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Twentieth Century Wars in European Memory



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Preface

The Social Instruments of European Memory

Is “European memory” an existing phenomenon, or is it merely a kind of wish with but slim chances to develop? Of course, we can generalize the topic and assume here at the outset that the concept of European memory includes all the varieties of remembrance of the European past that can be described (Judt, T. 2006:803). Therefore, I need to clarify that my interest focuses on the question: what (if anything) in European memory might be common for all Europeans?

Memory is basically a phenomenon of individual consciousness. When talking about collective memory – memory of a group or a society – we are moving towards metaphorical discourse or a theoretical concept which offers a handy shortcut in our thinking. However, as M. Holbwachs has shown, the problem is more complex (M. Holbwachs, 1992). L. Coser in his introduction to Holbwachs’ classical work got right to the point saying: “Just like God needs us, so memory needs others” (M. Holbwachs, 1992:34). The most important problems lie further on: for example, whether “others” (involuntarily or deliberately) affect our memory to a point where individuals exert little or no control. Herein arises the realm for the idea of the “politics of memory”. The formative influence of others may be so powerful that many individuals, or even societies as a whole, “remember” the past (at least in some areas) in a similar if not identical way, with the idea of the “historical truth” becoming altogether elusive. Who are those “others” in the European context, and what kind of instruments do they have for shaping social memory? What is the purpose of this process of memory construction?

In some situations the crucial problem stems from the fact that it is quite uncertain who the “others” are for particular people. Today’s integrating Europe seems to offer an especially interesting case. Participation in the process of integration includes the hopes that at a certain point all Europeans will become for each European the main reference in deciding what is remembered and how. At the same time, however, we know that this is quite a distant prospect, and that even within the societies of particular member states there are differing references depending on a variety of reasons – whether political, religious, or cultural. The “others” who become such a reference or who affect our memory can be sympathizers of a given political orientation, members of a local community, or our close professional circle. This means that when talking about

“European memory” we inevitably talk about a phenomenon which can be very fragmented and is certainly far from being “common”.

In various European countries the two world wars are remembered in very different ways, although everywhere one can find monuments which serve as material objectification of the memory of war. However, such objectifications not only determine certain patterns of remembrance and a specific perception of the past: they also contribute to local and/or national identity and create the basis for attitudes toward the other participants of war. The problem is that what is celebrated in one country as a case of heroism can be perceived as a case of wartime cruelty or criminality in another. This is – for example – the case of Latvian or Ukrainian military units serving in the German army during the Second World War. In both those countries they are remembered by some as fighters against Soviet domination. The same units can be remembered in a dramatically divergent way in neighbouring countries. There are numerous similar examples in various parts of Europe. Still, if European integration is to achieve not only its economic and political, but also its social aims, we must ask whether there is any ground for the shared memory of Europeans, and by “shared” I mean memory which will also reflect comparable evaluations of particular acts of war. This question is especially difficult to answer, in that we may constantly observe that social memory in Europe is so strongly attached to national contexts.

The human being is what he or she is only thanks to his or her social location. Therefore, no individual can be considered outside some kind of a social context. In every society among the basic needs of any member is the need for a certain social order. Such order is secured mostly by the institutionalization of rules which make the social coexistence of people possible (P. Berger and T. Luckmann, 1968). The very foundation of institutionalization and the basis of its legitimization can usually be found in the past expressed in customs, traditions, and (in Berger and Luckmann’s words) in specific “conceptual machineries” essential in creating and maintaining our symbolic universe. In this way a substantial part of the content of our memory becomes the object of intensive social construction. Both the remembrance of many facts and their meanings are shaped primarily by “others”, although we still tend to perceive those facts and meanings as our own, and perhaps even as intimate. Those “others” are not necessarily “significant others”, since in most cases they remain anonymous. Only sometimes may we identify them as “our” tribe, as a political party with which we sympathize, as our favourite artist, or as our political leadership. However, the process of socialization which we all undergo is trickier than that. Our memory is shaped not only by the elements to which we are alerted through the influence of others. Indeed, the content of

memory depends just as much on the absence of elements which are outside our awareness because of either accidental or deliberate negligence of certain facts from the past. Moreover, in some instances historical facts are intentionally distorted.

Thus it appears that we own neither the past, nor even memory of the past: rather, in most cases we are merely allowed to remember what others believe we need to remember. Of course, those managers of the past are usually well informed about what we are most likely to remember, and what would respond to our most common expectations and wishes. For example, in the case of the memory of war it is easier to accept the role of victims than the role of oppressors. This is why politicians and historians who present the first option are more likely to be appreciated by society.

European integration opened a completely new context for the problems of collective memory, in that Europeans struggle with the memory of hostilities between the very states which are now engaged in cooperation aimed at a common future. The collective memory of their societies is still strongly attached to the national perspectives which have been expressed in national traditions and transmitted down generational lines in the process of socialization with the help of a whole cultural legacy. The cultural heritage of every nation in Europe is usually full of symbolic objects which convey knowledge to new generations about past conflicts with other European states, ones which have now become partners in a common Europe. Although one can easily find symbolic objects of a European dimension (for example, those transmitted by myths), they are reaching the public very slowly. In most cases their impact has been limited to the minds of intellectuals.

The question remaining in the background of this publication is whether we can “make Europeans” without European collective memory transgressing national perspectives. Since this issue is quite recent – linked to the current process of European integration – it seems reasonable to expect that among the most important elements of such memory is the experience which made this process the most reasonable solution for Europe. Part of this experience was that of the two world wars and the post-war appeal to overcome the fate of the continent by creating conditions for peaceful, effective cooperation between European states. The past and its memory of war has become a crucial problem which – paradoxically – instead of receding with time, is increasing at the same time as the threat of war among European states seems less and less possible. We can say that Europeans have a common history, but a very differentiated memory of the role of particular states in this common past. Fabrice Larat (2005) once postulated something that he called a common “*acquis historique*”, which was supposed to be not only common, but also a shared view of some of

the European past. This idea was questioned by a young Polish political scientist in his critical reaction to Larat's proposal (Cichocki, M., 2007). Still, the memory of war, although experienced in different ways by different nations, or even by different groups within the same nation, seems to be the essential element of European collective memory.

This is why it is so important to study the ways and instruments of its remembrance. For this is a field which is becoming a central arena for memory construction. Therefore, such study may sooner or later help us find a way towards a shared, agreed view of the past. The social instruments of memory include a variety of means – from monuments and visual images, through literature, and to the use of geographical space. Those “practices of remembrance” and “theatres of memory” have been beautifully presented by Jay Winter (Winter, J. 2006) and they help us to understand how society creates its heroes and decides who are the victims, and who are the guilty.

The Second World War brought new elements, ones which became part of European memory and which cannot be denied as common. The Holocaust is just such a pre-eminent element. This is an especially challenging element of European memory because it creates more or less open feelings of guilt, and not only among those nations that produced the agents responsible for the horror, tragedy, and shame of the Holocaust. The feeling of guilt has been experienced by most Europeans, no matter what their possibilities were in opposing the Nazis' extermination programme. Moreover, in most of the countries occupied by the Germans there were cases of collaboration, including participation in the killings. In this context a very difficult question appears: can we count on developing a common European memory on the shared feeling of guilt?

At least some acts in the construction of World War Two memory were clearly coping with the issue of guilt, as with the elaborate strategies which attempt to victimize the nations that produced the main architects of the Holocaust. Of course, among them there were acts which showed recognition of responsibility for other wartime crimes. One good example is the activity of the German organization which attempts to make the Polish state responsible for the massive exile of Germans from territories which after the Second World War were granted by the Allies to Poland. Although from the point of view of those who suffered wartime cruelty at the hands of the German occupants the presentation of any Germans as victims of the war may strike as an unjust manipulation, the whole issue is more complex. “World War Two” – Tony Judt stressed – “was primarily a civilian experience” (Judt, T., 2006;13). In fact, those strategies of victimizing nationals of the nations responsible for the outbreak of the war do have a logical and moral underpinning in the ethical principle which rejects collective responsibility. After all, many of the people

who had to flee their homes as a result of the post-war border changes might not have been involved in any political or military actions during the war. Moreover, among the Germans there indeed were individuals who paid the highest price for their opposition to the official Nazi ideology and its deeds. Still, the strategies to victimize the nations whose authorities started the war remain to a great extent a manipulative distortion of memory because they somehow attribute guilt to the nations which indeed suffered most from the war, a war imposed on them.

It seems that such dilemmas will remain within European collective memory and the most reasonable and fitting attitude toward them would be to face their moral challenge. We cannot forget who were the oppressors, but at the same time we should admit that the horror of war and the Holocaust also brought sufferings to the nations of the oppressors. This also applies in Europe, especially to the people of the primary totalitarian states: the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. However, Tony Judt is probably right when he suggests that "In the course of this new-found Europeanism, Western Europeans settled for some twenty-five years into a comforting 'collective amnesia' (the phrase is Enzensberger's), resting their half of the continent on a number of crucial 'foundation myths', which certainly distorted the common perception of the wartime past of western European states" (Judt, T., 2004; 168). Quite a similar process on the other side of the Iron Curtain was pointed out by Jeffrey Herf, who noted the "'marginalization' of the memory of the Holocaust in East Germany" (Herf, J., 2004; 203). In this way the control of collective memory became an important factor for the political projects which were oriented towards the future.

In the post-Communist countries we could observe quite a different relation between politics and the memory of war. The radical change in politics, which was brought together with the new Communist order, had an immediate effect on memory reconstruction, and some instruments of collective memory gained meanings quite the opposite of what they had had before. Jan-Werner Müller quite correctly noted that the post-war period has been divided into two periods – one immediately after the war, and another after the end of the cold war – and "In both periods, the past has not been what it used to be" (Müller, J.W., 2004; 3). For example, after 1989 many World War Two monuments, which had been built to commemorate liberation by the Red Army, started to be perceived as material documentation of Soviet oppression in the area. The public reaction at that time, although easy to understand, mostly neglected the delicate "human" aspect of a process which demonstrated the clash of politics and individual dramas: of Russian soldiers killed in battles against the Germans occupying Central European states during the World War II, or post-war Polish soldiers

fighting against Polish compatriots in underground units who strove to defend (ultimately, unsuccessfully) the independence of the country from Soviet-imposed rule. After all, each of those individuals offered their life for a cause which they believed was right.

As it happens, instruments of memory live their own life and the meanings they attach to particular events may be changed by historical and political processes. Still, it seems possible to offer a certain categorization of the different reminders of war. Let me then make a distinction between objective and subjective reminders.

“Objective reminders” of war leave almost no space for interpretations which would go beyond the intentions or meanings of the initial sources. Good examples of this are presented in the current volume by Barbara Szacka, who refers in her text to biographical material analyzed by Svetlana Alexiyewich (Alexiyewich S., 1985) and by Marjorie Gerhardt, who writes about facially disfigured veterans. Most other reminders are essentially subjective, offering either the possibility of individual or socially-imposed interpretations, or simply serving the social need to control memory. Such a need is usually directed by political or ideological factors, although in some cases it simply reflects the necessity of the group to identify the basis of its identity. Among the most exploited instruments of memory are monuments, museums, art, photography, and literature. In most cases their interpretation can be adapted to social or political purposes depending on the changing contexts. In this way, the variety of the reminders of war supports mythmaking efforts aimed at creating war heroes. Others include founding symbols which stress the unity and identity of the group, or justify the perception of the historical developments, ones which are most useful for particular political goals. Most of the reminders of war respond to ethnic and national, if not local needs. How then could they serve European memory? Does building European memory need a special mythmaking activity or new instruments? It seems that the only way to develop European memory is by sharing the memory of different nations and by cultivating empathy. Of course, at the bottom there must be the process of teaching, and it should allow individual ways of coping with the differentiated memories of European nations. The memory of war, which inevitably shows the overall absurdity and tragedy of war no matter where and against whom fought, may be the primary candidate for such Europeanization. The shared feeling of guilt of all Europeans may also appear as a positive contribution to this goal.

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