

Blaive, Muriel/Gerbel, Christian/Lindenberger, Thomas (eds.): Clashes in European Memory. Communist Repression and the Holocaust.

Studien Verlag, Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen 2011, 294 S., ISBN 978-3-7065-4812-0.

The volume is a result of a conference organized by the Viennese Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres in September 2008 in Paris. The juxtaposition of “Communist repression” and the “Holocaust” in the title of the volume is unproblematic as such, yet in relation to its actual content it is, to a degree, narrowing. The reason for this is that the given reversed chronological order indicates multiple analytical frames which can be presumed by the reader: the reference to Communism in the first place suggests a retrospective stance with regard to dealing with contemporary European memory politics. It also leads to another premise, namely, that the memory of Holocaust was suppressed under Communism and it, therefore, came as a competing narrative when a public debate started with regard to the crimes of Communism. Although the fact that dealing with the issue of Communism and with the issue of Holocaust took place at the same time is included in the analytical framework of the volume, the scope of its discussion is more detailed. It focuses more on the question of a mutual conditionality of dealing with the two most repressive authoritarian regimes in the modern history of Europe after 1989, rather than on two antagonistic discourses. Moreover, the presented volume

does not limit itself thematically by merely focusing on Communism and the Holocaust it rather deals with a broader context that includes the Cold War and World War II. It discusses the European memory politics of the period between 1939 and 1989, and that from a post-Cold War, respectively a particular post-Communist, perspective. The discussion is divided into four thematic sections, comprising eighteen contributions.

The first section (Absences, Presences, and Transformations) deals with the paradox of missing narratives with regard to the Holocaust, World War II, and the era of Stalinism as normatively defined categories of undesirable models of social development in several Eastern European countries. The cases chosen to demonstrate the phenomenon of effacing history for the sake of contemporary social needs are taken from Russia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia. The second section (Memory Politics in the Confines of the National) focuses on post-1989 memory policies in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Sweden. It debates the consensual treatment of conflicting memories by central state authorities, the attitude of repressing memories by self-victimization, respectively, the political attitude of “small-state” alibism. The third section (Reconstructing European Memories: From Comparison to Transnational Entanglement) highlights the key aspect of the presented volume, namely, the issue of clashing memories and competing victim statuses in the context of the disasters created by the Holocaust and Communism in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, respectively the Czech Republic. The fourth section (Memory: Doubts, Critique and, New Perspectives) outlines the modes of epistemological preoccupation with memory as a political tool assigned to shape historical consciousness. It underlines how memory is being instrumentalised by concurrent groups trying to establish their social, ethnic or cultural identity through the act of creating distinctive victim-groups, alternatively, through self-victimization.

The crucial point of the discussions on memory politics with respect to the Holocaust is related throughout the volume (directly referred to by the articles of Martin Sabrow, Georg Kreis, Claus Bryld, Oliver Rathkolb and Aleida Assmann) to the Stockholm conference held in 2000, which gave impetus to the launch of Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. While the post-1989 European memory politics were characterized by fundamental divergences in approach to the Cold War and World War II in Eastern and Western Europe, the Stockholm conference intended to operate as a catalyst in these strongly polarized debates. It aimed to build a foundation for a transnational European memory culture and politics by abrogating the East-West divide. For this the price was, however, the introduction of general victim categories, creating a historical concept without identifiable actors thus de-sensitising self-enlightening initiatives of dealing with conflicting events of particular national histories.

A competing German alternative to the “correct” interpretation of the history of World War II, as understood by the 2000 Stockholm conference is introduced by Thomas Lindenbergers article, which opens the second section of the volume. Lindenberger analyses the so called “Faulenbach formula” issued in 1991, a fundamental paradigm for governing conflicted memories in Germany. According to this neo-liberal model of establishing a regime of truths, neither should the crimes of

National Socialism be relativized by the crimes of Stalinism nor should the crimes of Stalinism be belittled by pointing at the sins of Fascism. Although different in their perspectives on victimhood, both the “Stockholmian” and the German versions of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* build on a central policy of governing memories, which avert open debates in civil societies.

Central to the volume is the comparative study written by Muriel Blaive. It embraces a broader geo-political region which includes Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia/The Czech Republic, yet it also discusses the clashes between the memory of the Holocaust and that of Communism in tight interrelatedness. Blaive presents her observation according to which the collective memory of the recent past relates to national identities in Central Europe. National identity, however, is perceived differently in “Western” and “Eastern” contexts. The public memory of the Holocaust and the Communist repression can take divergent forms. She concludes that the social and moral consequences of the Holocaust and Communism for the Central European societies cannot be examined separately in isolation from one another. Blaive’s conclusions concerning Hungary and the Czech Republic are compelling, however, some of her statements about Poland conflict with facts and are in contradiction with the volume’s own notional taxonomy based on the clear differentiation between the public rites of memory and social memory itself. Her assertion that the apprehension of Jewish versus Polish memory concerning World War II is no longer conflicting is problematic. Evidence pointing to the rise in anti-Semitism in Poland between 1992 and 2002 cannot really be negated by references to the popularity of Klezmer music and Jewish cultural festivals in the country. Furthermore, the issue of the expulsion of the German population only generated a sizeable public interest when the topic began to gain political dimensions in Germany itself. The essay of Jan Gross about Jedwabne, published in 2004, was a watershed in the discussion about Polish participation in atrocities against Jews.

Even with the above problematic synthesis of post-Cold War European memory politics in view, the strength of the volume is in its inclusion of a wide palette of samples of critical debate coming from different national perspectives concerning World War II and Communism. Its main deficit, perhaps, lies in its structural weakness rooted in its ambition to embrace a broad perspective. The absence of Eastern European contributors exacerbates the imbalance in its final assertions even further. The conclusion provided by the present volume postulating the existence of a transnational European memory, remains, irrespective of the fact as whether we consider Europe as a form of historical heritage or as a political project,¹ a utopia with a backward-looking posture.

Århus

Katalin Deme

¹ François, Étienne: *Europäische lieux de mémoire*. In: *Budde, Gunilla/Conrad, Sebastian/Glanz, Oliver* (Hgg.): *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*. Göttingen 2006.