

European Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ERW>

Additional services for *European Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



***Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memories* Machteld Venken Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2011**

Anne Buttimer

European Review / Volume 20 / Issue 04 / October 2012, pp 563 - 565

DOI: 10.1017/S1062798712000130, Published online: 04 September 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1062798712000130

How to cite this article:

Anne Buttimer (2012). Review of Machteld Venken 'Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memories' European Review, 20, pp 563-565 doi:10.1017/S1062798712000130

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Book Reviews

doi:10.1017/S1062798712000130

Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memories

Machteld Venken

Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2011

The Second World War caused 20 million people to leave their homes. Many of these displaced persons (DPs) did not return to their previous homes but rather migrated to the West. Belgium hosted 20,000 people, mostly miners. Like Holocaust survivors, DPs were often overlooked in official national narratives on war memory because they were considered to be foreign in their host nation states, and/or betrayers of the communist idea in the regions from which they had come.

This book examines the experiences of two specific groups of post-war migrants: 350 former Allied Polish soldiers, and 4000 formerly Soviet women who were engaged as guest workers within the Nazi domain (*Ostarbeiterinnen*). Individuals from both groups married Belgian citizens and settled down. Qualitative methods are used to elicit insight into both the war experiences and war memories of a small sample of 12 individuals from each group. Interviews and encounters, and a careful listening to individual and group stories and lyrics were complemented by scrutiny of archival and literary sources. The central hypothesis is that the geo-political contexts of ‘home’ and ‘host’ societies, their interactions over time, and especially the changes in geopolitical frameworks following the demise of communism played a determining role in the construction and articulation of war memories. Key dynamics in these stories are presented in terms of the interactions among ‘agencies’ (the dominant voices in the cultural field of war memory) within ‘arenas’, which have different forms, depending on the power dynamics between the various agencies. The outcomes of negotiation in arenas differ, given the fact that power relations and acts of articulation are situational.

The book is organized in three parts. Part One: ‘Constructing War Memories’ devotes a chapter each to the group formation process and the construction of group memories within the two migration streams. Part Two: ‘Performing Group Memories’ looks at performances in ‘arenas’ where immigrant groups gathered, e.g. the yearly commemorations at the Polish war cemetery in Lommel (the Flemish Campines) where 257 soldiers of this division were buried, and the weekly choir rehearsals and concerts of the *Ostarbeiterinnen* (SSP/SSG) in Antwerp. Both provided insight into ways in which memories of

individual members interplayed with group memories and exerted an identifying function. Part Three: 'Trauma in Group Memories' highlights memories of troublesome war experiences. The collapse of communism was decisive for the articulation of troublesome war memories: it triggered a shift away from formerly politically-inspired narratives to stories of trauma and victimhood that were largely silent during the Cold War era. The conclusion highlights the most important findings of the research and seeks to place them within a broader framework of historiography and migration research. Appendices contain information about the interviewees and the song lyrics and music recorded during the project.

What the study reveals convincingly is that the processes of giving meaning to war experiences of former Allied soldiers from Poland and former *Ostarbeiterinnen* vary considerably. Each ended up in a very different refugee world. Various factors, such as war experiences, migration policy and naturalisation policy form a framework of (sometimes) contradicting possibilities that often turned out to be better for the former Allied soldiers from Poland. They enjoyed an advantageous situation that shut the door to expulsion, whereas the former *Ostarbeiterinnen* were faced with a disadvantageous discrepancy of Belgian and Soviet laws and could not always escape repatriation. One hundred and sixty-six former Allied soldiers from Poland lobbied to become remembered within Belgium as Catholic, brave Polish soldiers who liberated Flanders but unfortunately lost the Second World War and were betrayed by communism. *Ostarbeiterinnen* only rarely spoke up publicly, and then often to defend themselves against being negatively stereotyped as war whores or communists. The opportunity structure within Belgium therefore offered appealing affirmations to dominant war memory narratives as articulated by former Allied soldiers from Poland, but not to the narratives of *Ostarbeiterinnen* (who were more dominated by agencies from Soviet sources, which insisted on the official Soviet narrative on the Second World War). The close cooperation between the Soviet Consulate, the 'Motherland' Organisation, and the Association for Soviet Patriots (later SSP/SSG) was antithetical to the building of democratic organisations or to the development of a distinctive group narrative on war memory.

Insights from the empirical studies are fascinating. Central concerns in the book, too, appear to be on conceptual matters – emphasis throughout lies on historiography and the paradigm changes that have occurred in migration research in the aftermath of the Cold War and the demise of communism. This work indeed offers a major contribution to migration research and 'memory' studies. Traditionally, migration studies have tended to focus either on official memory politics or on oral testimonies. Post-war migration experiences were mostly described in Cold War terms, with an Atlantic World on one side, and the Iron Curtain and Warsaw Pact countries on the other. Host societies on both sides were regarded as homogeneous and the challenge of accommodating immigrants was construed as one of 'integration'. The Western world was eager to equate communism with Nazism and denounced this new but similar form of totalitarianism, whereas behind the Iron Curtain, it was stressed that the Soviets' concern for peace, brilliantly displayed through the Soviet Union's participation in the defeat of the fascist Nazi regime, had now been forgotten by Great Britain and America. The Soviet

Union tried to impose its war memory on all its satellite states, but did not succeed in doing this in Poland. Following the collapse of communism a major paradigm shift occurred in migration research: one from society to memory. The repressed memories of many war survivors came to the fore. The glasnost era also witnessed serious questioning of the anti-fascist narrative. In 1988, liberal dissidents set up a movement entitled 'Memorial' to awaken public interest in the Second World War and Soviet 'repression'.

This book also traces how historical accounts of migration indeed changed dramatically in the late 1980s. In the West, there has been not only a revival of the (Barth) theory of ethnic identification as socially constructed, and visions of society as culturally diverse, but also a new openness to individual and collective 'memory'. The paradigm of 'memory' invited exploration into ways whereby war experiences were forged into narratives on war memory and ways whereby these narratives were selected for representation in the public sphere. Much of this change, incidentally, is ascribed to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The in-depth study of Polish soldiers and *Ostarbeiterinnen* revealed how the narratives of the two focused groups changed when war history was re-interpreted through the perspective of a different geopolitical framework after the collapse of communism.

Straddling the Iron Curtain? offers an eminently readable text. Repetitious at times, it is generally evocative. Readers might, however, wish to know more about Belgium as a 'host' society for these two groups. While interviewees were encouraged to speak in their own vernacular languages, it is not clear what language was used in the overall project. The empirical evidence comes mainly from Flanders. Only two interviews were conducted in Wallonia. Belgium has an extremely strict policy on the formalisation of immigrant organizations – only those within which at least three-fifths of the active members held Belgian citizenship are recognized. But how have the differential experiences of immigrant groups influenced the apparent intransigence of Flemish and Walloon within the country called Belgium?

A Swedish proverb for scholarship declares that it is more important to whet the appetite rather than satisfy it. In this sense, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?* does play an impressive scholarly role.

Anne Buttimer

School of Geography, Planning & Environmental Policy

University College Dublin

Dublin

Email: anne.buttimer@ucd.ie