



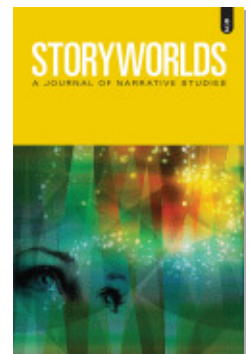
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History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis by Paul A. Cohen (review)

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Book Review

Paul A. Cohen, *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis*

Reviewed by Jessica Harrell

While analyzing the power of story is not a new project, in *History and Popular Memory* Paul Cohen considers the historical significance of stories, focusing on stories that shaped political action during times of crisis. He urges historians to take a closer look at stories in popular memory because, as he ultimately argues, stories from the past have the potential to reemerge and affect the present. “The power of story,” Cohen writes, “so common and yet so poorly understood, merits far more scrutiny than it has generally received from historians” (2014: xiii). Beyond the call for more awareness of a story’s potential in popular memory, Cohen’s book contributes to other work on collective or public memory as it skillfully chronicles ancient stories that prevailed through history, resurfacing to shape later action for entire groups of people. Furthermore, he highlights the interconnectedness of history and memory, affirming Pierre Nora’s claim that where history organizes the past, memory brings the events of the past into the present, often in strategic ways.

Much of Cohen's book, which pleasantly reads more like a book of short stories than a historical record, details the roots and evolution of the stories he examines. The book effectively outlines four cases that illustrate the transformative power of story in times of crisis: the Battle of Kosovo for the Serbs, Masada for the Jews, the downfall and eventual success of Goujian for the Chinese, and Joan of Arc for the French. Cohen also describes two films based on historical figures used as propaganda during World War II—Alexander Nevsky and Henry V. For each of the cases, Cohen describes the historical event the story is based on, sketches the historical record, identifies the shift from story to myth, and explains how the story was used as propaganda in response to specific moments of crisis. This framework is perhaps the book's key strength, providing a brilliant collection of stories that indeed had a profound impact on the people to whom they belong.

In the first chapter, Cohen describes what he refers to as the Kosovo myth. The Battle of Kosovo, he remarks, held particular significance to the Serbs, who remembered it as "a calamitous Serbian defeat" despite historians' belief that an earlier battle had far greater impact (2). In fact, little is actually known about the Battle of Kosovo. However, the figure Lazar, who is believed to have been killed in the battle, was, according to Cohen, memorialized and mythologized as a Christ-like figure in the centuries following. The events were crystallized in epic poems and artwork. Then, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the Serbs felt threatened by the immigration of Albanians and the events of World War II, the story became a symbol of their oppression and gave rise to Serbian claims to the land. Just as Cohen discusses Serbian perceptions of the Battle of Kosovo, he describes each of the other three cases, using these examples to firmly establish a story's power over people in the East and the West.

It is in these detailed overviews of each story and its evolution that Cohen demonstrates how narratives influence community thinking. His descriptions suggest that in some of these cases, the stories facilitated growing animosity between groups of people (e.g., between Serbs and Albanians or, with the Masada story, between Jews and Arabs). According to Cohen, Kosovo was lost Serbian land; as its symbolic authority rose in prevalence, remembering the loss of Kosovo heightened the Serbs' dis-

contentment. Such stories carry considerable potential to shape communities' actions. Cohen argues, "The Kosovo myth doesn't simply *resonate* with contemporary historical circumstances but also *shapes* them" (28). Similarly, the Masada story stood in for Jewish oppression at a time when many Jews migrated to Palestine in response to anti-Semitism in Europe and immigration restrictions in the United States.

These cases, for Cohen, provide examples of narratives that had power over community thinking, sometimes regarding enemies or neighboring communities. In other cases, the stories were used by leaders as tools to justify their political aims and gain support in times of conflict. For instance, Chiang Kai-Shek referenced Goujian's humiliation by, and eventual victory over, the oppressive ruler of Wu as a parallel to the Chinese situation in the early twentieth century; and Charles de Gaulle and Philippe Pétain strategically used the Joan of Arc story to further their competing political agendas during World War II. In these examples Cohen emphasizes the ways these stories were written or retold for particular political aims.

Whether the stories shaped communities over time or reappeared because political leaders strategically evoked them, Cohen's examples clearly show that stories can have influential power over responses to crises. While he never implies the stories are a solitary or even primary impetus for action, his work does emphasize the *role* of stories, perhaps because his goal is to convince historians to acknowledge popular memory's role in public sentiment. For Cohen, the value of these stories is not just that they have prevailed but in *how* they have been retold, often emphasizing some details while purposefully distorting others for political ends. The Joan of Arc story, for instance, was used by two competing leaders in France during World War II. While de Gaulle called forth the memory of Joan of Arc to inspire Frenchmen to stand against the Vichy regime, Pétain pointed to Joan of Arc's femininity to promote and idealize traditional female gender roles, displaying her in a dress rather than in pants as art and literature typically describe her. Cohen points out that the historical accuracy of the story was often far less important for political leaders and followers than the power of the story to reinforce current agendas, even when these misrepresent what historians believe to be the real account of the past.

More than once, Cohen refers to the stories he examines as *myths*, further emphasizing that popular memory is less about what really happened and more about what people believe happened. In his analysis of Joan of Arc in wartime France, Cohen says, “Timely alignment between story and history, between a narrative and a contemporary historical situation that invites those experiencing it to attach special import to that narrative, was crucially important” (190). The narratives or myths that reemerge work when they are timely, thus making them effective. Some of the stories Cohen discusses also fade from popular memory once the crisis to which they have been applied passes, reinforcing the importance of timeliness and suggesting that some stories’ power comes from how they are connected to the crisis.

Although his cases are compelling examples of stories that were influential in shaping responses to crises, Cohen could have done more to situate his work in existing scholarship on collective memory. Drawing on such scholarship would have helped to establish that Cohen’s book is not just a collection of case studies but, more importantly, an argument for the normative role of mythologized history in constructing community identity. His brief references to David Lowenthal and Pierre Nora in the conclusion to the book do little to connect his work to the larger and growing conversation about collective memory to which his work is a valuable addition.

Nonetheless, such connections are easy to make. For instance, his work builds on Paul Connerton’s argument, in *How Societies Remember*, that contemporary knowledge is based in past occurrences. Though Connerton focuses on performances of memory, such as commemorative ceremonies, he claims that memory shapes community identity: “The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity” (1989: 21). Connerton, like Cohen, emphasizes the role of the past on present circumstances, but he also explains the relationship between these stories and how they influence a community’s perception of its identity in response to its past.

Cohen is also not the first to argue to historians that narrative is an important player in collective memory. Steven Knapp, in a 1989 special

issue of *Representations*, proposed that narratives play a normative role in collective memory and that these narratives may give shape to other actions. Knapp, like others, also emphasized the reconstructed nature of memory and history alike (Aristotle 2007; Halbwachs 1992). Similarly, Cohen stresses how the stories he examines have been mythologized in their reconstruction. These stories, in other words, are not historical fact, but are versions of the past made relevant to the present.

Additionally, Cohen could have considered alternative stories that appeared alongside his examples but were overshadowed. After all, stories don't exist in a vacuum but stand alongside multiple discourses at work in a community. Examining the stories that competed for public attention would offer further evidence for why historians should make better note of influential stories in their work because they not only had productive power but also dominated public perception. John Bodnar's *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (1992) is a useful example of multiple stories working at once in a community. Though Bodnar limits his analysis to objects of US collective memory, he looks at both official and vernacular stories, identifying how certain stories dominated public opinion at moments of transformation.

Although I hesitate to call Cohen's claims novel, his examples successfully illustrate the power of stories, and therefore they serve as a reminder to historians that myths have contemporary significance. The descriptions of the stories Cohen examines, furthermore, provide a productive framework for analyzing a story's evolution from event to record, from record to myth, and from myth to propaganda. The power of stories in times of crisis deserves scholarly consideration, and Cohen has done a remarkable job of demonstrating, at least to this reader, the merits of analyzing the effects of popular memory.

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