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Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*. Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. x + 286 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-674-02206-8

Review by Sanford Gutman, State University of New York (SUNY) at Cortland.

Susan Suleiman, the Dillon Professor of French Civilization and Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, has collected several previously published essays into a new book on memory and World II. While I found many of the essays interesting, as a historian of the Holocaust not steeped in postmodern literary analysis, I also found the book rough going at times and only some of the essays of interest to historians.

In her introduction, Suleiman asks if too much attention has already been paid to individual and collective memory and whether there is a danger that studies of memory are not overwhelming good history. She cites Henry Rousso, whose acclaimed *The Vichy Syndrome*, written in 1987, traced the history of memory of the German occupation in postwar France, but who in more recent years has deplored the obsession with memory and the judaeo-centrism of memories of Vichy. Even more tellingly to this reviewer, Suleiman notes that Charles Maier, a Harvard colleague and prominent historian of twentieth-century Europe, has argued that the current surfeit of memory of World War II and the Holocaust is not only a retreat from transformative politics but also a block to historical understanding. The retriever of memory, according to Maier, seeks emotion, not understanding (pp. 5-6).

Despite these criticisms, Suleiman, of course, comes down on the side of continuing the work of memory. First of all, the individual and collective crises brought on by World War II and the memories of them are understandable and will not go away soon. Whether we like it or not, she argues, we are in an era of witness (p. 8).

The first three chapters examine French memories of the Occupation and the French Resistance. Because these chapters reflect on the connection between individual and collective memory on the one hand and history on the other, these essays may be of most interest to historians. Chapters four and five analyze films by Marcel Ophuls (*Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*) and István Szabó (*Sunshine*) in terms of the role of self-conscious artistry in the role of memory. Chapter six again examines artistic imagination, this time in the literary memoir of Jorge Semprun, a survivor of Buchenwald.

Chapter seven devotes a long discussion to the infamous fake memoir of Benjamin Wilkomirski (*Fragments: Memoirs of a Warsaw Childhood*) and a shorter section to a recent change Elie Wiesel has made in his autobiographical work, *Night*. Despite her relativistic postmodern analysis, Suleiman finds the fraudulent *Fragments* to be unacceptable while she interprets Wiesel's "revised memory" of his train journey to Auschwitz as adding to "Wiesel's and the reader's interpretations of a life-shattering experience...." (p. 176). Wilkomirski's memoirs were a total fraud. He was not a Holocaust survivor and, therefore, he deceived his readers and broke their trust. On the other hand, while Wiesel sanitizes his experience aboard the train in the later edition of *Night* by eliminating the earlier implication of aroused sexuality and "coupling" with a woman, Suleiman argues that this change does not efface the

horror of the train journey to Auschwitz nor alter the status of *Night* as a Holocaust memoir.

Finally, chapters eight and nine offer new essays specific to this book. One is a very interesting, if difficult, discussion of experimental writing by two child survivors. In her final chapter, Suleiman traces philosophical works on the role of forgetting and forgiving as applied to genocide and other collective crimes against humanity.

In her first essay, Suleiman closely analyzes Jean-Paul Sartre's post-war writings on France during the German occupation. Essentially, she concludes that Sartre ironically became the intellectual spokesperson for the Gaullist myth that France was unified in its opposition to the Occupation--ironic because Sartre himself was no *résistant*. After World War II, Charles de Gaulle sought to heal the wounds brought by the German occupation of France by presupposing that the French were unified in opposition to the Germans. Sartre also propagated the myth of French unity in opposition to the Germans but, according to Suleiman, Sartre recognized that French unity could not necessarily be assumed. In a close grammatical analysis of Sartre's work, Suleiman argues that Sartre spoke of "all Frenchmen who said no," not of "all Frenchmen, who said no." That is, Sartre intended to speak of only those who did resist, as opposed to describing all Frenchmen as resisters (pp. 18-19). But rather than blaming or accusing the non-resisters, Sartre apologizes for the inaction of ordinary people by recognizing their suffering during the Occupation and arguing that the ambiguity of the Occupation was even worse than the war, where everyone, at least, was clear about his duty as a man. As a postmodernist literary critic, Suleiman also speaks of the silences in Sartre's writings, and here she has something important to offer to historians. She notes that, like de Gaulle and the French population as a whole, Sartre is silent about the special persecution of the Jews, the Vichy collaborators, the more extreme collaborationists with Germany (who were hardly "marginal" as Sartre implies), and the class divisions within France.

Historians will also be interested in Suleiman's second chapter on the husband-and-wife team of resisters Raymond and Lucie Aubrac, and the postwar Aubrac Affair. The Affair arose during the Klaus Barbie trial in 1987, which was a watershed in French memories about Vichy. Barbie was accused of crimes against humanity for having deported French Jewish children. Barbie's defense attorney, Jacques Vergès, however, sought to turn the focus of the trial from Barbie's crimes against the Jews to his actions against the resistance, especially his responsibility for the arrest and murder of the heroic resistance leader Jean Moulin. By doing so Vergès pointed to divisions among the resisters and to the possible role Raymond Aubrac may have played in turning in Moulin. Until this time the Aubracs had been considered heroes of the resistance and their memoirs were lauded as examples of the heroism of France during the Occupation.

Suleiman analyzes the affair in terms of "narrative desire." On the one hand, there is the desire the French and the Aubracs had for heroic "aggrandizement," and on the other, the desire for narrative coherence and plausibility. Until the mid-1970s few questioned the heroic version of the French during the occupation. But by the mid-1980s, that version of Vichy and the French was under serious revision. Throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, many French intellectuals pointed out the inconsistencies in the Aubracs' accounts of the arrest of Jean Moulin. Narrative plausibility or verisimilitude, Suleiman maintains, became more important. In addition, the public mood in these modern (or postmodern) times seemed to be far more skeptical of heroes and heroism.

To reconcile conflicts in the Aubracs' memoirs and public statements, the daily newspaper *Libération* sponsored a day-long discussion on May 17, 1997. The meeting included the Aubracs and five of the best-known historians specializing on World War II. Unfortunately, the meeting failed to reconcile differing accounts by the Aubracs of the arrest of Jean Moulin, and thus questions remained about the Aubracs' responsibility. Suleiman raises here three kinds of memory: personal, collective or social, and historical (the memory of historians). In part because she believes that the historians at the May 17

meeting disagreed among themselves and only muddled the role of the Aubracs, Suleiman is very skeptical about the value of historical memory, and perhaps of historians. For Suleiman, the affair is far more interesting from a literary and cultural perspective, "because it points up the problematic relations between public and private memory, and between history and fantasy in the construction of both an individual and collective past" (p. 61).

I found chapter three on Jean Moulin and André Malraux of less interest. Suleiman's purpose was "to explore the Moulin-Malraux connection in the context of the politics of national memory in France," as well as what Moulin stood for in the personal memory of Malraux (p. 10). In short, the famed writer and Minister of Culture Malraux delivered the funeral oration at Moulin's "pantheonization" on the steps of the Panthéon on December 19, 1964. By so doing, Malraux and de Gaulle attempted to enshrine the myth of French unity and resistance during the occupation. At the same time, the French National Assembly declared that Nazi crimes against humanity were exempt from the the statute of limitations. This law would have great significance much later in the trials of Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier, and Maurice Papon. Somewhat paradoxically, the French National Assembly also passed a law of amnesty several days later exonerating crimes committed by Frenchmen who opposed Algerian independence. Thus Moulin's interment in the Panthéon sought unsuccessfully, according to Suleiman, to bring unity to Frenchmen at that time. Commemoration ceremonies, therefore, aim not only to seal a particular interpretation of the past but are also intended as a political maneuver for the present (1964). The remainder of the chapter focuses on Malraux himself, suggesting mundanely that Malraux was also mourning the loss of his children and more grandly that "art is more important than politics" (p. 76).

Suleiman's approach emerges most fully in her treatment of film and literature. Her essays on Marcel Ophuls' film *Hotel Terminus* (chapter four), Szabó's film *Sunshine*, the Buchenwald memoirs of Jorge Semprun (chapter six), and the experimental writing of two child survivors (chapter eight) are subjected to thorough postmodern, including Freudian, analyses. Suleiman uses the Freudian concept of "working through," much in vogue these days among postmodernists discussing the Holocaust, to anchor her discussion of both Marcel Ophuls' treatment of "The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie" in his film *Hotel Terminus* and in the Buchenwald memoirs of Jorge Semprun. "Working through," according to Suleiman, is Freud's expression for overcoming resistance to difficult material. Ophuls apparently "worked through" the difficulties of being a documentary filmmaker who put himself and his emotions into the film by making his own fears, angers, and prejudices visible. Suleiman calls these moments of self-representation "*expressionist moments*." Suleiman interprets Semprun's three different versions of his memories of registration at Buchenwald as another example of "working through" his traumatic experiences. As Suleiman puts it, "continuous revision is the literary performance of the working through of trauma, a performance that Semprun's Buchenwald memoirs enact brilliantly" (p. 158).

Several times, Suleiman expresses her view that literature and literary analysis are superior to historical works and analysis. This view comes through especially in her treatment of the experimental writers of what she calls the 1.5 generation (chapter eight). These are writer-survivors who experienced the trauma of the Holocaust as children, frequently in hiding. The two writers she discusses, Georges Perec and Raymond Federman, wrote experimental novels that are very difficult to follow for the uninitiated. Suleiman explains their writings in terms of the theoretical approach of "preterition, the self-contradictory figure of approach and avoidance, affirmation and negation, amnesia and anamnesis (lifting of repression)" (p. 206). She calls this generation undertheorized and believes that their bewilderment and helplessness is best expressed through individual, literary representation, not history or raw testimony. The "privileging of the literary ... produces the most complex understandings of self and world, both on the part of the writer and on that of the readers" (p. 183).

Suleiman concludes her book with an original essay on "Amnesia and Amnesty: Reflections on Forgetting and Forgiving." She has already reminded us that history and philosophy are among her

avored, if secondary, interests and in this essay she traces the philosophical approaches to forgetting and forgiving. This chapter is only loosely related to early chapters, the hinge being the issue of memory. Although she does not directly connect her discussion to the Holocaust, the association is obvious. Do the benefits for public harmony of forgetting, even forgiving, for living individuals and societies outweigh the dangers? Are some actions unforgivable, and therefore unforgettable? Suleiman's conclusion ("forgetting without amnesia, forgiving without effacing the debt one owes to the dead") is not altogether satisfying (p. 232). She herself acknowledges that these are uncomfortable positions to struggle with, both for individuals and societies. Still, her analytical survey of historical and philosophical treatments of amnesia and amnesty are useful.

In its relatively recent history, French governments have twice argued that amnesty was best for healing the country. In 1900, the government obtained an amnesty for all Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards who broke the law during the Affair. Again in the 1950s, France voted amnesties for collaborators under the German occupation--though the worst offenders were tried and punished immediately after the war. The reasoning was that France needed to heal and move on. But as Suleiman points out, Emile Zola protested that healing could not take place by burying embarrassing questions, thus showing a good understanding of the "'return of the repressed,' before Freud had put it in currency" (p. 218). In *The Vichy Syndrome*, Henry Rousso argued that amnesties for the collaborators during World War II hampered the nation's "work of mourning" and inhibited historians from critically investigating Vichy. Of course, neither amnesty curbed the disagreements between Right and Left. Amnesty thus, according to Suleiman, prevented the working through of a painful history and later led to the "return of the repressed" (pp. 220-221).

Still, Suleiman acknowledges that there can be an abuse of memory that inhibits a society from moving on. She cites the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa as one model for requiring the disclosure of crimes in order for reconciliation and amnesty, and eventual, genuine forgetting, if not forgiving, to take place. While Suleiman believes that this is a step in the right direction, she is not sure that it will work for memories and past histories that are too painful, too present, to let go of.

Many theorists link "moving forward" to forgiving. Suleiman cites Hannah Arendt to argue for the necessity of forgiveness over vengeance. It is impossible for human beings to undo what has been done. Therefore, according to Arendt, as long as the individual acknowledges his or her crime and asserts that he would undo it if he could, then the crime would qualify for forgiveness or punishment (which is not the same as vengeance). But even Arendt acknowledges that radical evil, like the Nazi crimes, can be neither punished nor forgiven; in later writings, however, notably on the Eichmann trial, she calls for international tribunals to punish crimes against humanity. In his magisterial work on memory and history, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paul Ricoeur agrees with Arendt that forgiveness must be preceded by the wrongdoer's recognition of guilt, but argues that we must separate the agent from his act and recognize that the guilty one is capable of something other than his crimes. Remember and decry the act, but forgive the individual as long as he acknowledges his crimes (pp. 217, 227-231). Although Suleiman ends with Ricoeur, it is not clear to me whether she agrees with him.

While Professor Suleiman has given me much to think about in these essays, I could not help but be skeptical of some of her postmodern analyses. To me, her discussion included too much jargon and too many doubtful postmodern inferences. As a historian, I am also not convinced that fiction and literary analyses provide the best path to understanding World War II and the Holocaust. Finally, while Suleiman offers up an interesting selection of her postmodern approach and tries hard to unite the chapters under common themes, even insightful, discrete essays do not necessarily make a book.

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