

## Book Review

Amending The Past: Europe's Holocaust Commissions and the Right to History

ALEXANDER KARN

Madison, Wisconsin, 2009

The compelling interest of Holocaust commissions is to develop, as far as possible, a unified history among conflicting narratives of a geographic and/or an administrative area. The issue Karn addresses is the divide between bridging the desire to underscore universal human rights with local and regional efforts to protect assumed perpetrator communities from homogeneous assumptions of collective guilt and shame. Alexander Karn's purpose in writing this book is to show ways in which the larger picture emphasizing human rights can mesh with particularistic, national and sometimes international motivations to show past events in ways that bring sympathetic understandings to diverse, entrenched points of view. In the best cases, these attempts take account of various stakeholders' positions and try to represent them honestly. These attempts are not always made, however, and when they are, they are not always successful. Karn expresses the hope that his interdisciplinary approach to the study of Holocaust commissions will provide information to readers on how to use responsible historical inquiry in the service of peace-building and political advocacy.

Historical commissions differ from truth commissions in that they concentrate on events in the more distant past for which few, if any, witnesses are still alive. Written documentation is the major source of evidence. Which materials are given credence and privileged is an issue in most of cases. In many cases, the choices represent a selective bias of materials that can be used in the assessment and result in a reduced universe of data favoring one narrative over another.

Karn has a universe of more than fifty commemorative Holocaust commissions in European countries to use as examples, from which he has written about five national and three international commissions. In each of the cases, different issues of emphasis, denial, and compromise are highlighted. It is a valuable selection, illustrating a wide variety of conflicting premises, different approaches and resolutions. Karn devotes chapters to Western European national commissions in France and Switzerland, Austria and Italy, and Germany. Eastern European national commissions present rather different scenarios, as shown in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Karn also includes a chapter on the Holocaust insurance claims and the Catholic-Jewish Historical Commission.

In several of the case studies offered in this book, both the non-Jewish perpetrators and the Jewish populations suffered significant loss of life during and shortly after the Second World War. For example, from shortly after the beginning of the war to July 1941, the Soviet Union

controlled pre-war Poland. Following the war, propaganda by anti-fascist elements in Poland claimed that Jews were collaborators with the Soviets and therefore fueled retaliation in the post-war period. This supposition was a contributing factor to the post-war violence in many parts of Poland. A moral equation eludes the historian in most cases, as the historian places these mass murders into a broader context of temporality, geography, genocide, and motivation. The attempt to speak of both events at the same time and in the same space results in a kind of relativism that can leave anger and resentment. Karn gives several examples of this in Eastern Europe.

Karn expresses his belief that historical commissions often assign collective guilt, or presume significant involvement of the 'perpetrator population', which does not lead to understanding and acceptance of factual events among those populations. The question remains: how can denial be overcome so that an understanding of the Holocaust is more completely incorporated into the historical narrative of those inhabiting the territory on which the moral and physical crimes occurred?

In *Amending the Past*, Karn tries with admirable success to detach his own judgements about how the moral imperative of Holocaust history should be presented in order to analyze the overwhelming dimension of the Holocaust in each locality. He advocates retaining a personal moral compass but maintaining a detached view in analyzing multi-faceted and entrenched beliefs about the historical period. Despite the uneven results of Holocaust historical commissions, Karn has produced a well-written, useful comparative study that will be valued for its review of various approaches to the theory and products of historical inquiry of the Holocaust and other contested periods.

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