



**Christoph Cornelißen, Lutz Klinkhammer, Wolfgang Schwentker, ed.** *Erinnerungskulturen: Deutschland, Italien und Japan seit 1945*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003. 368 pp. EUR 12.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-596-15219-3.



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## Variations on Catastrophe

In the autumn of 2001, the council of Trieste decided to reinstate Cesare Pagnini's portrait in the city gallery alongside the rest of the city's former mayors. What made this decision worthy of widespread attention, however, was the fact that Pagnini, a lawyer by profession and an enthusiastic fascist, was also a member of the "commission for cleansing of the Jews from the judicial system" (p. 222), a body founded as part of the fascist adoption of racial laws in 1938. Furthermore, Pagnini had been appointed mayor after the German occupation of Trieste in October 1943 and was a notorious collaborator with the Third Reich. The city also decided to name a street after Giorgio Almirante, the chief editor of the racist, antisemitic *Difesa della Razza*, and a well-known fascist. In spring of the same year, a new history textbook appeared in Japan, again sparking debate about the representation of Japanese behavior during World War II. Despite complaints about "soft" descriptions, which in some cases ignored Japanese crimes in China, Korea and other occupied countries, the Japanese government approved the book for schools. International reactions to the text highlighted its controversial nature: the Chinese foreign minister summoned the Japanese ambassador to

a meeting at which he threatened that the approval of the book would harm relations between the two countries, while South Korea went even further by recalling its ambassador to Tokyo. In Germany, however, such episodes have become unthinkable. Even though such comparisons sometimes make scholars of Japan and Italy uncomfortable, one can only imagine the reactions had a town decided to name a street after Julius Streicher or if a textbook failed to mention Auschwitz. Indeed, in 2001 the German authorities returned a textbook for reprinting after the authors neglected to put the term *Judenfrage* in quotation marks.

This collection of essays seeks to examine the memory of World War II in Japan, Germany and Italy in a comparative manner. The editors contend that through this comparison one can attain both a deeper and fuller understanding of the unique attitudes that characterize each culture and country and examine the current situation of memory scholarship. Germany, however, is clearly the focal point of this collection. Though only a few of the authors directly discuss German memory of the Second World War and the rest explore the differing

images and memory of the events by her allies, readers will encounter countless references and comparisons to specifically German events and issues. One of the collection's weaknesses, however, is its unclear audience: while some essays summarize stories that are already well known, and even well worn, others discuss historiographical issues of lesser interest to the lay reader.

The twenty-four short essays, each ten to fifteen pages in length, present a wide range of topics and materials, all concerning the image and memory of World War II. They deal mainly with the question of responsibility and guilt. Many of the writers are well-known scholars, such as Hans Mommsen, Jeffrey Herf and Martin Sabrow, who generally summarize older projects. The collection effectively portrays the main trends and discussions in the scholarship of memory of the Second World War as produced within these different states and is useful for anyone searching for comparisons among the three countries. According to the editors' testimony, the text seeks to bring these scholars together in order to cross national borders, which generally serve as the limit of memory scholarship. This goal, of course, is welcome and fruitful. Nevertheless, most of the essays remain contained within boundaries of the state, though the memory of World War II undoubtedly crosses national lines. It is similarly unfortunate that the essays fail to cross the borders of disciplines and remain exclusively within the sphere of political speeches, judicial processes and professional historical writing. With the exception of Petra Buchholz's essay, which uses first-person diaries, memoirs and interviews with Japanese soldiers, the editors have not included any study of memory in art, monuments, films, literature or even, other than a few references, discussions of the counter-narratives of marginal groups. Given that representations of World War II are widespread in cultural elements such as avant-garde monuments, best-selling memoirs and canonic literature, memory exclusively from the perspective of the state seems unsatisfactory and even awkward. Contributions in these directions would have both enriched the collection and helped it avoid repetition, a consequence of its more limited perspectives.

This collection is divided into six sections, each focused around a common theme, through which the writers try to tell the story of remembering, repressing, selecting and filtering the events of the war in the public sphere. The first section deals with immediate postwar judicial processes. While the Nuremberg Trials are well known and became the model for future war crimes trials, including those in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, trials in Italy

and Japan are hardly remembered by the international media. Even though the Tokyo Trials are often mentioned in public debate, as David Cohen shows, the memory of thousands of trials against Japanese war criminals conducted by the British, Philippine, Dutch and Chinese authorities is hardly discussed in the Japanese media for political reasons. Hans Woller also uses trials against senior fascists in Italy to refute standard claims about Italian repression of crimes committed by their own during the war. The essays in this section all discuss the reasons for canonization and forgetfulness of specific trials in national memories, mostly as a result of political struggles between different parties and movements in each country.

The essays in the second section discuss the process of demystifying the leading figures of the three regimes that collapsed with the end of the war. The comparison here is difficult as Hitler and Mussolini died and were transformed into myths while the Japanese emperor remained in power, albeit stripped of his divinity and sovereignty. In general, this section constitutes the weakest part of the collection, not because the writers have little new to say, but because some of the essays suffer from a lack of clarity and unexplained shifts in their materials.

The third section deals with the historiographical aspect of the memory of the war. Most professional historians will be familiar with the stories told here. The essays by Martin Sabrow and Sebastian Conrad, however, shed new light on common beliefs regarding the historiography of the war in East Germany and Japan. Sabrow describes lively debates under the communist regime regarding the nature of the National Socialists and proves this memory to be less monolithic than is usually claimed. Conrad claims that, immediately after the war, Japanese historians were much more critical than their German counterparts in their estimations of the destroyed regime. For those familiar with Japanese historiography, this is a well-known story. Conrad, however, goes further and claims that these historians functioned as an avant-garde element in the re-examination of the national past.

The fourth section, which is also the longest and most thought provoking, discusses aspects of the memory of the war in the "public sphere." Through his examination of celebrations, ceremonies, opinion polls and speeches, Edgar Wolfrum presents, in an excellent article, the German search for the end of the *Nachkriegszeit*, the never-ending attempt to go off in a new direction, free from

the shadow of the past and its persisting failure. Yagyu Kunichika explores the domestic and international debates surrounding the Yasukuni shrine, which is dedicated to the spirits of Japan's war dead. The controversy surrounding the prime ministers' visits to the shrine was sparked by the fact that the ceremonies included the spirits of men declared war criminals. The study shows how the transformation of memory into a source of international tension between Japan and its neighbors has also modified the internal debate and will to discuss forgotten horrors.

The fifth section, "Media and the Collective Memory," deals with the wide variety of representations of the war. In Germany, a key event was the broadcast of the American TV series "Holocaust" in 1979, which achieved record ratings and was followed by a vigorous public discussion of the extermination of European Jewry. Both its effects and the accusation of kitsch and sentimentality are well known, as are the artistic products that sought to challenge and mock this series, though these counter-narratives are absent from the essay. The other essays here discuss the changes in textbook discussions of the war and demonstrate the political struggles surrounding historical canonization in both Italy and Japan. The most original study, and perhaps the most outstanding essay in the collection, is that of Petra Buchholz. Employing a rich variety of sources, Buchholz tells the story of the personal memories of Japanese soldiers and their attempts to bring their story into the public sphere, where it was transformed as a result of political struggle. The relationships between personal and collective memories and the topic of auto-narration are important cases in memory scholarship, as shown in Harald Welzer's famous and controversial *Opa war doch kein Nazi* (2002). One can only hope that more fruitful studies such as Buchholz's will appear alongside studies of official memories.

The sixth section presents three studies of changing attitudes towards the past as part of generational experiences. The aim of the three essays in this chapter, one each on Germany, Italy and Japan, is to replace Karl Mannheim's old definition of generation as a group based on shared historical experience and to claim that in the case of post-World War II countries, it is the attitude towards history, and not the present, that embodies the shared experience. Most famous in the German case is of course the "68er" generation, which challenged parental authority by claiming to be those who bore the "real" memories and interpretations of the past. Both sociological and historical scholarship has long abandoned

Mannheim's definition and it seems that the essays of this chapter could have benefited from an updated theoretical framework more relevant to current historical debates.

As an introduction to both the techniques of state contained memory and the internal debates between parties and movements within each state, this collection is very useful and in many cases thought provoking. It demonstrates well the similarities among the three countries and cultures under discussion and contains some illuminating reflections on the factors that differentiate the experience of confronting crimes in Germany, Italy and Japan. But the volume also reifies the well-known distinction between Germany and the other countries without effectively moving beyond it. The German authorities' extreme, some would say obsessed, sensitivity to examining questions about guilt and lessons of the past is widely acknowledged, but the collection fails to explain it. Against the editors' stated will, it draws a negative picture of Japan and Italy as cultures that have not fully dealt with their past. Another weakness is the omission of international perspective, which is discussed clearly only in Franziska Seraphim's essay on war trials that took place in Japan because of the influence of globalization. The dynamics of World War II memory crosses national boundaries, and yet the essays are not only state-contained, but they also do not examine memories of the war in the English-speaking world, Russia, China, Israel or in any other groups influenced by the war. As George Mosse and Jay Winter's comparative research on memory in Germany, France and Britain has shown, the dynamics of memory are not unique to the defeated sides of a war and the collection would have benefited from more attention to the broader context of memory in the postwar world. The collection, however, not only confirms the significance of memory scholarship; more importantly, it demonstrates the importance of comparative perspective in interpreting memory and the construction of narratives, even if each culture believes it is discussing its past independently. The essays in this book bring us closer to a fuller, richer understanding of one of the most important components in collective cultural and political life.

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