

MATTHIAS SCHWARTZ – NINA WELLER – HEIKE WINKEL (eds.): After Memory: World War II in Contemporary Eastern European Literatures

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The reviewed collective monograph has been edited by three cultural studies scholars from Germany: Matthias Schwartz of the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research in Berlin, Nina Weller of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), and Heike Winkel of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge in Berlin. The contributing scholars are Slavists and cultural studies scholars based across Europe (Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Russia, Estonia, Austria, Romania), as well as in the USA, and include well-known names such as Ernst van Alphen, Kris van Heuckelom and Aleksandra Ubertowska.

The transformation of memory studies in recent decades has led to the emergence of new concepts and notions. Memory is no longer identified with a static “archive”, but with a dynamic “force field” of individual and collective values, which are constantly subject of discussion, revision and re-evaluation. In addition, postmodern historiography has completely changed the way we think about and re-tell the past, introducing new concepts such as “historiographic metafiction” (Linda Hutcheon), “second degree history” (Pierre Nora), “post-memory” (Marianne Hirsch), or “restorative and reflexive nostalgia” (Svetlana Boym). The book under review enters this discussion with a collection of 16 studies analyzing memory cultures reflecting World War II, with a focus on contemporary literature from “Eastern Europe”, which they define as postsocialist European countries.

The central premise of the book is that “The situation in postsocialist Europe as a whole is one ‘after memory’: until the end of the 1980s, a socialist culture of remembrance with a corresponding pool of collective memory existed, maintained by state institutions and appropriated by people prac-

ticing diverse forms of ‘warped’ mourning. But this collective memory was discarded, destroyed and, in part, has already been forgotten after the breakdown of state socialism” (2). The central question the editors ask is, “What role do literary texts play in this newly configured context after memory?” (2) In other words, the book is interested in literary revisions of the history of World War II after the fall of the communist regimes, when the socialist “master narrative” could be challenged and previously marginalized narratives and taboo topics could be brought out into the open for the first time. The problem this poses is that those private memories had been suppressed and repressed for a long time, because sharing them, even with the closest of family members, was risky. Memories that are not shared, written down, and passed on tend to be forgotten. How, after decades of oblivion, can such silenced, unresolved or unprocessed traumatic past be dealt with in literature? How do contemporary writers from Eastern Europe reconstruct those memories that had not been passed on, how do they write about events they do not remember and memories they cannot access, since their parents or grandparents kept silent about them due to fear, trauma, or both?

The key concept in the book is the transgenerational transmission of traumatic experience, which has been theorized by scholars such as Marianne Hirsch, Sigrid Weigel, or Astrid Erll. The editors ask: “Can trauma be transferred between generations, or should any treatment of the topic be rather called posttraumatic, where ‘post’ is understood in the sense of ‘beyond?’” (10) Marianne Hirsch’s term “post-memory” (alternatively postmemory or post memory) describes a situation in which traumatic memories are not transmitted across gener-

ations, or are done so in an encrypted form. The subsequent generation fills in the memory gap with substitute memories (memories of others conveyed through the media) which are either consciously or subconsciously adopted and appropriated. This implies a change of perspective, because now a generation that is not haunted by the past takes over, adopting transmitted images as they see fit. For Schwartz, Weller, and Winkel, this means that “collective traumata or memories of World War II, the Holocaust or the Gulag no longer serve as the constitutive moments of every artistic production but become the subject of imaginary adoptions of the past themselves” (11).

Postmodern literature, drama, and cinema about World War II has been the subject of many contemporary studies that have analyzed the way these artistic forms deal with, reflect and revise the traumatic past. The present book's original contribution to this debate is in its focus on historical fiction's imaginative and affective quality, rather than a historiographic or documentary one. Today, when the debate about World War II has moved to an open public forum that includes anyone who cares to contribute to it, especially in the online space, literature no longer has a pivotal mediating function when it comes to tabooed and marginalized issues. The loss of this communicative function has led to a reinforcement of literature's imaginative quality, its capacity for inventing fictional worlds, responding to readers' demands for escapist virtual realities and often deliberately reflecting on its fabrication. As Matthias Schwarz explains, “historical novels ‘after memory’ are now increasingly reloading these emotionally extremely charged forms – images or narrations – with completely different, contemporary sentiments and imaginary identifications. In other words, the topicality of the historical novel lies in the fact that its specific form – average heroes, moments of social crisis, unusual perspectives – offers the possibility of staging situations that may have to do with affective and ethical dimensions of the past

but which could also treat current popular topics, desires and fashions in quite different ways within the historical garb” (435). Such literature is no longer concerned with how the past affects the present, but focuses on what the present makes out of the past affectively and imaginatively. Such subversions, revisions and reinventions of normalized and ideologized representations maintain a distance from contemporary memory and history discourses and create imaginary alternatives to previous narratives. A representative example of this is post-Soviet speculative fiction that reimagines history in which Nazi Germany won World War II.

The articles in the book are divided into four sections, which are, however, closely related and overlapping. Part I, “Imaginary Adoptions: Family Histories and Personal Legacies”, focuses on the social frames of personal and family histories, reconstructed here by third-generation authors who engage with formerly unknown family histories. Among other themes, the essays (by Stephenie Young, Kris van Heuckelom, Dana Mihăilescu and Ernst van Alphen) treat memories of World War II from former Yugoslavia by Angela Courtney Brkic, Russian literary and cinema representations of the Gulag by Dmitrii Bykov or Andrei Zviagintsev, third-generation novels from Poland and Belgium about the Holocaust by Piotr Pazinski and Erwin Mortier, or ghost-written Romanian memoirs of child survivors of extermination camps based on the experiences of Leah Kaufman and Sara Tuvel Bernstein.

Part II, “Revisionist Appropriations: National Belongings and Collective Identities”, whose contributors include Roman Dubasevych, Maria Galina, Davor Beganović, Joanna Nizynska, is dedicated to the symbolic and imaginary reinvention of a nation's past. The studies in this part analyze how works of literature can function as pioneering testing grounds to offer new collective identities, to contest and revise normalized narratives. The literary works analyzed in this part are novels such

as the Ukrainian Iurii Vynnychuk's *Tango smerti* (2012; *Tango of Death*, 2019), popular post-soviet speculative fiction such as Viacheslav Shpakov's *Esli by Gitler vzial Moskvu* (If Hitler had captured Moscow, 2009) or Georgii Zotov's *Moskau* (2012), and post-communist Serbian novels such as *Noc generala* (The night of the general, 1994) by Vuk Drashkovic or *Kostantinovo rakrsce* (Constantine's junction, 2010) by Dejan Stojiljkovic. There is also a chapter on Polish memory sites such as the Warsaw Uprising Museum or the Museum of World War II in Gdańsk.

Part III, "Fictional Interventions: Alternative Narratives and Subverted Mythologies", is directly related to the previous section, dealing with literary histories that intervene in the normalized, official narratives of the Holocaust that have been shaped by the political interests of ruling parties in contemporary Russia, Poland and Hungary. The authors in this section (Alexandra Ubertowska, Brigitte Obermayr, Stephan Krause and Nina Weller) discuss for example the novels by the Polish writers Andrzej Bart and Igor Ostachowicz, controversial speculative fiction by the Russian writers Vladimir Sorokin, Andrei Lazarchuk or Andrei Turgenev (pen-name of Viacheslav Kuritsyn), or postmodern historical novels by the Hungarian authors László Martin, Zsuzsa Takács and Pál Závada.

Part IV, "Imaginative Reconfigurations: Average Heroes and Ambivalent Subjectivities", focuses primarily on fictionalized biographies (or autobiographical fictions) that have exceeded and transformed the conventions of trauma memoirs and survivor narratives. The authors (Heike Winkel, Tiina Kirss, Rutt Hinrikus, Madlene Hagemann, Gernot Howanitz and Matthias Schwartz) analyze works that have been published in the 21st century, including novels by the Czech Radka Denemarková and the Polish-Silesian Szczepan Twardoch, a Czech graphic novel by Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromír Švejdík, and autobiographical fictions by the Estonian and

Latvian (female) writers Leelo Tungal, Elin Toona, and Ene Mikkelson.

This collective monograph is an important and original contribution to cultural memory studies. Its depth and breadth is highly impressive, as well as its range of references. Working with some of the most recent theoretical impulses and mapping new literary production from across postsocialist Europe, including experimental postmodern genres such as the graphic novel, speculative fiction, fantasy, and "spectral" or "phantom" narratives, complemented by illustrations, the volume brings fresh insights into cultural memory studies, trauma studies and the study of the postmodern historical novel. The editors are to be commended also for including art in addition to scholarly studies: a poem and images by bellu&bellu, presented as a conceptual work of art that engages with "dominant historiographies and the relations of power, which often remain invisibly inscribed in mundane surroundings" (459). The book will be of high interest to literary and cultural studies scholars and could well be adopted for university courses on World War II literature.

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