

## A VERY PROMISING TITLE ... BUT NON-COMPLYING CONTENT

KOCH, Jörg. *Von Helden und Opfern. Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kriegsgedenkens*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013. – 204 S. ISBN 978-3-534-73116-9

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The Darmstadt publishers Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (WBG) brought out Jörg Koch's book *Von Helden und Opfern. Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Kriegsgedenkens* (About Heroes and Victims. A Cultural History of German War Remembrance) in 2013. Koch is known as a historian of Worms (Rheinland-Pfalz), and his last study, published in collaboration with WBG, was devoted to the reception of the 18th-century Jewish banker Joseph Süß Oppenheimer.

The theme that Koch's latest book is devoted to is undoubtedly very interesting, and deserves historical analysis. A public demonstration of relations with those who perished in the war is a cultural phenomenon with especially deep roots. Since the times of Reinhart Koselleck,<sup>1</sup> attempts have been made to give the phenomenon a national perspective in the interpretation of the specificity of the case of Germany. True, Koselleck and his colleagues once approached comparative studies: only a comparison could enable us to answer the question about the uniqueness of the case of Germany. Meanwhile, the author of the reviewed book has avoided a comparative perspective: apparently, the German case was interesting to him *per se*. True, no one would dare to doubt that the memory of wars in the cultures of remembrance and in the German politics of history has played an important role since the establishment of the German Reich in 1871. As is known from previous studies, the remembrance of the wars of German unification contributed to the establishment of the myth of Prussia's German mission, and simultaneously to the legitimisation of the Prussian approach to the unification of Germany. Remembrance of the First World War played a major role in the memorial practices typical of interwar Germany. Remembrance of the Second World War became the principal integral part of the politics of history in West Germany. These and many other phenomena related to war memories have already been analysed in a number of volumes of historical

<sup>1</sup> KOSELLECK, R. Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden. In *Identität, Poetik und Hermeneutik*. Bd. 8. Hrsg. von O. MARQUARD, K. STIERLE. München. 1979, S. 255-275; *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne*. Hrsg. von R. KOSELLECK, M. JESSMANN. München, 1994.

research. Probably the fact that only a few of them were used in the present book accounts for the discrepancy between the very promising title of Koch's work and its content. The study can be assigned to the category of books whose attractive title tempts, and the content disappoints. Even if we understand that Koch's publication was possibly not meant to be another study written 'by researchers for researchers', it is evident that the book is extremely lacking in contextuality and systematisation.

The text, which is likely to have been named after the study by Alexandra Kaiser,<sup>2</sup> consists of an introduction, four chapters and summaries. Chapter 1 describes the memorialisation of the Napoleonic Wars; Chapter 2, expressions of the memories of the wars of 1848, 1864, 1866 and 1870/71; Chapter 3, memorials to those who perished in the First World War; and Chapter 4, memorials to those who perished in the Second World War and its victims. Each chapter starts with brief introductory considerations, and each boasts insertions: short descriptions of individual war memorials, mainly sculptural, but also literary. Probably only the author's sympathies for Worms account for the fact that the memorials in that Rhineland city are given a disproportionate amount of space in the descriptions.

In a practical-cognitive sense, the greatest value of Koch's work is his explanations of the meaning of memorials as elements of the landscape, which, as is rightly pointed out by the author in the Introduction (p. 9), can be found in almost any German city or small town. However, if that was the main idea of the book, the question arises, why did the author concentrate on examples in southern Germany? Another question is: why did he choose to discuss only the part of the examples which no longer exist, or which are generally outside present-day Germany? In that way, the Tannenberg memorial, which is probably the most important First World War-related example of German remembrance and ritualisation of war, appears in Koch's book. When discussing it, the author contents himself with the short statement that it was '*Das einst größte Denkmal für die Gefallenen des Ersten Weltkrieges*' (p. 147), and does not offer a wider context which would emphasise the political significance of the monument, by attempting to show its relation with the cult of Hindenburg by one non-explicated quotation. However, the Neue Wache memorial in the very centre of Berlin, which at one time had the potential to be an alternative to the Tannenberg memorial as a central memorial to the casualties of the First World War, fails to receive more attention from the author for some reason, just like the projects to erect a central monument to those who perished in the First World War in Bad Berka. This proves that the conceptual side of the selection and explanation of the meanings of memorials in Koch's book is not the strongest one.

<sup>2</sup> KAISER, A. *Von Helden und Opfern. Eine Geschichte des Volkstrauertags*. Frankfurt a. M., 2010.

In a conceptual sense, the greatest achievement by the author of the book is the demonstration of the change in meanings of war-related memorials erected in Germany: from the memorials to German deeds and soldiers, to memorials to victims who suffered from the Germans themselves. However, a question still to be posed is whether the German 'remembrance of wars' has been so monolithic and coherent all this time. Maybe the diversity of memories was also previously more pluralistic than the author would believe? Maybe a more detailed analysis of both the sculptural expression of memories, but also of their carriers, would have led to a revision of the principal idea of the book? In the first three chapters, Koch devotes some attention to the role of war veterans, although he manages to do it without any reference to Benjamin Ziemann's research, which would seem indispensable in dealing with this issue. However, the principal question is whether the group of carriers of the war memory has always been limited merely to war veterans? In other words, did the victims whose memories had to be taken account of appear only after the Second World War? I would like to believe that the division of the carriers of war memories into heroes and victims is as old as the memory of war itself. And if the latter had been analysed on the basis of that approach, there would have been no need to create conceptions that at best conveyed the level of the 'politics of history', but hardly conveyed the level of the 'cultures of remembrance' or a level where memories were maintained in a non-institutional way.