

## Review - Memory and Trauma in International Relations

Written by Aline Sierp

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ALINE SIERP, APR 18 2014

Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates  
Edited by: Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte  
London and New York: Routledge, 2014

Traditionally, memory and trauma are topics explored by psychologists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists. As a result, there are very few works investigating the international political dimension of suffering, forgetting, remembering and memorializing traumatic events. The volume *Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases and Debates*, edited by Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte and published by Routledge in 2014, is one of those remarkable exceptions. The declared aim of the two editors is to provide a comprehensive and accessible survey of the international dimension of trauma and memory, and its manifestations in various cultural contexts. The collected texts thus do not only offer an overview of the social, political and ethical implications of forgetting and remembering traumatic events, but also explore to what extent they influence and are influenced by norms, identities and interests in world politics.

The book is divided into two sections (Part I and Part II). The first part covers different theoretical approaches and debates in seven chapters; the second part provides a large number of case studies, most of them from lesser studied cultural contexts, including the global south. The volume opens with a discussion of how ontological security treatments have understood and located trauma, memory and social change in the ontological security process. The second chapter focuses on the theoretical debates that have arisen around the practices and processes of transitional justice, while the third one explores the political linkages between trauma, memory and apologies. The impact of trauma and historical memory on a nation's foreign policy-making is surveyed in chapter four, chapter five discusses how natural disasters can trigger social change and chapter six investigates how the biomedical conception of trauma presented by different international organisations have influenced reconciliation and post-conflict scenarios. The final chapter of the first part examines the social and political implications of truth-seeking processes after traumatic events and crises.

The following seven chapters in Part II delve deeply into the question of how traumatic events are experienced and memorialized in different cultural contexts. They also explore various non-territorial spaces of memory. The focus seems to be not necessarily on surveying different measures of transitional justice, but rather on understanding the processes behind the construction of group identities. Case studies cover the Haitian politics of trauma that are framed in terms of technology of power; the exploration of how traumatic memories are adopted by different actors in order to shape national identity in Turkey; the investigation of the struggle of Germany's Green Party to react to changing international norms that led to a general reinterpretation of the past; the examination of the creation of transnational traumatic memory based on the experience of deportation under Soviet occupation in Lithuania; the description of social ontologies and the traumatic impact of thwarted political change in Nicaragua; the analysis of the effects of testimonialization practices on arms control and disarmament; and the importance of memory in the politics of climate change.

By highlighting the international dimension of memory and by surveying different increasingly denationalized measures in policy-making, all authors are proposing a significantly broader definition of transitional justice than most existing literature. The volume thus effectively challenges traditional nation-centred accounts of memory construction.

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Traumas and memories are understood as 'sites of intense contestations' (p. 10) in international politics. Throughout the volume they are conceptualized as 'sensitizing concepts' (p. 8) whose investigation allows for a better understanding of political change. In focusing on the question of how memory is invented, created and re-created by different memory actors in inter-state relations, all authors propose an actor-centred approach, placing the investigation of memory firmly within an IR framework.

The investigation of the various intersections of trauma and memory in IR is certainly novel and innovative. The selected case studies investigate the workings of trauma in transitional justice from unusual angles, introducing a fresh approach to the study of memory. In particular, the attempt to trace the different theoretical debates in IR, transitional justice and memory studies is very laudable. What the volume unfortunately fails to do is to propose a coherent research agenda. The division into a theoretical and a practical part seems slightly artificial as almost all authors start their chapter by first constructing a theoretical framework, before illustrating their particular case studies in significant detail. Drawing from a large number of different examples, it remains furthermore slightly unclear what the exact overall objective of the volume is: is it supposed to enrich the study of identity constructions? Shall it illustrate the international dimension of traumatic memory? Does it want to provide new insights into topics such as nationalism, transitional justice and reconciliation at both the national and the supranational level? This is not clarified by the editors in their introduction and remains hazy throughout the volume.

Yet, in bringing together scholars from different parts of the world and embracing a variety of theoretical approaches, Erica Resende's and Dovile Budryte's book will enrich the debate on trauma and memory in IR, raising new questions about the impact of forgetting and remembering traumatic events in world politics.

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### About the author:

**Aline Sierp** is a Lecturer in European Studies at Maastricht University (NL). She holds a PhD in Comparative European Politics and History from the University of Siena (IT). Before joining the University of Maastricht, Aline Sierp worked as researcher at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site (DE). She is the author of *History, Memory and Transeuropean Identity: Unifying Divisions* (Routledge, 2014) and has published on collective memory, questions of identity and European integration.