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Europeanising Institutional Memory or Supranationalising Domestic Memory Struggles?

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Since the early years of European integration, EU elites have attempted to transform and reconstruct national collective memory by adding layers of a transnational European memory. At stake in this process is the possibility of constructing an EU-level historical narrative, which could act as identification marker for European citizens. The focus, here, is on institutional discourses promoted by political elites. Until recently three memory discourses were indeed promoted by EU policy-makers: EU remembrance policies focused on European heritage, the Second World War as founding event of the European project, and the history of European integration itself. However, these memory discourses did not resonate well with the existing memory cultures of European societies and were not appealing to European citizens. In the 1990s, a discursive turn occurred in the discourse of EU elites, who increasingly referred to the Holocaust as a definitional element of European identity. This represented a shift away from the glorification of Europe's past and negative memories were, for the first time, integrated into the EU's discourse. By defining the Holocaust as central to the definition of European identity, EU elites hoped that the new memory discourse would better resonate with the existing commemoration cultures of EU Member States. The remembrance of Nazi crimes had indeed been integrated into the institutional memory of most Western European states since the 1980s. Along with the discursive shift came a change in the scope of EU level memory policies. From the years 2000s onwards, the use of 'memory' as a vector of identification to the EU as a political project became an explicit part of the EU's strategy aimed at better involving citizens in the EU polity. However, it will be argued here that while EU enlargement has accelerated the need for stronger mechanisms of identification with the EU as a political project, it has also represented an additional obstacle to the construction of a would-be European narrative which could fulfill this function. Thus, rather than exemplifying a Europeanization process of collective memory, EU-level debates on the commemoration of the past are permeated by competition between competing memory narratives which replicate, although with a new set of actors involved, former debates that had taken place in some EU Member States.



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Creating European memories

From the very early years of European integration, European institutions and European Heads of State perceived the conscious rediscovery of European heritage as a prerequisite to any sort of political unification. In 1973, Heads of State adopted the *Declaration on European Identity*, in which they underlined the role of culture as one of the fundamental elements of European identity.ⁱ The European Parliament, in the 1970s, also became involved with the politics of the European past and adopted several resolutions, suggesting measures in order to protect the European cultural heritage.ⁱⁱ The European cultural heritage was indeed presented as the ultimate expression of European collective memory. The European Commission, for its part, only intervened in the field from the 1990s onwards, via the vector of cultural heritage policies. The Directorate General Education and Culture launched in 1995 the Raphaël Programme dealing with European heritage, which has since 2000 been integrated into the Culture Framework Programme. Under the Culture Framework Programme, a great diversity of projects related to the promotion of architectural heritage as the deposit of 'European memory' has benefited from EU financial support. The creation of the label 'European heritage' in 2007 responds to a similar logic. The Acropolis in Athens, the Capitol in Rome, or the Court of Honour of the Papal Palace in Avignon are only a few examples of sites chosen as 'European' places of memory by the European Commission. Symbolic initiatives, such as the 'European City of Culture' and the 'European Cultural Month' are part of the same attempt at pointing to the existence of a common European heritage.

EU decision-makers also endeavored to define European integration against its 'founding event', the Second World War. The background of the War was central to the *raison d'être* of the European Community project. In the Schuman Declaration of May 1950, it was hoped that the Community would 'lead to the realization of the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace'.ⁱⁱⁱ The European project was therefore presented as an institutional experiment which would render similar conflicts impossible in the future. Churchill, in his Iron Curtain speech of 5 March 1946, had already argued that 'the safety of the world [...] requires a new unity in Europe, from which no nation should be permanently outcast'. The Preamble of the Treaty of Rome states again that EU governments aim, 'by thus pooling their resources to preserve and strengthen peace and liberty', and calling upon the other peoples of Europe who share their ideal to join in their efforts'. The Second World War was the explicit background against which the European project was initiated. Strikingly, however, the Holocaust was not mentioned as such in early Treaties and declarations on European integration and remained the implicit catastrophic motive of early attempts to establish supranational modes of governance.



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Finally, European institutions have attempted to create a new terrain of collective memory centered around the 'grand moments' of European integration history itself. In the wake of the low turnout in the 1979 European elections, European Commission policy strategists became convinced of the need to 'sell Europe' more effectively to the European public. The European Council appointed an *ad hoc* group of experts, which produced the two 1985 *Adonnino Reports on a People's Europe* in order to address these concerns. The reports contained specific sections devoted to culture and communication, which concentrated on the image and identity of the Community, and suggested, amongst other measures, the introduction of concrete 'European' symbols to which citizens could relate. In June 1985, the European Council adopted the European flag, the European anthem and Europe Day as the official symbols of the European Community. Europe Day was decreed to be the 9th of May, in celebration of the Schuman Declaration adopted on 9 May 1950. The objective consisted in creating EU-level commemoration mechanisms centered on the fundamental moments of the history of European integration and giving visible symbols to the EU as a political community.

However, none of these memory narratives were able to foster EU citizens' awareness of their 'European belonging'. The 'common heritage' and the 'founding event' narratives were promoted mainly via the use of cultural policy instruments. The 'grand moments of European integration' narrative was advanced via the vector of citizenship policies and was part of a more ambitious project aimed at fostering citizens' participation to the EU as a political project. But the history of European integration was not sufficiently appealing material to European citizens. Thus, EU institutions' attempts to create European memories essentially failed, because they did not resonate well with the existing memory cultures of European societies.

Europeanizing Memory

The Holocaust as a defining narrative for the EU Project

In response to former failures of EU memory policies, EU elites have developed a new strategy. EU policy-makers have indeed realised that remembrance mechanisms had become key vectors of identification at the domestic level. They have therefore taken the task of transferring those mechanisms of identification to the European level and construct new transnational spaces of communication around common remembrance actions. In the 1990s, at a time when a more general transformation on the collective remembrance of Nazi crimes had already taken place in Western European countries, the Holocaust was indeed transformed into a definitional narrative for the European project. The remembrance of the Holocaust had already become center-stage in several EU Member States since the 1980s, thus laying the ground for the adoption of a Holocaust-centered remembrance discourse at the EU level. Thus, EU elites within the European Parliament and the European Commission began referring to the Holocaust as



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the tragic event that changed the values of European societies. Nazi crimes became a central element of the EU's rhetoric and were presented as crucial to Europeans' very understanding of human rights and democracy and, as such, as central to the definition of European identity.

An increased focus on Nazi crimes took place, first, via the vector of EU heritage policies. In the early 1990s, the European Parliament proposed that Nazi concentration camps be considered as European historical monuments and decided to create a Holocaust memorial day in all EU countries.^{iv} However, the significance of the Holocaust in the discourse of EU political elites took off with the 2000 Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust. In 2000, the measures taken against Austria after the coalition building of the Austrian's People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) were taken in the wake of the Holocaust Forum in Stockholm. The sanctions, which froze all high-level diplomatic contacts with Austrian officials, were taken on behalf of moral imperatives derived from the commemoration of the Holocaust in Europe, rather than the concrete policies of the newly elected coalition. In June 2005, Beate Winkler, the former director of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, explained at an OSCE Conference: 'The Shoah is the traumatic experience of Europe's violent past. It has driven the EU's founders to build a united and peaceful Europe and thus been at the very root of the European integration project'.^v For the past ten years, cooperation and the coordination of the various European and global activities of Holocaust remembrance have been placed at the top of the European agenda.

Nazi crimes have also, when recent conflicts have occurred, been invoked to call to the necessity of humanitarian intervention. For instance, after the massacre of Srebrenica, the memory of the Second World War and of the Shoah was systematically mentioned by European leaders who advocated an active involvement of the EU in the conflict. Former German Minister of Foreign affairs, Joschka Fisher, said in order to support Germany's intervention in Kosovo 'I did not only learn: "Never again war". I also learned: "Never again Auschwitz"'.^{vi} The memory of Munich in 1938 was several times invoked in order to justify a more forceful European intervention.^{vii} The Holocaust became both the benchmark by which all other instances of organised state terror were understood and the ultimate justification for intervening in more recent conflicts. In the same way, the Rwandan genocide has been compared, in the press and by political elites, to the genocide of European Jews.^{viii} Being able to cope with the crimes of the past has moreover become, in the words of Tony Judt, 'Europe's entry ticket' for candidate EU states. Poland, for instance, faced repeated pressure from EU institutions during the negotiations for its EU membership. In the aftermath of the Second World War, thousands of Polish citizens had their properties seized and nationalized by the Communist government as part of a campaign of violence aimed specifically at Jews. Prior to its EU accession, some MEPs put pressure on Poland for



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having failed to implement private property restitution to date. It was also just before becoming an EU member that Romania admitted the role it had played in the Holocaust, in particular the crimes committed against Jews under the pro-Nazi regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu. Thus, the Holocaust has become, *a posteriori*, the definitional narrative of the EU project.

The Holocaust Redefined

With the Eastern enlargement, however, EU elites have reframed their discourse and have started focusing on the necessity of condemning Nazism and Stalinism, the two main European experiences of Totalitarianism in the 20th century, as equally evil. New EU states, with Poland and the Baltics at the vanguard of the commemorative politics struggle, have challenged the EU-endorsed remembrance of the Second World War as essentially a 'good war' fought for the common cause of anti-Nazism. For the new Europeans, the memory of the Holocaust is largely superseded by their more recent experiences with communist dictatorial regimes. The current struggle centers, therefore, on the right way of condemning the two European totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, opposing the paradigm of the distinctiveness of the Holocaust to the view that Nazism and Stalinism were two equally barbaric regimes in a longer history of organized state terror. The entry of Eastern European States into the EU has therefore displaced already pre-existing battles on the status of the Holocaust from the domestic to the EU level. Germany and France, in the 1980s, has already been the theatre of very similar debates, with the *Historikerstreit* in Germany and the controversy around *The Black Book of Communism* from Stéphane Courtois in France.

But while debates at the domestic level were between the Left and Right-wing intellectual and political elites, the controversy, in the EU context, was essentially between new and old Member States. The new constellation of participants to the memory struggle thus delegitimized the view, defended by the Left, that comparing Nazi and Stalinist crimes necessarily emanated from a conservative agenda. Eastern European States have succeeded, to some extent, in institutionalizing their own memory narrative in the EU institutional context. The 2005 European Parliament resolution *The Future of Europe Sixty Years after the Second World War*, recognized 'the magnitude of the suffering, injustice and long-term social, political and economic degradation endured by the captive nations located on the eastern side of what was to become the Iron Curtain' and confirmed 'its united stand against all totalitarian rule of whatever ideological persuasion'.ⁱ Upon the initiative of MEPs Tunne Kelam from Estonia, Jana Hybášková from the Czech Republic, and József Szájer from Hungary, the European Parliament also called for the proclamation of the 23rd of August as a Europe-wide Remembrance Day for the victims of both Nazism and Communism. In its 2009 resolution on *European Conscience and Totalitarianism*, it reiterated this discourse.^x The European Commission also included the commemoration of Stalinist crimes in its 'Active European



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Remembrance' action, launched in 2007. Thus, the narrative promoted by new Member States increasingly gained ground in the EU institutional discourse.

But instead of a reconciliation of Western and Eastern memory cultures, we observe rather an ongoing rhetorical competition between them in EU institutional arenas. In April 2007, EU justice ministers passed the Framework Decision on Combating Racism and Xenophobia, which allows to declare as a criminal offence the public condemnation, denial, or trivialization of 'genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes'.^{xi} But the demands of Eastern States that the denial of communist crimes would also be condemned was not accepted by other Member States. Ahead of the Holocaust remembrance day, in January 2010, Jerzy Buzek, the President of the European Parliament, also provoked a political controversy by comparing Nazi crimes with those committed under Stalin.^{xii} For the Israeli political elite and some sections of the political Left in Western Europe, the comparison was part of a broader attempt on the part of EU elites to undermine the status of the Holocaust as a unique case of genocide. Over the last ten years, the EU has become a terrain where the status of the Holocaust and its role in the identity-definition process of European societies has been debated.

Conclusions

In the context of the perceived lack of identification of European citizens with the EU as a political community, EU institutions endeavored to use memory and commemoration processes as a vector of identification. They were faced, however, with the problem of finding memory narratives which could appeal to all European societies. Early attempts at constructing European memories referred to narratives that were not sufficiently appealing to European citizens and could not act as cements for the construction of a European identity. Focusing on 'hot' historical memories, such as Nazi crimes, was therefore a skillful attempt from the part of EU institutions to transform commemoration processes into a genuine vector of identification to the EU. However, by using memory narratives which referred to already existing discourses at the national level, EU institutions prepared the ground for the EU to become a new locus of conflict over the interpretation of the past. Finding a common 'European memory' of recent European history was particularly intricate in the context of the confrontation of divergent Eastern and Western memory cultures. The 'Nazism and Stalinism as equally evil' narrative faced the resistance of a formerly well established and competing narrative and the EU became a terrain of debate over the status and nature of the two totalitarian experiences. Collective memory is indeed a particularly sensitive domain as a possible basis for building new vectors of identification to the European Community. If this only sends us back to the broader problem of constructing public spheres at the EU level, in a context of linguistic and cultural diversity, it also highlights that the remembrance of the past is as such an



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intricate vector of identification for citizens – as its agitation by nationalist elites at the domestic level has too often proved a reminder.

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