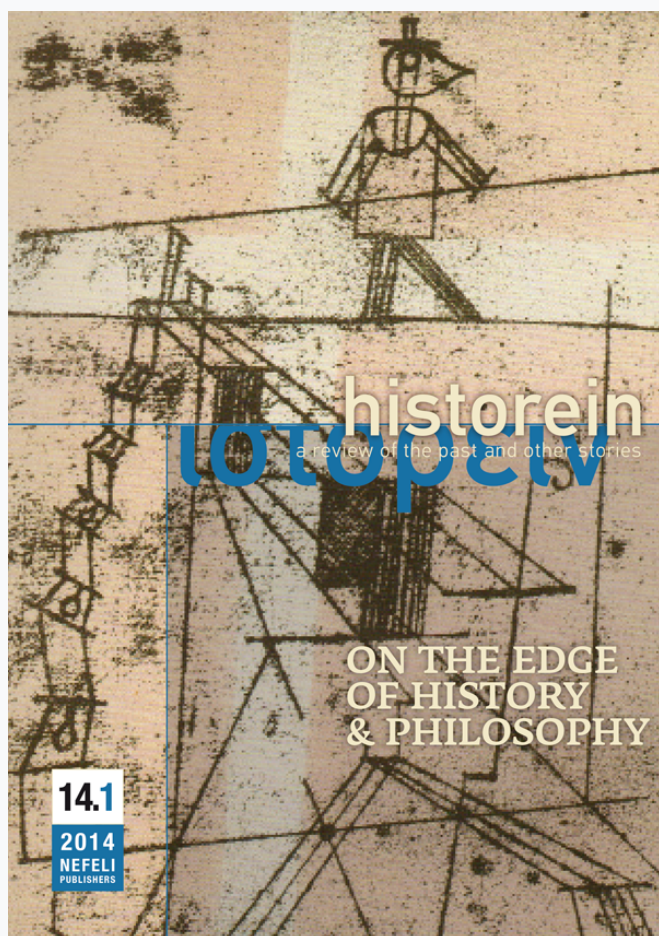


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On the Edge of History and Philosophy



Review of O. Varon-Vassard's Η ανάδυση μιας δύσκολης μνήμης. Κείμενα για τη γενοκτονία των Εβραίων [The emergence of a difficult memory: Texts on the genocide of the Jews]

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question is whether an integrative narrative of the Holocaust, one including a formal historical narrative focusing on “what really happened”, can be combined with a narrative, in whatever form, which accommodates the voice of the victims. Is it possible that, as Marc Nichanian suggests,¹ the archive enables the negation of genocides because the genocidal will, which erases all traces of its murderous actions, is confident that historical adjudication based on the archive alone for the confirmation of documentary evidence will always leave enough room for non-decidability. If there are no documents, then there is no proof for the intentions and machinations of the genocidal will, even if the testimonies of survivors are available but unable to testify to that. If history demands proof and the archive does not hold this kind of evidence, then the genocide did not happen. I am not certain whether I can follow this line of argumentation, which is fostered by the denial of the Armenian genocide, though I admit that I find it forceful. As a critique of history, it raises the question of whether this discipline can integrate the voice of the victims, which is not always consistent or reasonable, or will it always be in the business of rationalising the past, thus leaving outside of the archive everything that resists rationalisation. But if history cannot integrate the voices of the victims of limit events, if the discipline of the archive cannot grasp the desperation of victimhood, then maybe a historically and philosophically informed art can.

NOTE

- 1 Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion*, New York: Columbia UP, 2009.

Odette Varon-Vassard

*Η ανάδυση μιας δύσκολης μνήμης:
Κείμενα για τη γενοκτονία των Εβραίων*

**[The emergence of a difficult memory:
Texts on the genocide of the Jews]**

Athens: Estia, 2013 (2nd rev. ed.). 230 pp.

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This book is a compilation of 19 essays – two more than in the first edition – that the author produced in the course of approximately two decades in the form of scholarly articles, book presentations, seminar papers and public interventions. They reflect the process of scholarly research on Jewish history and Holocaust history in Greece as well as the author’s critical reflections on these topics.

The book is structured around a number of broad themes, including the various histories of the Jewish communities in Greece, the history and memory of the genocide of the Greek Jews, genocide testimonies, and literary and filmic representations of the Holocaust. The author opts for the term “genocide” to refer to the mass destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis, noting the religious underpinnings of the term “holocaust” which are connected to notions of voluntary sacrifice. This is, of course, a succinct and convincing argument, although the term “holocaust” has been established in various contexts in recent decades and stands as a generic term for a formative event. In this sense, we should perhaps take into account its current uses as well as its detachment from earlier connotations.

The book focuses particularly on the ways and the various reasons the genocide of the

Jews was silenced in Greece for a considerably long period, stretching from the 1950s to the 1980s, while it also discusses how Jewish pasts, histories and experiences, as well as the history of the Jewish genocide, emerged in the form of a “difficult memory” in recent decades. Antisemitism, the particularities of hegemonic versions of national identity primarily related to Orthodox Christianity, the impact of the Greek civil war and subsequent turbulence in politics, but also trauma among the Jewish communities, are touched on. Moreover, the author turns her attention to the “coming out” of Jewish and Holocaust history in Greece. In this context, the book explores current forms of representing the Holocaust in Greece, including historiography, testimonies, literature and film, as well as translated works of important authors such as Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún and Jean Améry, examining their significance and impact. By placing its themes within a wider frame that includes Holocaust representations in France and the USA, the book offers invaluable insights into the particularities of the Greek context within Jewish and Holocaust studies. It is also important that the book touches on critical topics such as the memory boom, revisionist debates with regard to the Holocaust, the significance of testimonies and oral evidence in history, historical traumas, painful pasts, history and subjectivity.

The author’s essay on “The genocide of Greek Jews (1943–1944) and its depiction in testimonies, literature and historiography” is an invaluable source of information on the silences surrounding the Jewish genocide as well as on the gradual emergence of both scholarly and public history on the genocide. The first publications of survivors’ testimonies, edited by Fragiskí Abatzopoulou, as well as the committed and pioneering work of the Society for the Study of Greek Jewry, from the early 1990s, played a prominent part in the “coming

out” of the complex and diverse Jewish histories, including Romaniote/Sephardi as well as Jewish Greek experiences. In addition to this informed and important essay, the volume is also complemented by other articles focusing on particular aspects of the Jewish presence in Greece, particularly in the city of Thessaloniki, and on Holocaust remembrance.

Apart from the volume’s significance for the study of Jewish history, as well as for the study of Holocaust remembrance within a particular national context, there are also other issues which deserve the readers’ attention. Varon-Vassard neither subscribes to the Holocaust’s “aestheticisation” and “moralisation” nor to “Holocaust exclusivism”, or even to “Jewish exclusivism”. She carefully examines the “duty to memory” outside the confines of “sacralisation” and reflects on the political logic of this duty as well as on the necessity of a critically informed public memory of the Holocaust. Moreover, the author succinctly points to the complexities of Jewish identity/ies in Greece and the long processes of the construction of “nationalised Jewishness” in this particular context. In this direction, it would have been useful, perhaps, if the book also examined nation-transcending dynamics with reference to identity formation – including diasporic and transnational “Greek Jewishness”. Finally, the author points to the need to revisit the Holocaust/resistance nexus in Greek history by questioning the stereotype of “Jewish passivity”.

This is an important work on Jewish and Holocaust history and memory inside and outside a national context, which not only contributes to our better understanding of past and present processes but also offers important insights for advancing historical research. It is a welcome contribution to contemporary critical historical thinking around burning issues regarding painful and silenced pasts.