

*The Americanization of France: Searching for Happiness after the Algerian War.* By Barnett Singer. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. 2013. viii + 283 pp. £39.95. ISBN 978 1 4422 2165 9.

This is a perplexing—and often frustrating—book. Barnett Singer asks some very important questions about post-war French politics and culture, but the answers he gives are, at best, partial and, at worst, deeply problematic. Even more worryingly, he frequently fails to apply the most basic criteria of historical scholarship to his work: he treats sources uncritically, makes dubious generalisations based on anecdotal evidence, and indulges far too easily in simplistic assertions. Indeed, it is debatable whether this book can really be called a piece of scholarship at all. There are moments of sharp insight but these are more than outweighed by a troubling absence of critical reflection.

Singer's basic argument is that the Algerian War was the pivot around which post-war French history turned. Before the loss of Algeria, France was a 'serious' place in which principles were real principles, politics was real politics, and elites were real elites. But from the 1960s onwards, the French succumbed to a 'happiness' revolution that was largely inspired by America. Since they were no longer beholden to higher principles of empire and culture, the baby-boom generation that came of age in the 1960s sent France hurtling into the arms of a cultural revolution that brought psychoanalysis, *yé-yé* singers and corrosive individualism. Over the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, this process continued apace. By the 2000s, France was a fallen nation that, under the influence of Americanisation, had finally consummated its terminal 'civilisational' decline.

This argument has some merits, not least in focusing our attention on deep changes in attitudes over the period, but the analysis is based on some highly questionable and partial source material. The opening chapter—which deals with the impact of the Algerian War on France—focuses entirely on the archives and accounts of the police. Singer offers us lurid tales of intra-Algerian violence in metropolitan France in the 1950s and 60s drawn verbatim from reports by the *Renseignements généraux*. He also cites at length the autobiographical interviews he completed in the 1990s and 2000s with former heads of the *Sûreté* like Emile Vié. In neither case does the author consider the potential problems that arise from using police reports that had every incentive to stress the prevalence of intra-Algerian 'terrorism' in the 1950s and police chiefs who are keen to justify their actions in the light of increasing contemporary criticism of France's practices of colonial policing. On the contrary, Singer seems to have nothing but good words for the French police and secret services, whose counter-insurgency skills he repeatedly praises and whose methods he holds up as a model for America's 'War on Terror'.

The middle chapters of the book—on the Americanisation of France in the 1960s—are marginally better. They include entertaining, if rather limited, biographies of key cultural figures like the singers Charles Aznavour and Johnny Hallyday, and the skier Jean-Claude Killy. Unfortunately, these potentially interesting individual perspectives are marred by a virulent and rather hackneyed anti-68ism, which makes it possible for Singer to announce (on more than occasion) that the baby-boomers 'have been one of the weakest generations in all of human history'. Although such polemical and a-historical statements are consistent with a certain kind of anti *soixante-huitard* writing, the references to civilizational decline and 'weakness' are more reminiscent of an Action Française pamphlet than a history book written in the twenty-first century.

The final chapter, entitled 'Today's Americanized France', confirms the overall impression. Here, Singer is at his most anecdotal, using his visits to Chambéry in the 2000s and his conversations with old ladies to validate his portrait of France as a country ravaged by the debased culture of the United States. Michael Jackson, Al Gore, hip-hop, McDonalds... all these cultural imports have destroyed a proud and 'idealistic' French civilisation that, before the loss of Algeria, knew the value of high principles, imperial grandeur and good food. Worse still, the 'flood' of immigrants from the Third World has created a 'constantly mounting barbaric tide within [France's] borders'. Where, in the 1950s, a 'cultured' man like Emile Vié would have known how to bring these miscreants to heel, the lacklustre France of the early twenty-first century has neither the will nor the means to do so.

It might be easier to dismiss such obvious nostalgic political posturing if this book were merely a pamphlet by an erstwhile *nouveau philosophe* seeking fresh publicity. In that case, one could put it down to a long French tradition of polemical writing. Instead, the biggest worry is that a well-meaning undergraduate or postgraduate student working on post-war France might inadvertently pick this book up from a university library shelf. If they were then to read the text in its entirety, they would come away with a profoundly distorted view of contemporary France and its history. They would have almost no understanding of the major economic and political changes that have taken place since the 1960s and they would imagine France to be a country populated by cantankerous elderly ladies, embittered *pieds-noirs* mourning the loss of Algeria, former police chiefs and delinquent Algerians. Yes, all these groups exist but, whatever one's political opinions, the themes Singer addresses deserve a more balanced and thoughtful treatment—and there are many other excellent books in the university library that do just that.

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*Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy.* By Rebecca Clifford. Oxford: Oxford Historical Monographs. 2013. viii + 292 pp. £65.00. ISBN: 978 0 1996 7981 2.

With a few notable exceptions, studies of the political nature of remembrance in twentieth-century Europe have tended to be situated within national historiography, thereby deepening nationally-based historical debate without always contributing to the questioning of national parameters which only comparative research can offer. Rebecca Clifford's study of Holocaust remembrance in France and Italy convincingly demonstrates the need for comparison, as it brings out the two countries' specificities as well as broader European trends with regard to public Holocaust remembrance in the second half of the twentieth century, with a focus on the 1990s.

The author's approach to remembrance is original and significant in two interrelated ways. Firstly, the author unfalteringly applies a politically informed sharpness in her analysis of what may appear 'beneficial' forms of Holocaust remembrance, for instance the *devoir de mémoire* in France or the *Giorno della memoria* in Italy. With these discourses and initiatives, both states have, since the 1990s, attempted to re-impose national consensus following episodes of disruption of the earlier war-time mythologies. Secondly, Clifford avoids the trap, not uncommon in scholarship on this theme, of