

BOOK REVIEW

Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy, by Rebecca Clifford (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2013; pp. 292. £68).

Much of the historical literature on memory suffers from a tendency to over-generalise. Memory seems to reside everywhere and nowhere at the same time. The recent emergence of concepts such as 'multi-directional memory' have done little to clarify exactly what constitutes memory and how it works. Yet historians cannot ignore the term. Even sceptics must now take memory seriously, if only because it has become a major tool for states and social movements in their battle to gain political traction. The struggle over whose history is 'right' and how past events should be memorialised affects everything from town planning to legal practice.

For most European countries, the main historical event that gave rise to a public struggle over memory in the twentieth century was the Second World War. The shame of defeat and occupation forced some states to forget uncomfortable aspects of their wartime past or elevate marginal resistance movements, or do both at the same time. Over time, however, a generalised memory battle over the Second World War gave way to a more specific debate about one of the most traumatic events of the war: the Holocaust. For the 'perpetrators' of the Holocaust (the Germans) the challenge was simply to find ways of memorialising an event that has come to symbolise the complete moral collapse of mid-twentieth-century Europe. But what about other nations? As Rebecca Clifford demonstrates in her thought-provoking book, the debate took on a quite different shape in countries that were not the main actors in the Holocaust. In places such as France and Italy, it was first necessary for the state to acknowledge some responsibility for the deportation of the Jews before one could even broach the question of how to memorialise the events.

It is this slow, and often difficult, process of recognising occupied and collaborator nations' involvement in the Holocaust that forms the central theme of Clifford's book. The main focus of her empirical research is the period that runs from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, but the book includes two substantial chapters on Holocaust memory in France and Italy from the 1940s to the 1980s. These introductory chapters, which provide an excellent overview of the field for students, lay the groundwork for the rest of the analysis. In particular, Clifford emphasises the role that activist groups have played in bringing certain issues to the fore. In the immediate post-war years, most deportees' organisations in France and Italy marginalised the Jewish experience of deportation, which meant that it was left to Jewish groups to commemorate the Holocaust. By the 1990s, a much wider range of organisations were involved in the work of memorialisation and the question of whether (and how) to remember the Holocaust was one that agitated a broad cross-section of civil society in both countries. But this spectacular growth of interest in the public commemoration of the Holocaust also changed its meaning. Within a few years, overwhelmingly private and intimate ceremonies to remember the

dead quickly became state-sponsored events that were subservient to other political motives.

Clifford explores this transformation in her discussion of the creation of national 'commemorative days' in France in 1993 and in Italy in 2000. It is not surprising that France was the first of the two countries—and, indeed, the first country in Europe—to institute such a day. Battles over how to commemorate historical events in France have always been intense, and the pointed debates over French national identity that accompanied the discussion of a commemorative day for the Holocaust mirrored similar debates over the bicentenary of the French Revolution in the late 1980s and France's responsibility for the slave trade in the late 1990s. The other crucial aspect of commemoration in France is the importance of the French state as a key actor. In her sensitive reading of how different political priorities jostled for attention in the run-up to the 1993 law, Clifford shows clearly how the state was the main focal point for debate. Ultimately, it was the difference between President François Mitterrand's ambiguous attitude to France's wartime past and the conciliatory, apologetic tone of his successor Jacques Chirac that marked a progression in French policy.

By contrast, the Italian case was less obviously related to ideological shifts at the highest echelons of the state. Instead, official recognition of the Holocaust through a memorial day was a by-product of a national debate over the country's fascist past. The virtual collapse of Italian political institutions in the late 1980s and early 1990s offered the chance for the Italian elites to revisit their history—and, in many cases, dismantle the anti-fascist consensus that had dominated post-war Italian politics. Unlike in France, the Holocaust was not central to these debates, which meant that the Italian state was unable to craft a consensual piece of legislation surrounding commemoration until 2000. By this point, it had become embarrassing for Italian institutions *not* to apologise for involvement in the Holocaust—but, even now, official commemorations in Italy are not as univocal or state-centred as they are in France.

This, of course, raises the question of the wider shifts in public opinion that underpinned the emergence of a strong commemorative culture in the 1990s. It is a shame that this book shies away from exploring the language that activists used in their efforts to get the French and Italian states to recognise the Holocaust. To what extent did a language of human rights permeate Holocaust memorial discourse? Do Clifford's conclusions suggest, as many would argue, that there has been a 'moralisation' of politics following the end of the Cold War? If so, what are the parallels between Holocaust memory after 1990 and other 'memory wars' (such as those to do with the colonial past), which seem to draw on the same linguistic and symbolic toolkit? It is to Clifford's credit that her precise, well-documented and well-argued book does not succumb to the vagueness that afflicts much of the work on memory, but her stimulating analysis nevertheless leaves the reader with as many questions as answers.

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