

Commemorating the Holocaust. The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy. By Rebecca Clifford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 292. £65,00 hardback.

At first glance, Rebecca Clifford's book *Commemorating the Holocaust. The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy* seems to be only one further addition to the already overflowing bookshelves on the difficulties of commemorating the Holocaust. However, at second glance, it proves to be a necessary and worthwhile contribution to the numerous existing books on memory and remembrance. By concentrating on two countries that are not habitually compared (Italy and France), by choosing an unusual time frame (the 1990s and 2000s) and by conceptualising national commemoration as a product of individual agency, Clifford approaches public Holocaust remembrance in the post-Cold War period from unusual angles.

Clifford divides her investigation into six chapters of roughly the same length, symmetrically juxtaposing developments in Italy and France. Her choice of subtitles indicates where developments in the two case studies start to diverge. If the chapter headings for the first part, exploring the history of divided memory in Italy and France, are exactly the same, in the following four chapters Clifford concentrates on the main differences. In Chapters 3 and 4 she describes in detail how and why different groups in Italy and France clashed over the form and function of commemoration. She examines how debates evolved and who played a part in them. For France she analyses the Vél d'hiv commemorations in particular, while for Italy she concentrates on the Day of Memory. In Chapters 5 and 6 she then focuses on those elements for which a consensual reading of the past had developed while other elements had to retreat into the realm of private commemorations. In investigating to what extent the purpose of commemorating the Holocaust changed in both countries, she attempts to discover those instances where the surface-level consensus cracks, uncovering deep divides between the individual and social memory on the one hand and the official memory on the other. She thus tries to show how the history of the Holocaust has been removed from its historical context by being contemporarily exalted and erased by different groups.

By drawing attention to the fact that pressure is often exerted by a wide range of different participants before public remembrance is institutionalised in one form or another, Rebecca Clifford effectively challenges the wide-spread idea that the state is the main driving force behind the institution of state-sponsored commemorative acts. Instead, she demonstrates in both case studies that the state is only one of the actors involved in the creation of official Holocaust commemorations, and is often the last participant, not the first. Assuming that changing representations of the past are far better explained by political, cultural, social and generational factors than by notions of collective trauma, she concentrates her analysis particularly on the ways in which personal and group motivations are influenced by generational issues, political affiliations, social memories and power-relationships. Her enquiry, however, does not stop at the analysis of the polyphonic dialogue characterising Italian and French acknowledgement of painful elements in their respective national past. Through the exploration of the ways in which the past is invoked in the public sphere to meet the needs of the present, she tries to shed light on a number of broader issues closely connected to questions of social and national identity, cultural representations and national unity.

The choice of the time-frame is of special interest here since it places those larger questions within the context of the rapidly transforming environment of the post-Cold war period. By concentrating on the link between the legacies of fascism and resistance in the period after the end of the Cold War on the one hand, and memories and representations of the Holocaust on the other, Clifford is able to demonstrate how the development of official commemorative

practices unfolded within, and were shaped by, the social and political context of the 1990s, a period that still remains under-researched in memory studies.

Another aspect meriting attention is Clifford's comparative approach and the particular choice of the two case studies. Despite the fact that the situation in Italy and France is sufficiently similar to invite comparison, existing analyses of the two country's processes of publicly dealing with the legacy of the Holocaust rarely go beyond the prism of national trauma. Clifford thus fills a research gap by providing an in depth comparison of commemoration practices in both Italy and France that sheds light on the broader shared processes at work as different European societies are trying to face up to the lasting legacy of WWII.

Clifford's book is written in clear, accessible language. It draws on an extensive range of primary and secondary sources that are skilfully interwoven to paint an accurate picture of the extent to which commemorations of the Holocaust can have multiple meanings and functions while its memory remains divided. By revealing existing divides between social, cultural and official memories, Clifford shows that national commemorations are shaped by 'debates, energies, and visions' (p. 254) of a myriad of different actors. By concentrating on individual agency and grassroots politics, Clifford thus offers a new take on the question of how a shared cultural knowledge of the past shapes, and is shaped by, the embodied memories of many different individuals and groups.

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