Diploma Thesis Review

Master’s Degree Programme ‘Central European Comparative Studies’

Sean T. McQuiggan, Nazi Anti-Semitism Remembered: Jewish Memorials in the SBZ and GDR between the Years 1945–1987, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, 2016.

For his Master thesis Sean T. McQuiggan chose a historical topic from the field of memory studies. The aim of the thesis is to analyse the memorial sites remembering Jewish victims of Nazism at the territory of East Germany from 1945–1987 and to challenge the view that in a communist ‘totalitarian’ regime the memory was ‘centrally planned’ and it was covered by a unifying anti-fascist master narrative that did not recognize Jews as a victim group in its own right.

For this analysis, Sean developed a sound research design that combined quantitative and qualitative methods in order to classify the memorial sites and to make an interpretation of the data possible. Time and place seem to be clear, nearly objective criteria, but they are not. The five-year periods are deliberately constructed as well as the spatial units of Länder. The author proved to be unaware of the fact that the Länder did not exist in the GDR from 1952–1990, (p. 36) which only underlines the constructiveness and arbitrariness of the temporal and spatial units used. The affiliation of the sites to the anti-fascist master narrative depends heavily on the definition of the criteria. Sometimes, these criteria are not helpful because there is not enough information contained in the site itself and further heuristic would be needed. The same applies in case of the social agents that were involved in the erection of the sites that are only defined as the state/party central level and the grass-root level local Jewish organisations. What seems especially thoughts-provoking is the intersection of grass-root initiative outside of the anti-fascist master narrative during the GDR period but I think that more research would be needed in order to specify the circumstances under which the site was built. The quantitative was given a slight preference over the qualitative in this thesis.

From the formal point of view, I regret to say that the function of a conclusion is misunderstood in this thesis. Even though the partial conclusions at the end of each chapter might be helpful in distilling the findings throughout the text, I do not think that there is much sense in writing a conclusion after introductory or theoretical parts (here mainly Chapters 3 and 4). Further, a conclusion that does not conclude but merely summarizes or ‘recaps’ (p. 60) lacks its main function which is to finalize the gained crude knowledge into the form of more general theses. This especially applies to the final conclusion of the thesis (pp. 86–88) that is a recapitulation of different facts from the previous text but I can hardly consider this to be a clean synthesis of the main findings convincingly showing what has been achieved in the preceding text. There are number of interesting facts that the authors found out but a one more step is needed to deliver the final intellectual product.

All in all, I appreciate the originality of the topic and the intellectual effort that was invested into the research process. The shortcomings mentioned above are not serious and typically the author discussed the limits of the chosen methods. For the defence of the thesis, I suggest the author makes a profound conclusion that I missed in the thesis. Having said this, I recommend
this thesis for defence and I suggest to award it the grade ‘very good’ (i. e. velmi dobře, 2) or excellent (i. e. výborně, 1).

PhDr. Václav Šmidrkal, Ph.D.

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