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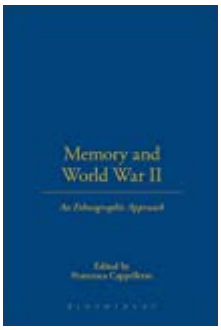

Francesca Cappelletto, ed. *Memory and World War II: An Ethnographic Approach.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005. xvii + 206 pp. $25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84520-205-7.

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A Last Chance

Sixty years after the end of World War II, it is crucial for scholars to realize that we are now being offered our last chance to obtain eyewitness recollections about the events of the war. Those who have a living memory of what happened are over seventy years old, and within a few years there will be no more witnesses, or at least no groups of witnesses, who directly experienced it. The authors of the articles in this volume were still in time. The interviews they conducted in "mnemonic communities" are valuable because a considerable number of the survivors were still alive, while the recollections of the second and third generations of these groups could be called upon. "Mnemonic community" is a key term of the book. It refers to groups that have a collective understanding of past events. Group identity is constructed through the recollection of these events. In this respect, it is interesting to see how the memory of the events is passed on from the actual survivors to later generations.

Several present-day problems of research on World War II are implicitly or explicitly addressed in the book. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is clear that one cannot talk anymore about the European theater of the war as a clash between the Axis and the Allies with some "nations" on the one and some on the other side. It is increasingly evident that other wars–civil wars–resulted from or were made possible by World War II itself. So-called grand narratives of nations or peoples are becoming obsolete. After Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* (2002), scholars have questioned the idea of victim nations or peoples and have reexamined collaboration and violence on the local level within communities. Several articles of this book deliberately seek to confront local memory and public narratives and discover–unsurprisingly–that the former often contradict the latter.

The authors focus on the local to see how such discrepancies with the grand narrative arise. In the introduction of the book Cappelletto notes that the volume uses a critical approach to collective memory and favors the term "group memory," or memory constructed intersubjectively (by telling, retelling, listening) as a means of identity formation. Individuals develop a memory of an event similar to those belonging to others in the same group. Divergent memories make for different groups.

The ethnographic approach, as it is explained in the

introduction, aims at an interdisciplinary approach to the recollection of World War II. It involves fieldwork in local communities, where the ethnographer has to become part of the community and yet remain an outsider in order to serve as the "object of knowledge." Ethnography tries to reveal events of the past, but aims at a sociological-political analysis of how the persons involved now perceive past events and how this perception relates to group identity on a local level.

The case studies that form the body of the book (Cappelletto's introduction regarding methodology and Stuart Woolf's closing essay on historians and memory set the frame) are refreshingly different and also varied in their methods. Interdisciplinarity is a pronounced aim of the book and the authors succeed in drawing on various fields, while all rely on the ethnographic method and consider how memories of World War II influence Europeans today. Several of its essays are of particular interest, and these are discussed below.

The articles reveal a high level of scholarly engagement and engage the reader. In the book's second case study, "Remembering the Resistance in Popular Theatre: a Basque Controversy," Sandra Ott examines the story of a Xiberoan (Basque) traditional theater play and its reception. It is an excellent example of how symbolic representation affects the mnemonic community and its recollections of the past.

Stuart Woolf's "Historians: Memories of War Atrocities" is a contribution of a more programmatic nature. It is partly a summary of the questions put forward by the articles of the book and an attempt to reach some tentative conclusions. Woolf considers present-day European identity and asks whether it is possible to create a new narrative for a unified Europe that can overcome nationalist sentiments and bring lasting peace to the continent. Woolf notes correctly that the task of the historian is different from that of the judge because the historian has to "reconstruct and analyze a specific event or situation … in order to arrive at a narration that includes alternative, even multiple, memories … of an event" (p. 168). Nevertheless, he attempts to present the "European" narrative as preferable vis-Ã -vis the "nationalist" or "neo-fascist" narrative that he believes stands in opposition to it. Thus, he automatically also partly becomes a "judge." Woolf also assumes that we now stand before only two options: a Europe that goes beyond nation-states or the narrative of the right. There are, I believe, more than two competing narratives of European history (histories) and one does not necessarily have to choose between the sides of the false dilemma of promoting a supranational Europe or supporting new nationalists or neo-fascists.

All in all, the book is a methodologically well-founded project that combines several approaches and includes essays with various points of view. The fact that the chapters offer different case studies makes it interesting to read. Based as it is on fieldwork done in local communities, the book gives us an essential understanding of the war and the narratives that have been framed in connection with it. The existing narratives are still often heavily dominated by the views of the perpetrators and dichotomies of Germans vs. others. We need to come to an understanding that sees the war as a complex web of events in which local and national communities were shattered and the main events of the war provided a context for local wars between various ethnic or other types of groups–a war that is now is seen as the last great civil war of Europe.

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