



Alon Confino. *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 336 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5722-9.

Reviewed by Anna Marta Holian (Department of History, Arizona State University)

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The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Memory Studies

“Memory” has by now become a central concept of historical scholarship, with numerous articles and books on memory, commemoration, and coming to terms with the past appearing regularly. Yet many questions still remain to be addressed about the nature of memory and how its study contributes to our knowledge of the past. Following up on a volume of essays edited with Peter Fritzsche, Alon Confino’s new book addresses these issues.[1] A collection of essays written between 1993 and 2004, it circles around the intertwined themes of memory, history, and national belonging in modern Germany. The essays are in themselves diverse. Some are best characterized as thought pieces on theory and method, while others are built around the author’s archival research. Many are a combination of these two genres.

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1, Confino examines the idea of *Heimat* in Germany from national unification to 1990. The focus here, as in his book on the *Heimat* movement in imperial Germany, falls on the relationship between the local and the national.[2] Taking issue with the idea that the development of nationalism and the nation-state subsumed and even obliterated local identities, Confino examines how ideas of localness informed and structured nationhood. The concept of *Heimat* plays a key role here. He suggests that *Heimat* is best understood not as an ideology, but as a flexible and malleable “historical mentality” (p. 28) adaptable to different political contexts. Each of the essays in

this section explores these themes from a different vantage point.

In chapter 1, Confino examines the construction of a collective image of the German nation in the period between 1871 and 1914. His objective here is to examine the transformations in self-understanding that occurred over the period, such that in August 1914, Germans from across the empire “marched united in the name of the nation” (p. 31). He argues that the concept of *Heimat* allowed Germans to reconcile their local histories and the history of the larger German nation. He traces the development of a “generic” concept of *Heimat* applicable to all the localities in Germany. This concept signaled the success of a nationalizing project that included regional differences as components of an overarching national entity.

Chapter 2 examines the representation of *Heimat* in Edgar Reitz’s 1980s made-for-TV miniseries of the same name. Here Confino uses the *Heimat* idea as a means of understanding the popularity of Reitz’s film. As he notes, a great deal of discussion about the film has centered around its “sins of omission,” notably the minor attention paid to the Second World War and the Holocaust. While Confino agrees with such critiques, he also thinks they fail to capture what made the film so compelling. Reitz, Confino argues, drew on the symbolic authority of the *Heimat* idea, “sanctifying memory and experience as modes of connecting with the past, while assuming

a dismissive attitude towards history” (p. 58). His approach dovetailed with larger cultural trends that identified memory as a more “authentic” means of representing the past.

In chapters 3 and 4, Confino explores the *Heimat* idea in West and East Germany, respectively. The concept of *Heimat*, he argues, provided West Germans with a means of talking about national identity at a time when expressions of nationalism were deemed suspect. Focusing on travel literature, he examines the representation of the *Heimat* as an innocent victim of the Nazi regime. At the same time, the *Heimat* idea could also be destabilizing. The existence of East Germany and of German refugees from Eastern Europe suggested “a homeland whose boundaries were unstable and unclear” (p. 87). In East Germany, on the other hand, one might have expected the *Heimat* idea to go the way of other concepts associated with the bourgeoisie and National Socialism. However, the flexibility of the idea allowed it to be adapted to the purpose of building a socialist state. Examining a set of East German election posters, Confino shows how the state sought to reconcile the traditional emphasis of *Heimat* on the idea of the nation with the new task of building a socialist state. The tension between these two approaches, he suggests, was irreconcilable.

In chapter 5, Confino seeks to identify the enduring traits of the *Heimat* idea. Some of the ground covered here is the same as in chapters 3 and 4, but with a specific focus on images of *Heimat*. Using tourist maps and posters as his source material, Confino examines how a set of enduring themes were employed by successive German governments. He suggests that the idea became increasingly expansive over time, such that it began to move beyond the bounds of the nation and into the global.

In part 2, Confino focuses on the concept of memory in historical scholarship. Here he looks back on the recent “memory boom” in history, part of a larger shift in emphasis from social to cultural history. (Indeed, Confino sometimes uses “memory studies” as a synonym for cultural history.) His goal is to assess what new historical insights the study of memory has brought while also addressing the shortcomings of contemporary approaches. He thus approaches memory “as a problem of historical narrative and method” (p. 155).

Within this section, in chapter 6, Confino reexamines Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) from the perspective of modern accounts of nationhood. Despite

Freud’s self-expressed inability to espouse nationalism, Confino argues that his narrative about the return of the repressed memory of Moses and the emergence of the Jewish nation nonetheless shares much with other contemporary national histories. Freud presented the nation as a spiritual principle that survives across the generations and used the language of scientific proof to establish the reality of the nation. At the same time, Freud’s approach was innovative in that he realized he was working in the domain of fiction rather than history. His emphasis on the return of a repressed crime makes his narrative eminently relevant to contemporary discussions about memory and hidden pasts.

Chapter 7 focuses on method in the study of collective memory. Here Confino uses the history of *mentalités* and the work of art historian Aby Warburg as models against which to measure contemporary research on memory. One of the shortcomings of contemporary memory studies, he argues, is the tendency to view memories in isolation from one another. The work of the *mentalités* school, on the other hand, emphasizes the need to view cultural objects as part of a larger social universe. Similarly, Warburg’s research sought to discover the social world contained within each work of art and to understand each artwork as the product of a given society’s traditions and tastes. Confino identifies three themes relevant to contemporary memory studies here: the relationship between politics and society; reception and evidence; and the relationships among different memories.

In chapter 8, Confino examines some problems with study of memory as it pertains specifically to German history. His primary focus here is the history of the Holocaust. While the memory of the Holocaust has been an important theme in recent studies of postwar Germany, the role of memory in the making of the Holocaust has received little attention. Confino poses the question: “Was the notion of memory—understood as a representation of the past in a given society—important at all to the making of the Holocaust?” (p. 195). He suggests that memory can offer a new way of thinking about the origins of the Holocaust, one that moves beyond the shortcomings of two other explanatory frameworks, ideological indoctrination and the barbarism of warfare. Unfortunately, Confino does not pursue this line of inquiry very far.

Chapters 9 and 10 focus on tourism in postwar Germany. In chapter 9, Confino examines what some Germans thought of tourism in the aftermath of World War II, in the context of defeat and occupation. He suggests that postwar tourism, at least from our perspective,

represents a “dissonance,” and as such offers an important vantage point onto attitudes towards the Third Reich. The postwar rhetoric of tourism emphasized both normality and progress in the Third Reich, at least up to the war years. Although the Nazi era was clearly seen as a problem for postwar Germany’s international image, 1950s tourist literature nonetheless emphasized many “accomplishments” of the Nazi era, such as the construction of the autobahn. In chapter 10, Confino again uses tourism to explore postwar Germans’ relationship with their past. He begins by reexamining the literature on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, tracing the shift in emphasis from repression to selective remembering. He suggests that considering postwar tourism can help push studies of selective remembering in new directions, precisely because it was not explicitly an arena for reckoning with the Nazi past. Here again Confino stresses the way in which the tourism industry both identified with and distanced itself from the Nazi period. Moving into new territory, he also explores the diverse motivations of postwar tourists, from former soldiers to 1950s youth.

Beautifully written, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance* offers many new insights into the themes of memory, history, and national identity. Confino is especially strong when writing about memory studies and their place in the discipline of history. He offers a number of insightful criticisms of contemporary scholarship on memory, with the goal of pushing historians beyond their comfort zones to think more seriously about the possibilities and limits of studying memory. He emphasizes the need to think about cultural representations as elements of broader cultural constellations which are themselves situated in the context of social relations. However, he does not question the prevailing tendency to define memory as cultural representation, a practice that I believe encourages historians to treat memory in the static and socially disconnected manner that Confino rightly criticizes. His discussion of memory and the Holocaust is also thought-provoking. Here he opens up new horizons for research by drawing attention to the fact that we still know little about the role of memory in the making of the Holocaust, as opposed to the memory of the Holocaust itself.

While Confino excels in probing the big questions and analyzing the work of other scholars, the essays built around his own primary source research are less satisfy-

ing. Some have an unfinished quality, and a fair amount of repetition occurs between them. More to the point, Confino does not always apply his own insights. In particular, although he stresses the need to combine both cultural and social history, the analysis of cultural representations and the study of social relations, his essays on the *Heimat* movement and the postwar tourism industry take a familiar approach, focusing on the analysis of select cultural artifacts intended for public consumption. For example, Confino’s discussion of tourism in the early postwar period relies heavily on official tourism brochures and posters. Here one learns little about the desires and fantasies of individual tourists, who surely did not see tourism primarily as a medium for working through the Nazi past (which many of them, as Confino suggests in one essay, may not have thought needed much working through). Similarly, one learns little about the motivations of the tourism industry, which, like other industries, was no doubt primarily interested in reviving itself after falling into a serious slump during the later war years. This gap between plan and execution may be in part a product of the fact that the essays were written over a significant period of time. Still, after reading Confino’s thoughtful analyses of contemporary memory studies, I also hoped he would chart new directions in his archival research, especially by delving into sources that might offer a better glimpse of everyday attitudes.

This collection demonstrates Confino’s skill in working in a number of registers, from big concepts to individual works of culture. While not all of the essays are satisfying, the book offers stimulating discussions on a broad range of topics. As memory continues to be an important theme in history, Confino’s analysis of the possibilities and pitfall of memory studies will hopefully encourage historians to try new methodological and conceptual approaches, especially integrating the study of memory with the history of society.

Notes

[1]. Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

[2]. Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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