

Pearce, Andy: *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group 2014. ISBN: 978-0-415-83593-0; 324 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Emiliano Perra, Department of History, University of Winchester

With this book, Andy Pearce provides the necessary and long overdue update to Tony Kushner's seminal research on the place of the Holocaust in British culture.<sup>1</sup> This new study is very welcome, because in the last twenty years Britain's engagement with the Holocaust has grown considerably.

The first chapter draws on the work of Kushner and David Cesarani<sup>2</sup> to sketch a history of the tentative rise of Holocaust consciousness in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, showing how, whilst not entirely meaningless, the event was not exactly meaningful for many British, either (p. 22). Having laid the groundwork, the bulk of the book investigates the rise of the Holocaust in British culture from the 1970s to the present in three main areas, which also give the name to the book's three main sections: „Education (Part I)“, „Memorialisation, Musealization, Commemoration (Part II)“, and the broader culture (Part III, entitled „The Cultural Hinterland“). While the first two parts engage with the institutionalisation of Holocaust consciousness, the third one discusses the multiple and polysemic nature of Holocaust culture in contemporary Britain: a composite culture that is bound to result in friction vis-à-vis attempts to put forward a unified and normative institutional narrative. Not surprisingly, the last substantive chapter of the book is titled „Cultural Tensions“ (pp. 186–209).

Even though tensions and potential conflicts over the „meaning“ of the Holocaust are explicitly tackled in the aforementioned chapter, they permeate the entirety of the book, and their careful reconstruction is one of the main strengths of the volume. For example, the rise of Holocaust education in the 1980s was to a large extent influenced by the heightened political conflicts of the Thatcher government years, as shown by the 1986 controversy over the Inner London Education Alliance's inclusion of the government's anti-

trade union legislation as a „link with today“ in its „Auschwitz: Yesterday's Racism“ education pack for schools (p. 51). Following Kushner, Pearce illustrates well how the inclusion of the Holocaust in the National Curriculum followed two main purposes shared to some extent by campaigners and the political establishment: it allowed teachers to talk about modern racism while at the same time linking the Holocaust to the reassuring narrative of British heroism against Nazism (p. 56).

However, Pearce's discussion of Holocaust education is much more extensive than Kushner's, if anything because of education's much more central role in current British Holocaust culture. Thus, Pearce shows how the Holocaust went from being a „war experience“ among others such as the home front in Britain and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the 1991 Curriculum (p. 62), to be promoted to the status of „main event“ among several others of the twentieth century in the 1995 Curriculum (p. 68). The Holocaust became a „significant“ event in a list of only four in 2000 (p. 73), and is now the only „challenge“ to Britain, Europe and the wider world. As a consequence, it is compulsory for all students to study the Holocaust in the 2014 Curriculum; World War Two, by comparison, is listed as an optional topic (p. 223).

Pearce explains this rather bizarre trajectory, in which it is conceivable to teach the Holocaust without reference to World War Two, with one of the staples of Holocaust educational and commemorative discourse in Britain: that learning *from* the Holocaust is somewhat more important than learning *about* it (p. 41). This is an approach that leaves the door wide open to a number of appropriations, for example the use of the Holocaust to teach about the importance of standing up to bullies in the present (p. 79). The fact that for many years, and to a certain extent even to this day, the normativity of institutional discourse on the Holocaust went hand in hand with its under-theorisation fur-

<sup>1</sup> Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, Oxford 1994.

<sup>2</sup> David Cesarani, *How Post-War Britain Reflected on the Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder of Europe's Jews. A Reassessment of Early Responses*, in: *Jewish Culture and History* 12 (2010), pp. 95–130; Kushner, *The Holocaust*.

---

ther complicated matters. Pearce discusses how it was only with the establishment of the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (IWMHE) that a relatively clear definition of what the Holocaust was (i.e. the extermination of the Jews of Europe as opposed to, for example, the whole gamut of Nazi crimes) entered into wider cultural circulation. As Pearce notes, this definition offered in an institutional venue such as the IWMHE represented „the most far-reaching change for British cultural memory’ of the Holocaust, signalling a shift away from ‘inclusivity and universalization“ (p. 121).

This shift also accompanied the at times heated debates around the establishment and commemoration of the first Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) in 2001, which the author reconstructs with remarkable precision in Chapter 6 (pp. 133–159). In the discussion of the gestation of the law establishing the HMD, one can see an important difference between the British case and that of France and Italy, recently discussed by Rebecca Clifford.<sup>3</sup> Commemorative legislation in the latter countries followed extensive grassroots campaigning, but in Britain this level of involvement is defined by Pearce as „misleading“ and an „appearance“ (p. 144), pointing out a much more top-down process in line with the leading role played by Tony Blair’s Labour government in the establishment of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) (pp. 138–140). The result is that, according to Pearce’s thoughtful argument, HMD skirts around the more cumbersome aspects of the Holocaust, such as Britain’s restrictive immigration policy during and after the event, and in general disregards the unsettling nature of the „grey zone“ and the challenge that it poses to clear-cut moral „lessons“ (p. 158).

Whilst thoroughly researched and exhaustive, the monograph also sows some seeds for future research, especially in the „Postscript“ (pp. 201–231). More work needs to be done about post-2001 HMDs, especially in the light of the trends towards an increasingly prescriptive and ‘infantilising’ memory of the Holocaust (p. 222). By the same token, more research on the local dimensions of Holocaust memory will further help un-

derstanding its place in British culture, especially considering Pearce’s key argument that „the development of Holocaust consciousness resists monocausal explanation, and requires reference to various dialectics from the local and the global, to the socio-cultural and the political, and the past and the present“ (p. 211). Whilst the complete exploration of these themes will require further research, this book provides a good framework for it. Read in conjunction with the recently published volume edited by Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen<sup>4</sup>, Andy Pearce’s work will play a major role in shaping scholarly debates on the place of the Holocaust in British memory culture.

HistLit 2014-4-121 / Emiliano Perra über Pearce, Andy: *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*. New York 2014, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.11.2014.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust. The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy*, Oxford 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Sharples / Olaf Jensen (eds.), *Britain and the Holocaust. Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, Basingstoke 2013.