

Clifford, Rebecca: *Commemorating the Holocaust. The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013. ISBN: 978-0-19967-981-2; 304 S.

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The subject of Rebecca Clifford's book and the rationale for her comparative approach as well as the key research question underpinning her work are admirably stated at the outset of her monograph. Commemorating the Holocaust „is an exploration of the conflicts and debates that drove the process of creating and maintaining official commemorations [of the Holocaust] in France and Italy, two countries that struggle with the memory of wartime collaboration and occupation“ (p. 2). Moreover, both Italy and France passed autonomous anti-Semitic laws and developed resistance movements before 1945, and in the postwar period created myths that centred on presenting the two countries as united in their mass resistance against regimes that were nothing more than historical parenthesis contrary to French and Italian „national character.“ In addition, both countries underwent deep political and cultural transformations in the 1990s that led, among other consequences, to the establishment of country-specific forms of official Holocaust commemoration (pp. 4–12). Clifford's key research questions are the following ones: what prompts national governments to commemorate the state's crimes against civilians? How are these crimes integrated into narratives of national history, and possibly identity, and with what consequences?

In the course of six chapters, symmetrically divided between France and Italy, Clifford argues a number of important points. Firstly, she argues that the state is only one of the actors involved in the creation of official Holocaust commemorations, and often a late-comer at that. Official, state-sanctioned and -promoted commemorations come only after lengthy campaigns from grassroots movements within civil societies. The campaigns themselves can be a polyphonic (and not always harmonious) dialogue involving a range of „memorial activists“ (p. 3). These include

Holocaust survivors and their children, political deportees and their families as well as supporters, historians, religious leaders and state representatives. Left-wing intellectuals often spearhead these efforts (pp. 2–3). This approach saves the author from some of the pitfalls that are sometimes found in works on these topics.¹

A second important point emerging from Clifford's book concerns the role of Jewish institutions in the planning of official commemorations. Contrary to popular belief, Jewish organisations – just like states – were not prime forces in this process but joined in only after calls for official commemorations had already reached critical mass. While this could be expected of Italy, whose Jewish community was in the words of Renzo De Felice „numerically, economically and culturally non-influential“², it is perhaps surprising in the French case. This is not only because of the considerably bigger size of France's Jewish community, but because historians have taken for granted its role as a driving force behind the establishment of official Holocaust commemorations.³

Clifford, by contrast, emphasises the role that organisations like the Comité Vel d'hiv 42 played in France. In 1992 the Comité Vel d'hiv 42 published a petition in *Le Monde* that called for an official recognition by the French State of the 1942 roundup of Jews in Paris carried out by the French police. It came at the end of a series of scandals, culminating in the infamous motion by the Court of Criminal Appeals in Paris not to proceed with the indictment for crimes against humanity against the architect of the Vel d'hiv roundup Paul Touvier. This halt of procedure exposed as mere fiction the clear-cut caesura between the

¹ As lamented by Alon Confino, *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*, in: *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997), pp. 1386–1403. Examples of works that tend to give too much importance to the role of high politics in the establishment of official forms of memory and commemoration include, among others, Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*, Paris 1990; Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge 1997.

² *Il razzista è sempre pronto*, in: *L'espresso*, 25/20, 20 May 1979, p. 85.

³ See, as an example, Joan B. Wolf, *Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France*, Stanford 2004.

Vichy regime and the Republic upon which French public memory of the war had commonly relied. Clifford restores the somewhat unexpected (and even to a certain extent involuntary) landmark represented by the activity of this committee. In so doing, she takes issue with their dismissal by established historians⁴, while at the same time providing a clear example of the often neglected importance of grassroots politics of memory (pp. 119–124 and 134).

In the same period, Italy faced even more fraught discussions about the war years. These were due to the political turmoil that followed the end of the Cold War, with the disappearance of all historical postwar political parties, and the rise of a centre-right coalition including the post-Fascist National Alliance. In this context, national reconciliation became a mantra that stymied all attempts to establish official forms of commemoration of past crimes.

The conflict was not only between left and right, or more precisely between supporters and opponents of „reconciliation“ (often seen in practical terms as a levelling and whitewashing of guilt), but also pitted the opponents against each other. In fact, there was disagreement among the opponents of „reconciliation“ over what should be officially commemorated: fascist crimes against the enemies of the regime, or Italian responsibility for the persecution of its Jews (p. 147). In other words, fascist or Italian crimes? In this context, proponents of official commemorations could not even agree on what date should be commemorated. Journalist Ricardo Franco Levi and MP Furio Colombo proposed 16 October, the anniversary of the roundup of Rome's Jews; the National Association of Former Deportees suggested 5 May, the anniversary of the liberation of the Mauthausen concentration camp where the majority of Italian political deportees was interned (pp. 171–181). It was only in 2000, after Italy had joined the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education and other European countries had established their own official Holocaust commemorations, that a similar law was rushed through Parliament. The law was passed *nem con* largely because it depoliticised the issue. As a result, it never

mentions Fascism but hints at fascist rescuers; it does not state who passed the anti-Semitic laws and who enforced them but lumps together Jewish, military and political deportees under the banner of victimhood.⁵ The agreed upon commemoration date of 27 January, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz, was as much an acknowledgment of a growing international consensus as it was the result of a domestic compromise, being a date neither specifically about Italy nor about Italian Fascism. Clifford carefully reconstructs the key developments of this debate. In the case of Italy, Clifford's work is crucial in showing how Holocaust commemoration came into being not because of state initiative or lobbying from Jewish institutions, but thanks to the work of civil groups, often with different agendas, that appealed for official acknowledgment of past crimes (p. 181).

With this book, Rebecca Clifford has added an important contribution to the literature on Holocaust commemorations. Her work competently draws on an extensive range of secondary material but also adds her own primary sources that allow her to offer readers a much more complex and fascinating history of how the French and Italian states came to commemorate the Holocaust. More generally, her work shows that national commemorations are shaped by „the debates, energies, and visions“ (p. 254) of those who campaigned for their establishment. In so doing, her work helps situate human agency and grassroots politics at the centre of memory studies, where they belong.

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⁴ Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*, Paris 1994.

⁵ On this, see Robert S. C. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Collective Memory: „Il giorno della Memoria, 27 January 2001, in: Modern Italy 11 (2006), pp. 167–188.*