



Jolande Withuis, Annet Mooij (eds.), ***The Politics of War Trauma: The Aftermath of World War II in Eleven European Countries*** (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2010, 369 pp., ISBN 978 90 5260 371 1).

Works that seek to compare the experiences of European states during the twentieth century have become more common in recent times, but this edited collection seeks to look at one particular overarching theme – that of the war trauma that resulted from the Second World War – from the perspective of history, sociology, psychology and psychiatry. This is a highly ambitious enterprise that takes the broadest view of what constitutes trauma, and while not always successful, does break some boundaries in attempting to come to meaningful conclusions. The analysis is based on following the development of the idea of trauma from 1945 to the formal recognition in many states of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980 – a diagnosis originally developed to explain the psychological problems experienced by veterans of the Vietnam War and by women subjected to incest, rape and sexual violence. However, it soon became apparent that PTSD could also be seen more widely among European servicemen and civilians during the Second World War. The introduction also links trauma to the development of welfare states although this is not fully explored and the footnoting of this particular section is rather scant. Nine substantive chapters follow that discuss the particularities and peculiarities of eleven European states; Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Poland, Norway, Denmark, East and West Germany. The focus excludes Britain and the United States but is largely western European, with only East Germany and Poland being included to provide a perspective across the iron curtain. The authors are all well known in their respective fields and provide coherent narratives and analyses of the developments in their respective case studies. Each author was given the same research questions to discuss the ways in which thinking on the medical and psychological effects of war were viewed in their particular country. What rapidly becomes apparent is that ‘war trauma’ was treated very differently in apparently similar countries. Thus for example, while the Netherlands has a culture of recognition and remembrance, this was not mirrored in neighbouring Belgium. These are followed by two separate summations by the editors, the first deals with the overall comparisons of remembrance, legislation and the official identification of victim groups between the case studies while the second compares the medical-psychological thinking that underpinned the recognition of ‘late consequences’ of war trauma.

The conclusions suggest that the myths of collective victimisation were apparent in all the occupied states – as well as in Austria as the first victim of Nazism. National ‘patriotic’ memory centred on resistance and ignored the uncomfortable elements of collaboration and complicity in Nazi crimes. This shifted only gradually and not consistently, with some states taking much longer to come to terms with their inconvenient past than others. A second feature was the shift to focus on the Holocaust and the Jews as the key victims of Nazism, and the third was the increasing recognition that the war and occupation could have long-term psychological effects on a whole range of victims. This latter issue was addressed in four ways, albeit with shifting priorities; legally through the purging of profiteers and collaborators, scientifically through the publication of scholarly studies of the period, morally through the award of decorations, pensions or special privileges to those who had rendered services to the (liberated) state, and financially through the award of reparations payments and compensation to those considered as ideological, racial or economic victims of the occupation period.

As the authors point out, these processes were by no means uniform, with huge disparities between the countries surveyed. The criteria for designation of victim status and schemes for compensation were more often piecemeal than comprehensive. One feature of this process which seems particularly arbitrary and potentially unfair was the restrictions placed on recipients, with many countries insisting on citizenship as a qualification and thus excluding many immigrant groups who had been either victimised by the Nazis (for example the vast bulk of the Jewish population in Belgium) or active in the resistance movement. Other exclusions involved black marketers and criminals who were deemed not to have behaved ‘with dignity’ during the war. France also disqualified labour conscripts and Poland ‘enemies of communism and the Soviet Union’. Restrictions based on medical disabilities exclusively attributable to the war and occupation were eventually dropped in most countries as the problems associated with this type of selectivity grew, but the authors also identify a clear hierarchy in the award of benefits and pensions, which invariably began with the resistance and political prisoners and only gradually extended out to other victims. This included the Jews, who did not fit the ‘traditional frame of reference for war’ as a conflict between nation states, and were only included as the Holocaust became more prominent in the memory of the war. The discussion of how these changes came about in the postwar era attributes them to the national political agenda, to the level of international pressure and to the lobbying of interest and victim groups. The authors also note the variance in victim groups between countries and the hierarchy that was established within each national case study – often unrelated to numbers or scale of victimisation.

This comparative study shows the complexity of individual country studies and raises new questions based on the juxtaposition of cases from across Europe, not least in relation to the returnees from incarceration in camps, forced or voluntary labour; their treatment on arrival and reintegration into postwar society. It can be read with profit by scholars interested in the development, medical history and compensation cultures of

postwar Europe, but its presentation cannot go entirely uncriticised. The text shows some infelicities in its use of English, the inclusion of one sentence paragraphs, a lack of consistency in the introduction of acronyms, and quotations left in their original language, all of which suggests that the editing and copy-editing of this volume could have been more carefully carried out.

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