H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Bodnar. *The „Good War" in American Memory.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9667-5.

Reviewed by Andrew Salvati

Published on Jhistory (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker

The Contested Pasts of World War II

The concept of collective or public memory generally refers to stabilized narratives of the past that are continually objectified and reproduced in material culture. The dominance of any one particular narrative, however, exists in an uneasy tension with individual recollections, which are often at odds with the totality presumed by "collective" memories. These tensions are made doubly problematic as group identities and moral frameworks are often bound with shared, homogenized interpretations of the past. Such contested memories–and identities–are the subject of John E. Bodnar's new volume *The "Good War" in American Memory*, in which the recovery of individual memories and historical narratives of World War II present a challenge to a standardized, hegemonic interpretation. The comprehensiveness and scope of Bodnar's research makes it a fine addition to an expanding body of work that seeks to complicate a consensus view of the war and that work toward a polysemic understanding of the past.

The strength of Bodnar's book is its interface of individual, subjective memories with the received narrative presented by national monuments, hawkish rhetoric, and the expanding market for heroic media representations of the war. The book reminds readers that the legacy of World War II is not simply a narrative that begins with the justness of the Allied cause against a palpable evil; moves through the destruction of that evil; and, finally, celebrates the valor and ethic of the "Greatest Generation." Bodnar's project involves recovering the subordinated memories that are seldom referenced in traditional, patriotic narratives. Endemic psychological and physical traumas, lifelong night terrors, fatherless children, marital infidelities, and instances of alcoholism and domestic violence among returning vets are rarely memorialized in material culture, but formed the reality of the war and its aftermath for many who survived. With the material arranged chronologically over seven chapters, Bodnar reconstructs these marginalized experiences, weaving poignant, often heartbreaking, stories of veterans and their families with a discussion of architectural and media memorialization, and alongside the narratives articulated by particular social groups, like the American Legion and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Emphasized are the memories of mothers who lost sons, of soldiers who returned home psychologically scarred, of African Americans angry at how wartime sacrifices failed to translate into equality at home, of women who took wartime factory jobs for economic benefit rather than political idealism, and of those Americans who became convinced of the tragedy and futility of war by the utter destructivity of that conflict.

Bodnar approaches this diversity of American experience by parsing out three meta-narratives–the traditional, the critical, and the humanitarian–through which "Americans struggled to craft both an understanding of World War II while it was being fought and a remembrance of the war after it ended" (p. 1). The traditional, Bodnar explains, customarily invoked World War II "not as a human tragedy but as an opportunity for Americans to assume a position of dominance in the world and reaffirm their innate … moral courage and bravery" (p. 4). In contrast, critical perspectives "engage its brutality more fully and tend to register the moral and emotional confusion that such contests bring" (p. 6). Finally, Bodnar asserts that a humanitarian perspective could po-

tentially serve both traditional and critical perspectives, having the potential to strengthen arguments that Americans "fought the war for righteous, compassionate ends," but that this framework also "conveyed sentiments and implications that rendered Americans simply part of a human community" (p. 6). Having no strict boundaries, Bodnar's meta-narratives are quite porous, with individual recollections mingling with various perspectives. He emphasizes that "these angles of vision were never totally separate from each other, but they were fundamental to the way citizens understood the war and explain why they argued over its meaning for decades" (p. 4).

In suggesting these narrative forms, Bodnar argues that despite the "oneness" and idealistic clarity so often privileged in contemporary public memories, wartime discussions of the meanings and outcomes of the conflict were more ambiguous (p. 3). Drawing examples from contemporary media coverage, and from the experiences of individual men, women, and communities mobilizing for war, Bodnar explains how uneasiness about military intervention initially stemmed from the failure of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Four Freedoms to convince all Americans–especially the strong isolationist contingent–of coherent ideological and ethical aims of the nation. "The mental landscape of wartime America," Bodnar writes, "was an uneven one, marked by various fractures and fissures. Doubts and confusion over the social and moral changes that marked the period were pervasive, and public attitudes toward the world struggle were varied and often confused" (p. 33). The experiences of individuals of differing race, class, and gender swept up in wartime mobilization contrasted with the consensus narrative of solemn clarity and purpose.

Struggle over meanings continued in the immediate postwar period, playing out in the pages of war novels and memoirs as well as on cinema screens. In contrast to the propagandistic films and literature resulting from collaboration between Hollywood and the Office of War Information during the war years, media products that emerged after 1945 revealed critical and humanitarian perspectives that underlined themes like psychological trauma and racial tensions that marked individual experiences of the war years. As veterans began to write and publish their experiences, critical and humanitarian perspectives of the war began to emerge. These soldier-writers, Bodnar writes, generally agreed that war "degraded individuals and could not be reduced to heroic stories and myths" (p. 59). Exemplifying the imperfect memory of the war in its immediate aftermath, Bodnar asserts that "the vast trove of representations of the war in American culture ultimately told a cluttered story in which virtue was forced to share culture and political space with streams of doubt, cynicism, and regret" (pp. 3-4).

As he traverses race, class, gender, books, film, small towns, and urban centers to recover marginalized memories of World War II, Bodnar also explains how the patriotic and victorious themes indigenous to the traditional narrative of the war have achieved an uneasy, dominant position. Chapters 3 and 7, for instance, describe how patriotic and consensus memories of the war became attractive analogies for Cold War solidarity up to the Vietnam War. The logic of "militarism and anticommunism," epitomized by groups like the American Legion and by General Douglass MacArthur during this period, articulated "powerful ideals that drove a traditionalist remembrance of the war" (p. 62). Later, Bodnar notes, these victorious representations would be rearticulated during the fiftieth-anniversary commemorations of the1990s, when filmic representations of the war enjoyed resurgence from a post-Vietnam era lull. By the end of the century, Bodnar writes, "the jumbled outlooks of the wartime generation had now been simplified by the passage of time and by the deaths of millions of those who lived through the war years" (p. 200).

While the comprehensiveness of *The"Good War" in American Memory* makes for a compelling historical critique to the myth and image, its breadth of scope means that particular themes and perspectives are necessarily left out. Acknowledging this tradeoff, Bodnar issues the disclaimer that he "does not attempt to cover every aspect of this incredibly pervasive discussion" (p. 8). While Bodnar is interested specifically in describing the contestedness of the collective memory of the "Good War," the omissions one may catch in the book will likely depend on one's own disciplinary perspective and personal history. For just one example, the explicit focus on American experiences excludes a discussion of the contributions of America's allies in the war and how traditional American memories of World War II are often blinkered from the horrors of the Russian front, the battles in Southeast Asia and Manchuria, or of the Blitz.

While further work in this and other directions may yet be done, these issues would likely inform the frame, and not the substance, of Bodnar's thesis, which is to nuance a totalized, selective version of the past by recovering subjective memories and critical historical discourses. Bodnar's project in *The "Good" War in American Memory* is therefore not to merely debunk the common myths of World War II, but to reveal a fractured and contentious past.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory

Citation: Andrew Salvati. Review of Bodnar, John, *The „Good War "in American Memory.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33393

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.