
HOW MARINE LE PEN TURNED RESPECTABLE (AND WHY YOU SHOULDN'T BE FOOLED)

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In 1987, a squinting, lipless, blond-haired politician named Jean Marie Le Pen was asked on a French radio show whether he believed that 6 million Jews had been murdered in the Nazi gas chambers. His response was a study in uncertainty. He started out pondering the question, as if hed just been asked for his view on the existence of UFOs, spent several seconds scrounging for the right words, then landed on a formula that seemed to satisfy him: The deaths of 6 million Jews during World War II, he declared, were a point de détail □ a minor detail, a technicality □ in the larger history of the war, as well as a subject for debate among historians.

This was hardly the former Algerian War paratroopers first brush with outrage. Until the early 1980s, Le Pen enthusiastically branded himself as a sort of cartoon villain in French politics, complete with pirates eyepatch. As leader of the far-right National Front party he had, by 1987, repeatedly been found guilty on various charges of inciting racial hatred, in addition to his infamous defense of the use of torture by French forces in Algeria. (During the 1950s, Le Pen had claimed to have ordered detainees to be tortured, only to later recant. The question of whether he did or not is still the subject of a live controversy). Yet it was the point de détail quip that for some reason wormed itself into the collective conscience as a kind of pre-internet meme.

As a kid growing up in France, I was too young to have heard Le Pen say those words in real time. But I was aware, by the time I was 8 or 10, of the fact that hed said them, just as I was aware of his valence in popular culture. [...]

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