

Event Report

Böll Lunch Debate

The Second World War in European Memory and its Significance for European Identity ¹

75 years ago, on 1 September 1939, German troops invaded Poland without a declaration of war, on the pretext that the Poles had conducted a series of sabotage acts against German targets. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War, in which 70 Million people would lose their lives, had started. When it ended five years later, Europe lay in ruins for the second time within one generation. Germany was destroyed and morally bankrupt; Europe was divided; and within a few years the Cold War started. In the west, a generation of European statesmen such as Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi and Jean Monnet developed the revolutionary idea of a community of states (and values) establishing a political system based on sharing sovereignty. This historically unprecedented system, which safely integrated (West) Germany, succeeded in keeping the peace on its territory and has brought numerous benefits to Europeans in the west and – after the collapse of communism – also in the east of Europe. But only ten years after this ‘unification of Europe’, the raison d’être of the EU is under attack by the rise of Euroscepticism, populism and nationalism. As the (individual) memories of WWII, of the two totalitarian regimes, fascism and communism, and of the exigencies of the Cold War are fading, the major driving force behind the European project is weakening. Despite (or maybe rather because) of its unique achievements, the very essence of a European Union is being undermined by populist, revisionist and nationalist forces, including the dismissal of notions such as a ‘European identity’, and a ‘collective European memory’. Yet the commonality of experience, past and present, is at the very core of the European project. How can we restore European memory and can it still be a driving force behind the European Union?

That Europeans are finally able to talk about their history is a good thing, as it was practically impossible for a long time. That we are now talking with each other about our history could lay the foundations for a future European historical identity. The whole point of the European Union was that it served as a mechanism to avoid talking about history, about what everybody did to everybody else and, instead, to submerge all our antagonisms in comitology. Comitology is, in this sense, a refined mechanism not to talk about the past. Only nations talk about the past. When twenty years ago the Berlin Wall came down and the communist regimes collapsed, some of the newly free nations turned to the European Union with demands, because they felt

¹ The event took place on 24 September 2014. Guest speakers were Philippe Perchoc, researcher, at the Université Catholique de Louvain, Dr Susanne Popp, professor didactics of history from the University of Augsburg and Dr Karolina Wigura, head of the Political Section of the Polish political and cultural weekly *Kultura Liberalna*. The event was moderated by Dr Ilana Bet-El who is a historian, writer and political analyst. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

that the EU owed them something, because they had been abandoned by the west, the answer was: that has nothing to do with us, we don't talk about the past. If you want to become a member, let's talk comitology, which everybody did and it was very successful. So, maybe in this year with all the anniversaries of historical events, what we're saying to each other is: now we have reached the point of maturity that we can talk about the past with each other in a constructive way.

Sometimes people ask: would WWII have been possible without WWI and if we look at the illnesses which caused WWII, like nationalism, the answer is yes. Nevertheless, WW II can be seen as an exacerbation of themes from WW I which was about the destruction of culture, of soldiers sitting in trenches or the end of a century and the beginning of a new one; whereas WWII was about common destruction, a war against people, the first war which saw the killing of civilians as a(n) (il)legitimate aim of war and the destruction of all norms of humanity and civilisation. If today we are talking about memory and commemoration we can ask ourselves the question: have we reached the point to move on from here? The answer is: yes. But if we look at recent developments, be it the beheading of people by the IS, whole villages being emptied in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere or Gaza being bombed, then we see that humanity has not been able of ridding itself from madness and destruction even 70 years after WWII. Looking at Europe: war, whether we like it or not, is part of European identity. Europeans have been very good at war and better than anybody else. We've done this for millennia. We are also the only continent which imposed itself on all the others. Europe has been good at destruction. A new generation has to answer the question: how do you build on the absence of destruction during 70 years (which is an achievement in European terms)? How do you accept that as the start of a new identity and how do you want to talk about it?

The Polish example: memory and forgiveness as a political strategy after World War II

As the example of Poland shows, Europe is not only good at war, but also at forgiveness and remorse. The Europeanisation of Polish remembrance culture had started before 1989 as a symbolical opposition to communist propaganda. It was the dream and the promise of 'returning to Europe' which was the most decisive factor in this process. In communist times being anti-(Western)-German was a feature of state propaganda in Poland. Stalin had created this hostility by moving Poland's borders to the west. The 'Polish Bishops' Appeal to Their German Colleagues' of 18 November 1965 was an attempt to write an alternative history of relations with the western neighbour and the first of three important political declarations of remorse and forgiveness in Polish post-war history. The letter of the Polish bishops took a stand on the moral and legal aspects of the Oder-Neiße-Linie and tried to present all relations with Germany in such a historical context that evil and injustice, though important and painful, are considered in spite of everything only a phase in an otherwise flourishing neighbourliness. At its end the letter contained the famous words "we grant forgiveness and we ask your forgiveness." Whereas the reaction of the Polish government was hostile – as was that of the majority of Polish people – and the Polish media fulminated, the answer of the German counterparts was disappointing. Their written reply neither touched on the subject of the Oder-Neiße-Linie, nor did it grant forgiveness, though requesting it from their side. In spite of these reactions and in spite of its flaws, the letter has become the symbol of the beginning of *reconciliation between Poland and Germany*.

The second example of repentance, this time concerning *Polish-Jewish relations*, took place in 2001 in Warsaw when a festive expiatory service was celebrated in the Church of All Saints which stands in the part of town formerly inhabited by Jews. The primate, as a sign of repentance dressed in a violet ornate, presided and almost 50 bishops participated, without mitres and liturgical robes, in black cassocks without red or violet belts. In a special service, the

bishops offered an apology to the Jewish inhabitants murdered by Poles in Jedwabne and surrounding areas and condemned all forms of intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism. No bishop, however, took place in the first official state commemoration in Jedwabne in July 2001, led by Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski.

The third example concerns *Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation*, when in 2005 the presidents Kaczyński and Yushchenko expressed mutual forgiveness. They commemorated the mass murder of Ukrainians in Pawłokoma in 1945 committed by Poles. A breakthrough for Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation was the Polish support for the Orange Revolution. None of the political declarations though ever achieved what the bishops' letter did, the most important reason being that in the meantime the proliferation of declarations of repentance had become ubiquitous. In this sense Poland's remembrance culture has truly become Europeanised, public apologies have become one of diplomatic necessities, but not necessarily reasons for controversy or heated public debate.

Collective memory and European identity

If one wants to find an answer to the question what role a collective memory of WWII can play for a European identity and the European project, one has to keep in mind that memory of World War II in Europe has always been divided depending on the perspective of the beholder. E.g. in Germany there has never been a general acceptance of 8 May as liberation from fascism. In fact, it took a long time before (some) German politicians dared to use that term.

After 1989 Europeans seem to have transformed their collective memory into an even more national perspective. In the post-communist countries WWII atrocities and the atrocities suffered under communist regimes have often been played off against each other and, especially, nationalist movements tend to emphasise the sufferings under communism. But that is not the only change in WWII memory. In German textbooks, for example, when speaking or writing over the Holocaust and the Nazi regime, anti-fascist, social-democratic and communist resistance is no longer mentioned, neither is the persecution of minorities. The divide of European memory of WWII has transformed, not vanished. Memory is increasingly dominated by national narratives. This manifests itself in history education: the young generation only receives information about WWII from a national perspective. A collective European memory of WWII which was one of the fundamental factors influencing the realisation of the European project was never very strong and belonged to a specific (war and post-war) generation. What is worse is that in the last 50 years, no real progress was made in (European) identity building. A common identity can only be created by dealing with each other's history, respect each other's narratives and detect the differences and similarities. However, such multi-perspective experiences are not yet to be found in the history textbooks; if anything, there are examples for bilateral perspectives. Also, WW II is only covered in a Eurocentric way, not from a universal perspective. In Europe there is no reception of WW II that deals with events in other parts of the world. Not only have the sufferings of people outside of Europe during WWII been forgotten, for them it didn't stop there. Whereas the war in Europe turned into a cold war, the war turned 'hot' again in other parts of the world such as Asia. For Europeans it is important to develop a perspective which surmounts Eurocentrism and to see and understand historic and political interrelations. Without a collective memory that considers the various perspectives and experiences, there cannot be a true European identity. So far attempts to create a European history textbook have failed so far because one could not agree on its contents. On the other hand, we live in a world where internet and structured e-books offer the opportunity of creating a multi-structured textbook; unfortunately the interest in such a project is low in most European countries. It is up to stakeholders and politicians to give an impulse for such an endeavour. When nowadays we see a serious tendency of backsliding into nationalism in many European countries, we have to

understand that nationalism always roots in a lack of knowledge, but knowledge as such does not guarantee more intellectual and human understanding. Nationalism always simplifies facts and put them in an emotional context, a strategy which is often hard to counter.

European memory and politics

Memory is not only about history but also about politics. Political scientists of the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) did research into the question whether the EU enlargement set in motion a process that leads to the replacement of the previous European narrative of EU integration centred on the Holocaust. The research was based on debates on historical issues which took place the European Parliament between 2004 and 2009. The outcome was that the 2004 enlargement enlarged the memory landscape bringing a new plurality and a new exemplarity to it. Even though the Holocaust remains a central "lieux de mémoire", a struggle has developed over the hierarchy of topics in the narrative which has an east vs. west and a left vs. right component. This struggle is not only about the past, but also about the future. The research shows that MEPs from the new Member States speak more about European narratives than others and that members of right-wing parties speak more about these topics than members of the left. There is also a clustering of countries and parties (e.g. (far) right-wing parties from Poland and the Baltic countries vs. Germany and the (far) left parties, whereas German MEPs tend to vote nationally rather than politically on these topics. As with the entry of the ex-communist Member States communist crimes move more and more into the centre of the debate, this creates an increasing response from communist MEPs from e.g. Greece and Portugal who criticise the marginalisation of the Holocaust in the European narrative.

What research like this shows is that whereas history is all about knowledge, memory is about identity and past experience. Commemoration on the other hand is all about politics because the political community gathers around the commemoration of the past which implies ethics for the future. It is therefore important to distinguish between history, memory (which some think is a social construct rather than reality), commemoration and knowledge, identity and politics.

Conclusion

In brief, *memory* is what happened *in the past* and the people who have invested in it. As far as both World Wars are concerned, this is no longer relevant as there are hardly any survivors left. Commemoration is what we are doing *now* and it says more about who we are now than about what happened then: Why do we feel the need to commemorate something in one way not another, why in one place and not another? As far as a common European *history* is concerned there is no such thing until now, but it's about time that we started it. These days history again belongs to nationalists like Nigel Farage, Marine le Pen or Golden Dawn. They make history sound very simple which is appealing especially in times of crisis, but also because in Europe we did not have these debates in the last 70 years. We have to reclaim history and take it away from the nationalists. The crisis the European project is facing today is above all a crisis of meaning. After the disappearance of the narrative about peace and prosperity, Europe needs a new narrative. We must explore a Europe whose institutions are a means not an end, remain open to discovery, attentive to stories and critical of prevalent ideas. We can start creating a new narrative by starting to talk about our common history which doesn't mean that we have to agree. This could be the basis of creating a genuine European identity.