

“European future has a past. Contemporary witnesses”

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I.

In World War One individuals from countries from all over Europe faced each other as enemies. Churchill, former British Minister of Defense, resumed a few years later: “cities and monuments were smashed by artillery. Bombs from the air were cast down indiscriminately. Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared the soldiers. Liquid fire was projected upon their bodies. (...) Europe and large parts of Asia and Africa became one large battlefield on which after years of struggles not armies but nations broke and ran.”

This year we commemorate above all the centenary of the Battle of Verdun, one of the bloodiest battles of World War One. This battle is regarded as a symbol of the first mass global war of industrial warfare in world history. Hundreds of thousands of humans died on the battlefields because they had been declared mere “human material”.

The horrors of World War One still remain incomprehensible to day and none the less this “great seminal catastrophe of this century” did not succeed in terminating these kinds of atrocities – on the contrary. The next civilization-threatening catastrophe, World War Two, started only after a short respite – a total war in which the boundaries between military and civilian spheres were annihilated.

The criminal war of conquest of the German Army – the Wehrmacht – , the Shoah and the air strikes against civilians, flight and forced migration; the lists of the horrors of World War Two are enormous and have exceeded those of World War One in their range of brutalities.

The experiences of the first half of the 20th century have left deep marks. These marks are on the one hand found on a personal level – the memory of the individuals who lived through these atrocities; but also in the memories they have passed on to their children and grandchildren. On the other hand these traces can be found in the sphere of public awareness of the respective nations involved. Whereas the individual memories fade, the discourses focusing on the dictatorships and wars remain virulent on the basis of the respective states as regards their national identities.

Dealing with the past and the shaping of a culture of remembrance that is appropriate to the past events is part of an extensive process of post war democratisation.

Establishing codes of moral values and guiding principles of the European democracies have been derived to date from the experiences of the rupture in civilization of the first half of the 20th century.

The history of destruction has been kept alive. In cities like Berlin, Rotterdam or Warsaw the historical heritage of the cities cannot be overlooked – but also in towns which were destroyed to a much smaller extent like Verona, Hasselt and Detmold, traces of war, tyranny and the holocaust can be found.

Conferences like this one are meant to contribute to unearth these traces. They are suited to clarify how much shaping power lies within these regional memories and to provide ideas of possible ways ahead of how – on the basis of municipalities – European Exchange and Understanding on dealing with this immensely difficult and dividing historical heritage can be achieved.

II.

It is hardly surprising that after experiences of distrust, violence and destruction Europe needed decades to overcome and heal the wounds of the first half of the century. When considering the European peace project starting in 1945 questions arise concerning the dialectics between destruction and the emergence of a new and stable order. However, now the issues of guilt and compensations are not those that are paramount today but those of negotiating an appropriate way of addressing and confronting the past.

Jorge Semprun said at the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp “One of the most effective possibilities to pave the way to a united, or rather re-united, Europe, is to share our pasts with each other, our memory, to unify our so far separated memories.”

Considering the historical background of varying experiences of violence, however, the question arises of how to integrate such mutual memories. Is it possible after all to combine the respective European memories to one shared culture of remembrance? Isn't the idea expressed in Semprun's Buchenwald speech to share the memories of the Shoah crimes rather an expression of wishful thinking that cannot be fulfilled? And is it opportune at all to interconnect the carefully shaped versions of remembrance of descendants of former war enemies, of culprits and of victims, with each other?

In order to get closer to the answer to all those considerations, let us have a closer look at the different phases of the postwar period, also focusing on what unites us.

Let us first of all review the immediate post-war decades: The period until the Mid-1960s was defined by individual experiences of war and loss. The sons, fathers, husbands and friends killed or missing in action, or “handicapped” by war used to be present everywhere. In Poland and Germany millions were uprooted by their fates of forced migration. Economic crises also had those suffer of shortages right into the 1950s who had been the victors of World War Two.

The omnipresence of personal affectedness was answered by a public blocking out, collective silence and disregard. Reconstruction was given priority over a critical assessment of the past, not only in Germany. In those countries that had been occupied by the German Military during the war and where there had been collaboration with Nazi-Germany, “grey areas” were blocked off in favour of a management of urgent issues.

In a second period beginning in the mid-1960s national cultures of remembrance started to change. Societal settings were transforming due to the 1968 movement, but additionally then topical disclosures about the extermination of the European Jews during National Socialism influenced public expressions of remembrance. Former places of National Socialist terror like Dachau and Bergen-Belsen became memorials accessible to the public. At the same time in Western Europe collaboration with the occupiers was scrutinized as well as Antisemitism and involvement in the holocaust.

The culture of remembrance in Germany was democratized not least due to the history movement of “History from below”. There, interested citizens, – among them pupils – discovered the archives for their ends. They safeguarded individual recognition of the victims of the National Socialist regime by recovering their names. They researched regional history and exposed the “petty” culprits, too. The nationwide competition for schoolchildren, awarded by the Federal President, has had an important part in setting the course for dealing with contemporary history. The confrontation with a history of persecution by historical research was put on a wider foundation in society. A generation unburdened of individual guilt paved the way for a regional culture of remembrance which could liberate itself from the ritualistic practices of the first post-war years.

Nevertheless, the act of remembering the deaths of World War Two remained rather difficult. Ideas promoting a national memorial were not favoured. Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker, in his keynote speech of 8th May 1985 commemorating liberation, clarified that hero commemoration as had happened after World War One had become impossible: “The wish to attribute meaning to the death of millions because they must not have died in vain, forbid itself in the light of crimes that the Wehrmacht – the German army – had been instrumentalized to either carry out, or conceal.” Only after reunification a memorial was erected in the “Neue Wache” (New Guardhouse) in Berlin where not only the soldiers killed in action but also the millions of civilian victims are commemorated.

The wording chosen there “To the victims of war and tyranny” expresses the objective of commemoration in brevity, but also in some vagueness. Controversy around this form of remembrance which is meant to include all parties, yet not stating them distinctly, finally led to the erection of the widely noted Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe.

The third period: The system established since 1945 of two superpowers based on two different worldviews collapsed in 1989. With the end of the communist system in Eastern Europe and the end of the GDR the general framework for the culture of remembrance changed once again. Now there were besides the victims of Nationalist Social terror those of the Communist dictatorship, which caused discussions of prominence in victim status especially at Eastern German memorial sites.

It is notable that only after the end of the East-West Divide the Holocaust moved to the center of European memory. The year 1989 marked a fundamental change of perspective which attributes a transnational and uniting role within Europe to the National Socialist genocide. This is why in many European countries the 27th January is commemorated as the day of liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The new European culture of remembrance focuses on victims instead of heroes. Groups of victims that were marginalized for a long time like Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and Jehova's Witnesses have been given back their identities in this refocused culture of remembrance. Victims are no longer meant to be mere statistical figures but perceptible once again as individuals. Forms of commemoration that put individuals in its center allow for sorrow and deference towards the dead and exemplify the meaning of those lives extinguished.

III.

Culture of remembrance today is not about the addressing or confronting of the past of the generation of those who themselves lived through the era. Personal guilt and also the personal experience of coping with suffering do no longer have the prominent part. All the more the objective is to do justice to the requirements of collective memory in the present and the past. For the German culture of remembrance this meant to clearly state the national responsibility for the World War and the holocaust. Against the background of historical responsibility there remains the initial question whether a European culture of remembrance is feasible at all. It can be stated that what was not possible to the generation that survived and lived through the era, that is to overcome the deep scars of personal experience in order to jointly remember the horrors of war and genocide seems more feasible to be accomplished by the following generation. We have become more European in our understanding of Europe's history of violence; we are thinking less in national categories, but rather in categories of justice and injustice. For the upcoming generation this seems not an issue: the holocaust is not only part of a German consciousness but it is an inextinguishable integral part of a collective European consciousness.

Nevertheless, as regards the dealing with diverging historical memories it must not be wiped out that those differ from country to country, from region to region, but between social groups, generations and

gender. The perspective of the victim, either from the outlook of a survivor or via the account that is passed on, has a formative quality that it is impossible to be erased by some kind of drawing of a final line, nor should it be. Each of the differing perspectives has its justification. "Homogenisation" of national cultures of remembrance does not give due credit to historical experience.

Are we thus to rule out a joint European commemoration altogether? Here, I would like to refer to a suggestion of European Parliament President Martin Schulz. At the conference on memorials in Berlin in the summer of this year he stated: "Of course, European commemoration is always both, the joint history of our continent which can also shape a European identity, and at the same time a plurality and diversity of historical narratives."

Schulz expressed that for victims of state terror it cannot be graded whether it was of greater importance whether they were in one of the extermination camps of the National Socialists, in Franco's torture chambers or in the prisons of Stalinist Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, these different experiences of violence will generate an existence side by side of different cultures of remembrance, which nonetheless should engage into a dialogue with each other.

More importantly than the equalizing of memory the surpassing of the experience of violence was groundbreaking for post-war Europe. European unification is also an answer to Auschwitz. Because of the experience of totalitarian regimes the respect for human rights and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights is of the highest priority. This awareness everyone can go along with – not alone the upcoming generation of those who inflicted the wrongs but also those who were made to suffer and of course also those who came to Europe from other continents and stayed. The heritage of the past concerns them all.

From the knowledge about the ruptures of civilization in the past there arises responsibility for the present and the future. This responsibility is to guide our joint European conduct. Antisemitism, racism, ultranationalism, and intolerance do not belong in the shared values of the European Community.

Thank you so much for your attention!

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