

Remembering the Road to World War Two

Review Number:

1190

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 January, 2011

Author:

Patrick Finney

ISBN:

9780415230179

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£24.99

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Alexander Macfie

In *Remembering the Road to World War Two* Patrick Finney (a student of 20th-century international history, history and theory, and collective memory) writes an impressive and informative account, not of the origins of the Second World War, but of the way historians and others have remembered those origins. At the same time he describes the way in which historical debates about the origins of the war have been used to shape and promote national identity. In his account, Finney deals with the origins of the war in seven countries: Russia, Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, the United States of America and Japan. Each of these countries is the focus of an interlinked, parallel case study.

Finney tells the reader in his introduction that his specific aim in writing the book is to bring the international historical writing on the subject into unwonted conversation with other bodies of work on national identity and collective memory, an ambition that might suggest to the reader that memory of the Second World War is now receding into the dismal recesses of the past, were it not for the fact that he makes it clear later on in the book that this is not the case.

For Finney, it may be noted, memory and identity are intertwined. The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is correspondingly defined by the assumed identity, so that it can be said that memory and identity are mutually constitutive. Collective memory, as distinct from individual and generational memory, is not based on the direct experience of individuals or groups of individuals, but rather on the memories of a 'necessarily fictitious' collective 'whole' (p. 15). As such, it forms a social framework, an organizational principle that nationally-conscious individuals use to organize their national identity. (Finney has a penchant for using quotations from other people's work to convey his thoughts. In this review I have generally

ignored the distinction.)

Finney's approach to the question of the origins of the Second World War, and the numerous and varied historical interpretations to which it gave rise, is thoroughly postmodern in approach throughout, as he explains in his introduction, inspired by Hayden White's historical theory that 'there is an inextinguishable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena' (p. 8). History, that is to say, cannot produce a single uncomplicated version of events, even if historians agree on the facts, because historical writing is a product not merely of empirical factors but also of context-grounded, aesthetic, ideological and moral choices. Secondly memory and identity, following the 'discursive' and 'linguistic' turns (to both of which Finney evidently subscribes), are now seen to be socially constructed (that is to say not natural), mutually constituted, highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, partisan and ideological.

What Finney reveals in his accounts of the historical debates taking place regarding the origins of the Second World War, is that, in Russia, the debate was concerned mainly with attempts to justify and explain (excuse) Stalin's decision to abandon attempts to obtain collective security by means of a series of alliances and agreements with anti-fascist powers, and opt instead for the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939. According to Soviet historians, writing mainly at the direction of the state, this decision was justified by what Stalin saw as the appeasement policies of the western powers, which were intent on redirecting Hitler's aggression towards the east; and also by Stalin's profound understandings of Marxist-Leninist teachings regarding history and the inherent contradictions of capitalism they revealed. It found its first expression in *Falsifiers of History*, a key text, jointly authored by Stalin himself, and first published in 1948. This was a work which broadly speaking provides the parameters, and even much of the phraseology, of all subsequent Soviet accounts of the Pact, and even those of the post-Soviet period.

Stalin's decision to outwit the 'Anglo-French war provocateurs' and conclude the Nazi-Soviet Pact was, therefore, seen by official Russian historians as a wise and farsighted act of Soviet foreign policy, which strengthened Russia's borders and defences and eventually made victory in 'the Great Patriotic War' possible (p. 42). Thereafter, Soviet official memory of the war advanced a simplified tale, aimed at the mobilization of the past in the service of the present and the future. For four decades after 1945, such a representation of the war in academic historiography, popular culture and a host of public commemorative practices, became the regime's crucial mnemonic technology for installing and securing a sense of national (Soviet) identity among the disparate peoples of the empire.

In Germany, on the other hand, according to Finney, a variety of narrative strategies have been used by German historians to explain, explain away, sanitize and even justify, Germany's part in the origination of the Second World War and the Nazi aggression that accompanied it. These strategies include the ideas that Hitler was a 'Satanic genius' and Nazism an aberration in German history; that Hitler's policies were fully in accord with the traditional aims of German foreign policy, since 1871 at least; that Nazism was engendered by broader European trends, including the Enlightenment (and its dreams of unattainable happiness), the French revolution, the pathology of modernism, European and American racialism, social Darwinism and even Italian Machiavellianism; and, finally, that Nazism should be seen as the more or less inevitable consequence of the inequities of the Versailles Treaty, the threat to Europe posed by Bolshevism, and the economic collapse of 1929-31.

According to Finney, throughout the half century or so following the Second World War the strategies employed to negotiate the wartime past in Germany were in part also designed to fashion contemporary German national identity; whilst at the same time the struggle to define national identity affected the choice of strategies adopted. Thus, for instance, the making of Hitler personally responsible for the war and the viewing of Nazism as an aberration in German history enabled the German people quickly to 'forget' the war, and the atrocities that accompanied it, thereby facilitating the foundation and building of a democratic Federal German Republic. (Neo-Marxist critics of the FGR, on the other hand, looked for continuities between the Republic and the Third Reich.) Later, attempts in the 1980s to facilitate a strengthening of German national identity were accompanied by strategies designed, in part at least, to displace blame for Nazi aggression onto a mainly Russian (Bolshevik) enemy. (According to this interpretation Germany's

contribution to the outbreak of the Second World War can, in part at least, be seen as pre-emptive).

In Italy, historical debate was concerned mainly with the possible justification, or otherwise, of the Axis, the Pact of Friendship and Alliance formed between Germany and Italy on 22 May 1939. According to Finney, from the beginning many contemporary observers doubted if there was much political substance behind the elaborate facade of propaganda and bluster that accompanied the pact. Later, three principal interpretations of Mussolini's diplomacy emerged: that Mussolini's diplomacy was made up mainly of this kind of bluster; that it was designed to disguise a shrewd *realpolitik* policy of cynical expansionism; and that it was inspired by a fanatical ideology, in which Mussolini and many of his followers actually believed. It is these three contrasting interpretations that have been at the heart of Italian and other historiographical debates regarding Mussolini ever since. In Italy, in the period immediately following the end of the war, a consensus developed that Mussolini had indeed been no more than an artist of propaganda, an interpretation that sustained a range of anti-Fascist positions and suited fellow travellers wishing to elide critical interrogation of the recent past. But over time, as scholarship became more sophisticated, interpretations came to focus rather on how far either *realpolitik* or ideology should be seen as the real driving force of Italian fascism. Advocates of the *realpolitik* position viewed Mussolini as a moderate expansionist, pursuing goals broadly in line with the long term traditions of the Italian state. Advocates of the ideological position, in contrast, viewed him as incarnating a rupture with the national past, inspired by a novel revolutionary ideology and rapacious ambition. Scholarship on both sides of the argument throughout drew inspiration and energy from the disputatious course of Italian politics, and directly contributed to the contestation of politics, memory and national identity, not least because such debates were given extensive coverage in the print media and on television.

In France, where defeat in war precipitated not only the demise of the Third Republic but also the inauguration of a collaborationist (Vichy) regime, attention was concentrated mainly on the question (paradigm) of decadence. According to this view, the Third Republic was rotten to the core, the product of an endemic moral decay. This explanation dominated French historiographical debate for at least three decades, not least because it served the interests of a series of successive regimes, starting with Vichy, which wished to use the concept of decadence as a foil to justify the construction of a new political system. But in the 1970s French historians began to advance a series of alternative interpretations of the war. These included new views of the constraints that French leaders laboured under in the 1930s, in particular the attitudes of the British and the Americans; radical rewritings of the history of the Vichy regime, seen now, not as an aberration in French history, but as an authentically French ideological project; and new views of the true nature and extent of collaboration and resistance – though it has to be said that the paradigm of decadence never entirely disappeared.

According to Finney, in the 1970s a defence of the decadence syndrome was seen as being tantamount to a defence of Gaullism and the established verities of French national identity. Challenging it was equivalent either to a recognition of the rising forces of fragmentation or a candid display of auto-interrogation. Later, histories and memories of the Second World War inevitably played an important part in attempts to rebuild French national pride, secure the election of French presidential candidates, and deal with some of the problems created by decolonisation.

In Britain, debates regarding the road to World War Two centred on the validity and effectiveness of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, symbolized by the Munich agreement of 1938. Had Chamberlain been a victim of his government's own propaganda, credulously trusting in the pledged word of the Führer? Was he criminally duplicitous in asserting the need to prepare for war whilst refusing to take the necessary military and diplomatic steps? Or did events rather reveal his strategic sagacity in leading a nation with limited options, owing to its peculiar military, economic and political circumstances? On these questions, according to Finney, despite the processing of masses of pertinent government and other documents, British historians have failed to arrive at any settled agreement.

The initial response of British historians and commentators to the failure of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, symbolized by the anonymous *Guilty Men* (1940), was one of unqualified condemnation. The

policy was seen as being an unmitigated disaster and the 'guilty men', led by Chamberlain and Baldwin, were responsible. Then, in the 1960s, historians, increasingly aware of the nature and extent of British national decline, began to reassess their position, showing an increasing awareness of the constraints under which Chamberlain had laboured and an increasing admiration for his skill and determination, a tendency continued in the following decades. Though surprisingly, in the 1990s, there emerged a 'self-styled counter-revisionist interpretation', that reaffirmed, albeit with refinements, the orthodox position (p. 207).

Throughout the Second World War and the half-century or so following, the debate regarding Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and the origins of the war played an important part in the shaping of national identity. Amidst the hazardous exigencies of 1940, the nation united around a common understanding of the failed compromises of appeasement. Later, the war, construed now as 'the People's War', formed the rhetorical binding of a post-war consensus, a consensus that persisted until the 1960s, when, in the context of economic decline and geopolitical contraction, it came under increasing challenge, from both the left and the right. Thatcherism also later challenged the concept of consensus, supposedly promoted by the war, emphasizing rather the alternative Churchillian myth of proud, national (imperial) independence and individual responsibility.

In the US, historical debate regarding the origins of the Second World War was mainly concerned with the efficacy of Roosevelt's foreign policy up to 1941, and the related questions of America's national identity and its place in the world. Anti-interventionists in the US wished to build up America's national defences and stay out of the European war, whilst interventionists, led by Roosevelt, pursued a policy almost certain in the circumstances to lead to war. After the war, during which debate was largely suspended, the controversy was resumed as historians and politicians argued about the extent of American intervention in the world in the context of the Cold War. As Finney puts it, 'the terms of the original political debate were foundational for the post-war historiographical treatments' (p. 232).

According to Finney, the positions of the two schools of American thought can, in broad terms, be easily summarized. The 'traditionalists' – a group of traditionalist diplomatic historians who enjoyed formal connections with the state, and who were in consequence inclined to recognize the necessity of an activist foreign policy – located the fundamental causes of the war in developments external to the United States, and specifically in the 'extremely serious threats to American security and interests' posed by the Axis powers (p. 232). Faced with this rising menace, Roosevelt hoped to keep the country out of hostilities yet safeguard it by extending all aid short of war to victims of Axis aggression in Europe, and by containing and deterring the Japanese. The 'revisionists', in contrast, emphasized internal factors and Roosevelt's agency in explaining the road to war. The Axis powers did not constitute a genuine menace to the western hemisphere, until 'shortsighted and provocative' American policies envenomed relations with them (p. 232). Roosevelt entangled the United States with Nazi Germany through the extension of aid to Britain, and exerted so much pressure on the Japanese that their vital interests were ultimately threatened. Whether this was by design or blunder was open to debate; in some variants, Roosevelt engineered conflict with Japan as an Asiatic 'back door' to war with the whole Axis, either in the service of preserving the British Empire or securing American economic expansion.

The emergence of these two narratives (and similar explanations of the Pearl Harbour debate) is according to some American historians no accident, since each drew on familiar, deep-rooted, narrative structures already circulating in American culture. The former grounded the story on a highly personalized and religiously-tinged language of retribution, and the latter exemplified a penchant for conspiracy theory and a pervasive cultural narrative of backlash against the power-wielders in Washington. In the event, the 'traditionalist' interpretation prevailed in the post-war historiographical debate and was enshrined in most college and high school textbooks as the conventional wisdom.

Surprisingly, according to Finney, American historians have struggled to identify and chart the vicissitudes of any American myth regarding a 'Great Patriotic War', preferring instead to unpick the simplification, sanitization and romanticization of the war; though all agree that the Second World War was generally a 'good' war.

In Japan, it is widely believed that the initial response of the Japanese people to the events of the Second World War was one of relentless amnesia. But such a belief, according to Finney, is misplaced. War memory in Japan has from the beginning been both varied and diverse, the site of acute contestation. Two sets of interrelated questions have divided Japanese opinion. The first concerns the nature of Japanese expansion in China and Southeast Asia. Should this be viewed as naked imperialist aggression, driven by a conviction of racial superiority over Asian others that also justified the commission of atrocities? Or did Japan merely act in much the same way as every other power in the brutal and chaotic circumstances of the 1930s, seeking to protect its legitimate interests on the continent as they were threatened by rising Chinese nationalism, communist subversion and western economic protectionism? Was it even perhaps the case that the wartime ideology of 'Asia for the Asians' underpinning the establishment of a 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere' had real validity, with Japan's leaders engaged in 'a genuinely moral campaign to liberate Asia from the oppressive Europeans and Americans, and to simultaneously create an impregnable bulwark against the rising tide of Communism' (p. 267)? Was the war, in other words, an integral part of a broad campaign of aggression, launched as a desperate gamble to preserve the new Japanese empire in Asia, and expressive of a pathological militarism produced by profound structural deformities in Japanese society? Or was it a tragic accident, the result of disastrous misunderstandings between Japanese and American policy-makers that could have been avoided by skilful diplomacy?

Japanese answers to these questions have from the beginning been substantially influenced by the American occupation of Japan, the remarkable political, social, cultural and economic changes in Japanese society which that occupation accomplished, the Cold War, during which Japan became one of America's principal allies, the revival of Marxism, as a powerful explanatory tool of understanding, and the on-going struggle of Japanese political parties to win and hold onto power. Foreign scholarship has similarly produced a variety of answers, influenced by similar factors.

For the uninitiated (a group that probably includes myself), Finney's book reveals some startling facts. That, according to some Russian historians, Stalin's preference had always been for an arrangement with Germany and the promotion of an inter-capitalist war in the west. That, as one German historian believed, Nazism was not properly 'a chapter of German history' (p. 79); and that, as another believed, Hitler was not really a German. That in 1948 an alliance between conservative political elements in Italy and the Roman Catholic Church, encouraged by the unsubtle interference of America, secured the exclusion of the left from government. That, in France the memory of the defeat of 1940 has been progressively eclipsed by memories of collaboration and the resistance. That the British Government viewed the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact with equanimity, having largely discounted the value of a Soviet alliance. That America's principal reason for going to war against Japan and Germany in 1941 may have been a defence of the free trade system. And that Japan's attack on America (at Pearl Harbour) may have been motivated, not by naked imperialist aggression, but by a desire to protect its legitimate interests in Asia, threatened by the rising tide of Chinese nationalism, communist subversion and western economic protectionism. All these are possibilities discussed by Finney in his book. Though he does not discuss (or at least not very much) the question that really interests me, the question of whether Britain could have avoided the worst consequences of the war by negotiating a necessarily humiliating *realpolitik* agreement with Hitler sometime in 1939-40, thereby redirecting Nazi aggression towards the east, doing to Russia/Stalin, in other words, what Russia/Stalin intended to do to it.

In his conclusion, Finney reminds the reader that international history on the origins of the Second World War has throughout been 'imbricated' with wider discourses of collective memory and national identity. In the three Axis powers, for instance, international historians devised less than entirely candid explanations of their nation's pre-war aggression, explanations that contributed to the reconstruction of broadly conservative

concepts of national identity, while in Britain historians and policy makers, increasingly aware of the realities of national decline in the 1960s – a development that necessitated a new view of British national identity – were accordingly persuaded to reassess their views of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.

Finney also concludes that historians of the origins of the war in the various countries concerned often adopted in their histories narrative options that originated in the political and cultural debates of the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes even adopting the actual 'story forms' in which those debates were preserved (p. 305). Therefore, he asserts, it can be said that the basic (postmodern) insight, that historians often operate within a prefigured field and deploy rather than generate emplotment, is sound. Moreover, in many instances the narratives in play within contemporary political discourse were themselves but iterations of more general emplotments already in circulation. Obvious examples include the 'triumph over alien forces' schematic narrative in Russia, and the 'decadence emplotment' in the French Third Republic. Defeated nations similarly often define their predicament in terms of common historiographical stereotypes.

Given the myriad specifications of each case, it would be imprudent, Finney concedes, to make any broad cross-national generalizations about the role of collective national memory in the historiography of the war. Nevertheless, it is notable how frequently turbulent crises in dominant perceptions of national identity and revisionist terms in the historiography of the war have been accompanied by critical shifts in collective memory. History, identity and memory, that is to say, are almost always intertwined, the subject of continuing political 'valence'. The realization that collective memory and history writing cannot be easily separated offers a corrective to historian's self-congratulatory delusion that disciplined scholarship necessarily functions to counteract myth.

The international history of the origins of the Second World War, Finney finally concludes, is to a large extent constructed through the differential combining of a range of binary interpretative options: structure versus agency; ideology versus *realpolitik*/ national tradition; continuity versus discontinuity; determinism versus contingency; and conspiracy versus systemic failure. As for the revisionist turns that occasionally occur in the writing of international history, they often embody less a transformation of understanding through new empirical discoveries, than a new methodological or interpretative shift in preference between two such binaries; though it is not possible to generalize about the political valence of the two sides.

Memory, in the context of international history, proves a difficult concept to handle, particularly collective memory. Individual memory is based on experience (I have myself some small individual memories of the war), but collective memory (an 'organizational principle' that circulates in society in the form of narratives, symbols and images) is, as Finney said in his introduction, essentially fictitious, by which I presume he means imaginary (p. 15). The notes Finney adds to each chapter are replete with references to individual memory (experience). But in the text itself, for the most part, only collective memory appears, morphing frequently into narrative, story, discourse and even myth. The potential reader should not, therefore, look to *Remembering the Road to World War Two* for an account of the personal experiences of those who were involved in it. Rather he should look for the role of collective memory in the construction of politics, historiography and national identity, with each of which it is, as Finney shows in elaborate detail, indissolubly bound up. (Does this mean, one wonders, that history, like collective memory, is also fictitious?)

For Finney, then, national identity, like history, is deeply implicated in collective memory. Of the two possible views of nationality Finney considers in the introduction to his book – that nations, once formed, are real communities of culture and power, or that they are imagined communities, cultured constructions and narratives, subject to endless exercises in manipulation by an elite – he not surprisingly opts for the latter. Thus national identity, like history and collective memory, is both fluid and unstable, the product of a never-ending process of becoming rather than a quality to be possessed or a state of being – though, unlike some other cultural artifacts, national identity does command, as Finney makes clear, profound emotional legitimacy and colossal sacrifice. The amount of sacrifice involved is, indeed, almost beyond belief.

Finney makes great efforts in his book to give due prominence to the archival, cultural, political and collective factors that contributed to decision-making and the historical understanding of decision-making in

the post-war period; and he makes similar efforts to relate these processes to the context of current political and cultural debates over national identity and collective memory. But it is remarkable how much of what he discusses continues to turn on the policies and decisions of the eight or nine supposedly 'great men' of the period, namely Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, de Gaulle, Chamberlain, Churchill, Roosevelt, Emperor Hirohito and Tojo. International history remains, then, despite the best efforts of many international historians, still to a surprising extent the history of 'great men'.

Finney's account of the historiography of the origins of the Second World War leaves the reader in no doubt that, as he writes in his introduction, history is 'inexpungeably' relative (p. 8). Not only is the history he describes, with so much expertise, invariably partial, context-grounded, and ideologically driven, it is also almost always prefigured, emplotted (in literary form), and trapped in a range of binary, interpretative options, from which it is difficult, possibly impossible, in our language at least, to escape. The conventional historian, faced with this mountain of illustrative postmodern evidence, has I think no option but to abandon the redout of conventional historical theory and lay down his arms. Though, while raising the white flag, he might I think, with suitable humility, point out that the superstructure of inexpungeably relativist history hangs together only with the support of a modernist paradigm of (possibly imagined) 'real events', what supposedly 'actually happened', without which the whole structure of postmodern interpretation might collapse. (Language fails here. We clearly need a new word to describe the reality of the virtual, or perhaps the virtuality of the real.) Such, at least, is the opinion of this somewhat old-fashioned conventional historian, though I have to admit that we human beings are remarkably skilled at interpreting and describing (explaining) events of which we have no direct experience. (It is interesting to remark that some contemporary philosophers of history see relativism as an aspect of the paradigm of modernity, not of postmodernity.)

Finney's book, then, is a triumph of the application of some aspects of postmodern theory to the practical business of writing history, despite the fact that much of it can in practice be read as conventional history. It is also a major contribution to the modern schools of memory and identity studies.

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