

**Otto Heim/Caroline Wiedmer (Hrsg.), *Inventing the Past. Memory Work in Culture and History* (Vol. 9, International Cooper Series in English Language and Literature) Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2005, 236 S.**

Rezensiert von  
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“*Inventing the Past. Memory Work in Culture and History*” provides ample evidence that the “memory boom” in history and the humanities is still underway. The present collection, which originated in a graduate symposium held at the University of Basel in 2000, is eclectic in character, but distinct emphases and points of interest nonetheless stand out. There is a heavy bias toward literary topics: Diane Elam deals with the relation of waiting to temporality in Henry James’s *Wings of the Dove*; Mara Cambiaghi, with memory in the works of A. S. Byatt; Barbara Straumann, with recollection in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*; Otto Heim, with melancholy, repetition, and “race” in Charles Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars*; and Catherine Sprecher, with how the characters in W. G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* are haunted by obsessive memories that they cannot grasp.

Two essays, both with a Swiss focus, deal with the delayed aftermath of the Holocaust: Aleida Assmann discusses the notorious case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, the Swiss man of Christian origins who imagined himself to be a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and Caroline Wiedmer discusses the claim for compensation from Switzer-

land made by Charles and Sabine Sonabend, who were Jewish refugees in 1942, when they were summarily deported from Switzerland along with their parents.

In addition, Annette Kuhn offers some general reflections on the relation between memory and textuality; Dana Craciun examines how some post-Communist Romanians remember their pasts in the light of such common objects as beds, chairs, and tables; Peter Burleigh examines several nineteenth-century photographic texts and images; Sarah Clift discusses “figures of memory” in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; and Cathy Caruth, guided by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, discusses trauma and survival, focusing on the role that physical mementos (a bit like Craciun’s furniture) play in helping survivors cope. Heim and Wiedmer’s collection could be discussed from a number of different points of view. I approach the collection from the perspective of a historian interested in the theory of historical research and writing. From this perspective, some of the essays are of relatively little interest. Clift’s discussion of Locke’s *Essay* does not connect with historians’ concerns, and Burleigh’s study of several early attempts in mid-nineteenth-century Britain to practice, and reflect on, photography labors too hard to demolish the assumption, which no serious scholar surely holds any more, that the photographic image “is a self-defining and transparent object that we all know how to look at and that is clearly about a past that has been” (p.44). However, quite a few of the essays – even those on what might appear to be strictly literary subjects – have some relevance to historiography. And, overall,

the collection is rich in illumination. Sometimes the theoretical devices that the authors invoke, as well as the particular methods they pursue, do connect with problems that historians face in their work. At the very least, the historian ought to find stimulus in the often searching examination of complex texts that the authors engage in.

Risking invidious omission, I mention some highlights. The introduction by Heim and Wiedmer is a suggestive survey of the memory literature; among other things, they offer an interesting discussion of the art historian Alois Riegl's important essay of 1903 on commemorative monuments, "The Modern Cult of Monuments" (pp. 5-9). Annette Kuhn offers five "theses on memory" that might be considered obvious but that in Kuhn's presentation – which includes excellent exemplifications of each point – stand out in a most useful way. Dana Craciun's study of the temporal and mnemonic role of everyday objects in Romanians' memories of the past is a nicely executed case study that might well give methodological stimulus to historians. It is also of interest because of the larger phenomenon to which it draws attention, namely, the displacement of memory away from past events (and toward objects) in situations where there is some sort of awkwardness or taboo about confronting events directly. Aleida Assmann's rich and pithy account of the Wilkomirski case canvasses, in a few stimulating pages, a number of important topics: the character of autobiographical memory, and especially of so-called "flash bulb" memories; debates over false memory; the connections among memory, forgetting, and identity;

and the multi-dimensional status of the Holocaust as, simultaneously, a historical event, an accumulation of memories in the minds of those who were involved, and something imagined in films, literary fictions, and other aesthetic forms. Wiedmer, in her essay on the Sonabend case, addresses the nexus among memory, law, and money in the light of the shift that has occurred from Holocaust survivors' earlier role as witnesses to the new role of claimant. She describes how the Sonabend siblings sought compensation from the Swiss Federation for the family's deportation from the country, which led to their parents' deaths at Auschwitz. Their claim raised difficult issues for the Swiss Federal Council, which finally allowed its own narrow conception of law to trump the wider claim of justice.

A number of the essays focused on literary works are also of some relevance for historical theory. In her study of *The Wings of the Dove* Diane Elam argues that the "subjective experience of temporality" (p. 64) is developed through waiting more than through narrativization, thus challenging Paul Ricoeur's insistence that time "becomes human" primarily through its organization by narrative (p. 62). In reflecting on the work of A. S. Byatt, Mary Cambiaghi offers a rich exploration of various different modalities of memory and of identity. Her account undoubtedly owes much to the wide curiosity and lively intelligence of Byatt herself, who has shown an intense interest in the collisions and overlappings of history and imagination. Barbara Straumann's study of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* details Nabokov's complex strategies for dealing with the trauma of his expulsion from the Russia of his

childhood. These strategies of idealization and displacement are no doubt adopted by vast numbers of people finding themselves in similar situations, but they are made unusually vivid by their presence in the work of a writer who, like Byatt, possessed a deeply intellectual curiosity about the world. It is a banal but true point that, as products of self-conscious reflection and crafting, aesthetic works can sometimes offer clearer insight into the way people orient themselves toward the past than do more “representative,” but less articulate, texts.

In sum, this volume makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of issues of memory and identity in history and other fields. It thus stands as a worthwhile addition to the memory literature.

**Stefan Plaggenborg, Experiment  
Moderne. Der sowjetische Weg.  
Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag  
2006, 401 S.**

Rezensiert von  
Lutz Häfner, Bielefeld

Die vorliegende Monographie des Marburger Professors für Osteuropäische Geschichte thematisiert das im Herbst 1917 begonnene, insgesamt grandios gescheiterte und schließlich nach fast einem Dreivierteljahrhundert Ende Dezember 1991 sang- und klanglos beendete bolschewistische Experiment unter dem sperrigen Begriff der Moderne.

Wenn in der westlichen Soziologie von

Moderne in Bezug auf Europa die Rede war, machte die Forschung zumeist an den vom Kalten Krieg gezogenen Grenzen Halt und sparte Osteuropa, insbesondere die Sowjetunion, in ihren Analysen aus. Deshalb verfolgt Plaggenborg das Anliegen, die mehr als 300 Jahre alten Diskurse über den Gehalt der Moderne an die geschichtlichen Ereignisse zurückzubinden und auf die Entwürfe der bolschewistischen Utopie sowie die praktische Umsetzung ihrer Modernisierungsideologie zu beziehen. Um den Erkenntnisgewinn seines Werkes nicht durch ein normatives Moderneverständnis a priori einzuschränken, rekurriert Plaggenborg auf die historisierende Modernebeschreibung Stephen Toulmins, deren Charakteristika u. a. Systematisierung, Abstraktion, Allgemeingültigkeit physikalischer und sozialer Gesetzmäßigkeiten sowie Herrschaft der Rationalität sind.

Plaggenborg wählt einen problemorientierten Zugriff, der auf einen chronologisch-ereignisgeschichtlichen roten Faden verzichtet. Vermittels als zentral postulierter Aspekte strukturiert er seine Darstellung systematisch mit dem Ziel, Kontinuitäten, Widersprüche und Brüche der sowjetischen Geschichte aufzuzeigen. Komplexitätsreduktionen und Typisierungen sind eine sich daraus ergebende Konsequenz.

Allerdings ist den Überschriften der sieben Kapitel und 18 Unterpunkte nur bedingt zu entnehmen, was sie thematisieren, wie z. B. „Revolutionär im U-Boot“ illustriert. Der erste Teil behandelt die große Zäsur der Russischen Revolution von 1917 mit ihrem fundamentalen Wandel in den Bereichen Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Politik und Kultur. Für weite Teile der Bevölkerung brachte sie und der bis 1921 währende Bürgerkrieg Gewalt, Elend und Tod. Insofern werden