

# The Second World War in European Memory: Calamity, Loss of Power and a New Beginning

By Claus Leggewie

## Introduction

In France, there used to be a warning sign at level crossings that had no barriers warning that a second train could well follow directly after the first one (*Un train peut cacher un autre*). We are somewhat in the same situation in this important commemorative year of 2014-15 for Europe: Europeans have only just understood the meaning of the First World War when they now have to interpret the significance of the Second World War.

There are a number of continuing parallels between these two catastrophic historic events with their origins in Europe: many of the unresolved issues from WW 1 contributed to the escalation of events to WW 2, in particular the foreseeable decline of Europe as the centre of world affairs in 1918 that had become definitive post 1945. National Socialism resulted in the material and moral self-destruction of Europe: some of the worst human rights abuses and the cost of colonial racism were clear by the end of the war. European great powers would no longer be major players in world affairs as the drivers of social and economic change were no longer to be found in the old world. The 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologies of fascism and communism took state control in the Soviet Union, Italy and the Third Reich between 1917 and 1933 and then between 1945 and 1948 divided Europe into two opposing blocs led by the USA and the Soviet Union. In the East-West conflict European powers, even Great Britain and France (former major international and imperial powers), became dependent on the strategies of the USA and the Soviet Union.

## Myth of Zero Hour

Post 1945 there was a reshaping of views: memories of the war were not just influenced by national factors but also by the East-West division. The western successor state to the Third Reich that was now regarded as responsible for the war was given a second chance within the framework of the Western alliance. The eastern part, along with the other central European countries, fell under Russian hegemony and the Soviet dictatorship. Only in 1989-90 were these Eastern bloc countries and the GDR able to break free.

1945 can therefore be regarded as the most important break in both European and global history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, those who lived through the days of the Third Reich's total military capitulation on the 8 May 1945 and those who came after called this the 'zero hour'. To quote just a few German voices: sociologist Alfred

Weber, said that it was the end of existing history: dramatist Wolfgang Borchert, a leading figure in the literary movement that took its name Kahlschlagliteratur ("clear-cutting literature") from the ruins that were everywhere in Germany, spoke, on his return from the war, of 'a homeless generation that had not even bid farewell' (to its previous life); the theologian Karl Barth waiting out the war in Basle declared shortly before the end of hostilities that the 'zero point' had been reached; in December 1945, Theodor Spitta, the mayor of Bremen, spoke of a 'completely new beginning'; a group of publicists and literary figures around Alfred Andersch and Hans Werner Richter called themselves 'the young generation' (even though they were not exactly young in years). This 'young generation' also had a magazine that published their independent writings and promoted a radical literary new beginning post 1945.

Political and literary historians, however, have exposed the 'zero hour' or *finis Germaniae* theories and interpretations as a myth and, in contrast, have emphasised the lines of continuity between the German Reich and its successor states, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and its Cold War adversary the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Jürgen Kocka asked "*Just how complete was this break in 1945 when there was an indisputable continuity between the Federal Republic and the Germany of 1945 or pre 1933. One example was the continuity in the basic structure of private business and the capitalist economic system. With American support attempts to introduce more socialist policies were successfully repelled. Despite many reforms, the basic economic principles remained the same and even changes made during the war to establish a command economy were rescinded. Another example was the continuity of the German civil service structure and its illiberal traditions that successfully opposed the reform efforts of the American and British occupation forces. Similarly, the eschewal of a comprehensive de-nazification programme bound the FRG to its past longer than the GDR. There were also other, less critically viewed, continuity factors such as the welfare state, federalism and the churches.*"(2006: XX)

In 2005, a young historian brought this debate together: "*The continuity of the political and social elites in the civil service, the legal, medical, academic, economic and intellectual professions is the reason why we can draw such ambiguous conclusions. We can see it both as carrying on as before and a new beginning. 'Zero hour' is the hinge that binds the two and therefore more than any other expression marks the moment when the lines were covered up.*"(Berg 2005:207)

### **End of WW2 – Chaos and Normality**

Another factor that should not be ignored is the nature of the Reich's capitulation that was more complete than many historical collapses of defeated states. Not only was the German army finished but the very existence of the Reich and Prussia had come to an end as government, all forms of production, infrastructure and communications had ceased and even the simplest of daily tasks were impossible. Striking symbols of 1945 are scenes of ruin, the bombed out homeless and displaced persons returning home in a confused and demoralised state, desperately seeking to reconnect to some semblance of a normal life that had increasingly gone to pieces before the end of the war – and yet for those born later it seemed to carry on in some amazing form of normality. Chaos and normality ran side by side in the same manner as culprits, victims and hangers on continued to have daily contact.

### **Zero Hour – *tabula rasa***

*Tabula rasa* – everything cleared away for a new beginning: this radical action is for some people and even whole societies both a dream and a nightmare and calls for the power and attraction of a myth such as the 'zero hour'. Such a break implies a root and branch change from the previous existence as well as the promise of a

completely new life. That time could stand still contradicts the modern understanding of time as one of irreversible forward movement even though it still has metaphorical value and a technical dimension. At the time 'zero hour' was a familiar concept in the planning departments of large organisations, including the military, where orders referred to zero plus how ever many hours. We also know that it was a widely used contemporary expression as Roberto Rossellini's 1948 film *Germany Year Zero* demonstrated.

In historical terms, it is the revolutionary protagonists of the idea of a radical break with the "terrible fatalism of history" (Georg Büchner), who have been able to reclaim ground. The leaders of the French Revolution declared 1792 as year one and announced a new method of time calculation, including a calendar. The opening shots of the July revolution in 1830 were aimed at clock towers as a demonstration that the 'old time' had stopped and a new era was beginning. Even the American Revolution, whose aim was to re-establish the good old state of affairs used Vergil's *novus ordo saeculorum* that celebrated the new rule of Augustus and the beginning of the Roman Empire.

### **Feelings and objectives post 1945**

With the exception of a few, mostly returning exiles, revolutionary ideas attracted little support in May 1945. The bulk of the population were relieved that 'it' (bombing raids, latent and acute threats to individual and family integrity, the unreasonable and arbitrary demands of a totalitarian system) was finally over. The planning timeframe, however, both for individuals and administrative institutions was frequently reduced to just a few days or weeks because of scarcity of resources and lack of clarity as to the status of the German federal states.

One recent historical summary of the events in Europe in 1945 (Buruma 2013) has successfully highlighted the overlapping nature of often contrary events and feelings, while putting them in a global context: having escaped from horror and chaos initial feelings were a mixture of exultation, hunger and desire for revenge. There then followed the major task of clearing destroyed buildings and infrastructure, the enormous (mostly forced) migration from east to west and the restoration of the rule of law and administration. Everywhere, particularly in relation to criminal proceedings there was a rapid demand for a 'line to be drawn under the past', when victims of the Nazi dictatorship and its collaborators sought recognition, material compensation and the punishment of the perpetrators. At the same time there was a commitment, bluntly expressed as 'Never Again' (the oath taken by the survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp) not to allow the appalling crimes of the Third Reich and its allies to be forgotten. In addition they committed to ensuring that Germany, viewed by the whole world as a barbaric society, was returned to a civilised state and that Europe, destroyed by Nazism be re-founded. The complicated and widely varying perceptions of the reality of 'zero hour' meant that the desire for a 'new world' was just as evident as the stultifying wish to remain stuck in the 'same old shit' (Karl Marx, MEW3, 35).

Those born post war can relate to this concurrence of opposing ideas in the writings and motion pictures of the so-called *Kahlschlag* movement that describe the experiences of those returning home, the women clearing the ruins and the defeated, often infused with a pathos and serenity that seems strange today (Hüppauf 1981). This ambivalence was documented in a more sober fashion by Walter Kempowski in 'Echolot' a multi volume diary presenting a collage of views from diverse individual diaries. (Kempowski 1995ff 'Fuga Furiosa' and 'Abgesang 1945' are the two volumes covering 1945). A surreal collection of curiosities can be found in Günter Grass's 'The Tin Drum' (1959), filmed by Volker Schlöndorff in 1979 and to round it off, the

much viewed 2004 Bernd Eichinger film 'The Downfall' that covered the still contentious transition from the last days of the Third Reich to the broken society post 1945.

### **Historical evaluation – break with the past?**

Historical research findings (since 1945 gradually re hashed) about the pre war and war generations demonstrate clear differences as to the impact of the 'German catastrophe' (Meinecke 1946). An interim balance sheet on the demystification of 'zero hour' was drawn up in 1976 by Jürgen Kocka in which he emphasised the real breaks and turning points with the past: the end of major landowners east of the Elbe and militarism and the change in the elites:

*"... that went much deeper than that of 1918/19 or 1933. It applied least to the church and higher education where there was a good deal of continuity. The clearest changes were in government, parliament and the political parties. Compared to both these areas, the change over at the top of private business was neither particularly great nor particularly small."(op cit.:18).*

The background to this change was the demilitarisation of both German states that in the Cold War was re-examined and modified and from 1955 saw the FRG become a member of NATO and the GDR a member of the Warsaw Pact. There was massive intellectual and popular street protest against this and in a wave of national neutrality, desiring equidistance between east and west, something remained of the hopes (and illusions) of 'zero hour'. Kocka also pointed out additional elements of a break with the past, namely the founding of the inter-denominational CDU/CSU, the most successful of the post 1945 political parties.

*"One cannot rate highly enough that, with the passing of the federal constitution and the changes it brought, lessons were learned from the collapse of the Weimar Republic and, for the first time, Germany had a functioning parliamentary democracy without full sovereignty and a national state. This loss of a national state with forced division as a consequence of war, defeat, occupation and the Cold War, did not, however, hinder the development of a free and democratic constitution in the FRG. It might well have been an advantage, although it came at a price, one mostly paid by the 17 million residing in the eastern half". (op cit.:18-19).*

### **Different East/West experiences post 1945**

What cannot be emphasised enough is the growing difference as to how East and West experienced the time post 1945. While the West Germans were able to approach the liberation part of 'defeat or liberation', the great majority of those living on the other side of the Elbe and the Oder, where this alternative shaped official memory, had most definitely found no liberation. Immediately after the Nazi dictatorship a Stalinist model dictatorship was established in the Soviet zone of occupation as in the rest of Eastern Europe. The communist government of the GDR nurtured a particular variation of 'zero hour' with the myth that anti fascism in the East was a radical break with the past while they passed off the West as still connected to the Nazi past. This polarisation handed down many unenlightened myths about the 'zero hour' that, in the context of FRG anti communism, especially in conservative circles in the army and the intelligence services, resulted in a fatal continuity of attitude and personnel.

### **FRG 1945 - 1990**

For contemporaries, opposition to 'defeat or liberation' was somewhat abstract. *"Those who then and now labelled/label 1945 as a break to liberation, neither described/describe the prevailing emotions of the time nor the disintegrating nature*

*of society at the time but rather they presented/present an interpretation of such 'breaks' in the light of long term effect.*"(Kocka 2006:16)

This self-enlightenment driven by critical social scientists and finding expression in the protest movements of the 1960s and 70s was reflected in public statements showing official sensitivity to history. For the first time in 1970 Willy Brandt gave a formal declaration to the German parliament on the 8<sup>th</sup> May but, 5 years later, it was one time soldier, Helmut Schmidt who used the term 'liberation' to describe this day. In President Scheel's 1975 speech the 'contradiction' associated with the 8<sup>th</sup> May entered official parlance at the highest government level: Scheel "*differentiated when remembering the millions murdered 'in our name' the different groups of victims: Jews,'gypsies', the mentally ill and the political prisoners. Privately he openly addressed the question of guilt and emphasised that 'the German tragedy' began in 1933 not 1945.*" (Kocka)

The high point of this public controversy was a speech (that became famous both in Germany and internationally) by the then President Richard von Weizsäcker, whose father was heavily involved in Nazi diplomacy. He showed how "*the state could deal with the Nazi past in a worthy and differentiated manner and how the political and moral aspects of the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 should be properly evaluated.*" (op cit.:198) From the entirely unhistorical comparison of collapse versus liberation emerged an appreciation of contemporary emotions and degrees of continuity as commentators acquired an increasingly critical distance. This required a re-ordering into other historical breaks and turning points: the collapse of 1945 was the result of what happened in 1933; could the symbolic re-founding of the FRG in 1968 therefore be interpreted as a liberation and German reunification in 1990 as a means of wiping away the effects of 1939/45 without having to create and maintain a revisionist myth as was done after 1918.

### **Zero Hour – a new global beginning?**

This happy development could finally, after all, articulate a certain degree of *tabula rasa*. Given the nature of today's global world, why contemplate a 'zero hour'? It is time to end this German navel gazing. As a result of the Second World War, traditional elites and power centres disappeared, allowing Western Europe to undergo significant modernisation and supra national unification that did not, however, halt its loss of influence or prevent the end of European driven global politics. From Setif to Suez this was already visible in May 1945: it was the beginning of de colonisation; bloc free states banded together; the Chinese revolution and Indian democracy were significant breaks with history that have had considerable influence in shaping today's global south.

'Zero hour' was without doubt a myth that allowed the Germans and western Europeans to have a 'new beginning' even though there was still much that was a 'continuation'. With the passage of time, challenging this myth allowed Europeans to indulge in self-examination up until the point of the (luckily) failed attempt of the 68ers to destroy the concept of the new beginning and point out the degree of continuity there had been in the nature of the elites and thought by insinuating "The womb he crawled from is still going strong" (Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, 1941). Zero hour is an especially many layered and adaptable political myth that illustrates the ambivalent and fluctuating nature of time perception in the modern age, situated as it is between experience and expectation.

### **Europe Post 1945: the Phoenix rises from the ashes; lack of freedom continues**

The different outcomes of the war – in the west freedom from the Nazi dictatorship that had almost covered the whole of the continent, in the east the establishment of a

new Soviet occupation and dictatorship – resulted in different memories. Even in Western Germany the initial recognition of the country's collapse was the subject of a multi-faceted 'discussion of the past' (Adorno) in which the release from the burden of war and dictatorship was also transformed into a release from an authoritarian and anti democratic system. The democratic system instituted by the allies in Western Germany, whose establishment could be regarded as a 'political wonder' benefitting from the FRG's economic success enjoyed a high degree of popular support. In contrast, the anti fascist regime in the GDR received little recognition and the longer it lasted the less it was tolerated.

In this situation, Europe played an important role as a third option. To clear-sighted members of the left, liberal and Christian opposition to Hitler it was obvious that the continent's catastrophe was the result of national aggression and that Europe's place could only be reasonably assured if relations between states were more open and equitable. The transnational cooperation with the aim of unifying Europe that began in the opposition movement and was continued immediately post 1945 by intellectuals and politicians (Loth 2014) had two aims: first of all Germany should be contained within a supranational system and secondly, the whole of Europe, or in any case the western part, should cooperate in order to be able to hold its own with the two global superpowers. The key was economic cooperation – the opening up of markets, making it easy for investors to invest beyond their own borders and later a monetary union. Attempts to replicate this model in a European defence community or a Gaullist project for a French led nuclear deterrent force, underpinned by a security policy, failed. In the same manner, the European Parliament (EP), despite enhanced powers has been unsuccessful in creating a supra national demos. The integration of southern and eastern European countries in the 1970s and 90s was for the most part achieved via economic mechanisms, whose effectiveness was questioned in the wake of the financial crisis at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Re-nationalisation tendencies are evident in all countries: national sentiment is strong although (or perhaps because) nation states have drastically diminished power to steer their own and global affairs.

### **European conflicts of memory: Holocaust and Gulags**

Given this background, one has to ask if a collective European memory of the Second World War could ever be possible. In this regard, many observers have misgivings that open disagreement as to the significance of historical events could well result in a disastrous division between the nations of Europe. In contrast is the post 1945 Franco German reconciliation in which both sides dealt with a bloody and tragic past. This process involved a convergence of social, political and cultural structures that to some extent can be traced back to coming to terms with the past. We could, however, say quite a lot about areas of 'misunderstanding'. What is uncontested is that history expressed in European terms has fewer French and Germans lined up like tribes confronting each other as in the myth of hereditary enmity and the binary view of the Resistance that viewed Nazis and their collaborators as the common enemy.

Many of the European conflicts of memory have been studied at supra and transnational level: they form concentric circles around western Europe's central historical event, the Holocaust and in the east they focus on the Gulags that between 1933 and 1945 and most notably in the 'Bloodlands'<sup>1</sup> became disastrously entangled. In addition, there were the racist colonial conflicts, often resulting in genocide, ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> *Bloodlands* by Timothy Snyder is a historical account of the mass murders committed by the Nazi and Stalinist regimes as two aspects of a single history.

cleansing on the European periphery (from Armenia to Bosnia) but also accounts of European Community successes post 1945. One difficulty as to how Europe views past events is how to highlight a singular issue such as the industrial and administrative destruction of the Jews without detracting from the historical significance of the Holocaust and the playing down the extermination of the 'class and people's enemy' in the Soviet sphere. It is not easy to find a form of commemoration that gives the requisite respect to these tragic experiences without putting both dictatorships on the same level. One therefore needs to keep in mind the chronology of events and where they took place. For the individual it did not matter which system victimised him or her, but it was important for historical analyses and had to reflect the rituals of memory. Only occasionally was this balance achieved at the first go. For the most part the groups of victims were unfortunately sorted according to their degree of importance and in relation to their 'competitors', equating victims of the Nazis with those of the Communists as though one collective experience of dictatorship could off-set another. The experiences of one group of victims would be played down while that of another dramatised in what often resulted in a cynical body count, designed to silence the 'other side'.

Those people who always keep the Holocaust to the fore often either, consciously or unconsciously, rate the Stalinist terror as a lesser evil or excuse it on the grounds that Communism, in contrast to Nazism had more humane intentions and wanted a more advanced society. Those who keep the Gulags to the fore often, either consciously or unconsciously, overlook the entanglement of Stalin's victims as part of collaboration with Nazism. If anything, whoever discounts this plays down the post 1945 Stalinist dictatorship claiming that central and eastern Europe had, before the Nazi occupation, been seized and 'cleansed' by Soviet troops. The 'Cui bono? (to whose benefit?) of the Cold War threatens to trump historical reality and perpetuate the division of the continent.

It is above all the western Europeans who must recognise the interaction between Nazism and Stalinism in their region and understand how these two totalitarian regimes were bound in a kind of 'antagonistic' cooperation that encouraged radicalisation. There is a kind of inner relationship between the millions who starved in the Ukraine, those who perished in the Holocaust, Stalin's mass deportations, those worked to death in the Nazi concentration camps and the ethnic cleansing after the Second World War that resulted in the loss of at least 14 million lives in Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine and Belarus. This figure takes no account of those who died as a direct result of hostilities. The Hitler-Stalin Pact clearly demonstrated the contempt both men held for the people and countries that lay between them: Russification and the 'living space' (Lebensraum) policy were not identical but they fitted together in deadly perfection, with hatred of the Jews uniting both dictators and systems.

### **Franco-German reconciliation**

Future generations can use the civilised and constructive Franco-German reconciliation model to deal with conflicts of historical memory and they will not need to agree on all disputed details. Even the current Franco-German relationship allows for differences of opinion. The most decisive point is that France and Germany were, above all, able to reconcile decades of conflict post 1945 because it could be done within a European framework.

In a broad ranging study entitled *Les lieux de mémoire*, French historian Pierre Nora directed research for an inventory of 'places of national remembrance' that in his opinion could provide the basis for France's political identity. Places of remembrance could be "simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, an instant sensual experience

and simultaneously the result of a highly abstract thought process". In general we can view them as a collective means of community memory among which are:

- Physical places such as memorials, monuments and museums that often provide a means of arousing and fostering memory
- Memorial ceremonies, outstanding personalities, commemorative organisations, rituals and emblems
- Scientific, literary and legal texts

These "places" have material, symbolic and functional meaning. They are less concerned with reconstructing "what actually happened" than with ways and means of constructing and utilising history as a major resource for the provision of a secondary common cultural and communicative memory reflexion.

Nora's projection that only referred to the French Republic, has been extrapolated to include Europe and other times and places of global history. While national commemorative places, as a rule, refer to a defined territorial area of collective memory, Europe's borders have never been clearly defined with the result that reference frameworks and outcomes remain unsettled.

This gives rise to a new perception of the past that "emphasises the common aspects of separate histories and regards the neighbour's history as part of one's own". (Francois 2006:302) In this sense, (Rousso 2004) asserts: "a common European memory is more likely to be constructed in terms of expectations rather than from an analysis of past events".

European history in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is notable in that it has been able to address the horror of nationalist and racist confrontation of former archenemies. Germans and French now learn from the same history books. Poles and Germans hold discussions in Auschwitz on the anti-Semitism prevalent in both countries. Germans and Jews (from both eastern Europe and Israel) are able to live together in Berlin communes. Russians and Poles have knelt down together at the mass graves of Katyn, Russian and German ex servicemen have together mourned the victims of the siege of St Petersburg.

The civilian nature of this reconciliation process is demonstrated when old battles are no longer re-fought and there is neither a hierarchy of victims nor a competition as to who suffered most. All this is able to take place without denying historical crimes, without attempting to gloss over certain events or construct a confusing revisionist alternative. In this difficult area of collective memory, we see the truth of the sociologist's wisdom that modern societies grow and develop when conflict is resolved by non-military means. The common interest means leaving behind fatal national quarrels and reconstructing a common European history that does not seek to put different attitudes and concerns on the same level but rather reach an understanding through discussion, thus demonstrating that one could continue to have different views without allowing new enmities to develop.

### **Discordant European memories**

This was not always possible in all cases. A number of secondary irritations have appeared between the Germans and the Dutch; Germany's leading role in Europe has provoked feeling of historical revanchism in Italy and Greece. The peoples of the former Yugoslavia are far from any kind of 'dealing with the past' either on a bilateral or multilateral basis in the case of ancient quarrels (Kosovo), disputes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the civil war post 1991. Europe's colonial history that still influences current migration patterns and the treatment of the Roma, have scarcely been discussed. A sad continuation of discrimination is still predominant.

A particularly crass example is the militancy with which collective memory has been co-opted in Ukraine. If you had spent the last 70 years on the moon and then returned to study the current actions of Ukrainian nationalists and the partisan attitudes of many Russians, you could think that the 'Great Patriotic War' (1941-45) was still raging. They talk of 'fascists' being in power in Kiev as though it was Nazi collaborators who had occupied Maidan Square. The secessionists in Donetsk and the Crimea are waving red flags decorated with hammer and sickle and a likeness of Stalin as though the dictator were still in power. These symbols and icons are partly used to manipulate but they also reflect the unenlightened mood of the people who have never had to undergo the acid test of doubt as to historical events.

This demonstrates what can happen to societies who have never been able to achieve any kind of self-critical distance. This is especially true of Russian society and parts of the Russian speaking population in Ukraine who, in the harshness of the post Soviet transformation period used the anti fascist model of the 'Great Patriotic War' or the Cold War tradition of anti western prejudices. Against this background, Vladimir Putin's 'Eurasia policy' that draws on the traditions of imperial Czarist Russia and the Lenin and Stalin periods, has received support. These were imperial and populist alternatives to the modernisation proposed by those looking to the west, who wanted Russia to undergo a democratic and technocratic renewal after the abolition of serfdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Putin's Russia there still remains something of an 'oriental despotism' (Marx); capitalism feeds an oligarchy that divides its revenues in a system of patronage. Russia as another kind of oil and gas sheikdom, neither promotes the development of civil society nor any proper reappraisal of history.

This is the view of critical circles in Russia, who have, however, failed to become predominant and their initiatives on historical memory, with the exception of the Memorial Organisation, have done little to challenge the nostalgic, romantic image of the Soviet imperial past. It always contains the conspiracy theory of encirclement and Russia as victim, factors that appeal to Russophiles in the west. Whoever considers this left wing, is, all things being equal, able to call upon Karl Marx's argument that the people's democracy needs to be defended against czarist rule. Whoever shouts 'fascist' needs to ask what he himself is. In the 'Eurasian' view of the world, the masterminds of Bolshevik thinking combine National Socialism and Soviet communism. In 'Eurasian' terms, Ukraine belongs to Moscow's sphere of influence. The myth of the Kiev Russian is on a par with such enduring folklore as the 'Battle of Blackbirds' Field (also known as the Battle of Kosovo 1389) used by those aspiring to a greater Serbia and with it destroyed Yugoslavia.

The Marxist view demanded support for national movements in eastern Europe that challenged the Czar (or the Ottoman Empire). When assessing Ukrainian nationalism it will depend on whether it is the inclusive kind that promotes co-existence between the Ukrainian and Russian speaking peoples as the vast majority of Ukrainians want, seeing it as a bridge between Russia and the EU within the framework of a peaceful European order. Or is it the nationalism of the Svoboda Party or the 'Right' that agitates against Russians (Communists), Poles and Jews?

Above all, there is urgent need for more understanding as to the historical collaboration between Ukraine and Nazi Germany. Every democratic movement in Ukraine has to deal with the historical baggage that continues to fuel controversy. There are memorials and street names in western Ukraine commemorating Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) who fought

against Russians and Germans and even the SS volunteers of the Galician Division are looked on favourably by some members of the population.

On the other hand, after a long silence dictated by the Soviet government, various Ukrainian initiatives have examined the Holocaust, the problem areas of the national movement and collaboration with the Nazis. As in the rest of Europe, this has been many faceted and events have had to be put into context: Ukrainian independence ambitions after the demise of the Hapsburg monarchy were brutally ended by the Soviets, who drove million to their deaths in the 1930s with the forced collectivisation of agriculture that resulted in mass starvation (Holodomor). Even though it was the German occupation 1941-44 that resulted in the largest loss of life in any of the occupied countries with the Ukraine Reichskommissariat systematically plundering, and reducing the population by starvation and working people to death as forced labour, it was hatred of Communists and Jews that shaped their view of the world.

Above all, the concept of a European understanding of the Second World War has to comprehend that in the 'Bloodlands' of Ukraine, Hitler and Stalin first co-operated and then opposed each other's (colonisation) occupation plans.

However hopeless the overheated confrontation currently appears, we need to do everything in our power to support Ukraine and Russia in making a joint effort to understand their common and divided history. The war, with its 'my country, right or wrong' logic threatens to stamp out these fragile shoots. A right wing political figure such as Marine Le Pen in France, who is sympathetic to the autocratic Putin, is attempting to make capital out of this.

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