

WORLD WAR II IN AMERICAN ALTERNATE HISTORY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEMORY STUDIES

mgr Magdalena Wąsowicz-Miszczyńska

This dissertation sets out to assess how that what merely could have happened but never had can shape the collective and cultural memory of what really happened. The analysis of alternate histories of World War II in the context of memory studies provides a fresh perspective on the collective and cultural memory of the period between 1939 and 1945 and advances our understanding of its meaning for contemporary American society.

To gauge the relationship between alternate history and mnemonic discourses regarding World War II, this dissertation focuses on five questions:

- 1) Which World War II sites of memory are depicted in American alternate history?
- 2) How do alternate history narratives utilize World War II sites of memory?
- 3) What politics of memory do alternate histories promote?
- 4) Do alternate histories support the hegemonic memory or subvert it?
- 5) How do alternate history narratives contribute to our understanding of American memory culture?

The dissertation follows an interpretative pattern inspired by the methods used in memory studies that involves: 1) the summary of the novel, 2) the biographical and historical background, 3) the analysis of sites of memory the novel refers to, 4) the politics of memory promoted by the novel, and, if possible, 5) the literary afterlives of the novel.

The dissertation is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with defining what alternate history is and providing an explanation of how it can be analyzed in the context of memory studies. The first chapter focuses on defining the genre. In the first subchapter, I differentiate between alternate history and counterfactual history. The second subchapter addresses the problem of defining alternate history. I begin by aggregating the existing definitions to extract four defining features of the genre: 1) history, 2) point of divergence, 3) ramifications, and 4) probability. On the basis of the abovementioned thematic concerns, a single comprehensive definition is created. The second chapter begins by laying out the methodological dimensions of the research. Firstly, I provide an overview of the history of the most influential theories of memory studies, such as Maurice Halbwach's collective memory,

Jan Assmann's cultural and communicative memory, Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory, Pierre Nora's sites of memory, and the broadly understood politics of memory. Next, I proceed to describe the usefulness of memory studies for literary analysis and discuss the intersections between alternate history and memory. There, I demonstrate how collective and cultural memory are founded on the same mechanisms as alternate history and explain in detail how the key concepts of memory studies can be used as a toolkit for interpreting alternate history narratives.

The second part of the dissertation is concerned with the analysis of the memory of World War II in chosen American alternate history novels. It begins with a general overview of the memory of World War II in the United States. What follows is an analysis of the selected alternate history novels pertaining to World War II: *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) by Philip K. Dick, *After Dachau* (2001) by Daniel Quinn, *The Plot Against America* (2004) by Philip Roth, *Amerikan Eagle* (2011) by Brendan DuBois, *Wolf by Wolf* (2015) and *Blood for Blood* (2016) by Ryan Graudin, and *Rocket's Red Glare* (2020) by Cy Stein. The analysis established three sites of memory toward which all the narratives gravitate: 1) Franklin D. Roosevelt, 2) the Holocaust, and 3) Adolf Hitler (often in the form of a stand-in). In most cases, these sites of memory constitute starting points around which various memories of American historical experience loop themselves.

The present dissertation investigates the politics of memory pursued by particular novels, thus showing how they correlate with extra-literary developments, such as the political tensions of the 1960s, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009, the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States, the emergence of the far right in the 2010s, and the waning of the Holocaust memory since 2000, especially among young people. The analysis of the politics of memory they participate in, as well as the examination of their literary afterlives, allowed me to demonstrate that alternate history can be a bellwether of social attitudes. It also demonstrates how alternate history instrumentally uses the past to comment on the present and ponder the future.

Alternate history emerges as a unique, invigorating literary mode of accessing collective and cultural memory and a powerful tool for memory activism. The analysis of alternate histories in the context of memory studies conducted in this dissertation proves that alternate history allows us to approach the mnemonic discourse regarding American memory of World War II from a new direction and provides an intriguing space for creation of counter-memories to the hegemonic mnemonic discourses. Moreover, it

confirms that so-called “popular literature” can be as important for national memory cultures as high literature.