

History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis. Paul A. Cohen. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780231166362

What is the relationship between memory and the present? How is history mediated by popular narrative to shape human action in the world? Why do people turn to specific stories about the past at various times? These are the questions that Paul A. Cohen sets out to examine in *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis*.

Cohen approaches the topic through a comparative framework, taking up six case studies, each an instance in which a particular popular narrative about the past takes on new importance in time of crisis. The first two chapters examine cases in which historical military defeats are invoked by nationalist forces as rallying cries for the present—the 1389 battle of Kosovo within Serbian nationalism and the story of Masada in Zionist thought and Israeli nationalism. The next two chapters cover the role of two very different historical figures in public memory—King Goujian in Nationalist China and Joan of Arc in France. The final chapter details storytelling through film in the context of World War II—the Soviet film *Alexander Nevsky* and Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V*.

The book’s strongest chapter is undoubtedly that on King Goujian in the Chinese context. Cohen, a historian of China who has written a book on Goujian, provides both a detailed summary of the story and a sufficient historical context for the reader to understand its role in early 20th century China. Here we see not just a general link between historical memory and nationalist action, but a well fleshed out account of how the Goujian story affected nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, acting as a source of inspiration and a “guide to proper thinking” (86). The chapter also describes in some detail how different elements of the story became emphasized as the needs of the present changed.

This work on King Goujian highlights Cohen’s most useful arguments. He contends that the presence of identifiable, human individuals in historical stories is a major reason for their salience. These human characters supply “cognitive models” for individuals and groups in the present (203-4). Cohen further usefully concludes that the power of stories is “derived from their capacity to speak metaphorically to what was happening” and that “the right story” enables “people to see through the clutter of their everyday lives and recognize what is truly important to them at a particular historical moment” (204).

These insights are of some use in thinking through the complex relationship between past, memory, and popular narratives, and their influence on the present. Ultimately, however, these conclusions raise more questions than *History and Popular Memory* can answer.

The chapter on King Goujian provides an effective argument because it is layered with sufficient context and evidence. The other case studies, unfortunately, are not so detailed. In part this is a

problem of scope: six examples in five chapters leaves little room to each individual story, rendering the broad based comparison less useful than a more modest one might.

But problems also arise because *History and Popular Memory* is under-theorized in several respects. There is little engagement with literatures—historical, anthropological, literary or otherwise—on the relationship between history, narrative, memory, and the world of the present.

In particular, cultural difference is not accounted for sufficiently. Too little is done to fill the reader in on the role that narrative played in a given culture context—surely, story cannot be expected to work the same way in France as in Soviet Russia, in Israel as in China. Yet rather than search for cultural particularities, Cohen seeks to naturalize the relationship between history, narrative, and the present. Citing psychologist Jerome Bruner’s claim that the “human” predilection to story is a “seemingly innate addiction” and product of “biological evolution” (203), Cohen argues that “members of a national community instinctively turn to certain kinds of stories” (206).

But there is nothing “instinctive” about the turn to historical narrative. Cohen’s own evidence shows that story is often complicit in constituting “the nation” in first place (e.g. in his Serbian and Israeli examples) Further, his case studies illustrate how stories are often highly mediated by political or literary elites—from nationalist poets to Soviet dictators. Indeed, contrary to its central claims, the book’s evidence overwhelmingly indicates that, far from natural, innate, or instinctual, popular historical narratives are culturally specific and historically contingent.

Falling short of its aim to draw broad conclusions from across contexts, *History and Popular Memory* might still be read as a more modest look at popular nationalist narrative. Indeed, though they may appear widely diverse, each of the book’s six case studies are variations on a similar theme: the nationalist historical narrative backed by some form of state power.

This aspect of the project falters too, however, because *History and Popular Memory* focuses almost exclusively on elite political discourse. We learn a great deal about literary and artistic figures who produce national narratives, and more about the political elites who back such productions. But popular consciousness itself is portrayed as a rather passive recipient of story. In short, we learn some of what King Goujian meant to Chiang Kai-shek, Joan of Arc to de Gaulle, and Nevsky to Stalin, but little or nothing about how the followers (or any other non-elite actors) of those great political figures received the stories pushed upon them by the forces of nationalism.

This curious absence of “the popular” in *History and Popular Memory* results in a serious weakness in the analysis of nationalist historical narratives. Take, for example, Cohen’s chapter on the film *Alexander Nevsky*. Cohen notes that by backing the film Stalin invoked the Czarist legend Alexander Nevsky, rather than working-class, Soviet mythology he had done so much to propagate earlier (207). Cohen acknowledges a key point here: that the example shows how

culture and popular consciousness acted as conditions of possibility for nationalist narratives, even in their most top-down manifestations.

This observation would suggest that an understanding of nationalist historical narrative is analytically impossible without a detailed consideration of the popular discourse it takes place within. Unfortunately, no such analysis is attempted in *History and Popular Memory*. Intriguingly, Cohen utilizes a much more complex analysis of popular discourse in his earlier works on China, with many productive conclusions (see, for example, his work on King Goujian in *Speaking to History* and his treatment of the Boxers in *History in Three Keys*). It is disappointing that a similar scrutiny could not be brought to bear on the case-studies treated here.

The real issue here may lie with the very focus on crisis as the subject of study. Through that focus Cohen proves a limited point: in times of great distress nationalist movements seize on history and that the stories these regimes tell may have great popular resonance. Yet the book treats this observation as a closed conclusion, rather than an open provocation for further examination. Read in a different light, we might see that the question of crisis distorts the whole picture of popular historical narrative, by tangling together the categories of popular and nationalist memory exactly where they should be picked apart. How might the picture shift if we approached the notion of “crisis” in more nuanced form: as economic or social or ecological, for example—as crisis that exists alongside the nation state and beyond it? How might we consider memory as separate from (though related to) nationalist narrative? Indeed, one suspects that it is precisely in the non-elite, non-state, every-day orientation to the past that may be found the most important example of “the power of story in history.”

Alex Steele is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at the University of Minnesota