

Culture(s) of Remembrance in Germany, Poland, France, and Portugal

A European Memory?

In *The Struggle for a European Memory: Visit to a Battlefield* the political scientist Claus Leggewie asks whether a “European identity” based on a shared European past and memory exists. He concludes that it is impossible to speak of either “a” European culture of remembrance, or of “a” European identity. Rather, Europe’s collective memory is just as manifold as its nations and cultures. Stalinism, colonialism, expulsions, and migration are part of Europe’s shared history, but they are interpreted differently in different national contexts. The National Socialist politics of annihilation, the Shoah, and the Cold War from 1945 to 1989 represent the culmination points of the remembered European past.

Both the victims of National Socialism and those who assisted the perpetrators came from different European countries. Among others, the Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Jerusalem, Efraim Zuroff, has shown this.¹ Recent years have seen the trials of collaborators from the Netherlands (Heinrich Boere, voluntary SS member, sentenced to life in prison in 2010), Austria (Heinrich Gross, guilty of euthanasia murders as a doctor; repeated prosecutions and trial proceedings, most recently in 2005; the case against him was closed following his death in 2006), Ukraine (John Demjanjuk, forced to enrol as an SS warden at the Sobibor Extermination Camp, sentenced to five years in prison in 2011 after a number of legal proceedings), and other countries. These trials are important because they prove that the politics of annihilation pursued in National Socialist Germany had many supporters in other European countries. They also give us insights into how other European countries integrated the Shoah into their respective national identities. In 1980s France, for example, the trial of the French war criminal Claus Barbie was a source of great controversy, particularly because it challenged France’s identity under Charles de Gaulle as a victim of Germany and the home of the *résistance*. While the following text focuses on the politics of remembrance in Germany, it also refers to cultures of remembrance in Portugal, France, and Poland.

“European memory” or “national memory”:
What in your view are the advantages and problems
associated with both kinds of memory?

Memory and Remembrance

While one can only remember things one has experienced at first hand, memories can be mediated, transferred, and manifested in different media. There is a range of theories to describe this difference in the context of European cultures of remembrance.

With his concept of “collective memory”, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs paved the way for the theoretical engagement with forms of remembering and memory in the national context. In 1944 the French scholar and socialist was arrested by the Gestapo in Paris and deported to Buchenwald, where he was murdered in March 1945.

¹ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 10. July 2007

In Halbwach's view, individuals are connected with history through memory and the imaginary. Memory itself and the act of remembering require a social framework within which remembrance takes place and a society that remembers and preserves what is remembered. The social framework of memory is formed in the present, the point of departure for all forms of memory and remembering. It denotes a common relationship to the past shared by individuals in a particular social community or group, by virtue of nationality, sex, or shared experiences. Each epoch and its community of remembrance renegotiates the collective memory of its members, eliminating from that memory anything that divides the community and negating or simplifying contradictions. The memory thus formed is in turn manifested in various media.

These media do not just refer to historical facts; they also reflect the convictions of their communities of remembrance. In contrast to an individual's memory of his lived experience, collective memory comprises knowledge beyond the individual and can therefore be mediated. Following Halbwachs, this means that collectives determine the memory of their members. Thus memory is viewed as a thoroughly social phenomenon that connects the private with the political.

In their theory of cultural and communicative memory, Jan and Aleida Assmann differentiate between two different forms of remembering. Communicative memory describes the memory of the historical experience encompassed by an individual biography. It is informal in nature and mediated through interaction, typically in oral communications between remembering individuals. Its timespan is limited to the living memory of experience, extending over 3 to 4 generations, or 80 to 100 years. "Family ties" and "love" structure this private memory sphere, which in turn influences "cultural memory". Cultural memory is a combination of tradition and communicative memory that manifests itself in museums, monuments, and commemorative plaques, i.e. in media of collective memory. Drawing on Halbwachs and the Jewish historian Marc Bloch, the cultural historian Peter Burke refers to history as "social memory". Thus history can reveal how public memories are transmitted, how this transmission changes over time, how memories (and therefore the past) are used, how this use changes over time, and what role forgetting plays in these processes.

The study of family memory in the European context has been invaluable for understanding the different ways in which public and private memory of National Socialism and the Shoah function.

In their research on family memory, the social psychologist Harald Welzer and his research team focussed primarily on the interaction of cultural and communicative memory. Among other things, their interview-based study *'Opa war kein Nazi'. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Welzer/Moller/Tschugnall 2005) shows how TV and film influence individual memory, highlighting the importance of media as carriers of memory. Literature, film, commemorative holidays, and memorials are all media of communicative and national memory. History is interpreted, fixed, and sometimes reappraised in and through such media. Thus memory does not exist independently of media, and media in turn influence how we remember.

How did you come to learn about history and what overlaps were there between communicative memory (e.g. family memory) and collective memory (the interpretation of the past reflected in commemorative ceremonies, memorials, and monuments, i.e. media of cultural memory)?

a Carmelite convent on the site of the former concentration camp in the 1980s, competing Jewish and Polish memory cultures collided (see Ehret 2008). After 1945 the status of communists as the main victims of the Germans was established, with no official remembrance of Jewish and other victim groups. The conflict surrounding the convent peaked in 1989, at a time of confrontation between Western and Eastern European memory politics. Until then, Jewish victims had been excluded from Poland's official culture of remembrance, while the Catholic Church had played a far greater role in Polish memory politics since 1956 in the aftermath of Stalin's death. In the heated debate between Catholics and Jews, deeply-rooted Polish anti-Semitism flared up.

In 1946 an anti-Semitic pogrom in which 43 Jews were killed took place in Kielce (see Sauerland 2004). After that incident the Polish state continued to promote anti-Semitism, with the result that almost the entire Jewish population emigrated from Poland.

What sites of remembrance are you aware of in your home country?

Have a look at the following website which details sites of remembrance and and memorials throughout Europe: <http://www.memorialmuseums.org/europe>

Central Sites of Remembrance in Germany/Berlin

It might seem paradoxical to talk about central sites of remembrance in Germany, given the fact that until 1990 the GDR and West Germany pursued diametrically opposed memory politics: dictated in the GDR by that state's political identification with anti-fascism, and in West Germany by an anti-communist stance.

Nevertheless, memorials were established in both East and West Germany in the immediate aftermath of the War, often at the sites of former concentration camps such as *Bergen-Belsen* in the West (1952) and *Ravensbrück* in the East (1959). The latter two memorials were founded by survivor associations and built near rather than directly on the respective historical sites. Monuments in memory of the victims were constructed at both sites.

On Ravensbrück see:

<http://www.ravensbrueck.de/mgr/index.html>

and on Bergen-Belsen:

<http://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/home.html>

At the end of the 1980s, plans to erect central sites of remembrance were discussed in East and West Berlin. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 most of these sites were built. Following discussions on the location and realization of the project that went on for over fifteen years, the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was finally opened on 15 May 2005. Initially, this memorial was due to be built on the site occupied by the *Topography of Terror Documentation Centre* today, on the former location of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), or, as one of the main initiators of the memorial Leah Rosh put it, on the "ruins at the centre of Nazi power" (quoted in Stavginski 2002, p. 40). The memorial is a counter-project to the *New Guard House (Neue Wache)* established in 1993 as a

central memorial to “victims of war and tyranny” (as the inscription states) and a symbol of German re-unification. The latter’s blurring of the distinction between victim and perpetrator (the remains of a concentration camp inmate and an unknown soldier are both buried in the *New Guard House*) stands in sharp contrast to the exclusive focus on victims at the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*. Yet this memorial is not immune to reinterpretations, as Christina von Braun has pointed out (von Braun 2001). Von Braun raises the question of whether the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* was erected for the victims or as a reminder of the shame of the perpetrators and their offspring, as memorials are subject to new interpretations by successive communities of remembrance.

On the *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* see:
<http://www.holocaust-denkmal-berlin.de/index.php?id=home&L=1>
On the *Topography of Terror Documentation Centre* see:
<http://www.topographie.de/en/topography-of-terror/nc/1/>
Zur Neuen Wache http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neue_Wache

Opened in 2001, the *Jewish Museum* attempts to visualize the Shoah through its very architecture. Architect Daniel Libeskind referred to his design as “an architectonic answer to a history made of ash” (Libeskind 1999, p. 26). When authorities in East Berlin decided to reconstruct the synagogue in the Oranienburger Strasse in 1988, in West Berlin a decision was taken to build a new Jewish Museum.

On the *Jewish Museum* see:
<http://www.jmberlin.de/main/EN/homepage-EN.php>
On the synagogue see:
http://www.or-synagoge.de/html/en_homepage.htm

Stolpersteine (stumbling blocks) are brass-clad paving stones engraved with the name, date of birth and details of the deportation and murder of victims of National Socialism and set into the footpath in front of their former homes. In contrast to centralized memorials they are an everyday reminder of the past that catch passers-by by surprise. Officially permitted since 1996, the project initiated by the artist Gunter Demning remembers all victims of National Socialism. To date over 10,000 *Stolpersteine* have been laid in Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and Hungary. Together they represent a huge de-centralized memorial.