

Johannes Heuman. *The Holocaust and French Historical Culture, 1945-65.*

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 211 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-137-52932-9.



Reviewed by Rebecca Clifford

Published on H-Nationalism (December, 2016)

Commissioned by Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

Over the past several years, there has been increasing scholarly interest in the issue of Holocaust representation and remembrance in the early postwar decades. From the notion that the 1961 trial of Adolph Eichmann and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War marked watershed moments ending a period of public silence on the genocide, we have now moved towards a more nuanced view of public Holocaust memory in the late 1940s and 1950s. Recent scholarship has worked to question, challenge, and unpick the “silence” thesis, producing groundbreaking work that has explored national contexts (such as Hasia Diner’s 2009 *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*) as well as transnational ones (such as Laura Jockusch’s 2012 *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*). In this new historiographical wave, France has received ample attention. In addition to Jockusch’s work (which looks at France, Poland, Germany, Austria and Italy), we have in English such recent additions as Daniella Doron’s *Jewish*

Youth and Identity in Postwar France (2015) and Seán Hand and Steven T. Katz’s edited volume, *Post-Holocaust France and the Jews, 1945-1955* [2015]); while neither volume focuses specifically on memory, both engage strongly with the concept. There is Michael Rothberg’s 2009 *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, which links an emergent public memory of the Holocaust to the decolonization process. In French, noteworthy is philosopher François Azouvi’s 2012 *Le mythe du grand silence: Auschwitz, les français, la mémoire*, an intellectual history that argues that debate and discussion about the genocide, particularly among Catholic intellectuals, increased gradually throughout the early postwar decades, setting the stage for the rapid increase in public awareness that followed in the 1960s.

Scholarship that questions the early postwar “myth of silence” has thus become a well-established field since the late 2000s. Johannes Heuman’s *The Holocaust and French Historical Culture* adds to this literature on early Holocaust

remembrance in France. Heuman's focus is the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine/Mémorial de la Shoah (hereafter the CDJC). The CDJC was and is an archive, library, exhibition space, and memorial that was founded in Grenoble in 1943, moved to Paris after the liberation in 1944, and has played a central role in developing, promoting, and shaping the contours of public Holocaust memory in France. It is an institution that has already been well studied by others—in English by Jockusch, in French by Annette Wiewiorka, Renée Poznanski, and Simon Perego—but Heuman's claim to originality is his argument that, both where the CDJC is concerned and in relation to early Holocaust memory more broadly, not enough has been said by scholars about the reception of these early mnemonic efforts.[1] What is missing from this scholarship, he posits, is "an understanding of the impact these activities might have had, the extent to which they managed to challenge more established interpretations of the past, or how they integrated the Jewish experience into broader national debates. If the growing body of Holocaust research was indeed completely marginalized, then the notion of silence remains valid, at least on a national level" (p. 2). This is a very timely call for sustained investigations of the impact of such early vectors of memory, rather than simply their construction, and it is an idea with great potential. However, *The Holocaust and French Historical Culture* never develops the theme of reception as far as readers might wish; ultimately, readers are left knowing far more about how the CDJC was created and developed than about people's reactions to and engagement with CDJC activities.

Heuman's book is divided into five empirical chapters, book-ended by an extended introduction and conclusion. In an initial chapter entitled "French-Jewish Relations and Historical Culture," Heuman looks at the early development of the CDJC, tracing the origins of its "alternative identity politics" back to the Dreyfus Affair (p. 22). This is useful background for any reader not familiar

with debates about French republicanism and their impact on Holocaust memory, but it squares somewhat uncomfortably with the chapter's later discussion of the key figures who worked to found the CDJC, as every one of these key players was born in eastern Europe. Here one feels something of a missed opportunity to engage with transnational impacts and ideas. What might Dreyfusard concepts have meant to these immigrant intellectuals, scholars, and activists? How does the national frame that Heuman has chosen to use constrain rather than illuminate here? The founding of the CDJC was clearly far more than a "French" project; the author does raise this issue, but his faithfulness to the national frame curtails his discussion of other cultural influences that shaped the CDJC at its inception.

The middle chapters of the book look at early scholarly work on the Holocaust in France, linked to the CDJC, and on a ten-day conference held in Paris in 1947, an early attempt to establish a framework for pan-European Holocaust studies that failed to bear much fruit. This is interesting material, covered in part already by Jockusch, but Heuman concludes that the 1947 conference "had no direct impact on French historical culture" (p. 98). If Heuman privileges impacts, why then devote an entire chapter to an event that had no impact? Or is it the limitations of the concept of "French historical culture" that hold the author back here from evaluating the event's repercussions? Here again, one wonders if the national frame, the insistence on looking at construction and reception within "French historical culture," constrains rather than drives Heuman's analysis.

The story changes somewhat in the final two empirical chapters of the book, where Heuman engages in a thoughtful discussion of the campaign, in the mid-1950s, to build the Tombeau du Martyr Juif Inconnu (later the Mémorial de la Shoah, integrated with the CDJC). The book is at its strongest here, and Heuman covers material that has not been well covered by others. This is

also the point at which the author engages most readily with the issue of reception. Heuman's perspective remains institutional: he looks at the political figures who lent their names and their clout to the Mémorial project, and at the number of people who attended exhibitions in the new memorial space in the late 1950s. What he does not tell us much about, however, is *why*: What motivated politicians to get behind the project? What drove people to attend the exhibitions, and how did they react? How might we understand what this participation meant to individuals and communities? There is great potential here to show how the construction of the Mémorial might have extended fingers into French collective consciousness of the genocide well before the watershed period of the 1960s, but the reader is left without a clear picture of the motivations behind growing non-Jewish interest in and support for the CDJC and its activities.

Part of the problem here is conceptual: Heuman sets up a too-strict divide between institutional remembering and what he calls "existential" memory, the embodied memory of the genocide that is assumed here to be the preserve of affected individuals and communities. This strikes me as a false dichotomy between public and private remembrance: even at the institutional level, mnemonic practices are shaped by real people with real memories (even if these are not direct, lived memories of the genocide). The CDJC as an institution looms so large here that the voices of the individual people and activist communities that created and sustained it are rather silenced. Yet we cannot begin to understand motivations and impacts if we take our focus off of people. *The Holocaust and French Historical Culture* is a useful contribution to the burgeoning field of early Holocaust memory, but there is still work to do.

Note

[1]. See Annette Wieviorka, "Du centre de documentation juive contemporaine au Mémorial de la Shoah," *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah: Le Monde*

Juif 181 (2004): 11-37; Simon Perego and Renée Poznanski, *Le Centre de documentation juive contemporaine, 1943-2013. Documenter la Shoah* (Paris: Editions du Mémorial de la Shoah, 2013).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Rebecca Clifford. Review of Heuman, Johannes. *The Holocaust and French Historical Culture, 1945-65*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. December, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46428>



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