INTERSECTING MEMORIES: WAR AND REMEMBRANCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE

The construction of memory in interwar France. By Daniel J. Sherman. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 448. ISBN 0-226-75285-2. £31.50.

Realms of memory: the construction of the French past, vol. II: *Traditions*. Under the direction of Pierre Nora, English-language edn ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 591. ISBN 0-231-10634-3. £29.95.

Vectors of memory: legacies of trauma in postwar Europe. By Nancy Wood. Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999. Pp. 204. ISBN 1-85973-294-1. £14.99.

I

What do war memorials, Vichy, the Marseillaise, Rheims Cathedral, French gastronomy (including Marcel Proust's celebrated *madeleine*), and the Tour de France have in common? They represent *lieux de mémoire*, or rather they are entries in the corpus of French *Realms of memory* compiled under the guidance of Pierre Nora. A *lieu de mémoire* constitutes 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.[1] Nora, scholar-cum-publisher, and his contributors have recorded the history of France from the perspective of its collective memory. Seven weighty tomes of *Les Lieux de mémoire* appeared between 1984 and 1992. A slimmed-down translation in three volumes has recently been published by Columbia University Press; University of Chicago Press will bring out the remaining essays in 2001. The American publishers have been spurred by the remarkable success of Nora's *magnum opus*. It not only set the agenda for cultural history in the 1990s, but also represented a formidable publishing coup for Nora's house, Gallimard.

History sells, and the past decade witnessed an unprecedented growth in memory business. Ironically, Nora the publisher profited from the memory boom which Nora the scholar set out to unmask. From an academic point of view, Nora disapproves of *lieux de mémoire*, for they exist due to the demise of *milieux de mémoire*. The advent of modernity, notably globalization, democratization, and mass(-media) culture, destroyed a society based upon memory transmitted from generation to generation via institutions such as church, family, and school. Sites of memory have emerged over the past two hundred years or so in order to compensate for the loss of true, lived memory. 'If we still dwelled among our memories, there would be no need to consecrate sites embodying them. *Lieux de mémoire* would not exist, because memory would not have been swept away by history.'[2] Instead, modern society has retreated into an historical illusion, a Disneyland

[1] Pierre Nora, 'From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of memory*', in idem, ed., *Realms of memory: rethinking the French past*, vol. 1: *Conflicts and divisions* (3 vols., New York, 1996–8), p. xvii.

[2] Pierre Nora, 'General introduction: between memory and history', in idem, ed., *Realms of memory*, 1, p. 2.

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of mnemonic substitutes. Nora urges the historian to make these *lieux de mémoire* the object of historical – critical – enquiry. In order to decode them, Nora asserts, one has to treat *lieux de mémoire* as self-referential signifiers, i.e. 'pure signs' without referents in reality.[3]

Leaving Nora's cultural pessimism aside, his hypothesis for the driving force behind the memory boom is open to question. Have *milieux de mémoire* really vanished? Have institutions like the family indeed ceased to function as vectors of transmission? One of Nora's critics claims that the current vogue is firmly rooted in family life. Jay Winter – historian, film-maker, and creator of a museum – argues that the widespread appeal of sites of memory rests on the linkage between the generations.[4] Families visit history museums, read historical novels, etc., because commemorations locate their life stories in universal narratives. Today's grandparents and parents were brought up in the shadow of the Great War and the Second World War respectively. Commemorations reflect and accommodate the iconic character of war in the twentieth century, and that is what gives them their audiences and footing. To illustrate this point, Winter cites the founding of a well-received war museum, the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne at the Somme in 1992. This international, comparative museum was the brainchild of Max Lejeune, president of the departmental council and former defence minister. The idea originated in family history, in the story of Lejeune's own family. For Lejeune, the Péronne museum was a means of coming to terms with childhood memories, memories of his father, an *ancien combattant*, who had returned to his home as a broken man.

By contrast, Antoine Prost suggests in his contribution (originally published in 1986) to *Realms of memory* on the battle of Verdun that 'For French people today, Verdun is not a clear and vital memory but a vague idea … it is no longer part of today's world.'[5] The Second World War proved to be a turning point in the remembrance of the longest battle in history; the horrors of 1939–45 buried the memory of the atrocious campaign of 1916. To be sure, Prost added his remarks on the changing image of Verdun as an afterthought. The main thrust of his argument focuses on the place of Verdun in French national memory between the two world wars. Like Auschwitz after 1945, Prost concludes, Verdun stood for a breach of the limits of the human existence in the inter-war years. Prost distinguishes between three distinct but complementary battle narratives: the veterans' contemplative view from below; the official, patriotic discourse shaped by the generals, the church, and the municipal council of Verdun; and the historical-educational memory imparted to battlefield tourists. The first wave of commemorative activities between 1916 and 1923 was characterized by the juxtaposition of the official version and the testimony of combatants. After an interlude of about six years, Verdun captured French imagination once again from the late 1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War. But this time the two discourses amalgamated into one and established the public image of the battle as the most atrocious encounter in military history.

Prost's account, though authoritative and compelling, suffers from the generic

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[3] Ibid., p. 19.

[4] Jay Winter, 'The generation of memory: reflections on the "memory boom" in contemporary historical studies', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington*, 27 (2000), pp. 80–2.

[5] Antoine Prost, 'Verdun', in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of memory: the construction of the French past*, vol. III: *Symbols* (3 vols., New York, 1996–8), p. 400; see also Serge Barcellini, 'Mémoire et mémoires de Verdun, 1916–1996', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 182 (1996), pp. 77–98.

weakness of Nora's Francocentric project. Verdun has never been an exclusively French *lieu de mémoire*, but lies at the intersection of Franco-German memories of the First World War. The battleground was annexed to French and German 'mindscapes' of the war of attrition alike.[6] Although he touches upon German delegations visiting the battlefield in the aftermath of the world wars, Prost eschews a binational approach. In effect, he disentangles two interwoven memory scripts. By isolating the French narrative, Prost conforms with his editor's interest in the construction of France as a symbolic reality. In doing so, he also links up with his own essay for *Realms of memory* on the spirit of French republicanism in local war remembrance during the 1920s and 1930s.

II

Municipal *monuments aux morts*, clumsily rendered as 'monuments to the dead', incorporated wartime suffering and sacrifice into the republican tradition. Great War memorials evolved into foci of a 'civil religion', in Rousseau's sense, celebrating neither the state nor the army but the dutiful citizens of the Third Republic. In emphasizing republicanism, Prost combats public prejudice against the monumental legacy of the First World War in the early 1980s. He points out that, at the time of their inauguration, the monuments signified republican pride mixed with personal grief rather than jingoistic nationalism. In a sense, Prost attempts to rehabilitate war memorials, 'Today abandoned by the popular fervor that created them'.[7] (Significantly, the article, first published in 1984, preceded the memory boom.) Contrary to popular opinion, Prost maintains that victory monuments featuring the triumphant *poilu* (infantryman) were not the most common form. What is more, the meaning of a memorial depended upon a complex system of signs such as location, iconography, and inscriptions. Taking this into account, Prost develops a typology comprising four basic memorial forms (civic, patriotic-republican, funerary-patriotic, and purely funerary or pacifist monuments). Despite this diversity, republican civism represented the overarching and unifying theme of commemorative sculpture. In addition, the rites performed at war memorials enhanced the republican aura of the monuments. Armistice Day ceremonies exalted neither the military nor the fatherland. 'On the contrary, it was the fatherland that honored its citizens, and it was this that made the occasion republican, for the Republic held precisely that its citizens were the supreme value and ultimate end of society.'[8]

Prost's concise, penetrating analysis of *monuments aux morts* is one of the finest articles included in *Realms of memory*. Naturally, a brief essay cannot convey the subtle nuances of the commemorative process. For a detailed account of the memorialization of the First World War one should consult Daniel J. Sherman's exhaustive study, *The construction of memory in interwar France*. Unlike Prost, Sherman emphasizes difference rather than coherence, and controversy rather than consensus. He highlights the complexity of the interdependence in war commemoration between the national and local, the general public and the bereaved, civilians and veterans. The author, adopting

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[6] Susanne Brandt, *Vom Kriegsschauplatz zum Gedächtnisraum: Die Westfront, 1914–1940* (Baden-Baden, 2000).

[7] Antoine Prost, 'Monuments to the dead', in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of memory: the construction of the French past*, vol. II: *Traditions* (3 vols., New York, 1996–8), p. 330.

[8] Ibid., p. 324; see also Annette Becker, *Les monuments aux morts: patrimoine et mémoire de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1989).

a Foucaultian framework, argues that the instigators of war memorials sought to seize power over the individual and collective knowledge of the war. Politicians, bureaucrats, families, ex-servicemen, clerics, artists, builders, and contributors struggled to control the commemorative space. A constant tension between competing discourses, between creating, preserving, and annihilating memories, characterized the set-up of war remembrance. Ultimately, 'Commemoration sets itself an objective it can never entirely attain: to construct a unitary and coherent version of the past that displaces individual memories.'[9]

The structure of the book is twofold. The first part explores the origins or, in Foucault's phrase, the 'emergence' of war remembrance. First, Sherman examines what he calls 'registers of experience' which framed French imaginings of war. Notably war literature, battlefield guidebooks, and visual imagery furnished a repertoire of forms that could be drawn upon by the memorial makers. The second chapter shifts the discussion from cultural forms to commemorative levels and shows how both the national ossuaries and local agents appropriated the bodies and names of the fallen soldiers. Part two, the bulk of the book, gives a chronology of local commemorative conflicts based upon documentary evidence of four different departments (the Loire, Meuse, Morbihan, and Var). In four separate chapters Sherman traces the stages of the establishment of communal war memorials: first, the fund-raising process and the rhetoric of (pecuniary) 'sacrifice' employed by private donors, local government, and the state; secondly, disputes about artistic standards involving members of the Paris art scene, the prefectoral review boards, monument suppliers, and clients; thirdly, the issues of location, (Catholic) iconography, and local materials and labour; and, finally, the ceremonial dedication as both the climax and synthesis of the wrangles surrounding war memorials. The overall picture emerging from these case studies is one of commemoration as a contentious instrument in reinforcing a conservative, male vision of French society.

In sum, Sherman provides a thoroughly researched, consistently argued, theoretically sound, and copiously illustrated account of the business, politics, and symbolism of war memorials during the Third Republic. However, one crucial question remains unanswered: what distinguished French commemoration as a whole? Sherman rejects unitary meanings such as republicanism and stresses multivocality instead. Yet multiple meanings and discourses are intrinsic to the workings of commemoration in general. Memorials were equally contested terrains across the Channel and the Rhine. Unfortunately, the author does not present French evidence in the light of British and German findings, and nor does he comment on the existing comparative literature, namely by Reinhart Koselleck (whom he does not acknowledge), George L. Mosse, and Jay Winter.[10] In fact, he gives the impression that French representations of war emerged from within an international vacuum.

The distorting effects of this narrow approach become apparent when we consider that in the aftermath of the First World War several belligerent nations colonized the commemorative landscape of north-eastern France. The bereaved or their agents

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[9] Daniel J. Sherman, *The construction of memory in interwar France* (Chicago and London, 1999), p. 311.

[10] Reinhart Koselleck, *Zur politischen Ikonologie des gewaltsamen Todes: Ein deutsch-französischer Vergleich* (Basle, 1998); George L. Mosse, *Fallen soldiers: reshaping the memory of the world wars* (New York and Oxford, 1990); Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, sites of mourning: the Great War in European cultural history* (Cambridge, 1995).

claimed symbolically that 'corner of a foreign field that is for ever England' (Rupert Brooke). The Western Front turned from being an international battlefield into an embattled *lieu de mémoire* of various nations. Sherman alludes to the Thiepval monument by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the British gift to the ossuary of Notre-Dame de Lorette, and the repatriated 'Unknown Warrior', but does not deal with their impact upon French commemoration. The long-drawn-out disputes between the German war graves commission and French authorities over the design of German war cemeteries on French territory do not feature at all in Sherman's otherwise sophisticated study. He neglects the importance of intersecting memories and – positive as well as negative – cultural transfer. The cemeteries and memorials in the former war zone did not merely represent a cluster of the respective national memories, but were sites of cultural conflict and exchange.

Since Sherman is imprisoned within the national framework, it is not surprising that his analysis does not extend to the Franco-German borderland. Alsace-Lorraine occupied a pivotal position in the politics of competing memories. The *provinces retrouvées* were plastered with monuments of Imperial Germany. The victors of 1918 pursued, in contrast to the Germans after 1870–1, a policy of *damnatio memoriae*. German memorials were removed and replaced with French ones cast in the recycled bronze. In Metz, for example, the figure of a *poilu* surmounted temporarily the plinth of a demolished statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I.[11] Such acts of mnemonic cleansing confirm the nexus of power and knowledge that lies at the core of Sherman's work. The case of Alsace-Lorraine underscores the ambivalences and frictions within representations of war configured in inter-war France.

III

In the epilogue to his book, Sherman draws attention to the recurrence of memories of the Great War since 1945. 'Commemoration endures', he concludes, 'because people yearn to construe as natural the solidarities that bring structure to an increasingly fragmented world.'[12] But perhaps the answer lies in the form rather than the function of memory. The notion of traumatic memory, encapsulated in the term 'shell-shock', originated in the experience of the First World War. That war created the vocabulary which is now used – in commemoration and in historiography – to describe subsequent traumas of the twentieth century, the Second World War in particular.[13] Hence, the language of trauma, encoded in a host of ways, brings us back to the cultural history of the Great War. Nancy Wood's *Vectors of memory: legacies of trauma in postwar Europe* is a book of interesting insights into the forms and workings of traumatic memory in post-Second World War France and Germany, although she seems to be unaware of the genesis of the concept. Wood's collection of essays discusses (yet does not compare) the repercussions of traumatic events such as the Holocaust, occupation and collaboration in Vichy France, the atomic bomb, and the Algerian war. The individual essays are of high quality, but their publication in a single volume is redundant: six out of eight rather heterogenous chapters have previously been published.

[11] Annette Maas, 'Zeitenwende in Elsaß-Lothringen: Denkmalstürze und Umdeutung der nationalen Erinnerungslandschaft in Metz (November 1918–1922)', in Winfried Speitkamp, ed., *Denkmalsturz: Zur Konfliktgeschichte politischer Symbolik* (Göttingen, 1997), pp. 79–108.
[12] Sherman, *Construction of memory*, p. 331.
[13] Winter, 'The generation of memory', pp. 82–6.

New in this collection is an intriguing essay on Jürgen Habermas's model of memory as a medium of critical self-reflection. Habermas has made the point that fostering a 'postnational' or 'postconventional' German identity requires a continuing public debate about German history and the Nazi crimes. Collective liability (as opposed to individual guilt) for the past should become an integral part of individual and collective identities rather than a mere expression of an indebted memory to the victims. In 1986, Habermas intervened forcefully in the 'public sphere' of historical debate. His trenchant criticism of apologetic historians, namely Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, triggered the *Historikerstreit* ('historians' debate') about the place of Nazism in German history. For Habermas, a posthumous 'settling of damages' by means of historical revision was unacceptable. Germany could not escape its past and thus assume a conventional identity based upon a neo-conservative form of historical narration. On the contrary, liability for the Nazi terror has been built into German 'historical milieux': 'Our form of life is connected with that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political, and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle … None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and as Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it.'[14]

Habermas first formulated his position in a newspaper article on the occasion of President Ronald Reagan's visit to the Second World War cemetery of Bitburg in May 1985. The invitation had been issued by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of VE Day. The meeting was meant to underline Germany's status as a 'normal' nation, but it had exactly the opposite effect. Prior to the event, it transpired that not only regular soldiers but also members of the Waffen-SS were buried in Bitburg. In an attempt to limit the political damage, the programme was changed at short notice so as to include a visit to Bergen-Belsen. The Bitburg incident infuriated Habermas. He accused Kohl of circumventing the specific German liability for the Nazi past by using a 'veteran strategy'. Indeed, like the famous pilgrimage of French, German, and Italian ex-servicemen to the war cemetery of Douaumont (Verdun) in 1936, Bitburg would have smoothed over the guilt question by enacting *rapprochement* between chivalrous enemies. Post-war reconciliation was supposed to come full circle at Bitburg, though Wood does not seem to realize this. Kohl modelled the event after his and François Mitterrand's joint visit to Douaumont in September 1984. At the graves of the dead of 1914–18, the German chancellor and the French president demonstrated Franco-German unity at the end of an age of total war by joining hands in a moment of silence.

The handshakes of Bitburg and Verdun show how layers of memory intersect; German recollections overlap with American and French memories, and invocations of the Second World War refer back to the Great War. The works which have been reviewed in this article reveal a substantial gap in the literature of war and remembrance in twentieth-century Europe. They exemplify how recent research has enriched our understanding of the forms and functions of war commemoration with respect to particular societies and periods. Future researchers, however, will have to leave behind national boundaries and conventional caesura if they want to take seriously the concept of intersecting memories.

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[14] As cited in Nancy Wood, *Vectors of memory: legacies of trauma in postwar Europe* (Oxford and New York, 1999), pp. 50–1.