



Review of *Guerres et Témoignages de Guerres*, edited by Pascaline Lefort and Christophe Rey

Souad BAGHLI BERBAR

University of Tlemcen

LLC Research Lab

Lefort, Pascaline and Rey, Christophe (eds) (2021). *Guerres et Témoignages de Guerres*. Limoges : Editions Lambert-Lucas in collaboration with University of Picardie – Jules Vernes, CURAPP and Institut universitaire de France. 224 pages. ISBN : 978-2-35935-333-4.

This multidisciplinary collection gathers authors from such various horizons as linguistics, history, literature, social and political sciences, to investigate notions of witnesses and war testimonies during the war and post-war times of the twentieth century, not only the two World Wars but also conflicts such as the Mexican revolution and the Korean war. It is the outcome of a two-day conference on “Wars and Testimonies” organized in 2014 at the University of Picardie as part of the centennial commemorations of WWI. The collective work opens with a preface by Armel Huet who bridges the gaps between inner and outer visions of the wars, drawing on the outsider’s commentary as well as the fighter’s own experience of the battles. She cites Francis Bacon when he asserts that “evidence is an antidote to the poison of testimony” and explores the challenges posed by war testimonies of both agents and victims, in their direct and indirect, civilian and military forms, evoking the liberating power of such testimonials.

The thirteen articles are divided into two periods, following the chronology of the conflicts of the twentieth century. The first article by Marie-Françoise Lemonnier-Delpy considers the genre of the “memorial-novel”, half-fiction, half-fact, where the duty of testimony concurs with the feeling of guilt at survival when so many have died, conjuring the myths and interrogating the future. Alexandre Lafon deals with the first-hand denunciations of the absurdity and violence of the war and its militarism in the notebooks of the soldiers who fought the First World War and, with contradictory feelings and attitudes, realized that they were making and writing History. The diaries of two women from the Vosges about the German occupation of their region is the focus of Philippe Nivet who sheds light on the popular habit of journal-keeping by ordinary individuals and its importance in times of war to express the complex relations between the occupier and the occupied. Laurence Boudart centers her contribution on Louis Boumal, victim of the Spanish flu before the end of the war, who narrates his daily war experience interspersed with poems and even a play, wavering from testimony to fiction. Loredana Trovato paradoxically uses laughter and amusement to qualify the war testimonials found in the newspapers of the trenches where the soldier-journalist has used the rhetoric of irony and puns as well as fables in the discourse of propaganda. She sheds light on the caricatures and comical testimonies of the war, illustrating with pictures from those newspapers. Kevin Perromat takes us to the Mexican contemporary war against narco-traffickers to evoke the Mexican revolution and its coverage as well as the phenomena of (self)censorship, manipulation and propaganda and their evolution in war historiography.

The second half of the twentieth century and its conflicts constitute the second part of this collection where Vincent Dupont addresses the testimonies of French soldiers of various ranks who fought World War II and examines their different forms, from diaries and notebooks written on the spot to memoirs composed later in their lives, thus offering multiple visions of this conflict, even leading to a “war of memories”. Elouan Rochcongar chooses to delve into a controversial aspect of war testimonials, that of indicting the “collaborators” or French traitors who sided with Germany, and to study documents of spontaneous denunciations as well as interrogations and judicial testifying. Mahé Ben Hamed, on her part, seeks to identify the memory dynamics in the testimonials of Shoah victims and trace the processes of traumatic remembering as tri-dimensional topography in relation to cognitive psychology, analysing the lexical composition of the thematic classes found in those testimonies where the individual melts into the collective Jewish people. A similar endeavour is undertaken by Pascaline Lefort who focuses on the language contacts in the survivors’ testimonies and enquires about the violence of the concentration camps and the reconstruction of a lost identity. The repetitions, glozing and brooding, far from imprisoning the deported in his pain, allow him to vent his suffering by expressing it in his mother tongue and ultimately freeing himself from it.

In the same vein, but by using a novel rather than autobiographies, Latifa Sari explores the journey into the horror of the concentration camps through the double narrative employed by Boualem Sansal in *Le Village de l’Allemand*. Fiction can contribute to a better understanding of the dark reality of such crimes against humanity by focusing on feelings and imagination without transgressing the truth of the camps and their traumatic load. She shows how the two personal diaries that form the novel intersect to cover several settings during the whole of the twentieth century until the 1990s, moving from France and Germany to Algeria and as far as Turkey and Egypt, by blending the individual and the intimate with the collective and the Historical. Laurent Quisefit takes us even further in space and time by analysing the discourse, distance and contaminations through the witnesses and testimonies of the Korean war in its French episode. To the archives and official documents are added testimonials that confirm and often contradict them, where the individual memories of the conflict are contaminated by collective remembrance and common existence, leading to uncertainty and even creating legends like the figure of doctor-commander Jean-Louis.

The part of subjectivity is unavoidable when narrating war experiences which are inherently impossible to transmit, as the past can only be comprehended through the lives, voices and memories of the witnesses. Hence, the collected works explore, each in its particular way, how wars reveal the mysteries of human behaviour in traumatic situations and the duty of putting them into words by their witnesses for posterity.