

Populist Historical Reason on the French Far-Right: The Case of Éric Zemmour and *Reconquête*

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This article examines the significance of history in the political strategy of French far-right populist Éric Zemmour and his party, *Reconquête*. It argues that Zemmour's discourse is a textbook example of "populist historical reason". A media-pundit turned politician, Zemmour's notoriety largely stems from radical historical revisionism spanning antiquity to the contemporary era. He narrates French history in grim terms as a story of original greatness followed by decline and betrayal. As a proponent of the Great Replacement theory, he accuses (Muslim) migrants and politically correct elites of conspiring to destroy the French people. Zemmour's self-declared "war of history" prioritizes a polarizing philosophy of history over factual accuracy and plays a crucial role in his authoritarian agenda. The article shows that Zemmour mobilizes history to incite fear and paranoia, redefine and restrict popular sovereignty, showcase his patriotism, cast himself as a providential leader capable of saving the nation, and ultimately undermine democratic norms and the rule of law.
Keywords: populism; far-right; Éric Zemmour.

A razão histórica populista na extrema-direita francesa: o caso de Éric Zemmour e do *Reconquête*

Este artigo examina o significado da história na estratégia política do populista de extrema-direita francês Éric Zemmour e do seu partido, o *Reconquête*. Defende que o discurso de Zemmour é um exemplo clássico de "razão histórica populista". Ex-comentarista mediático que se tornou político, a notoriedade de Zemmour deriva em grande parte de um revisionismo histórico radical que abrange desde a Antiguidade até à era contemporânea. Ele narra a história francesa em termos sombrios, como uma história de grandeza original seguida de declínio e traição. Como defensor da teoria da Grande Substituição, acusa os migrantes (muçulmanos) e as elites do "politicamente correto" de conspirarem para destruir o povo francês. A autoproclamada "guerra da história" de Zemmour privilegia uma filosofia polarizadora da história em detrimento da exatidão factual e desempenha um papel crucial na sua agenda autoritária. O artigo

mostra que Zemmour mobiliza a história para incitar o medo e a paranoia, redefinir e restringir a soberania popular, exibir o seu patriotismo, apresentar-se como um líder providencial capaz de salvar a nação e, em última análise, minar as normas democráticas e o Estado de direito.
Palavras-chave: populismo; extrema-direita; Éric Zemmour.

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Berber Bevernage*

Introduction

Populist parties worldwide show a strong interest in history as a political resource. In a recent edited volume Eline Mestdagh, Walderez Ramalho, Marie-Gabrielle Verbergt and I argued that this interest, despite thematic divergences, follows a common logic that we termed "populist historical reason".[1] Examining a large number of case studies of left- and right-wing populisms – from Bolsonaro to Islamic populism in Tanzania, Podemos in Spain, and Modi's BJP in India –, we identified typical features of how populists engage with the past. We highlighted recurring elements such as vagueness and decontextualization of historical references, a logic of equivalence linking diverse events and actors, moralized antagonisms, strong affective investments, and a rejection of pluralism in historical representation. Partly because we

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1 Berber Bevernage, Eline Mestdagh, Walderez Ramalho and Marie-Gabrielle Verbergt (eds.), *Claiming the People's Past: Populist Politics of History in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). I would like to thank these colleagues and friends for the discussions that helped form this article. I am responsible for all translations in this article.

focussed on commonalities between right- and left-wing populisms, we could not elaborate profoundly on the question of *why* populists focus history as a political strategy. What role does history play in their broader strategy for power?

In this article, I address this question by focussing on far-right populist Éric Zemmour and his political party *Reconquête ["Reconquer"]. A well-known media figure in France, Zemmour gained international attention when he entered the presidential race of 2022 with an aggressive campaign that simultaneously had to help him outcompete Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National on its right flank and position him as the candidate for a "united right". Zemmour combined culturally conservative rhetorics with* a neoliberal yet anti-globalist economic program. He profiled himself around ultra-nationalistic, identitarian, anti-feminist & LBGTQ+ and extreme anti-migration and Islamophobic rhetorics and loudly proclaimed the "great replacement" thesis, arguing that "invading" migrants are replacing the original French population through reverse colonisation.

Zemmour promised to "save" France from its allegedly "suicidal" historical course set by cosmopolitan elites, by returning power to the French people to resist "Islamisation" and protect their heritage. His party attracted the support of influential radical right-wing figures including Philippe De Villiers, former presidential candidate and founder of the historical theme park *Puy du Fou*; Marion Maréchal, granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen; and Patrick Buisson, a former Sarkozy spin doctor, polemicist, and amateur historian. Zemmour secured substantial media visibility, most notably through the network of media mogul Vincent Bolloré.

Zemmour's strategy for the 2022 elections arguably failed since he stranded at 7% of the votes,[2] despite jumping over Le Pen in pre-elec-

2 Franck Johannès, "2022 Presidential Election Results: The Failed Bet of Eric Zemmour," *Le Monde*, 13 April 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2022/04/11/2022-presidential-election-results-the-failed-bet-of-eric-zemmour-who-missed-a-campaign-in-which-he-imposed-his-topics_5980284_5.html.

tion polls.[3] Since then, *Reconquête* has had mixed and overall limited electoral success. The party claims to have over 100.000 members.[4] In the 2024 European Parliament elections, it won five MEP seats, but internal tensions soon led to the expulsion of four of them, including Marion Maréchal.[5] In the subsequent 2024 snap elections for the National Assembly Zemmour's party in shambles failed to win any seats.[6] Since then Zemmour and his party are trying to form local alliances ahead of the 2026 municipal elections, and positioning themselves for the presidential elections of 2027.

These relatively low electoral results should, however, not obscure the fact that Zemmour has been very successful at creating "a new political brand that will remain on the French ideological market."[7] As Cecile Alduy argues, Zemmour's discourse seems contagious: "It structures debates, permeates conversations, determines what is said and what is believable, and spreads across an unprecedented media and political landscape."[8] In Zemmour's own words, his party cannot lose because it is waging a war for ideas rather than merely trying to win elections.[9] Importantly, Zemmour identifies his key contribution as the reintroduction of France's history and its historical destiny into political discourse. He deliberately engages in a "war of history"[10] which

3 Reuters, "Zemmour Widens Gap over Le Pen in Race for French Presidential Runoff Vote – Poll," 9 November 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zemmour-widens-gap-over-le-pen-race-french-presidential-runoff-vote-poll-2021-11-09/.

4 https://www.parti-reconquete.fr/ (accessed 5/1/2026).

5 Théophane Hartmann, "Political Future of Expelled Newly Elected Reconquête! MEPs in Question," *Euractiv*, 13 June 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/news/political-future-of-expelled-newly-elected-reconquete-meps-in-question/.

6 Raphaëlle Aubert, Pierre Breteau, Maxime Ferrer, and Manon Romain, "La carte des résultats des législatives 2024 au second tour," *Le Monde*, 9 July 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2024/07/08/la-carte-des-resultats-des-legislatives-2024-au-second-tour-la-composition-de-l-assemblee-et-le-depute-elu-dans-votre-circonscription_6247510_4355771.html.

7 Périne Schir and Marlène Laruelle, "Eric Zemmour, The New Face of the French Far Right: Media-Sponsored, Neoliberal, and Reactionary," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2022): 2.

8 Cécile Alduy, *La Langue de Zemmour: Une arme de destruction sémantique* (Paris: Seuil, 2022), 12.

9 Thomas Beker, "Législatives 2024: 0,7 % des voix pour Reconquête," *Le Figaro*, 15 July 2024, https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/legislatives/legislatives-2024-0-7-des-voix-pour-reconquete-20240701.

10 Éric Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas dit mon dernier mot* (Paris: Rubempré, 2023), 215.

he views as a vital element of a civilizational war already unfolding in France and Europe.

This article examines this war of history and its place within Zemmour's broader political, or as he terms it, "metapolitical," strategy. It analyses how Zemmour has portrayed and instrumentalized history throughout his career. This includes his roles as journalist and polemicist, most notably at *Le Figaro*, as television commentator,[11] and as self-proclaimed *connoisseur* of history. Besides analysing Zemmour's political speeches, online videos and electoral programs, I focus on his best-selling history books – including *Mélancolie française* [French Melancholia] (2010), *Le suicide français* [French Suicide] (2014) and *Destin français* [French Destiny] (2018). I also look at his most recent political campaign books *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* [France Has Not Had Its Last Word] (2021), *Je nai pas dit mon dernier mot* [I Haven't Had My Last Word] (2023) and *La messe nest pas dite: Pour un sursaut judéo-chrétien* [The Mass Is Not Yet Said: For a Judeo-Christian Revival] (2025).

Examining Zemmour's discourse is important, not because it is original, but precisely because it is not. It serves as a prominent example of a broader far-right trend that normalizes historical revisionism across media platforms. I use Zemmour's case as a lens to explore the diverse techniques and logics employed in far-right populist historical reason, showing how history is instrumentalised to obtain political power. Zemmour's use of history underpins an authoritarian ideology that rejects democratic norms of deliberation, representation, and accountability. His discourse prioritizes a polarising and hyperbolic philosophy of history over concerns with factual accuracy, using history as a tool to mobilize emotions and ultimately to incite hatred and violence.

11 Zemmour was a regular guest in the talk show "*Face à l'info*" on CNews where his provocative style boosted the show's audience, attracting between 800.000 to 1 million viewers at peak moments. Schir and Laruelle, "Eric Zemmour," 5.

I. Zemmour and populist historical reason

I.1. History in Zemmour's discourse

History is omnipresent in Zemmour's discourse. His notoriety largely stems from radical historical revisionism which has drawn strong criticism from historians.[12] Zemmour's oeuvre is extensive but also highly repetitive. Central to his discourse is a vision of French history as a continuous cycle of original greatness followed by decline and betrayal, wherein the French nation is undermined by external enemies as well as by its own elites. His revisionist histories span from antiquity to modern times, emphasizing France's glorious origins, while portraying modern France as a nation in crisis due to multiculturalism, immigration, and erosion of traditional values.

According to Zemmour, France was built from Roman Gaul, which provided its language, law, and centralized state tradition, and from Catholic Christianity, which unified the population culturally. He believes the nation was forged by a succession of great men who strengthened the State and assimilated diverse peoples into a single and homogenous cultural identity. In this narrative, France's destiny has always been to revive the grandeur of the Roman Empire, acting as the unifying force of Europe and as the civilizer of the world. For a thousand years, France was the "beating heart" of the history of Europe and "thus" the world.[13] France, according to Zemmour, "invented" everything that matters – the nation-state, feudality, the monastery, the enlightenment, democracy, secularism and even the individual[14] – and defended Europe against "Islamization" by gloriously leading the crusades.

12 See for example: Alya Aglan, Florian Besson, Jean-Luc Chappey, e.a. *Zemmour contre l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022); Laurent Joly, *La falsification de l'histoire: Éric Zemmour, l'extrême droite, Vichy et les juifs* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2022); and Gérard Noiriel, *Le venin dans la plume: Édouard Drumont, Éric Zemmour, et la part sombre de la République* (La Découverte, 2021).

13 Éric Zemmour, *Destin français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2018), 31.

14 For example, "Discours d'Éric Zemmour à Bruxelles (National Conservatism Conference)," accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours_d_eric_zemmour_bruxelles_national_conservatism_conference.

Modern France created its own downfall, however, by abandoning this historical mission. Zemmour argues that France's decline began toward the end of the 18th century when it started losing its imperial and colonial dominance and culminated in Napoleon's defeat, signifying a loss of influence in Europe. Another turning point, for Zemmour, is May 1968, when traditional authority and national cohesion allegedly began to erode, and immigration and multiculturalism accelerated civilizational decline.

Zemmour claims that Islam has taken advantage of the void left by the "nihilist individualism" and "woke ideology" of politically correct elites to impose its own rule on French soil. Zemmour posits a reverse "colonization," whereby the original French population is gradually supplanted. This dynamic is depicted as the pinnacle of a millennial civilizational conflict threatening the survival of the French people.[15]

I.2. Alignment with features of populist historical reason

While populism as a concept has sparked extensive debate,[16] describing Eric Zemmour as a populist is uncontroversial. Scholars have identified many populist elements in Zemmour's rhetoric.[17] Furthermore, the term does not necessarily have a negative connotation in French politics. Prominent politicians, including Jean-Luc Mélenchon and even Emmanuel Macron, have embraced it as a badge of honor, as has Zemmour.[18]

I focus less on the extent to which Zemmour's politics are populist or how they intertwine with conservative and authoritarian traits.

15 Especially: Éric Zemmour, *La messe n'est pas dite: Pour un sursaut judéo-chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 2025).

16 For an overview: Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul A. Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

17 Lorella Sini, "Qu'est-ce qu'un discours populiste? Le cas du discours de déclaration de candidature d'Éric Zemmour," *Espaces Linguistiques* 7 (2024): 10-22; Nora Gattiglia, "La fabrication du «peuple» dans le discours de campagne présidentielle sur Twitter d'Éric Zemmour," *Espaces Linguistiques* 7 (2024): 23-41.

18 Sini, "Qu'est-ce qu'un discours populiste?," 14.

Zemmour clearly merges these. The main point is that Zemmour's politics exemplify a textbook case of populist historical reason, as outlined in our volume *Claiming the People's Past*. Building on Ernesto Laclau's theory that "populist reason" is a distinct political logic rather than a fixed set of ideas, we argued that populist historical reason should be understood not by the specific historical contents populists reference, but by the way they weave together these contents and the dimensions of the past, present, and future.

Populist historical reason typically features vague, decontextualized invocations of the past, connecting heterogenous and often chronologically distant historical phenomena around empty signifiers such as "greatness," "liberty," or "foreignness". Closely related, it is antagonistic, presenting binaries between "us" and "them" while rejecting academic historiography as serving anti-patriotic interests. Furthermore, we argued it is typically characterized by strong affective overtones invoking feelings such as hatred, pride, fear, and nostalgia. Finally, it tends to reject representational pluralism by insisting on a single "true" history, dismissing other representations not because they are factually incorrect, but primarily because they conflict with populists moral and affective connection to the past. Zemmour's discourse exemplifies all these characteristics.

Vagueness and decontextualisation

Although Zemmour has written several book-length essays on history, his historical accounts remain vague and decontextualized. He contrasts a glorious past with a present marked by decline and crisis, yet offers few arguments to substantiate these claims. Historical figures, such as Charles Martel, Joan of Arc or Roland the protagonist of *La Chanson de Roland* are detached from their contexts and transformed into symbolic caricatures of heroism and resistance. His work amasses historical references without explaining coherent relations and is often anachronistic, with stories leaping across time periods spanning over a thousand years. Zemmour blends historical figures with fictional characters from films or literature. This is illustrated in his 2021 presiden-

tial campaign video which combined archival WWII footage with cinematic depictions of medieval battles and iconic shots from 1960s fiction films. After copyright issues forced the removal of the original video, the reworked version maintained the same voiceover, equally mixing historical figures with references to Hugo's stories and La Fontaine's fables to construct a nostalgic vision of a threatened France.[19]

Chains of equivalence, analogies and typological imagination

Zemmour frequently employs a logic of equivalence to resort diverse social issues such as immigration, crime, cultural change under a common denominator of decline or invasion. He presents these as elements of a "war of civilisations,"[20] portraying petty crime (including cell phone theft), drug dealing and demographic changes as strategies for the "great replacement."[21]

Central to Zemmour's discourse is a typological approach to history, where he draws analogies between historically and contextually disparate phenomena simplifying complex realities into stark, emotionally charged narratives. He calls Islam "the Germany of our generation," drawing parallels between the allegedly "germanophile" elites of the past and the "islamophile" ones of today.[22] The contemporary French "judicial machine" is branded as a new "holy inquisition".[23] Similarly, he typifies the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which established the European Union, as the "anti-1789," a direct negation of the French Revolution's principle of national and popular sovereignty.[24] Through these analogies and chains of equivalences, Zemmour creates an easily legible vision of history.

19 Éric Zemmour, "Annonce de candidature," 30 November 2021. Video 10 min., 11 sec. The original video was removed from You Tube, but can still be retrieve4 here: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x85z02o.

20 Zemmour, *La messe,* 119.

21 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot,* 339-340.

22 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 359 and 408.

23 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 204.

24 Zemmour, Éric. *Le suicide français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), 359.

Antagonism

If antagonism is crucial to populism's logic, it is equally central to populist historical reason. Zemmour's historical imagery centres on oppositions and conflict. As Cecile Alduy notes, "war" is one of the most frequent words in Zemmour's history books.[25] A red thread in world history, according to Zemmour, is the perennial civilisational war between "east" and "west". This confrontation allegedly began with Alexander the Great's conquests and later became a war with Islam, which embodies "an Orient perpetually seeking revenge against the West."[26] Another key antagonism, in typical populist vein, is that of cosmopolitan elites against the French people. The notion of French elites betraying the people by conspiring with foreign powers is central to Zemmour's histories. In *Destin français* he projects back this storyline to the medieval "jacqueries" or popular rebellions which he interprets as rebellions against "predatory elites" in defence of the nation and sovereignty.[27] In *Le suicide français*, Zemmour claims post-May'68 elites have killed the French nation by "deconstructing" its history and dismantling state power, destroying in forty years what took a millennium to build. To cite Zemmour:

> France is dying, France is dead. Our political, economic, administrative, media, intellectual, and artistic elites spit on its grave and trample its still-smouldering corpse.[28]

Antagonisms are projected not only onto the past itself but also onto contemporary relations with the past. Populists often claim to protect history from being corrupted by academic historians. Zemmour exemplifies this through his vendetta against American historian Robert Paxton whose work on the Vichy regime's role in the Shoah he

25 Alduy, *La langue*.

26 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 82

27 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 107-108.

28 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 526.

presents as anti-French ideology. Zemmour extends a similar criticism to the entire "mafia-like" community of academic historians whom, according to him, hold the levers of power and try to "euthanise" France by destroying national identity and blaming "white, heterosexual and catholic men" for all the sins of history.[29]

Affective overtones

Zemmour frequently invokes polarized emotions of fear, loss, abjection, pride and love. *Destin français* opens with Zemmour visiting the Berezina river in Rusia, weeping over Napoleon army's defeat.[30] After the Notre Dame cathedral fire, Zemmour describes how he struggled to hold back tears.[31] In speeches he empathically talks about the "immense suffering" of young people robbed of their (Christian) heritage by the "68 generation."[32] Above all, Zemmour emphasizes French people's anxieties, claiming they face multiple enemies. He labels migrants and politically correct elites as "extremely dangerous" and Islam as "objectively everything that French society abhors." Yet, Zemmour promises that "fear [will] change sides" under his leadership.[33] While acknowledging his tough stances, Zemmour attributes these to his deep love for France. He often expresses exalted love for the French nation and territory, calling French and European "civilization" the most brilliant, beautiful and admirable of all times and chanting "glory to us".[34] This dual emotional appeal combines a narrative of French victimhood with a proud and chauvinistic celebration of past glories.

29 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 37-41.

30 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 12.

31 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 287.

32 Zemmour, *La messe*, 118.

33 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 339.

34 For example: "Le discours de lancement de campagne des Européennes, au Dôme de Paris – Palais des Sports", accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours-europeennes-paris.

The dismissal of representational pluralism

According to Jan-Werner Müller, anti-pluralism is a defining feature of populism, as populists generally claim to be the only legitimate representatives of the people and their interests.[35] This extends to how populists treat history. They typically oppose pluralist historical narratives and insist on a singular version that aligns with their agenda. Following this trend, Zemmour challenges the legitimacy of alternative historical interpretations, particularly those that highlight the diversity of French heritage. If competing histories are allowed in the public sphere, this according to Zemmour, can lead to a civil war:

> There cannot be, on the same soil, within the same nation and the same people, different histories competing, rivalling, and clashing with one another. Gradually, this war of histories solidifies into a war of memories, which can, sooner or later, turn into a civil war.[36]

The survival of the country, according to Zemmour, can only be safeguarded if the French people accept and pass on a singular and unifying historical narrative.

I.3. Zemmour and the French intellectual tradition

While Zemmour is a textbook populist, akin to many other far-right populists globally, there is something distinctively French about his style. Unlike populists elsewhere who often adopt an anti-intellectualist style, Zemmour presents himself as a serious intellectual. His writings are wrapped in a veneer of intellectual gravitas. This aligns with the French tradition where intellectual, cultural and political discussions often intertwine.[37] As Périne Schir and Marlène Laruelle argue, Zem-

35 Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 20.

36 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 216.

37 Alain Duhamel, "L'intellectualisme et la politique française," *Commentaire* 155, no. 3 (2016):

mour's career exemplifies the resurgence of the figure of the *intellectuel engagé*, traditionally associated with the political left but now claimed by the (far) right.[38]

Rather than providing new insights Zemmour often assembles and repurposes existing ideas from the French far-right intellectual tradition. He selectively draws on themes of national decline, demographic replacement, and identity preservation, combining elements from the *Nouvelle Droite*, ultra-nationalist monarchism, and contemporary far-right thinking to craft narratives that resonate with broad audiences.

This ideological bricolage is most evident in Zemmour's frequent mobilization of concepts from Charles Maurras (1868-1952), the ultra-nationalist and openly antisemitic leader of the monarchist *Action française*, and from Maurice Barrès (1862-1923), the equally nationalistic and antisemitic French writer, politician and theorists of "rootedness" (*enracination*). Zemmour also often cites 18th, 19th and early 20th century nationalist historians such as François René de Chateaubriand, Jules Michelet and Jacques Bainville, an anti-democratic intellectual who idealized French monarchy.

Zemmour's discourse also reflects the influence of the *Nouvelle Droite* ["New Right"] of the 1970s and 1980s, although his relationship with this movement is selective and pragmatic. Echoes of Alain de Benoist and his far-right think tank GRECE are evident in Zemmour's rejection of egalitarianism and liberal universalism as threats to national cohesion. Another similarity is the emphasis on the dual threat of Islamization and Americanization, both framed as colonization. Like the *Nouvelle Droite* ideologues, Zemmour uses a civilizational discourse that denies being racist by arguing that it simply defends the right of France and Europe to be different and to maintain their identity. Though he frequently speaks of race, Zemmour claims he is xenophobic but not racist, as he defends an assimilationist France.[39] A key differ-

569-578.

38 Schir and Laruelle, "Eric Zemmour," 16.

39 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 185.

ence from de Benoist's early *Nouvelle Droite* ideology is that while de Benoist celebrated neo-paganism and viewed Christianity as a colonizing force.[40] Zemmour advocates for a Judeo-Christian tradition against an alleged Islamic colonisation of Europe.

This stance puts Zemmour closer to the former *Nouvelle Droite* but now dissident theorist Guillaume Faye, one of the most outspoken proponents of the reverse colonisation theory.[41] Zemmour's conservative historical interpretations and emphasis on catholic monarchic French identity furthermore connect him to revisionist (amateur) historians like Lorent Deutsch, Jean Sévillia, Dimitri Casali and his ally Philippe de Villiers.[42]

Finally, Zemmour is clearly influenced by a series of contemporary right-wing intellectuals. His theory of civilisational war is intellectually indebted to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations."[43] The terminology of a "Great Replacement" is borrowed from the French political commentator Renaud Camus who claims that "native" French and more generally European populations are deliberately replaced by immigrants.[44]

II. History as a strategy for power

Having illustrated how Zemmour's discourse exemplifies key features of populist historical reason and having situated him in the broader far-right tradition, let us focus on the instrumental role history plays within his authoritarian political project.

40 Lou Mousset, "«Reverse Colonization»: Early Narratives of Decline in the French New Right", in *The Politics of Replacement: Demographic Fears, Conspiracy Theories, and Race Wars*, ed. Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar (Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2023).

41 Guillaume Faye, *La colonisation de l'Europe: discours vrai sur l'immigration et l'Islam* (Paris: L'Æncre, 2000).

42 For an analysis of this network see: William Blanc, Christophe Naudin and Aurore Chery, *Les Historiens de garde: De Lorant Deutsch à Patrick Buisson, la résurgence du roman national* (Paris: Libertalia, 2018). And: William Blanc, "Spectres de Charles Maurras: comment le néomaurrassisme fabrique le «roman national» contemporain," *La Revue du Crieur* 6, no. 1 (2017): 144-159.

43 Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.

44 Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Reinharc, 2011).

II.1 Feeding the paranoic mind: prophesying imminent catastrophe

Zemmour uses historical narratives as both a way to create a sense crisis and threat, identify the enemies of the people, provide purported evidence for the malice of these enemies, and posit their historical motives. Importantly, history is mobilized here not merely to describe past events or to make the present comprehensible, but also in a prophetic style to warn against the catastrophic fate awaiting the French people if they do not act now, or rather, choose a visionary leader to act on their behalf.

This use of history connects with a Manichean worldview dividing the world into good and evil forces, presenting French history as "*toujours entre la grandeur et l'abîme*"[45] [always between greatness and abyss]. Zemmour uses historical narratives to identify perennial enemies who are demonized as existential threats. As mentioned, the primary enemy of the French people are allegedly Islam and Islamic migrants. To stoke neo-malthusian fears of demographic replacement, Zemmour warns that the extent of the present crisis can only be understood if one knows how to interpret history. In a campaign speech in October 2022, for example, he asserts that occurrences of Islamist violence – such as the brutal murder of history teacher Samuel Patty – should not be seen as isolated or exceptional events but as part of a historical "continuum of violence" that has "very deep roots" and that he calls "francocide".[46]

To persuade those dismissing the idea of a collective violent takeover as a conspiracy theory, Zemmour claims his thesis is confirmed by numerous historical precedents in North Africa and the Byzantine Empire where Islamisation of Christian lands started with peaceful pretences but revealed its true violent face once demographic force permitted.[47] To authorise his views, he refers to Henri Pirenne (1862-

45 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 40.

46 Éric Zemmour, "Le discours contre l'offensive islamique à l'école," accessed 13 January 2025, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours-samuelpaty.

47 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 71.

1935) who in his *Mohamed and Charlemagne* allegedly already "said and understood it all": that Islamic and Western "civilisations" are "irreducibly antagonistic" and Islam is a religion of total "submission" that is "inassimilable".[48] For Zemmour, history shows that between Christianity and Islam there can only be conflict: "Who does not unite, divides; who does not attack, retreats; who retreats no more, conquers. Who conquers no more is conquered."[49]

Zemmour celebrates the medieval crusades as saving "the west" from Arabic invaders. However, he warns that France is destined to "relive this history" if it fails to learn its lessons and recognize that history is an "endless vengeance" ["*une sempiternelle revanche*"].[50] Historical vengeance, according to Zemmour, drives the Great Replacement and mass migration in general. It allegedly not only explains the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 but also the seemingly innocuous "*sans papiers*" who "invoke our past invasion of their territory to absolve and conceal their present invasion of our territory."[51]

Besides being threatened by external enemies, France is imperilled by an internal enemy and a centuries old tragic historical process. Influenced by developments dating back as far as the Italian renaissance, German Protestantism, and especially since May '68, Zemmour claims that cosmopolitan elites have deliberately steered France onto a suicidal course by promoting an "uprooted" individualism and dechristianisation, which have destroyed social cohesion and traditional values.[52] This internal decay was exploited by Islamic migrants to impose their own "archaic notions of family, clan and religion."[53]

Adopting a fully-fledged prophetic and apocalyptic tone, Zemmour claims that historical precedents reveal the bleak future awaiting France. He frequently evokes the history of Kosovo as prefiguring the

48 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 59.
49 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 69.
50 Zemmour, *La messe*, 74-75.
51 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 416.
52 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 12.
53 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 70.

Islamised future of France. His other favourite analogies to prophesize doom are the fall of the Roman Empire and the terror of the French Revolution. Zemmour, for instance, combines both analogies in a reflection on the 2012 terrorist attack by Mohammed Merah, turning it into a historiosophical reflection on the causes of violent clashes between civilisations:

> There is massacre when there is a mismatch [*décalage*]. A mismatch of temporality, a mismatch of ferocity, a mismatch of civilization. When Roman citizens, softened by the refinements of the *Pax Romana* and Christianity, no longer want to fight in the Empire's army, the Barbarians take their place and eventually despoil and slaughter them. Hippolyte Taine, in *The Origins of Contemporary France*, is astonished by the passivity of the aristocrats, arrested and guillotined by tyrannical and bloodthirsty Jacobins; the descendants of the old feudal lords had become courtiers, more inclined to wield the epigram than the sword. We are the Romans of the decline or the aristocrats of the Revolution, and [Islamist terrorists] are the Barbarians and the *sans-culottes* of our time.[54]

To sum up, history, in Zemmour's discourse becomes a prophetic narrative that feeds paranoia by presenting war and vengeance as the historical norm while portraying ideals of dialogue, pacifism and reconciliation as naïve and dangerous historical aberrations.[55] By portraying Islam as an archaic religion and Muslims as a "counter-people,"[56] he marks then as barbaric, and fundamentally incompatible with French civilization, reinforcing their status as eternal ennemies.

54 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 152.

55 As Cécile Alduy notes this use of a prophetic tone is a broader characteristic of far-right's uses of history. Cécile Alduy, "Guerre des histoires, guerre des mémoires," *Socio* 19 (2024): 81-98.

56 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 566.

II.2 Power to (some of) the people: making popular sovereignty conditional

Besides using history to feed paranoia, Zemmour employs it to define who legitimately belongs to "the people" and to limit popular sovereignty. He portrays national identity as rooted in an essentially static and homogenic past, excluding those who do not fit within this imagined historical continuity as not authentically French. This justifies a restricted definition of "the people," making popular sovereignty contingent on adherence to selective historical criteria. Zemmour often cites a quote allegedly from De Gaulle, stating that "[the French] are above all a people of the white race, of the Christian religion, and of Greco-Roman culture."[57] While Zemmour rhetorically stresses that "there exists no stronger legitimacy than that of the people,"[58] his historical narratives rarely feature real people of flesh and blood, instead focusing on idealized, and often caricaturized heroes or "great men."[59] Women hardly appear in Zemmour's histories except to warn against "feminisation," "tolerance" and "pacifism". Similarly, while Zemmour loudly champions popular sovereignty and promises to return power to the people,[60] his interpretation of this power is notably restrictive. He essentially confines it to continuing the nation's historical mission and identity.

Although Zemmour constantly invokes treacherous elites betraying the people, he is not anti-elitist in general. In fact, he celebrates aristocratic values, venerates kings and knights and emphasizes the necessity of social hierarchy. Zemmour often laments that the ideology of egalitarianism and the "myth of social mobility" have turned contemporary society into an "assemblage of equal and rival atoms." He contrasts this with an idealized past of social harmony and clear hierarchies:

57 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 214. Although this quote circulates widely in far-right circles its veracity is controversial. For a discussion see Mathilde Damgé and Samuel Laurent, "Les «races», Morano et De Gaulle: pour clore la polémique," *Le Monde*, 1 October 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/10/01/les-races-morano-et-de-gaulle-pour-clore-la-polemique_4780347_4355770.html.

58 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 203.

59 This absence has been remarked by several commentators. For example Alduy, *La langue*, 11.

60 Zemmour, "Annonce de candidature".

> Men used to remain in their social condition. People did not look upward with regret and envy. They were content in their own world. Souls were less troubled and less tense. The French followed their kind and sociable instincts, which so charmed foreign visitors. Everyone noted the national habit of singing cheerful, good-natured songs at the end of meals.[61]

The proper role of the elites and the state, according to Zemmour, is not merely to defend the people, but more profoundly to constitute and preserve them as a people by creating cultural homogeneity. Historically, Zemmour claims, the French people were created by the State and he is fond of citing monarchist saying that the France was built "by forty kings," only to be inherited by the republic.[62] The French state had a unique tradition to ensure that over generations no "foreign population" would form outside of the "national body": namely through assimilation.[63] The tragedy, however, according to Zemmour, is that the State has stopped assimilating and producing Frenchmen unified around a single dominant culture.

When Zemmour talks about restoring popular sovereignty, he primarily means returning power to the central state so that it can resume its historical mission of creating a homogeneous people. These etatist views are particularly evident when Zemmour pleads for a referendum as the sole "weapon" against demographic replacement and to restore power "to the state, and thus to the French people" and take it away from migrants, ethnic minorities and their "armed wing," the legal system.[64] To cite Zemmour:

> Demography is destiny. Let us now give France and its people the means to take control of their own destiny once again.

61 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 309.

62 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 73.

63 Éric Zemmour, *Mélancolie française: L'histoire de France racontée* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 219.

64 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 205.

> Our people, through a referendum, must decide on their composition and their future.[65]

To understand why Zemmour sees no contradiction in asking the people to decide by referendum who are the people, we must explore his perception of peoplehood and of "historical France". It is often noted that both left- and right-wing populists frequently speak about the people but that they envision these differently as respectively "demos" and "ethnos."[66] Zemmour clearly views "the people" in the latter terms. He goes further, however, and makes the "recognition" and defence of heritage and tradition key factors in determining who belongs to "the people," and thus who can exercise popular sovereignty.

As Lorella Sini argues, Zemmour perceives the legitimate French people as patriots in the literal sense of those defending the territory of their fathers.[67] This military imagination helps explain how he can combine anti-elite and pro-people rhetoric with a celebration of aristocratic, authoritarian and overtly anti-egalitarian values. Zemmour's strategic semantic ambivalence becomes clear when he refers to the people as "*la base*," which in a vertical imagination can denote society's foundation to depict opponents as out-of-touch elites, but can also include the wealthy and even aristocrats when invoking a horizontal territorial-military imagination of a stronghold from which France's "reconquering" will be organized. To quote Zemmour:

> This Judeo-Christian people, anxious and clear-sighted, will be the base from which we can defend, protect, and one day, reclaim a France that longs to remain French and stay faithful to the European civilization that has shaped it for over a thousand years.[68]

65 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 339.

66 Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusion populiste* (Paris: Éditions Berg, 2002).

67 Sini, "Qu'est-ce qu'un discours," 14.

68 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 115.

In the prophetic-historical mode, Zemmour envisions the people as those who will soon heed their leader's call to reconquer. Although past and present suffering and victimhood play an important role in Zemmour's rhetorics, it is ultimately the prophetically anticipated future of apocalyptic trials and ferocious defence that truly defines a people and grants them legitimacy. As Zemmour put it during a rally in March 2024:

> [The] peril of Islamization is the major challenge posed by the coming century. Let us never forget this law: only a free people can make a great nation! A people subjected to a foreign religion is no longer free. A people who lower their eyes before a religion called "submission" is no longer the French people.[69]

At the "national conservatism conference" in Brussels in April 2024, Zemmour applies a similar logic to define who is truly European:

> Europe is not a country, Europe is not a people nor a nation, but it is indeed a single and unified civilization, forged by Judeo-Christianity and the Greco-Roman spirit. [...] Those who recognize themselves in this heritage, who embrace it and wish to perpetuate it, are Europeans. All those who do not identify with it belong to another civilization.[70]

To sum up, "the people" are deemed legitimate only as long as they stay faithful to their alleged origins and traditions. Similarly, popular sovereignty is conceived as a general will ("*volonté générale*") that is legitimate only if it serves to continue the historical nation. "*Le peuple français*" is only made tangible through what is said to threaten it: it seems to exist solely in relation to its enemies or by virtue of being

69 Zemmour, "Le discours de lancement".

70 Zemmour, "Discours d'Éric Zemmour à Bruxelles".

betrayed by the elites. Zemmour constructs a helpless people which can only be safe if led by and submissive to a providential leader.[71] Zemmour is not against submission, but it must be the right kind.

II.3. A love supreme... Historical revisionism as display and test of love, loyalty and courage

For Zemmour, history is not just something to study and understand, but also something to take sides on. He uses historical revisionism to showcase his patriotic love and unwavering loyalty to France, while simultaneously casting doubt on that of others. By challenging what he frames as politically correct historical interpretations, Zemmour affirms his devotion to the nation and performatively asserts his courage to break "taboos". Those who oppose his historical revisionism are labelled disloyal to France. Perceived attachment to History becomes a means to distinguish true patriots from others.

Zemmour's use of history as a strategy of power hinges less on the specific content of his claims than on the intensity of emotions (love, loyalty, hatred and fear) as well as the demonstrations of courage and transgression they enable him to evoke and enact. As mentioned, he portrays history in stark, grim terms, highlighting violence, vengeance, and betrayal. Simultaneously, he frequently speaks in exalted terms about patriotic love, sublime beauty, and heroic sacrifice, framing his own connection to French history as a passionate love story. Being fully French, according to Zemmour, is either inherited or earned through assimilation by proving devotion to France and by adopting its History.[72] As stated in *Reconquête*'s program: "Assimilation is that proof of love through which one receives France as one's heritage."[73]

Zemmour warns, however, that adopting France's history as one's own must be sincere and unconditional, often requiring the sacrifice

71 Gattiglia, "La fabrication," 30.

72 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 336.

73 Éric Zemmour, "Pour que la France reste la France: Mon programme," accessed 6 January 2025. https://programme.ericzemmour.fr/.

of previous attachments and loyalties. Becoming a "son" of France "by spirit," if one is not "by flesh" involves "retrospectively" choosing France's side even if it subjugated or colonized one's biological ancestors.[74] Throughout his oeuvre Zemmour employs history to assert his identity as a Frenchman by spiritual adoption. He frequently cites his own (idealised) biography as a model for all migrants.[75] As a self-defined assimilated Jew, born to Algerian immigrant parents, Zemmour stresses how, from a young age, he developed a profound love for French history and its heroes:

> The history of France flowed in my veins, filled the air I breathed, forged my childhood dreams... I still had the Gauls as my ancestors.[76]

Zemmour often presents himself as having embraced French identity by adopting the phrase "*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*" ("our ancestors the Gauls") as personal motto. By invoking this controversial expression with strong colonial overtones, he signals his alignment with France's foundational myths and positions himself in an alleged French historical continuum.

Similarly, although raised in the Judaic tradition and stressing that he does not believe in core Christian doctrines, Zemmour pleads for a revival of "Judeo-Christianism" for reasons of "national interest".[77] He embraces it not as a faith but as a "matrix of identity". He claims one cannot be truly French without being profoundly "impregnated" by Catholicism.[78] Yet, he rejects the values of tolerance, universalism and especially repentance, which he associates with "ori-

74 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 19.

75 On the use of ego-history in Zemmour's discourse on history, see: Silvia Modena, "La mobilisation de l'Histoire dans le discours politique d'Éric Zemmour," *Espaces Linguistiques* 7 (2024): 42-60.

76 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 15.

77 Zemmour, *La messe*, 5 and 15.

78 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 28, and Zemmour, *La messe*, 5.

ental Christianity," sees as weaknesses and contrasts with the "virility" of Western Christianity.[79]

Zemmour employs other provocative techniques to prove his loyalty to France. During a television appearance in 2019, he defended French general Bugeaud, notorious for brutal violence during the colonial conquest of Algeria. Acknowledging that Bugeaud massacred Muslims and "even some Jews," Zemmour stated that "today, [he] stand[s] with General Bugeaud. That's what it means to be French."[80] He similarly stoked controversy by claiming on television and in his books that Marshal Pétain, the leader of the WWII collaborationist Vichy regime, "saved" French (naturalised) Jews by sacrificing "foreign" ones, insinuating this was a patriotic deed.[81] This thesis was heavily criticized by historians as blatantly falsifying history,[82] and it earned Zemmour a conviction for "contestation of a crime against humanity" in April 2025, following a lengthy legal procedure.[83]

Another infamous figure whom Zemmour defends is French collaborator Maurice Papon, responsible for the mass deportation of Jews from Bordeaux. In his characteristic reversal of victim and perpetrator roles, Zemmour claims Papon was the victim of an "ideological trial" designed to "inculpate France."[84] Only "sincere and steadfast patriots," could see that the trial was "a trap" set by "militant, far-left historians" and other "internal enemies" to scapegoat France.[85] Papon's trial allegedly was the culmination of a broader "ideology of repentance" and an "authentically metapolitical" war of history that is waged by the

79 Zemmour, *La messe*, 74.

80 Sandrine Cassini and Mouna El Mokhtari, "CNews, la télé du clash permanent," *Le Monde*, 26 October 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2019/10/26/cnews-la-tele-du-clash-permanent_6016977_3234.html. Also see Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 336, and Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 216.

81 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 90.

82 Joly, *La falsification*.

83 Justine Audollent, "Pétain 'sauveur' de juifs français : Zemmour condamné à 10.000 euros d'amende," *www.rtl.fr*. 2 April 2025. https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/petain-sauveur-de-juifs-francais-zemmour-condamne-a-10-000-euros-d-amende-7900489976.

84 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 54.

85 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 59.

enemies of the French people to destroy its memory or even its "soul".[86] Anybody who is critical of aspects of French history, especially slavery, colonialism and WWII collaboration, is accused of promoting "self-hatred" ["*haine de soi*"]. To cite Zemmour:

> [...] every day, our country engages in the relentless hatred of its own history, in the systematic criminalization of its heroes. Schools, universities, media outlets, even the President of the Republic, all the institutions spit on France and the generations that built it.[87]

Zemmour frequently targets people with a migration background and especially Muslim youths whom he accuses of refusing to identify with French history and especially the holocaust and crusades.[88] Paradoxically he also criticizes French presidents such as Chirac, Hollande and Macron for turning holocaust commemoration into an "official religion," which he claims inevitably leads to "victimhood competition."[89] However, these criticisms do not keep Zemmour from instrumentalizing the memory of suffering and victimhood when it serves his agenda. As Cecile Alduy observes, Zemmour, like many on the far-right, actively participates in the very competition of victimhood he accuses others of.[90] For instance he asserts that Christians are the most victimized religious group on the planet.[91] During his presidential campaign in 2021, Zemmour also made a highly mediatised visit to the genocide memorial in Armenia, portraying the country as a land of martyrs in the war against Islam.[92] Similarly Zemmour supports the controversial thesis

86 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 210.

87 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 337.

88 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 18.

89 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 383.

90 Alduy, "Guerre des histoires," 81-98.

91 Zemmour, *Le messe*, 19.

92 V. M, "Présidentielle 2022: Éric Zemmour en Arménie, «une nation chrétienne au milieu d'un océan islamique»", *TF1 Info*, 12 December 2021, https://www.tf1info.fr/politique/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-candidat-de-reconquete-en-armenie-avec-philippe-de-villiers-

of a "genocide" perpetrated by the French revolutionary government against the population of the Vendée region. This thesis is also advocated by his political ally Philippe de Villiers, who was also present during the Armenia visit. To argue that commemorating these events, although involving violence among French people, is not a politics of repentance akin to "cancel culture" Zemmour emphasizes that it does not aim to "smear France and make the French feel guilty, but to denounce the ravages of Jacobin tyranny [...]."[93]

II.4 Redemptive history: promising rehabilitation and national regeneration

Despite his constant warnings of doom, Zemmour, in his political performances, also presents history as a source of hope and aspiration, casting himself as a redeemer of history. He promises to redeem history in three senses. As discussed above, he aims to redeem history in the sense of rehabilitating or mitigating it, for instance by emphasising the redeeming features of controversial figures. In another sense, Zemmour presents history as containing a value or promise that can and must be redeemed as if one would redeem a cheque.[94] Finally, in a thoroughly religious sense, Zemmour offers a redemptive narrative, claiming that he alone can save or deliver France from its fatal historical course.

Zemmour asserts that "the future is written in the past," emphasizing the importance of learning from history. He contends that French elites propagate false histories to manipulate the populace, making them passive toward the "Islamic invasion." Zemmour positions himself as a defender of the authentic memory of the French people, accusing "politically correct" historians of erasing collective memory, what Philippe de Villiers calls "memoricide."[95] Zemmour's project is framed

une-nation-chretienne-au-milieu-d-un-ocean-islamique-2204376.html.

93 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas dit*, 165.

94 I would like to thank Kate Temoney for pointing out the different meanings of this word to me.

95 Philippe de Villiers, *Mémoricide* (Paris: Fayard, 2024).

as a rescue mission to protect France's "true" history from malicious academic revisionism.

Recognizing that an aspirational message is necessary to gain popular traction, Zemmour in his political speeches and writings frequently emphasizes that despite the grave threats of annihilation, there remains hope if his warnings are heeded. To counterbalance the extreme historical fatalism of his earlier writings, particularly *Le Suicide français*, where France was declared dead,[96] all of Zemmour's publications since the onset of his political career convey the notion that French history has not yet run its course. This is evident in their titles: *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, *Je n'ai pas dit mon dernier mot*, *La messe n'est pas dite*.

In his typical blend of personal and national history, Zemmour confesses that he too faced moments of despair, but that he found renewed hope by reading history. He asserts that, just like individuals, nations experience phases of discouragement that precede a "rebirth". History reveals that France is currently "reliving a moment that [it] regularly experience[d] in [its] history, when the people no longer recognize themselves in their elites". Yet, history also teaches that France has repeatedly "stared death in the face" and that each time it found among its own people "a providential figure who takes up the sword and rallies energies in the name of the nation's survival."[97] He names Joan of Arc, Napoleon, and de Gaulle as such figures, though these examples clearly serve to prefigure his own arrival on the politico-historical scene.

Zemmour's self-presentation as a historical saviour features prominently in his political speeches and campaign communications. In his announcement video in 2021, Zemmour stated that he entered politics to "take the fate of France into his hands." Whereas other politicians merely try to reform France, he will "save" it.[98] Expanding his campaign

96 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 527.

97 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 335-336.

98 Zemmour, "Annonce de candidature".

to the European level he similarly claims he is fighting to "save the fate of the most beautiful civilisation of all time".[99]

In line with the tradition of revolutionary conservatism and fascism where the past is seen as containing a promise of national regeneration or "palingenesis",[100] Zemmour presents history as a "renewable" source of "vital energy".[101] According to Zemmour, France's "glorious past pleads for [its] future".[102] France stands at a historical "crossroads," but under his leadership a "rebirth" [*renaissance*] is withing reach. He pleads for a "rupture" with the present situation and the recent past yet does so in the name of deeper historical continuity. One of his key slogans is "we will continue France."[103] By reconnecting with its history, the nation can rejuvenate itself and realise utopian ideals such as virility, glory, cultural homogeneity and even solidarity. As stated in his presidential program of 2022:

> With me, the France of tomorrow will be a France with more solidarity, because it will have reconnected with the thread of its History and will value its civilizational achievements, without which no solidarity is possible.[104]

History itself, its renewal, restoration or continuation, becomes a battle cry. It serves as the ultimate empty signifier through which Zemmour evokes the people's fears, worries and pride: it is what France allegedly once had and made, then lost and should now regain.[105] According to Zemmour, France is in decline because it "withdrew from

99 Zemmour, "Discours d'Éric Zemmour à Bruxelles".

100 For a discussion see: Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Beyond Historicism: Utopian Thought in the «Conservative Revolution»," *GHI Bulletin* 14 (2019): 57-71.

101 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 42.

102 Zemmour, "Annonce de candidature".

103 Zemmour, "Annonce de candidature".

104 Zemmour, "Pour que la France".

105 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 31. I would like to thank Walderez Ramalho for point this out to me.

History".[106] He promise change, however. Zemmour asks his supporters to "destroy the fatalism within [themselves]" and claims his goal is to "win [the elections] to change the course of History."[107] On Twitter, he urges the electorate to "choose our history... chose our future."[108] After his 2022 electoral defeat, he relaunches his party with the slogan "*Ecrivez la suite de l'histoire*" [write the remainder of the story/history].[109]

II.5 Invoking the majesty of History, futilizing politics, belittling the rule of law

Finally, Zemmour strategically uses historical narratives, analogies and imagery to undermine the legitimacy of democratic procedures, question the rule of law and promote authoritarian policies. By invoking the grandeur and supposed inevitability of historical laws and destinies, he positions History (systematically written with a capital) as an authority that eclipses democratic deliberation and electoral legitimacy. This approach not only belittles the role of ballots and institutional checks but also fosters a political culture in which extraordinary measures and authoritarian impulses are justified in the name of preserving the nation's historical continuity. Zemmour cultivates a permanent sense of emergency, promoting the suspension of legal and democratic norms and even the use of violence under the guise of defending an overarching historical mission.

In one of his characteristically provocative speeches, at *Reconquête*'s "summer university" of 2024 Zemmour condemns political parties as a threat to the nation, declares that "politics has become the enemy of the people," and calls for an "anti-political revolutio."[110] Al-

106 Zemmour, *Destin français*, 31.

107 "Le discours du meeting anniversaire Reconquête au Palais des Sports," accessed 6 January 2025, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours-meeting-anniversaire-reconquete.

108 Gattiglia, "La fabrication," 28.

109 "Éric Zemmour repart en meeting, objectif 2027," *TP1+*, accessed 6 January 2026. https://www.tf1.fr/fr-be/tmc/quotidien-avec-yann-barthes/videos/eric-zemmour-repart-en-meeting-objectif-2027-85859326.html.

110 Éric Zemmour, "Discours de l'Université d'été 2024 à Orange," accessed 12 January 2026, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours-udt-2024.

though these claims might seem contradictory coming from a man who founded his own political party, they align with the tendency of populists to distinguish themselves from "ordinary" politicians and with the far-right's preference for a "metapolitical" struggle for cultural hegemony over "conventional" politics. Zemmour's rejection of democratic politics, as well as the rule of law, is also a logical outcome of, and legitimized by, his own historical diagnosis and self-declared philosophy of history.

During his 2021-2022 presidential campaign Zemmour declared that, unlike other politicians who focus on the electorate, he is committed to the entire French people, encompassing not only the present, but also future and past generations. Speaking in the name of this larger transgenerational community authorizes Zemmour to posit heavy responsibilities and enduring duties that should guide and restrict the choices of contemporary voters. To quote Zemmour:

> This struggle [to save French "civilization"] is bigger than all of us, and the future of our children and grandchildren depends on it. It also concerns those who came before us, who forged the France we have inherited, the beautiful France we love and that the whole world admires, those ancestors to whom we owe gratitude and respect, even as we continually subject them to insults and reproach, those ancestors to whom we are indebted to preserve France as they passed it on to us. We are here to continue the history of France.[111]

Claiming to answer to a higher transgenerational collective also enables Zemmour to dismiss contemporary democratic accountability, as past and future generations can no longer or not yet cast their vote. This discourse allows him to depict the democratic system and the Republic as temporary constructs, legitimate only insofar as they

111 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 342.

uphold the legacy of "historical France." It is telling that Zemmour does not conclude his campaign speeches with the customary "*vive la Republique*," but typically with the words "*Vive la Republique, mais surtout, vive la France*" ["Long live the republic, but above all, long live France"].[112] After losing the 2022 elections, Zemmour similarly asserts that history will ultimately vindicate him and his supporters.[113]

Zemmour further undermines democratic, particularly deliberative, politics by portraying it as too slow and indecisive. Given the alleged historical urgency of the existential threats facing France, there is "no time and no choice" left for political deliberation or even for "compassion" or "humanism".[114] Moreover the nature of the threats, often labelled as "imminently historical" or even "anthropological," render ordinary democratic means futile. Since France is allegedly confronted with a demographic-civilisational conflict with deep historical roots that threatens the survival of the nation and the "perenniality"[115] [*pérennité*] of its cultural identity, only extraordinary historic measures can avert the danger. According to Zemmour, compromise and dialogue are impossible because history shows that Islamic and Judaeo-Christian "civilisations" are inherently incompatible and different peoples remain determined by their origins and cannot fundamentally change.

Those who complain about police violence or discrimination against migrants fail to grasp the broader historical context, according to Zemmour. Otherwise, he argues, they would give the police the presumption of legitimate self-defense.[116] In his programs and essays, Zemmour offers some indications of what is needed to restore "peace" and "security". He advocates measures to remove "invasive predators" and restore the demographic "balance of forces," such as state-led assimilation programs ("voluntarily or forced"), the "systematic expulsion" of

112 For example: Éric Zemmour, "Le discours des Sables d'Olonne," accessed 12 January 2026, https://www.ericzemmour.fr/discours-sables-dolonne..

113 Zemmour, *Je n'ai pas*, 115.

114 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 340.

115 Zemmour, *La messe*, 106.

116 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 339.

foreigners convicted of crimes, or more broadly the remigration of Muslim migrants to their countries of origin.[117] Zemmour moreover argues that because migrants are allegedly exploiting the protections of individual liberties, human rights, and the rule of law, the French people must be prepared to sacrifice these principles. France can allegedly only survive if it restores "authority and hierarchy," rejects the "anarchising sacralisation of the individual" and reevaluates the "sacrosanct rule of law" ["*État de droit*"].[118]

What is ultimately required to save France, however, according to Zemmour, is a profound historical insight into the "deeper meaning of the violence we [the French people] are subjected to".[119] All of Zemmour's essays promise this deeper historical insight and he deploys a great array of historical analogies to maximize the legibility of history. Yet, his analyses and proposed solutions always follow the same pattern: the French people are portrayed as victims of a ruthless enemy, betrayed by an elite that preaches universal love while sowing internal division, and can only be protected by a strong leader who must restore order and unity by any means necessary, including violence. An insightful passage appears in *Destin français*, where Zemmour draws a parallel between contemporary France and the religious wars of the 16th and 17th century, with a focus on the persecution of French Protestants during the St. Bartholomew's Night massacre and the infamous siege of the rebellious city of La Rochelle. In his characteristic revisionist style, Zemmour argues that these historical events should not be seen as lessons about the importance of religious tolerance, but rather the opposite, as lessons about the division that tolerance sows, and the draconian yet, according to Zemmour, legitimate measures that courageous French leaders had to take. In La Rochelle, Zemmour argues, a state within the state arose, dividing the French nation, and this had to be eradicated at any costs. During the siege and subjugation of the last Protestant stronghold in La Rochelle, historians estimate 20,000

117 See: Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 340. And Zemmour, "Pour que la France".
118 Zemmour, *La messe*, 106-107.
119 Zemmour, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot*, 339.

people died, including women and children. For those who might still miss the intended historical lesson, Zemmour renders the analogy even more explicit in another book: Muslim migrants are an "internal enemy," forming an "Islamic La Rochelle".[120] Both attuned and less attuned readers must understand the violence Zemmour is instigating.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Éric Zemmour's political project represents a textbook example of populist historical reason, demonstrating how the far right mobilises the past as an instrument of power. Through a historical imaginary marked by vagueness, decontextualisation, chains of equivalence, intense antagonism, powerful affective appeals and a rejection of representational pluralism, Zemmour weaponises history to simultaneously stoke paranoia, restrict popular sovereignty, performatively display or question loyalty and promise national redemption. His discourse constantly prophesies a catastrophic civilisational war while casting himself as the providential leader uniquely capable of saving France. In doing so, he systematically undermines democratic deliberation, the rule of law and the very possibility of a pluralist public sphere, invoking history to justify extraordinary measures.

Zemmour's case illuminates broader dynamics of far-right populist historical reason that extend well beyond France. His ability to mainstream radical revisionism across media platforms, despite limited electoral success, exemplifies how a metapolitical "war of history" can reshape public discourse, normalise exclusionary definitions of peoplehood and cultivate an affective environment ripe for authoritarian solutions.

120 Zemmour, *Le suicide*, 526.

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