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Mirjam Zadoff

Gewalt und Gedächtnis

Globale Erinnerung im 21. Jahrhundert

(München: Hanser Verlag, 2023), pp. 237

How to quote this article:

Ulrich Wyrwa review of Mirjam Zadoff, *Gewalt und Gedächtnis. Globale Erinnerung im 21. Jahrhundert*, in *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 29, no. 1 (2026), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/16815

It is a very personal book that Mirjam Zadoff, the director of the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, which conveys the history of National Socialism with a view to the present and the future and considers the historical experience of the Nazi dictatorship in a current and global context, has written. Her topic is the global remembrance in the twenty-first century, and she wanted to know how people individually and how societies as a whole deal with war crimes and genocide, experiences of violence and crimes against humanity in wars and civil wars, and not just in German-occupied Europe. To this end, she has visited memorials in various European countries as well as in Asia and Africa, visited monuments and reflected extensively on the topic of refugees. In addition, Zadoff, having taught history and Jewish studies at Indiana University Bloomington from 2014 to 2019, has been able to integrate her academic experience in America into her considerations.

In accordance with her chosen personal approach, Mirjam Zadoff begins with thoughts about childhood memories, about the possible future memories of her children and her own memories of her childhood in Innsbruck in the 1970s. She recalls how her parents listened to the protest and anti-war songs of Joan Baez or Bob Dylan, for example, or the German singer-songwriter Franz Josef Degenhardt, songs that, according to Zadoff, became the “first media of remembrance” (p. 10).

The first stop on her journey is Jerusalem, where she sought dialogue with the writer Avrom Sutzkever, who was born in 1913 in the Russian Empire. Through his Yiddish poems, he developed, what Zadoff has called a “programmatic remembrance of the Holocaust” (p. 21). At the Yad Vashem memorial, she combines her observations with references to the early collections of sources and documents on the persecution and murder of the European Jews by National Socialist Germany as well as views on the current controversies surrounding the politics of remembrance.

Her next stop is Milan, where she visits the memorial to the Jewish victims, the Memoriale

della Shoah. This was erected in 2013 in Milan's main railway station on the underground platform from which Jews were deported to the concentration and extermination camps. Strangely, she did not mention the Documentation Center for Contemporary Jewish History, CDEC, which is located in the same place and in fact played a key role in the opening of the memorial.

In Warsaw, she visits the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, POLIN, founded in 2013, describes the current historical-political debates in Poland, and draws attention to the contribution by Polish artists to the "controversial memory of the Holocaust" (p. 61).

Zadoff then looks at current refugee policy and links her observations with references to the experiences of refugees during the National Socialist era. In a further step, she examines the manner in which traditional monuments are dealt with and poses the question of how a critical approach can be applied in this context. Starting with the controversial monument in the harbor of Livorno, il Monumento dei Quattro Mori, from the seventeenth century, she goes into the debates about the Karl Lueger monument in Vienna. She concludes this topic with reference to the USA, where a research project is investigating how history is told in public spaces on the basis of 50,000 objects.

A photo collage shown in Tel Aviv about the last survivor of the mass murder at Babyn Yar leads her to the war today. There were once plans to build Europe's largest memorial project with 15 museums in that ravine near Kyiv. The Russian war against Ukraine has put paid to this idea.

A visit to the museum of wax figures in Berlin, where Anne Frank is exhibited alongside the Scholl siblings and Adolf Hitler, leads her to reflect on Frank's diary, which has become an international icon of Holocaust remembrance. According to Zadoff, the figure of Anne Frank serves as a symbol for the globalization of memory, while simultaneously highlighting its commercialization.

After these reflections on the internationalization of Holocaust remembrance, Zadoff travels to Asia and visits the Shrine of the Fallen Soldiers and Civilian War Victims in Tokyo. She criticizes the empty spaces and the nationalist-bellucist agenda of the adjacent museum, in which militarism and pacifism stand are juxtaposed. Having visited Hiroshima, Zadoff illustrates the coexistence of divergent forms of remembrance within Japanese society, while also highlighting the tendency to overlook the history of Japan's war of aggression and its colonial past.

It is on her next stop, in South Korea, that this strikes home with particular force when she visits the memorial to women forced into prostitution in the wartime brothels of the Japanese army. As Zadoff observes, the presentation of the exhibits is reminiscent of exhibition design in Holocaust museums. In fact, their "language and aesthetics of remembrance," (p. 132) as the director explains, served as a model. Another museum in Seoul shows just how problematic the culture of remembrance is in Korea. Set up in a former prison, which was used as such until the fall of the authoritarian military regime, the museum displays exhibits on Korean nationalism and national independence.

In Phnom Penh, Mirjam Zadoff is greeted by blossoming trees. They stand in the courtyard of the genocide museum, which commemorates the crimes of the Pol Pot regime. The building previously served as a prison and torture center for the Khmer Rouge security forces. Zadoff again points out the ambivalence of commemoration, because the museum, although it was

opened to commemorate the murder of two-thirds of the Cambodian population, was not originally intended to serve as a reappraisal of Cambodian history. The purpose of the museum was rather to “justify the Vietnamese occupation of the country” (p. 146). The exhibition works with the concept of “shock and emotion” (p. 147). According to Zadoff, “voids of missing memories” remain in Cambodian society, especially as the Khmer Rouge deliberately destroyed “the country’s cultural memory” (p. 151). According to Zadoff, it is dancers and filmmakers that fill these gaps today.

It is in Belgium that Zadoff comes face to face with the legacy of colonial crimes in Africa. She visits the Africa Museum there “to understand how Belgium deals with its violent colonial history” (p. 154). The museum seeks to self-critically come to terms with the atrocities during the Belgian colonial era, and at the beginning of the exhibition, as Zadoff quotes, stands the sentence: “Everything passes, except the past” (p. 159).

When Zadoff returns to her investigation of the traces of European colonial crimes, it is in Cape Town. Here she visits the island on the west coast of South Africa, where Nelson Mandela, among others, was imprisoned. The island has become the most important place of remembrance in South Africa. An exhibition shown in South Africa about the diary of Anne Frank, which established “the crimes of the Nazis as a paradigm” (p. 173), came to represent a link between the memory of the apartheid regime and the Holocaust.

Here and there amid her considerations on the memorials and museums, Zadoff has inserted reflections on current refugee movements, thus bringing them into relation with the experiences of refugees from Nazi Germany—topics she had also discussed with her students in Bloomington. In the final chapter Zadoff returns to her experiences in the USA and recounts the current war being waged by conservative Republicans against liberal society. This is mainly being fought over libraries, museums and universities. Zadoff speaks of a “censorship fever” (p. 185). But democratic America, according to Zadoff’s optimistic outlook, “would not be democratic America if it did not find an answer to this” (p. 185). She sees these in book weeks at American libraries, in projects to commemorate slavery, or in the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, which opened in 2016. She does not leave out the nationalist counter-narratives, but concludes her book by recalling the inauguration of President Joe Biden, at which the young poet Amanda Gorman recited her hopeful poem “The Hill We Climb.”

Mirjam Zadoff’s reflections are convincing not least because of her personal approach, her generous inclusion of her own observations and perceptions at the memorials. It is also remarkable that in her explorations the historian Zadoff did not so much consult historical research; rather, she sought to establish a dialogue with writers and visual artists.

Zadoff thus opens our eyes to international developments in the field of politics of the past and shows how Holocaust remembrance has become the paradigm for an international culture of remembrance. However, she repeatedly draws attention to the ambivalences in the various cultures of remembrance. Zadoff had already warned at the beginning: “Our present has become complicated and with it our view of the past” (p. 27). “History and memory,” she laments, are being “instrumentalised, used and distorted in a propagandistic campaign” (p. 29).

This book by Mirjam Zadoff on remembrance in the twenty-first century comes at just the

right time in view of the multiple attacks on the German culture of remembrance coming both from the nationalist side and from professional historians. In view of the recent attacks on the politics of history in the USA by the new administration, the book perhaps came a little too soon. But a shadow of tomorrow had already been cast by the banning of Amanda Gorman's poem by the Miami school board in May 2023, which Zadoff had drawn attention to. By the time Donald Trump was re-elected in November 2024 and inaugurated in January 2025, Mirjam Zadoff had already written her book. Now a new chapter in global memory in the twenty-first century has begun.

Postscript. Given the personal nature of Mirjam Zadoff's explorations and her memories of the anti-war songs heard by her parents, the author of the present review might be forgiven for allowing himself a brief personal reminiscence. In his youth, he had heard the protest songs of another German singer-songwriter, Dieter Süverkrüp, who in the song "Kirschen auf Sahne" (Cherries on cream) released in 1967 on the record "Widerborstige Gesängen," tells the story of a former resistance fighter whose memories of Auschwitz caught up with him during a visit to a café. When a lady at the next table began to eat cherries on cream, he is overcome by the image of "blood in the snow." "And the shaky man becomes embarrassed and leaves. He's ashamed, because all those damned memories won't go away."