a centre for research and permanent collections devoted to the civil and military history of France'. Unsurprisingly, this task was immediately assigned to the person who had come up with the original idea, Hervé Lemoine.

This was followed in subsequent years by a series of reports, public announcements and decisions which gradually fleshed out the project. Following the first report requested from Hervé Lemoine and submitted to the Minister for Culture and Communication and the Minister for Defence in April 2008, a second report was commissioned at the start of 2009 on the possible sites for the new institution. This report was entrusted to a specialist in contemporary history, Jean-Pierre Rioux, chosen because of his multiple skills: in addition to his main specialism and the duties he had performed at the French Institute of Contemporary History, Jean-Pierre Rioux is also founder of the journal *Vingtième Siècle*, which from the start established itself as one of the leading historical journals in France and abroad, the author of authoritative essays on the relationship between the French and its past and, furthermore, for several years he was Inspector

General for History at the Ministry of National Education, a strategic position which placed him at the interface between research, the world of teaching and education policy. This second report, presented in May 2009, suggested five sites that could potentially house the new institution: the Hôtel des Invalides, the Palais de Chaillot, the Grand Palais, the Château de Vincennes and the Château de Fontainebleau. Moreover, it proposed that the new institution be called ‘House’ to better emphasise that it was intended to be a place for collective history, not official history. Finally, after Christine Albanel was replaced by Frédéric Mitterrand at the Ministry of Culture and Communication in June 2009, a third report was commissioned from Jean-François Hébert, a senior official who had held several positions of responsibility at the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Culture and Communication, as well as being President of the Château de Fontainebleau, a public institution. Submitted in April 2010, this final report, entitled ‘Decision factors for the Maison de l’Histoire de France’, envisaged an *ex nihilo* site for the new institution on the Île Seguin (former site of the Renault factories at Boulogne–Billancourt). It also proposed including the new institution in a network of nine art and history museums overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Communication (Musée des Eyzies-de-Tayac for prehistory, Hôtel de Cluny for the Middle Ages, Musée d’Ecouen for the Renaissance and so on).

As this series of reports was being produced, the office of the President and the Ministry of Culture and Communication were beginning to define the contours of the future institution. The first important date in this respect was 13 January 2009. In his New Year wishes to representatives from the world of culture in Nîmes, the President publicly announced the ‘creation of a museum of French history’. One year later, on the same occasion, he confirmed this creation in a speech given at the City of Music in Paris, adding that its location would be decided soon. Finally, on 12 September, Nicolas Sarkozy announced that the future Maison de l’Histoire de France would be located in Paris itself, on the Rohan–Soubise site, in the heart of the Marais district. It was to share the same premises as the Public Records Office and would take over the buildings vacated following the transfer of public records dating from after the French Revolution to the new site being completed at Pierrefite-sur-Seine. For its part, in March 2010, the Ministry of Culture and Communication appointed Jean-François Hébert as President of a ‘pre-launch association’, a small body (having only four members at the end of 2010) tasked with shaping the future public institution.

Two aspects emerge from this brief rundown of the background to the Maison de l’Histoire de France: it was, above all, a presidential project. Although not originating from the President of the Republic himself, it did come from his inner circle, so in this regard it was similar to the ‘major projects’ launched by former French presidents (the Pompidou Centre, François Mitterrand Library and Quai Branly Museum). However, unlike these major projects, which were the result of constant effort and strong commitment on the part of the presidents concerned, the project for the Maison de l’Histoire de France appeared uncertain, struggled to define its identity and only received sporadic attention on the part of the French President.

A predominantly negative reception

From the start, and increasingly as it progressed and as the President spoke in its favour, the project to establish a ‘Museum’ and then a ‘House’ of French history sparked intense debate and heated controversy among the public, particularly among historians. Formulated early on, then clarified over the years, the vast majority of positions taken were critical. Widely relayed by the

press and electronic media, both in France and abroad, they became progressively more radical and entrenched.

An initial body of criticism denounced the retrograde, insular and therefore dangerous nature of an unacceptable project. Why have a museum dedicated to national history when the focus was now, more than ever, on Europe and globalisation? Why have a museum putting forward a necessarily simplistic and static view of French history, when historical research was constantly evolving and had already dismantled the idea of an idealised, patriotic view of French history a long time earlier? How could collections equal to the project's ambitions be put together when France already had a huge number of history museums? Lastly, how could one avoid political exploitation by the powers that be? These objections — which in many respects were (unwittingly) reminiscent of those raised following Chancellor Helmut Kohl's announcement of his intention to create a 'German Historical Museum' in West Berlin — received all the more attention as they were voiced by a number of internationally renowned historians, including Arlette Farge, Jacques Le Goff, Daniel Roche, Christophe Charle and Roger Chartier, but also by several self-nominated representatives of a new generation like Isabelle Backouche, Vincent Duclert and Nicolas Offenstadt (the latter was the most extreme of them all in his rejection of the project).

A second body of objections questioned the intrusion, deemed unacceptable, of political power (more precisely of the office of the President of the Republic) into an area outside its competence, for reasons which moreover were mainly ideological and party political. This was the stance taken in particular by Pierre Nora, who a few years earlier had fought political interference in historical research in the form of the so called 'lois mémorielles' (laws about the right interpretation of the past), and had founded the 'Liberté pour l'Histoire' (Freedom for History) association to combat this danger. While acknowledging that questioning the construction, evolution and current state of national identity was relevant, Pierre Nora believed that direct intervention by politicians, with the political ulterior motives behind it (the Presidency of the Republic and the majority at the time had made the active restoration of national identity one of their political priorities), constituted an 'original sin' for the Maison de l'Histoire de France, something which it would never manage to cast off and which would deprive the project of all legitimacy from the start.

The third body of objections concerned the choices made by politicians, in particular, the decision imposed in an authoritarian way, with no prior consultation, to house the future Maison de l'Histoire de France on the site of the Public Records Office. This was the position expressed in particular by the majority of Public Records Office staff, which led to an open dispute with the Ministry of Culture and Communication and to the sudden ousting in February 2011 of the Director of the Public Records Office, who had made no secret of her sympathy for the protesters.

This criticism, voiced repeatedly and widely by historians, but also by the public, dominated the debate from the start. Many attempts were made to establish dialogue between the opponents and supporters of the project, and when Frédéric Mitterrand was appointed Minister for Culture and Communication, in June 2009, his first concern was to seek contact with the critics in order to gain a better understanding of their reasons and to take them into account. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, the balance of power between supporters and opponents of the project has always remained deeply asymmetric. The feeling that the real motive behind this initiative was

economic and political, in the negative sense of the word, continued to prevail, and the arguments in favour of the Maison de l'Histoire de France never managed to seriously counterbalance those of its opponents, let alone gain the upper hand.

A late but promising start

After this long phase of reflection and uncertainty, while debates and controversies were still raging, work finally began to set up the Maison de l'Histoire de France. This work was done very discreetly, with the creation in March 2010 of a pre-launch association led by Jean-François Hébert. Its intention was to prepare for the creation, planned for 2012, of a 'public institution', namely a permanent body, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. At its inception, the association, located within the premises of the Public Records Office, only had two members: Jean-François Hébert (who kept his responsibilities at Fontainebleau) and Charles Personnaz (historian, senior official, Secretary-General of the 'Musées de France' national museum network and cosignatory, together with Hervé Lemoine, of the letter sent to Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign team in spring 2007) who carried out the actual work. Later, this small, young and active body, which comprised historians as well as museum and media experts, was strengthened by new recruits: it had 4 members in January 2011 and 10 members in December of the same year.

Once the pre-launch association had been set up at its premises, the second stage was to establish a scientific steering committee. The Minister for Culture and Communication, Frédéric Mitterrand, strongly backed the creation of this committee, which was entrusted to Jean-Pierre Rioux, in conjunction with the Ministry. Placed under the honorary chairmanship of Jean Favier, a medievalist historian, former Director of the Public Records Office and former President of the National Library of France, and under the chairmanship of Jean-Pierre Rioux, this committee had 20 members, both French and foreign, with varied and complementary skills (historians, museum curators, archivists, publishers and so on), who 'represented historical fields and disciplines'. Officially set up on 13 January 2011, the Ministry tasked this committee with 'drawing up and defining the heart of the project'. In my dual capacity as a German historian living and working in Germany for 20 years, but also as Vice-Chair of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the German Historical Museum, I was fortunate enough to serve on this committee. I am keen to stress that, thanks to the judicious choices made regarding the composition of this committee, the efficiency and professionalism of Jean-Pierre Rioux's collegial leadership, the perfect complementarity between our committee and the pre-launch association, and lastly the total freedom with which we were able to pursue our work (we were never subject to any political interference or orders whatsoever and we were shown complete trust), the work done by this committee was extraordinary. Each one of us gave his or her best, driven by the same desire to meet the challenge of designing a new institution that responded to present and future issues in the best way possible, and that was also a genuine public service institution.

In order to develop the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France, we worked in two stages. The first part of 2011 was devoted to drawing up a 'preliminary project'. Ad hoc working group meetings, plenary committee sittings and summarising and drafting tasks carried out by Jean-Pierre Rioux led to this preliminary project being submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Communication in June 2011. This 71-page document was then the subject of a wide consultation exercise: 1 700 copies were produced and sent to a broad sample of individuals from

cultural and scientific fields, in France and abroad, who were qualified to appraise it, as well as being posted online. Between the end of September and the end of November, seven regional meetings were scheduled in Paris and elsewhere in France (Lyon, Marseilles, Toulouse, Rennes, Lille and Strasbourg). For each meeting, several hundred invitations were sent out, based mainly on the Regional Directorates of Cultural Affairs networks. Other meetings were organised in response to requests: they were therefore held with the heads of departmental archives, during the 'Encounters with History' festival in Blois, at the Pessac Historical Film Festival and with the management of the Public Records Office and of the French National Archives. Attendance at these debates by state school teachers, academics and researchers was poor, many of them not wishing to give the impression of being involved in a project considered to be too political. There was, however, much greater participation from the world of culture, museums, archives and conservation, and more generally among those responsible for, and involved in, the country's '1 000 historical and heritage sites'. A vast partnership and exchange network was thereby gradually created, which allowed both the association and the scientific committee to better gauge local expectations of the Maison de l'Histoire de France in the world of culture and research. Profitable partnerships were also formed with the world of historical research, in France and abroad, as well as with major institutions that support research (French National Centre for Scientific Research and the French National Research Agency).

As of autumn 2011, the many contacts and exchanges we had in numerous areas enabled us to go back to the text of the preliminary project and improve and supplement it, in particular drawing on the criticisms and suggestions we had received from France and abroad. The resulting 'Project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France' was submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Communication on 10 January 2012 and was made public on 27 January 2012. This document was shorter than the preliminary project (at only 40 pages long) and set seven goals for the Maison de l'Histoire de France: 'to provide digital historical resources that would meet the historiographical and technological challenges of the 21st century; to create a permanent, evolving time gallery illustrating the history of France with a chronological backbone and "snapshots of history"; to host exhibitions and temporary events on aspects of French history, enabling visitors to see and understand by implementing scientific approaches, appropriate methods and resources; to formulate major historical themes and topics likely to enthuse the public, to be covered in programmes of events on an annual or biennial basis; to help showcase historical research on an ongoing basis; to implement regional, national and international partnerships with public cultural and scientific institutions of all kinds; to accommodate all audiences, with special consideration for children and young people, history lovers, education professionals, associations and foreign tourists'. In short: an ambitious, multi-dimensional programme aiming to make the Maison de l'Histoire de France 'a home for everyone, a forum for documentation, reflection and debate, the audiences and cultural and civic usefulness of which are based on the strength of its offering and its partnerships'.

The third stage, which was under way while the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France was being drawn up, consisted of preparing the legal and financial aspects of the public institution, due to take over from the pre-launch association in January 2012. Presented to and discussed by the Cabinet on 21 December 2011, the decree officially establishing the Maison de l'Histoire de France, in the form of a 'public administrative institution' under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Communication, was issued the next day, 22 December 2011. This

decree confirmed that the Maison de l'Histoire de France was to be established at the site of the Public Records Office and appointed Maryvonne de Saint-Pulgent as its president. A Councillor of State, former Director of Heritage at the Ministry of Culture and Communication, Ms de Saint-Pulgent, although not a historian, was chosen for her strength of character, her reputation for independent thinking, but also for her wide range of skills (at that time she was Chair of the Ministry's Committee for History, a member of the board of directors of the Orsay Museum and of the French National Centre of Cinematography and the Moving Image, but also President of the French National Geographical Institute and Chair of the Board of Directors of the French National Theatre of Opéra Comique). Shortly afterwards, a board of directors was formed for the new institution which included figures such as Krzysztof Pomian, Régis Debray, Elie Barnavi and Leïla Sebbar, while the scientific steering committee became its scientific advisory committee.

Lastly, to publicly mark the creation of the Maison de l'Histoire de France (prior to its official opening scheduled for 2015), a temporary exhibition with the potential to attract visitors of all kinds and to inform the public of the fledgling project took place between mid-January and mid-February 2012. Organised in partnership with the French National Museums Authority and the Museum of Military Scale Models, this exhibition was held at the Grand Palais. Making use of the extraordinary resources of the Museum of Military Scale Models — to be specific, a number of scale models of border towns made between the end of the 17th century and the middle of the 19th century — it highlighted the fact that far from being an unchanging constant, France, as a territory, has been built over the centuries for predominantly political and strategic reasons, and that its borders have also evolved over time. As a foretaste of what the Maison de l'Histoire de France proposed to do later on, this first exhibition was a resounding success with the public, attracting 140 000 visitors.

Rapid closure without appeal

The election campaign at the start of 2012, the election of François Hollande as President in May 2012, followed by the victory of the Socialist Party in the legislative elections in June 2012, initially led to all new initiatives being suspended and then to a period of uncertainty. François Hollande had been expressing his concerns since August 2011: 'A great museum of French history is a wonderful idea', he wrote, adding: 'The Maison de l'Histoire de France, administratively improvised, created by an act of government with no consultation or consideration, refusing to take into account advances in research and the doubts expressed by its various audiences, is a project that does not live up to the expectations for France's great cultural initiatives.' In October of the same year, the Socialist Party confirmed its opposition to the Maison de l'Histoire de France. Opponents of the project took advantage of the election campaign to reassert and entrench their positions and to have their countless supporters in the Socialist Party and left-wing organisations endorse their arguments.

Shortly after her appointment as the new Minister for Culture and Communication, Aurélie Filipetti, who had never hidden her hostility to the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France, decided to halt all the planned work in the middle of July 2012. Using as an argument the additional expense that setting up the Maison de l'Histoire de France would have entailed (there were rumours of a provisional budget of EUR 80 million) while France's public finances were in dire straits, she announced, one month later, that she was bringing the project to an end, that there would be no budget for 2013 and that all its staff would be swiftly redeployed. As a result,

Maryvonne de Saint-Pulgent resigned from her position on 30 September 2012, returning to the Council of State.

The project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France therefore sank without trace, together with all the future initiatives it had started to prepare. It must be acknowledged that there were no protests over its closure. What was this failure down to and what are the reasons behind it?

The first reason is clearly political in nature. Presented to the public in the context of the 2007 presidential campaign and advanced on several occasions by President Sarkozy himself as a project that he 'strongly desired', much of the public identified the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France, from start to end, with Nicolas Sarkozy himself and with his government's ideas and methods, thereby giving rise to profound reservations, even a categorical opposition, among his opponents.

The second reason is that the very circumstances in which the project was gradually developed increased initial fears instead of dispelling them. The dithering of the first few years, the relaunch of the project in the context of the policy to restore 'national identity' promoted by Eric Besson, Minister for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Cooperative Development, the authoritarianism perceived both in the decision to set up the Maison de l'Histoire de France on the Rohan-Soubise site and in the dismissal of Isabelle Neuschwander, Director of the Public Records Office, in February 2011, all served to undermine the legitimacy of the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France by giving it a partisan, political connotation.

The third reason is due to the timing. Despite the efforts of the pre-launch association and the scientific steering committee to make the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France an ambitious, consensual, outward- and forward-looking project, meeting expectations and current needs, these efforts came too late to be clearly perceived on the outside and to win over to the project, if not those who opposed it on principle, at least those who had their doubts as to whether it could be put on the right path. The institution only began to really take shape at the beginning of 2012, against a background where the election campaign had assumed such vital importance that it was almost impossible to escape from it. As far as I am concerned, I am convinced that if the presidential and legislative elections had not taken place in 2012, but instead in 2014, thereby giving the Maison de l'Histoire de France the time to prove itself, things would have turned out differently.

Finally, although they are less important, two reasons cannot fail to be mentioned. The first one is an ideological, and partly, a political reason. The new Minister for Culture and her advisors wanted to close, as soon as possible, a project perceived as an emblematic initiative of the Right. The second is a financial one. The implementation costs of the new institution would have been quite high and difficult to justify in a context of increasing public debts.

* * *

Having taken an active part in defining the project for the Maison de l'Histoire de France, personally, I am sorry that the current political majority took this decision. I am certainly not calling it into question: the new majority was democratically elected and I fully understand that, taking into account the financial circumstances, but also the controversy that accompanied the entire history of the Maison de l'Histoire de France, the current government decided to end the

experiment. However, that does not stop me thinking that it was a wasted opportunity. In contemporary French society, which is divided, uncertain of its future and faced with the dual challenge of European integration and globalisation, a forum for discussion and debate on the place of the past in the present could have played an essential educational, civic and political role. In fact, a large number of inhabitants of France (either French citizens or not) have great difficulties to come to terms with the French history. France is by no means the only country where the project for a museum or house of national history has failed; the same happened in the Netherlands and Austria. I would, however, have preferred to see my country follow the example of Germany, Canada or Australia.