Introduction

This book arose from the sense of unease the editors have felt over a number of years about weaknesses in the huge and rapidly growing historical literature on the subject of 'collective memory'. It seems as if everyone is talking about this subject. The terms 'memory' and 'collective memory' appear with such frequency and ease that readers may be under the impression that there is a scholarly consensus about what these terms mean and how they may be used effectively in historical study.

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is much discussion, but very little agreement, as to whether or not there are meaningful links between individual cognitive psychological processes and the cultural representations and gestures of groups. How groups 'remember' – or even if they 'remember' – cannot be extrapolated simply from evidence on the ways individuals store and retrieve information or images. Furthermore, the word 'memory' has profoundly different shades of meaning in different languages. It should not be surprising, therefore, that historians frequently talk at cross purposes or in complete ignorance of each other's position in this field.

A good example of the ambiguity of much writing on collective memory is the work of Pierre Nora, the organizer and inspiration behind an influential, seven-volume collection of essays on sites of collective memory, *Les lieux de mémoire*, published between 1984 and 1992. His programmatic essay presents his point of view on collective memory in emphatic terms. 'Memory is constantly on our lips', he writes, 'because it no longer exists.' Or rather it no longer exists in the midst of life.[1] Since 'society has banished ritual', and thereby 'renounced memory',[2] everyone cries out for artificial or symbolic substitutes for what less rapidly changing societies have taken for granted. What we have is

[1] Pierre Nora (ed.) *Realms of memory. The construction of the French past. I. Conflicts and divisions*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 1.
[2] Ibid., p. 6.

second-order memory: we collect, organize, exhibit, catalogue, but observe the form and not the substance of memory: 'The trace negates the sacred but retains its aura.'[3]

These sites, and their study by historians, reproduce what literature once did, and now – in Nora's view – no longer can accomplish. Hence the exploration of these artefacts and phenomena helps to refill 'our depleted fund of collective memory'. Thus a new kind of 'History offers profundity to an epoch devoid of it, true stories to an epoch devoid of real novels.' 'Memory', he concludes, 'has been promoted to the center of history: thus do we mourn the loss of literature.'[4]

When Nora argues that society has banished ritual, or claims that it has no further use for the sacred,[5] and that literature is dead, he displays the weakest links in his position. Anybody observing the difficulties attendant on the assimilation of Muslims into French society would scoff at such claims. The sacred hasn't vanished, though few would seek it primarily in the institutional life of churches and synagogues.

Furthermore, if the claim is that society has banished ritual, and not that French society has banished ritual, we need to pose the question of the strength of the claim in other than French contexts. The parochial character of Nora's argument raises doubts as to its relevance outside France. It is true that historical legitimacy has been contested terrain since the revolution of 1789, and, ever since, polemicists have ransacked the symbolic vocabulary and imagery of French history to espouse one cause and deride others. But the same is true of German history, and more recently, of Russian history. What is missing here is an account of precisely what is French about the exercise Nora conducts.

The Frenchness of the position is its particular kind of cultural pessimism. Again there are equivalents across the Rhine and elsewhere, but French pessimism has its own distinctive flavour. Where else would intelligent commentators equate the decline in the birth rate and the drop in the number of people speaking the French language with the decline of Western civilization itself? Are these the unspoken assumptions of a world of French intellectuals who take themselves just a bit too seriously?

The insularity of the claims made by Nora has another source. The French government spends more on museums and cultural activities per capita and as a share of the national budget than does any other Western country. Why? Is it because the sacred is dead and we need a set of symbolic substitutes? The explanation may be more mundane. History sells: it is a popular and money-making trade because it locates family

[3] Ibid. p. 9. [4] Ibid. p. 20. [5] Ibid. p. 7.

stories in bigger, more universal, narratives. The government invests in this part of the service sector because it pays to do so.

The huge growth of museums at the end of the twentieth century is also a reflection of another facet of the 'memory business': the contemporary link between grandparents and grandchildren. This link has spawned a huge market for museums and literature about this turbulent century. Yes, literature: the same literature which Nora considers dead. Examples abound: like Jean Rouaud's *Champs d'honneur* winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1991,[6] or Sebastien Japrisot's moving *Un long dimanche de fiançaille*,[7] or Pat Barker's fictional trilogy on the Great War,[8] or Sebastian Faulks's powerful *Birdsong*.[9] Today's grandparents were children after the 1914–18 war, and their stories – family stories – are now embedded in history, and fiction, and exhibitions, and museums, and pilgrimage, in all the stuff of ritual Nora considers as signs of a loss of 'true' collective memory. The linkage between the young and the old – now extended substantially with the life span – is so central to the concept of memory that it is surprising that Nora doesn't simply urge us to leave our libraries and just look around, at our own families. A vital, palpable, popular kind of collective memory is, then, alive. Its obituary, written by Nora, is premature and misleading.

Given the difficulties and ambiguities raised by a work of a major historian like Pierre Nora, it is evident that that there is much room for reflection and clarification in this branch of cultural history. This book is a preliminary step towards that end. It focuses on one particular set of problems in the field of 'collective memory', namely, the issues raised by the shadow of war in this century.

How war has been remembered collectively is the central question in this volume. We investigate this issue in the twentieth-century context, when the reach of war – geographically and socially – has extended far beyond that of earlier, non-industrial conflicts. Most of the chapters are about European experience, though some American and Israeli evidence is examined too. We have chosen war in this century as a vivid, indeed a traumatic phenomenon, which has left in its wake survivors who engage time and again in acts of remembrance. The voluminous records they have left enable us to put to the test the ambiguities and inner tensions of our general subject: the contour and character of 'collective memory'.

A word or two about coverage is essential. Our aim is to address a set

[6] Jean Rouaud, *Champs d'honneur* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1990).
[7] Sebastien Japrisot, *Un long dimanche de fiançailles: roman* (Paris: Denoël, 1991).
[8] Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (New York: Viking, 1991); *The eye in the door* (New York: Viking, 1993); *The ghost road* (New York: Viking, 1995).
[9] Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).

of questions about the nature of 'collective memory' in the context of twentieth-century warfare. We do not, indeed could not, survey more than a handful of cases drawn from the documentary history of this century. We discuss issues related to the First World War, to the Spanish Civil War, to the Second World War, to the Algerian War, and to the shadows left by each of these conflicts in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. In one volume, little more is possible. If time and space permitted, it would be valuable to examine other instances, covering the globe from China to Armenia to Rwanda to Argentina. Our field of inquiry is limited, and extra-European historians and social scientists have much to add.

There is one set of problems, specifically European, which we do not treat directly, not because it is undocumented or unimportant, but because it is such a special case that it threatens to overshadow all other cases. There is now a huge literature on Germany and the Holocaust, and on German approaches to remembering their war between 1939 and 1945 and on the crimes committed during it.[10] Such commentaries collide with a problem so complex that we believe it is unacceptable simply to lump together the Holocaust and the experience of war in this century. For the history of the Death Camps is the history of industrial murder, remote from war of the kind we consider in chapters on Europe in 1914 to 1918, on Spain in 1936 to 1939, on Algeria in 1954 to 1962, in the Middle East, and so on. We discuss the problem of mass death in Russia in the First World War, in the Civil War, in the Gulag, and in the Second World War, but here too we are remote from the history of the 'Final Solution'.

There is a special danger here. Locating Germany and the Holocaust within the framework we set out is, on the face of it, a challenging assignment. But to do so *here* risks 'historicizing' the Holocaust, making it one more chapter in the history of warfare, akin to the American treatment of Indians or the Japanese rape of Nanking. There are different and violently expressed views on this issue. We would prefer to leave the subject to a separate volume, since its inclusion presents one set of risks, while its exclusion presents another.

[10] Some recent examples are: Ian Buruma, *Wages of guilt. Memories of war in Germany and Japan* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994); Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes (eds.), *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust. The changing situation in West Germany* (London: Holmes & Meier, 1987); Norbert Kampe, 'Normalizing the Holocaust: the recent historians' debate in the Federal Republic of Germany', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 2, 1 (1987), pp. 61–80; Mannfred Henningsen, 'The politics of memory: Holocaust and legitimacy in post-Nazi Germany', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 4, 1 (1989), pp. 15–26; Wolfgang Benz, 'Auschwitz and the Germans: the remembrance of the Genocide', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 8, 1 (1994), pp. 25–40.

We have not ignored these issues entirely. Three of our authors have addressed them: directly, in the chapter on French survivor-'witnesses'; tangentially, in the chapter on German and Italian post-1945 films; and indirectly in the discussion of Walter Benjamin's ambiguous treatment of the 'healing' effects of remembrance; he died, of course, before Auschwitz, but his ideas have a disturbing relevance to the overall subject. Remembrance as a means to healing, Benjamin held, may perpetrate injustice, by covering up crimes and thereby protecting their perpetrators. But those ultimately responsible for his death and those of millions of other Jews in Europe were guilty of a crime so enormous as to demand separate discussion, inquiry, and reflection, and not to be treated as one story among many. If this book stimulates such research, and if the framework of theories of 'collective memory' and 'social agency' proves useful in that inquiry, then the editors and all the contributors will have realized one of the aims of this book.

1 Setting the framework

Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan

Collective remembrance

Collective remembrance is public recollection. It is the act of gathering bits and pieces of the past, and joining them together in public. The 'public' is the group that produces, expresses, and consumes it. What they create is not a cluster of individual memories; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Collective memory is constructed through the action of groups and individuals in the light of day. Passive memory – understood as the personal recollections of a silent individual – is not collective memory, though the way we talk about our own memories is socially bounded. When people enter the public domain, and comment about the past – their own personal past, their family past, their national past, and so on – they bring with them images and gestures derived from their broader social experience. As Maurice Halbwachs put it, their memory is 'socially framed'.[1] When people come together to remember, they enter a domain beyond that of individual memory.

The upheavals of this century have tended to separate individual memories from politically and socially sanctioned official versions of the past. All political leaders massage the past for their own benefit, but over the last ninety years many of those in power have done more: they have massacred it. Milan Kundera tells the story of a photograph of the political leadership of the Czech socialist republic in 1948. One man in the photo was later purged. That individual had been removed from the photograph; all that remained was his hat, in the hands of a surviving colleague.[2] The snapshot – an image of a past event – had been

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For recent elaborations, see Iwona Irwin-Zarecki, *Frames of remembrance: the dynamics of collective memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994); and Peter Burke, 'History as social memory,' in *Memory: history, culture and the mind*, edited by Thomas Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 97–113.

[2] Milan Kundera, *The book of laughter and forgetting* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 3.

reconfigured; those who 'remembered' that the hat had once had a man under it, had to think again.

In many other ways, private and public modes of remembering were severed in the Soviet period. The lies and distortions were terribly visible.[3] To be sure, there were counter-trends. In some authoritarian societies, popular theatre and ceremony played a critical role, especially in bringing women's voices into the chorus of public comment on the past. Because memory can be gendered, women's testimony arises in different places than that of men.[4] But this distinction should not be drawn too sharply. The poetry that Nadezdha Mandelstam memorized, written by her husband Osip Mandelstam, was their joint and precious possession. She stayed alive, she said, to ensure that his voice was not silenced.[5] Others were not so fortunate.

The circulation of fiction was similarly significant in the dark days of dictatorship.[6] Literature played a critical role in keeping collective memory alive in a society where the writing of history was a routine operation dedicated to the glorification of the regime. Not only history, but the names of towns, roads, and the like became mythologized. New toponyms, inspired by the Russian revolution, tended to abolish all diversity, whether regional or cultural. They homogenized the country, shaping it all in the image of the all-powerful centre. In a word, ideology replaced memory by imposing the imaginary notion of a uniform Soviet people. Literature taught otherwise.[7]

Under Fascism or other repressive regimes, the invasion of everyday private life by political agents contaminated memories of mundane events; how to write about family life under such circumstances was a profound challenge. Where 'normality' ended and the monstrous began is a question which may never be answered fully. A similar divide between recollections of the rhythms of daily life under the Nazis – private memories – and 'amnesia' about the disappearance of the Jews has spawned a huge interpretive literature. As Saul Friedlander has observed, 'the Nazi past is too massive to be forgotten, and too repellent to be integrated into the "normal" narrative of memory'.[8] This dilemma

[3] See the discussion in Alain Brossat, Sonia Combe, Jean-Yves Potel, and Jean-Charles Szurek (ed.), *À l'Est la mémoire retrouvée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990).
[4] Elizabeth F. Loftus, Mahzarin R. Banaji, and Rachel A. Foster, 'Who remembers what?: gender differences in memory' *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 1 (1987), pp. 26, 64–85.
[5] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against hope*, trans. by Max Hayward (New York: Athenaeum, 1974).
[6] Andrei Plesu, 'Intellectual life under dictatorship' *Representations*, 49 (1996), pp. 61–71.
[7] Luisa Passerini (ed.), *Memory and totalitarianism*, *International yearbook of oral history and life stories*, vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 'Introduction', p. 13.
[8] Saul Friedlander, *Memory, history, and the extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 2.

has been the subject of entire libraries; it has also informed painting, sculpture, architecture, and other facets of the visual arts.

It would be idle to assume that these problems are restricted to authoritarian regimes. Even the democratic West has had trouble in reconciling its official versions of the past with the memories of millions of ordinary people. This is especially true in the case of that other collective trauma of the twentieth century, that of the two world wars. Of course, the two histories – that of Fascism and communism on the one hand, and of warfare on the other – are inextricably mixed. The shape of 'the short twentieth century'[9] emerged from the catastrophe of the First World War. It is only now in the 1990s, after the collapse of communism, and at a time when the European state system created in 1919 is being reconfigured, that we are able to see clearly some of the fundamental features of this brutal century.

Historians have contributed to public conversations about the recent past. They have helped to organize exhibitions, create museums, and write both for their colleagues and students, as well as for a wider public. But it is important to separate any notion of 'collective memory' from historical knowledge. Collective memory is not what historians say about the past. These professionals try to provide a documentary record of events, but in doing so they almost always depart from private memories. Anyone who has conducted interviews with participants in public events can attest to that. Collective memory is not historical memory, though the two usually overlap at many points. Professional history matters, to be sure, but only to a small population. Collective remembrance is a set of acts which go beyond the limits of the professionals. These acts may draw from professional history, but they do not depend on it.

This is apparent in the uproar that greets some public exhibitions, presenting a narrative which varies from individual recollection, from the official version of events, or offends some particular sensibilities. Collective remembrance is apparently too important a subject to be left to the historians.

This is evident in the way wars have been remembered in public. In all combatant countries there has been a proliferation of monuments, understood as literary, visual, or physical reminders of twentieth-century warfare. Many are self-serving tributes; most go beyond state-sponsored triumphalism to the familial and existential levels where many of the effects of war on the lives of ordinary people reside.

Here too the dialectic between remembering and forgetting is visible,

[9] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The age of extremes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p. 4.

and is especially salient in non-official forms of collective remembrance. This book is intended as a contribution to the history of collective remembrance in the twentieth century. Its focus is on wars, soldiers, and victims of wars in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Its purpose is to examine collective remembrance as the outcome of agency, as the product of individuals and groups who come together, not at the behest of the state or any of its subsidiary organizations, but because they have to speak out.

Why? Here we are at the intersection of private memories, family memories, and collective memories. The men and women whose activity we explore in this book lived through war as trauma, understood as an overwhelming, sustained, and mass experience. Many were in mourning; most were torn by war from one set of daily rhythms and were in search of another. Their decisions to act in public – by creating associations, by writing memoirs, by producing films, by speaking out in a host of ways – were profoundly personal. But they were not only private matters, since they existed in a social framework, the framework of collective action.

This emphasis on agency, on activity, on creativity, highlights a different approach to the cultural history of this century. We too speak of 'collective memory', but depart from those who define it as the property of dominant forces in the state, or of all survivors of war in the privacy of their lives, or as some facet of the mental furniture of a population – what the French like to call their *mentalités*.

Instead, we privilege the term 'collective remembrance'. The primary advantage of this shift in terminology is the avoidance of generalizations which simply cannot be true. The 'collective memory' of war is not what everybody thinks about war; it is a phrase without purchase when we try to disentangle the behaviour of different groups within the collective. Some act; others – most others – do not. Through the constant interrogation of actors and actions, we separate 'collective memory' from a vague wave of associations which supposedly come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned. Given the centrality of the experience of war in this century, we can and must do better than that.

To speak of 'collective remembrance' is to begin that task. Wars, soldiers, and the victims of war have been remembered in ceremony, in ritual, in stone, in film, in verse, in art; in effect in a composite of narratives. All are charged with the weight of the event: twentieth-century warfare is infused with horror as well as honour; the proper balance in representing the two is never obvious.

Those who make the effort to remember collectively bring to the task

their private memories. They also use language and gestures filled with social meaning. But the key mid-point, the linkage that binds their stories and their gestures, between *homo psychologicus* – the man of private memory – and *homo sociologicus* – the man of socially determined memory – is action. *Homo actans* is our subject. He or she acts, not all the time, and not usually through instruction from on high, but as a participant in a social group constructed for the purpose of commemoration. Their efforts are at the heart of this book.

Many different approaches obtain. But one unifying element persists. We stand at a mid-point between two extreme and unacceptable positions in this field: between those who argue that private memories are ineffable and individual, and those who see them as entirely socially determined, and therefore present whether or not anyone acts on them. With Blondel, we urge that such approaches are best located in 'the gallery of useless abstractions'.[10] In between is the palpable, messy activity which produces collective remembrance.

In this as in other areas, agency is arduous. Its opportunity costs – time, money, effort – are substantial. And it rarely lasts. Other tasks take precedence; other issues crowd out the ones leading to public work. And ageing takes its toll: people fade away, either personally or physically. The collective remembrance of past warfare, old soldiers, and the victims of wars is, therefore, a quixotic act. It is both an effort to think publicly about painful issues in the past and one which is bound to decompose over time.

This fading away is inevitable. But the effort to create artefacts or ceremonies in the aftermath of war has been so widespread that it is time to consider them not as reflections of current political authority or a general consensus – although some clearly are one or the other, but rather as a set of profound and evanescent expressions of the force of civil society itself. The history of collective remembrance of wars in this century is infused with both sadness and dignity; an understanding of its contours requires both.

Homo psychologicus

The difficult terrain between individual memories and collective remembrance may be traversed more safely in the light of the findings of two very different communities of scholars. The first studies cognitive psychology; the second, social psychology and patterns of action. Each has much to add to our understanding of remembrance as a social activity.

[10] As cited by Coser in his introduction to Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, p.13.