
H-France Review Vol. 15 (April 2015), No. 46

Rémi Dalisson, *Les guerres et la mémoire: Enjeux identitaires et célébrations de guerre en France de 1870 à nos jours*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013. 345 pp. Notes, appendices, figures, bibliography, and index. 25.00€. (cl). ISBN 978-2-271-07236-8.

Review by Martin Hurcombe, University of Bristol.

Memory studies and, in particular, the study of French memory of war have flourished since Pierre Nora's editorship and direction of the now globally influential *Lieux de mémoire*.^[1] Before this, there was of course Antoine Prost, whose exhaustive study of French veterans of the First World War had appeared in 1977, marrying sociology, history, and memory before the invention of memory studies.^[2] Rémi Dalisson's *Les guerres et la mémoire* fits very much within this tradition of French historiography, offering analysis of a range of commemorative practices centring on France's experience of combat from 1870 to the present and arguing that France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War opened up an era of commemoration where war, memory, national and personal identity all became imbricated. The commemoration of war, Dalisson contends, has therefore been central to identity formation; French national identity as a result is bound up with the memory of pain and suffering as much as it is with victory and military prowess. The primary focus of this book, however, is the political use and indeed manipulation of memory through the rituals associated with commemoration and how these reveal the motivations of, and sometimes rivalries between, stakeholders in the commemorative process.

Les guerres et la mémoire is divided into three chronologically ordered parts. The first explores relatively neglected commemorations of the defeat of 1870. As chapters one, two, and three reveal, these became another means of articulating the desire and need for revenge over the newly united Germany. The interest of Dalisson's analysis here lies in his argument that historians should look to the commemorations of the 1870s in order to discover the origins of a national memorial culture with which we are all now familiar; the language of commemoration mobilized in the wake of the First World War and recycled having been invented in the aftermath of this earlier conflict. Although this memorial culture itself was a form of bricolage, its use of monuments, medals and associated rituals established the template for later *fêtes de guerre*. Moreover, these also helped turn defeat into anticipated victory, feeding into the culture of *revanche* around which, Dalisson contends, Republican identity and legitimacy coalesced, particularly in the 1880s. While he overstates the extent to which *revanche* was a founding principle of the new, invigorated Republicanism to emerge in the late nineteenth century, Dalisson is nevertheless alive to the lack of political consensus under the Third Republic. The divisions of the Dreyfus Affair are thus visible in commemorations of the defeat of 1870, revealing an opposition characterized by Michel Winock as that between open nationalism (broadly speaking, pluralistic, informed by a belief in the rights of the individual, Republican, and representative) and closed nationalism (based on race, heredity, and the supreme value of the past). The memory of war, as it will remain until the present day, becomes, then, a battleground between competing factions vying for power and influence over national life. Yet, the memory of 1870 serves increasingly, and through a huge increase in commemorative practices, as a force for galvanising French citizens across the political spectrum for the next war with the hereditary enemy. Dalisson argues convincingly here for a reappraisal of the extent and significance of such ceremonies throughout the period.

Part two is concerned with commemorations between 1914 and 1944, which are inevitably inflected by the scale and losses of the First World War. This did not prevent early commemorations of the 1870 war from taking on the appearance of an anticipated victory celebration in 1914 and 1915. However, as the war persisted, commemorations reflected a “quête de sens qui plonge loin dans l’imaginaire et l’histoire, [et qui] s’appuie sur l’identité nationale républicaine confortée et fédératrice qui seule peut justifier cette souffrance” (p. 88). There is perhaps here too ready an acceptance of the idea of a deeply entrenched, national commitment to Republican democracy during what was essentially the truce of the Union Sacrée. Nevertheless, Dalisson’s detailed descriptions of wartime *journées de guerre* and postwar ceremonies highlight the manner in which the Republic deliberately fused commemorative, didactic, and propagandistic elements in order to legitimize both national sacrifice and Republican authority. Indeed, the greatest interest of these chapters lies in the way in which they detail rivalries and tensions between political factions, the state, veterans, and grieving families in the interwar years. What is missing, however, is any engagement with debates concerning the commitment of veterans to either the Republic or to radical politics; Dalisson neither supports nor refutes Prost’s now contested assertion that veterans’ commitment to the Republic saved France from fascism.[3] However, while Prost’s earlier analysis of commemoration focuses principally on the role accorded and assumed by veterans, Dalisson also considers attempts by a range of political stakeholders to claim commemoration of the First World War as their own. Interwar commemorations become the locus of a struggle between Republican nationalism, radical pacifism, and the supporters of an increasingly virulent form of racial nationalism who seek a celebration of victory over remembrance of national suffering.

Many of those who supported a more bellicose commemorative process would throw their weight behind a national hero of that conflict following the collapse of France in June 1940: Marshal Philippe Pétain, the saviour of Verdun, former government minister, but also a frequenter of Action Française’s politico-cultural circles. Ironically, of course, the Occupation meant that French nationalists could no longer celebrate the victory of 1918, while collaboration rendered any resurrection of the spirit of *revanche* redundant. As chapter six details, the commemoration of war under Vichy became a means of promoting the National Revolution’s values “de l’expiation, du sacrifice exemplaire et de la solidarité nationale...” (p. 143), but also served to “faire table rase du passé républicain” (p. 142). The memory of recent defeat is banished in a celebration of the veteran of the First World War, but even this conflict is inscribed in a longer history stretching back to the Gauls, “une longue chaîne ininterrompue de ‘vrais Français’ dont le sang féconde la terre” (p. 148). Vichy thus uses commemoration to assert a form of racial nationalism, but also to impose national introspection, distracting the public from any inclination towards future action.

Vichy was not alone in putting parts of French history to political use at this time. The Resistance continued to celebrate 11 November not only as the anniversary of the Armistice, but as an anticipated victory over the occupier. And it was no coincidence that de Gaulle chose to relegate the veterans of 1914–1918, tainted by association with Pétain, behind the Parisian resistance during the events marking “le 11 novembre de la Liberté” in 1944 (p. 163). Chapter seven therefore traces the battle to shape memories of France’s most recent conflict under the Fourth Republic. As in earlier chapters, Dalisson focuses on both the state’s management of commemoration through rituals, national holidays, and *journées de guerre*, and the attempts made by other stakeholders to assert an alternative memory. Thus, the period 1945–47 is marked by a commemorative rivalry between Gaullists and communists that mirrors attempts by both forces to gain greater influence over the French people. Gaullist commemorations of the 18 June find their counterpoint in communist celebrations of the 10 July. While the former marry both open, republican nationalism and aspects of a closed nationalism, associating national identity with the theme of rootedness, the latter promote the Parti Communiste not only as *amis du peuple*, but *amis de la paix*.

The third part of Dalisson’s study explores the limitations of these attempted metanarratives of national identity and memory. Drawing on Nora’s observations regarding the particularization of memory as

acceptance of a unitary, national, Republican model entering into decline, Dalisson highlights the emergence of collective memories of the Shoah and the wars of decolonization for which national practices of commemoration had made no place. In part, this decline is due to the failure of de Gaulle's regime to adapt commemorative practices to the social realities of the 1960s. Here, the explanation of a generational conflict is based on the rather tired assertion that the France of the 1960s was essentially "une société de consommation travaillée par l'hédonisme" (p. 207) which the Resistance generation could no longer understand. Chapter eight, however, commands greater attention. It traces the modernization of commemorative practices in the wake of May 1968, first under Georges Pompidou's presidency and then, more importantly, under that of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Whilst 8 May commemorations, for example, do not necessarily abandon the celebration of French military victories, they are now internationalized, becoming the foundation of European peace through the presence of international heads of state, including that of Germany, invited to attend for the first time in 1995.

All this coincides with the emergence of a French Jewish memory of that population's experience of the Second World War. This breaks free of a national memory of wartime deportation which, in the 1950s, paid no attention to the reasons behind an individual's deportation, failing to distinguish between the political, racial, or sexual, but nevertheless privileging the former (because normally associated with the Resistance). Dalisson, in his thorough analysis of attempts made by pressure groups associated with the wars of decolonization (veterans, but also *harkis*, and *pieds noirs* in the case of Algeria), sees a similar process at work. Here he evokes not only a dissonance between a state unwilling to admit to military defeat, but between the groups themselves who struggle to impose a single interpretation of the experience of either Algeria or Indochina. Chapter nine traces the state's gradual accommodations with the difficult and conflicting memories of both conflicts from the 1960s to the present. If Dalisson discerns here, like Nora, "un éclatement mémoriel...", which the latter saw as symptomatic of "l'ère de la commémoration," Dalisson nevertheless contends: "L'identité française accepte en son sein une communauté meurtrie que la nation reconnaît en commémorant sa responsabilité ..." (p. 236). Far from seeing in all of this the triumph of memory over history, as Nora does, he perceives in the state's flexibility throughout the 1990s and early 2000s a recognition of history and of certain historical facts. In this sophisticated and nuanced chapter, Dalisson also explores how, in its desire to integrate diverse political interpretations of the past into its commemorative practices, multiculturalism and nostalgia for *la plus grande France* co-exist awkwardly.

Indeed, any optimism is short-lived. The Sarkozy presidency sees the return of memory at the expense of history as the latter is instrumentalized and put to the political services of the conservative right. The difficult memories of France's colonial past, for example, are overcome by absorbing them into a glorious national narrative that stretches back beyond the Republic to Joan of Arc. In his attempts to make of the 11 November commemorations a US-style Memorial Day, in which the dead of past and present conflicts (such as Afghanistan) could be commemorated simultaneously, Sarkozy promotes "une célébration non-identifiée qui nie le 'décor d'histoire' que les fêtes de guerre semblaient incarner depuis trente ans" (p. 270); by celebrating all conflicts since time immemorial, we in fact celebrate none in particular: "Ne reste alors que l'émotion face à la douleur et à la perte..., les larmes qui n'expliquent rien-la mémoire et l'affect plutôt que l'histoire et la raison" (p. 270).

By focusing on the forms, content, and policies surrounding commemorative practices, particularly at national level, Dalisson offers extensive analysis which stands somewhere between Prost's exhaustive interest in one particular group (veterans of the First World War) at one particular moment in time (1914-1939) and Nora's preference for *longue-durée* analysis of commemorative phenomena. *Les guerres et la mémoire* is impressive in scope, yet sufficiently focused to offer a coherent and detailed narrative. However, its title is slightly misleading; this is not a book about memory per se, but more precisely about commemoration. As Paul Ricœur's *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* demonstrates, commemoration is a single aspect of what is a much more complex phenomenon.[4] Dalisson's analysis might have benefited from some engagement with Ricœur and other thinkers in the field of memory studies.

Moreover, it also offers a predominantly top-down history of these processes; it is only when he writes of the memory of the Shoah, of Algeria, and of Indochina, that we sense that there are often a multiplicity of other stakeholders involved in, and often contesting, established commemorative practices. That said, *Les guerres et la mémoire* moves beyond recent debates about the relationship between the state and the nation's past in subtle ways. Its author could have stated this originality more boldly, but to have done so might have distracted from a narrative of a national debate about identity tied into the notion of conflict and which dates back to the very foundations of modern, Republican France, foundations that lie in a defeat that would start a cycle of Franco-German conflict.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: La République, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 2: La nation, (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 3: Les France, (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

[2] Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, 3 vols, (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977).

[3] Prost, *Les anciens combattants*, vol. 3, pp. 217-23. This view has been challenged by, among others, Pierre Milza, *Fascisme français: passé et présent* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987) and Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-War France* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012).

[4] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

Martin Hurcombe
University of Bristol
m.j.hurcombe@bristol.ac.uk

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172