

Michael Böss (ed.), *Conflicted Pasts and National Identities. Narratives of War and Conflict* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2014)

Over the last decades, memory studies have become one of the priority research areas in the field of Humanities, while at the same time in public debates the “duty of memory” seems to have been replaced by a sort of *obsession* with memory.

Tensions between global and local identities, need to reckon with an evil past (in Europe as well as in Latin America) and processes of decolonization have helped this (not always easy, however) reorientation of historical studies. This book, which collects several contributions originally presented at a conference in 2012, constitutes at the same time an evidence and a critical assessment of this tendency.

The case studies are extremely heterogeneous as to disciplinary approach, geographical area of reference (from Denmark to Australia) and relative importance of theoretical vs. empirical significance. In spite of this variety, an underlying theme emerges, as the editor, Michael Böss, points out in his *Introduction*: the effort of contemporary historians and social scientists to question “the unqualified notion of coherent, monolithic, collective memories and national narratives” (p. 9). People indeed often take part in diverse commemorative communities at the same time, depending on their religious, ethnic, and gender belonging, besides the national one.

In the first essay, “Narrative engagement and Narrative Templates”, James V. Wertsch provides a theoretical introduction to the case studies discussed in the following chapters of the book, by coping with the dilemma: are narratives related to the past or rather the agents who make use of them that control our vision of the past?

The contribution by Judith Pollmann, “Memory Before and After Nationalism: A Revision”, emphasizes how helpful the knowledge of early modern history can be when it comes to examine critically a nation’s exclusive role in the making of collective memory. From a more empirical perspective, Sebastian Olden-Jorgensen draws attention as well to the “instabilities” of national memory, by recalling - in the chapter entitled “History in the Clutch of Memory: the Failed Swedish Assault on Copenhagen 11 February 1659 in Commemorative Culture 1659-2009” - how the anniversary of that event was sometimes exacerbated (and by whom) and sometimes almost neglected, over the course of three centuries and a half.

The following two essays are dedicated to Australian history and are therefore of particular interest to a European reader. In “Australian Generations? Transformative Events, Memory, and Generational identity”, Alistair Thomson distinguishes the popular notion of “generation”, indeed quite superficial, from that, more scientific, of “generational

Michael Böss (ed.), *Conflicted Pasts and National Identities. Narratives of War and Conflict* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2014)

consciousness”, and argues that it is the latter that we have to look into if we want to explain the interaction between individual and collective memory. As to Paula Hamilton, she insists, in her “Generational Change and Conflicted Memories of World War II in Australia”, on the gap between the sacralisation of the Holocaust in the European memory of World War II and the centrality of the Pacific War in a country like Australia.

With a perhaps too sudden leap we are carried from the peculiarities of Australian collective memory to the former Irish president Eamon de Valera, whose biography by Lord Longford and Thomas P. O’Neill the editor of the book, i.e. Böss, discusses in “Self, Nation and Generational Memory: a Case Study of Trauma and Self-Recovery”, showing how biography and autobiography can reflect national(ist) narratives.

Biographical accounts have been a major source of our knowledge and memory of historical events such as the Holocaust and the Resistance movement; should we get anxious about our capability to preserve their legacy in the face of the loss of living memory (the witnesses) or, on the contrary, can we be confident that technology (i.e. electronic archives) will prolong the life of “communicative memory”? With such questions Marlene Briggs deals in “The Loss of Living Memory: The cultural Reception of Harry Patch (2008-2009). The Last British Veteran of the First World War”.

There are then three chapters focusing on war legacies and strategies of commemoration or, shortly, the relation between memory (and historians) and politics. Whereas the first concentrates on Ireland and namely on interpretations of the Rebellion of 1798 in the view of the contemporary Peace process in the country (Tom Dunne, “Historians and the Politics of Commemoration: an Irish Case Study”), the other two reveal tensions and shifts in Danish national memory. In “National Memory in Fire! The Case of the Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945”, Esben Kjeldbaeck summarizes indeed the main positions (fundamentalists, revisionists and “technoes”) which emerged in the debate over the re-design of the Museum of Danish Resistance after the fire that destroyed it in 2013. From World War II we move back to World War I with the next essay, “Changing Narratives of War: the World War I Monument in Aarhus”, by Bjarne Søndergaard Bendtsen; through the alternate fortunes of that monument the reader can follow how war narratives are affected by political and cultural circumstances in countries which are traditionally neutral and “consensual” too.

The research which is presented in the last chapter (“The Swedish Miners’ Strike of 1969-1970: Remembering Conflict in a context of Consensus”, by Robert Nilsson Mohammadi), reminds as well to us that memories of social conflict (when compared to “official” history) can play a divisive role even in an allegedly homogeneous country like

Michael Böss (ed.), *Conflicted Pasts and National Identities. Narratives of War and Conflict* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2014)

Sweden.

After reading this series of contributions, the overall impression is that, in spite of the quite chaotic structure of the book (this is its major shortcoming indeed), the authors' joint effort is effective in stressing that private and public, local and national (and nowadays maybe transnational) forms of commemoration do coexist and it is up to historians (with the help of social scientists) to grasp whether these diverse levels strengthen each other (for instance in producing nationalist narratives) or, on the contrary, some of them (an example is the political potential of mourning) can challenge the dominant interpretation of history, and of the present as well.

### **Share this:**

- [Share](#)