

The Past in the Present

Beitrag vom: 17.01.2017

Rezension von M.A. Ela Rossmiller Redaktionell betreut von Dr. Jack J. B. Hutchens

The Present in the Past is a compilation of previously-published work by noted historian and political scientist, Robert Traba. It includes material from two earlier books published in Polish, *Historia przestrzeń dialogu* (2006) and *Przeszłość w teraźniejszości. Polskie spory o historię na początku XXI wieku* (2009), as well as two articles published in 2013. Although its contents are not new to Polish-speaking readers, the book is valuable insofar as it introduces English-speaking audiences to the seminal works of a scholar associated with Poland's "memory boom."

The book covers a wide range of topics related to history, historiography, memory, and the construction of national identity, especially as they relate to Poland, Germany, and Polish-German relations. It explores sites of memory such as the Polish *Kresy* and East Prussia, the construction of Polish national identity through celebrations of the anniversary of Grunwald, comparative perspectives on the memory of German expulsions from Eastern Europe following the Second World War, and the political cult of the fallen. It also includes reflections on historiography, historical politics, applied history, and research methods that will be of interest to memory scholars beyond the context of the Polish and German history, politics, and research traditions in which they are based. An essay on the state of the field will introduce readers to the richness of Polish research on memory. There are also intellectual biographies of key scholars such as Jan Assmann, Stefan Czarnowski, and Golo Mann.

Certain themes thread through the book. First, Traba makes the case for an approach to history that goes beyond the ethno-national paradigm to take into consideration transnational history, trans-border history, regional and local history, comparative history, and the history of events. The purpose is not to erase or replace national history, but to offer a richer and more nuanced picture in which national history is but one of its many "colors." This approach embraces pluralism, dialogue, and critical patriotism, opening up a space to tell a history not exclusively focused on Polish victimhood, martyrdom, and heroism. Along these lines, he criticizes the Warsaw Uprising Museum for promoting a single interpretation of the event closed off to other interpretations (61-63). (For a more in-depth discussion of this point, see Monika Żychlińska's and Erika Fontana's ethnographic study of the museum. They argue that the museum 's that its homage to insurgents glorifies and attempts to inculcate a Polish Romantic ideal of heroic sacrifice to the nation while precluding any

critical analysis of the Rising's political dimensions and excluding identities that do not fall within the version of national identity portrayed by Polish Romanticism.)[1]

Traba also criticizes national history focused on a single ethnicity. Instead, he appeals to historians to write the history of places and their residents, who more often than not include people from many nations and ethnicities (75). For example, his critical analysis of the Polish *Kresy* as a *lieux de mémoire* considers the eastern borderlands as a multinational and multi-religious territory and site of contact and confrontation between Poles and Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Russians, Tatars, and Turks, and between Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam (79-107). Indeed, he claims that Central and Eastern Europe is naturally better suited to regional and transnational approaches to history as compared to a national paradigm, since "national identities overlap (are interlaced) with various regional and trans- or intern-national identities" to a degree that renders national history inadequate. (190-191)

A second important theme concerns historical politics. Traba is critical of the new historical politics represented by institutions such as the Center for Political Thought, IPN, and recent state-sponsored museum projects, monuments, and commemorations. He claims that it reflects a conservative, nationalistic approach to history that dangerously fuses history with politics and memory with national identity, consciously constructing national myths that glorify the nation and mourn its martyrs (13-16). Instead, history should be left to historians and governments should not attempt to legislate truth. The government can play a positive (and limited) role, however, by funding historical research, especially collaborative transnational research projects (172-176).

As a whole, the book reflects the author's "internal dialogue about history" (7) and it should be read in this spirit. The writing style is meandering and non-linear, as explicitly acknowledged with sub-headings like "DIGRESSION" and "POST-DIGRESSION" (42, 44). It is a journey through various memoryscapes taken by foot, not by train, and through open fields, not urban grids. The reader is invited to pause and reflect on particularly interesting insights, take detours, and ignore the compass. While some may ask, "Where are we going? Are we there yet?" others will appreciate this more reflective, open-ended approach to the exploration of ideas.

The book's main flaws pertain to editing and organization. There are numerous errors of proofreading and translation; examples include "obscuration" instead of "obfuscation" (42), "understand" instead of "understood" (114), "Codres" instead of "Cadres" (126), "Carolina Wigura" instead of "Karolina Wigura" (185), "one-hundred-eight-three" instead of "one-hundred-and-eighty-three" (267), "Europe-wide" instead of "European-wide" (268), "unstopped" instead of "unleashed" (314), and occasional errors related to the use of "the" and "a." As these examples demonstrate, the mistakes are as minor as they are numerous, and I hasten to add that they do not distract from the substance of the book. A more serious oversight is the absence of chapter 6 in Part I from the table of contents, and the section title for Part 2 ("Poles and Germans: Theory") is confusing because this section is not, in the main, about theory. Finally, one could quibble over the value of including intellectual biographies about Jan Assmann, Stefan Czarnowski, and Golo Mann. Specialized audiences might find these chapters too superficial, while casual readers will not find much to pique their curiosity. On the other hand, the list of innovative scholars associated with Polish research in realms of memory (184-187) should have included Maria Lewicka. This oversight perhaps reflects a more general bias favoring the fields of history and sociology and ignoring important contributions by social psychologists. These comments notwithstanding, the book is an

invaluable resource for international scholars seeking to become familiar with some of the "greatest hits" of recent Polish memory research.

[1] Monika Żychlińska and Erica Fontana. "Museal Games and Emotional Truths: Creating Polish National Identity at the Warsaw Rising Museum." In *East European Politics, Societies and Cultures* (2015) pp. 1-35.



Zitierweise:

M.A. Ela Rossmiller: Rezension zu: Traba, Robert: *The Past in the Present. The Construction of Polish History*, 2015, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1779#r5547>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1779?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=5547>