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# Re-imagining the Nation: Memory, Identity and the Emotions

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The new nationalism emerging across much of Europe is ready to forgo and forget lessons of history that had successfully domesticated and democratized the nations of the EU over the last 70 years. If the nation, however, is an important resource for integration, and integration is seen as a common project for both its citizens and its migrants, how can it be reimagined and supported to live up to this difficult and important task? This article will analyse these problems in the light of new and older concepts.

## The Return of the Nation

Within the framework of modernization theory, the nation was considered to be a transitory stage on the way to a larger cosmopolitan unit called ‘world society’. This evolution was supposed to be driven by the force of globalization that was expected to eventually dissolve national borders and replace them by strong links of interdependence in an unbounded market economy. Modernization theorists, technocrats, managers, but also leftists and cosmopolitans shared a view of history in which the concept of the nation was rendered obsolete. But also in memory studies, the nation was treated with suspicion. The term ‘methodological nationalism’ was created as a deterrent from engaging with this concept. The reason is clear: any engagement with the nation was suspected to – wittingly or unwittingly – promote ‘nationalism’. When, at a public festival in Dortmund in 2019, Heribert Prantl, editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, gave a galvanizing speech and was asked afterwards how to deal with the concept of the nation, his answer was quick, short and expectable: ‘zero tolerance for nationalism and extremism!’

But don't we all live in nations? As far as I can see there is as yet no real alternative for the nation. Nations of course do not exist in the void; they exist in states that can be either liberal democracies or autocratic regimes. Today the principles of liberal democracy are challenged in Europe and elsewhere. We are experiencing a strong pull by right-wing parties that systematically 'dismantle' democratic structures and openly promote illiberal transformations. Tabooing and abandoning the concept of the nation by the left may even have contributed to empowering the right, which has in the meantime answered the trend towards pluralization with polarization. While pluralization had been backed up by a social utopia, polarization is backed up by spite, resentment and outright hatred. Political ideologies have given way to identity politics and to collective emotions as the driving force of politics.

This is also a wake-up call for Memory Studies. For more than a decade we emphatically opted for transnational memories. I definitely include myself in this perspective. Our normative emphasis was progressive, leftist and cosmopolitan. In studying and recommending transnational memories, we had hoped that this would automatically strengthen them. In our liberal thinking, we have forgotten the nation, but illiberal thinkers and movements have not. Right-wing nationalists have returned, they are presenting themselves unashamedly and are emphatically steering political action in the EU today.

Let me start with an example. In the mid-1990s, the European Parliament decided to create a 'House of European History' in Brussels. This project proved more difficult than expected. After ten intensive years of brainstorming and preparations, the first team of experts gave up when they discovered that a unifying master narrative for Europe was not available. A second team was more successful; it chose a different approach that focused mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, in particular, on the history of European unification in a global context. It was designed to present European history as a transnational process, emphasizing the plurality of experiences and perspectives. The museum opened in 2016 and was generally hailed as a success. The exhibition impressed its visitors with a new standard of high-tech museology, emphasizing visual images and reducing verbal descriptions. It was praised for its multi-perspectival approach and reflexive presentation.

This remained the state of affairs until a group of Visegrad states undertook a collective trip to Brussels to visit the House of European history in August 2017. They were not at all pleased with what they saw and strongly objected to the whole concept of the museum, because they could not find a reference to nations and nation states. What they held to be most important and in fact most sacred, namely their nation, proved to be totally absent from this museum. As they did not find themselves adequately represented, they strongly criticized the museum as a fraud and denigration of history. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had a simple explanation for the museum. Because of the conspicuous absence of references to nations, he argued, it presented a communist view. For him, the EU is the revival of the Soviet Union, with the Poles once more in the position of the victim at the hands of an ideological enemy. The presentation is seen as an homage to the *homo sovieticus* – 'a man without nationalities in a homogeneous mass of identical nations'.

Such criticism obviously tells us more about prejudices and paranoia than about the real House of European history in Brussels. For these visitors, the museum works like a screen on which the undigested histories of European nations are projected. It shows how a history that has not been worked through repeats itself. In the Polish view, Brussels is the new Moscow.<sup>1</sup> (Krupa 2018, 19).

There may indeed be historical memories, experiences and emotions involved here. In Germany, for instance, intellectuals dropped the concept of the nation for another obvious reason that had to do with historical memory. During its Nazi period, the country had had an overdose of nationalism that had degenerated into the murderous regime of National Socialism with the worst possible consequences for Europe and its Jews. In Poland, on the other hand, the historical experience taught the opposite lesson: due to foreign invasion and occupation, the country had completely vanished from the map in previous times and, when the Polish state was re-established after the First World War, underwent long periods of persecution, occupation and foreign dominance during and after the Second World War. No wonder that the concept of the nation is estimated differently within the EU. While, for some member states, such as Germany, it was a welcome invitation to leave the concept of the nation behind and to focus on the transnational level of Europe, for others, such as Poland, Europe became inversely the guarantor of the nation state and, when this nation state was threatened by liberal values and immigration, Europe was turned into the enemy that endangered the survival of the nation.

In a country such as Germany, the continued indifference of intellectuals concerning the nation had detrimental effects. One negative consequence was that the extreme right had an easy chance to pick up the empty and neglected container of the nation to fill it with its own values, images, emotions and promises. Another negative consequence is that a country without a clear self-image and a shared sense of its own nationhood has great difficulties integrating new migrants. They have left something behind and expect not only shelter but also a new homeland into which they are invited and introduced in order not only to share, but also to shape and transform their new nation by contributing their own experience and competencies. If the nation presents itself as an empty signifier, however, the call of the previous homeland will remain the normative instance and new bonds of loyalty are unlikely to develop. A shared identity is usually expressed in terms of national pride, but pride has been sidelined in Germany as a possible option for collective identification. Are there other positive options available that can serve as a robust source of common identification in a democratic and diverse society? And what role can memory play here?

These are questions that deserve attention and investigation because, in Europe, the battle against migrants is vocally articulated by right-wing groups that are becoming more and more self-assertive, supporting populist demands for easy solutions, strong borders and reckless leaders. This new nationalism is ready to forgo

1. Together with the Polish government the platform of 'European Memory and Conscience' (a union of 34 research institutes and memory sites of 20 countries situated in Prague) objected to the museum as a leftist and neo-Marxist construct depicting the nation and the church as the source of all evil on this continent (Krupa 2018, 19).

and forget lessons of history that had successfully domesticated and democratized the nations of the EU over the last 70 years. If the nation, however, is an important resource for integration, and integration is seen as a common project for both its citizens and its migrants, how can it be reimaged and supported to live up to this difficult and important task? In this article, I will try to analyse these problems in the light of new and older concepts.

### **Francis Fukuyama: Identity Politics and the Role of the Emotions**

Fukuyama had been a staunch modernization theorist who, after the demise of communism, had taken for granted that not only the nation but also history would disappear. Now, 30 years after his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama sees a need to revise his premises. In his recent book, *Identity. Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (2018), he registers another global transformation and addresses the current crisis of the American nation. The latter's foundational formula, 'e pluribus unum', seems less and less able to contain the multiplicity of self-assertive and self-centred groups that are giving up their emotional investment in a common nation and its liberal democracy. The national consensus is eroded by 'identity politics', an ongoing struggle for social recognition.

Like so many others, Fukuyama blurs the important distinction between individual and collective identity and generalizes them in the overly repeated formula of 'identity politics'. 'Identities,' he writes 'can be and are incredibly varied, based on nation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. They are all manifestations of a common phenomenon, that of identity politics' (Fukuyama 2018, 9). For Fukuyama, identity politics is driven by emotions. In this context he introduces a new term that was absent from modernization theory so far and that he now presents as a new key to human motivations, namely 'thymos'. He found this term in the Greek dialogues of Plato. Thymos is a severe blow to the concept of human behaviour according to modernization theory as it overturns the rational choice description of economists who had focused only on self-interest and a narrow concern for utility. Thymos is connected to the value and valour of the warrior and emphasizes male courage, enthusiasm, and patriotism, motivations that lead men to perform outstanding heroic feats of honour for the collective. Thymos, writes Fukuyama, 'is the seat of both anger and pride' (Fukuyama 2018, 20). And he continues: 'It is the seat of today's identity politics' (Fukuyama 2018, 18).

From the very start, memory studies have been engaged with emotions, but it took a long time for philosophers, economists and political scientists to recognize the role of collectives and the emotions as a vital part of human thinking, judging, acting and decision making.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Fukuyama's introduction of the term thymos is interesting. But his short-cut from Plato to today's identity politics is highly

2. A new effort to learn more about emotions in the humanities only started after the millennium; an example is the first Max Planck Institute focusing on 'the history of the emotions' in Berlin.

problematic as he uses ‘thymos’ as a *passe-partout* concept that levels all distinctions and bypasses historical contexts. In his definition, he raises the emphatically male thymos to ‘a universal aspect of human personality *that craves recognition*’ (Fukuyama 2018, 37) because ‘the desire for recognition [...] seems to lie within every human soul’ (Fukuyama 2018, 23, emphasis added). Recognition thus becomes the overriding concept, including both *megalo-thymia* (namely craving recognition for outstanding feats in the aristocratic warrior tradition) and *iso-thymia* (namely craving recognition in liberal democracies where everyone is recognized as inherently equal). With the link between thymos and recognition Fukuyama is confident that he has forged a key to unlock the problems of identity politics: ‘Contemporary identity politics is driven by the quest for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalized by their societies. But that desire for equal recognition can easily slide over into a demand for recognition of the group’s superiority’ (Fukuyama 2018, 22).

Fukuyama rightly criticizes in identity politics a tendency to create watertight boundaries around such groups that make it difficult to communicate, interact and collaborate within a common social or national framework. My son, for instance, is a filmmaker who has edited a documentary about two black boxers from Chicago. Some (white) critics argued that he and the director were not entitled to engage in such a project because they did not have the right skin colour, denouncing their work as ‘cultural appropriation’.<sup>3</sup> They were relieved, however, when after the documentary premiered at the Berlinale 2019 these voices disappeared and their artistic work of nine years with Kenny and Destyne was accepted and even praised. Acknowledging and respecting the ‘lived experience’ of marginalized and victimized groups is one thing; creating fences around them and sealing their experiences as untouchable, incomprehensible and untranslatable for others is a problematic strategy that undermines communication, free speech, art, empathy, shared values and joint projects.

My criticism of Fukuyama’s concept of ‘thymos’ is that he conflates three historical traditions that have nothing in common.

- (1) the Greek concept of thymos, pointing to ancient Greece and an old aristocratic, virile warrior spirit,
- (2) the early modern concept of an autonomous inner self that goes back to the reformation, print culture and the rise of the individual, and
- (3) the concept of human dignity that goes back to eighteenth-century enlightenment and is the cornerstone of human rights.

The Greek word ‘thymos’ literally means anger, courage and vigour. These emotions are part of an aristocratic warrior culture and can be applied to individuals as well as to collectives, particularly nations who use emotions such as honour, shame

3. Fukuyama’s concept of lived experience comes from German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. If this concept is fetishized it is no longer important what is said but only who says it. In the context of a politics of recognition we need to create room in our discourse and society for this, but this must not override other categories such as legitimized political authority and objectively verified truth. See Fukuyama (2018, 116).

and pride, but also anger, rage and resentment to mobilize masses and to enforce strong group cohesion. The recognition of an inner self, however, cannot be applied to collectives. On the contrary, it empowers the individual against society and its institutions, such as the church or the state. In the case of the concept of human dignity, we are dealing with an ethical norm and a moral commitment to recognize a common humanity that has to be protected in all humans individually, irrespective of sex, race, status, nationality and other group affiliations.

The result of these conceptual slippages is that Fukuyama also conflates pride and dignity. One is an emotion, the other is an ethical principle. While pride energizes and mobilizes individuals and national collectives, recognition of human rights and dignity is written into the foundation of democratic states and has become a standard and norm to measure civilized nations. To refer to both as forms of 'identity politics' that equally disrupt the framework of a democratic society is therefore highly misleading.

### **Monologic and Dialogic Memory**

I pick up Fukuyama's thymos and with it emotions such as pride, honour and resentment to apply them to a critical study of national memory. In sharp contrast from dignity that is intrinsically dialogic because it depends on the recognition by others, national pride depends only on the support and participation of the members of the collective. For this reason Peter Sloterdijk (2005; 2013) has referred to national myths as 'auto-hypnotic'.

To gain a deeper insight into the structure of national memory, it is helpful to introduce Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) concept of the 'social frame'. Like a picture frame, a memory frame includes something and excludes everything else. National memories are ruled by a simple logic of forgetting. In Paris, for instance, you will find metro stations commemorating Napoleon's victories such as 'Iena' or 'Austerlitz', but you will not find a metro station with the name 'Waterloo'. In order to enter this station, you have to go to London. In other words: national memory commemorates victories and forgets the defeats.

The question of the frame is: what can, should and may be articulated and what should be by-passed and remain silent? Which memories can be revived, and which ones should better not be communicated? What attracts interest and attention, what raises empathy, and what remains unspoken? These questions point to the emotions that are the motor and fuel of memories. While pride, craving recognition and a positive self-image, determines the selection of memories, emotions such as guilt and shame are responsible for the exclusion and repression of memories. Nobody knew this better than Nietzsche, who wrote:

Yes, I have done it, says my memory.

No, I cannot have done this, says my pride and stays adamant.

Finally memory gives in. (Nietzsche 1954, 626)

What is true for individuals is also true for groups: we remember and forget in order to belong and avoid what might have an exclusionary effect. Social frames work like filters that organize the selection of memories and confirm their relevance. Whatever supports the identity of the group is remembered, and the identity of the group consolidates the memories of the individuals. In other words: the relation between identity and memories is circular. These frames can subsist as long as they are needed; but they can easily collapse when contexts change and new identities emerge.

All of this means that in national memory, history more often than not is carefully reduced to a respectable narrative. When facing a traumatic and guilty past, there were only three acceptable roles for the collective: that of the victor who has triumphed over evil, that of the resistor or martyr who has fought evil, and that of the passive victim who has suffered evil. What remained outside these sanctioned roles could not enter the narrative and was on an official level 'forgotten'.

Marc Bloch already criticized this auto-hypnotic or monological character of national memory in the 1920s: 'Let's stop talking forever from national history to national history without understanding each other!' He called this conversation a 'dialogue between deafs, in which both give wrong answers to the questions of the other' (Middell 1994, 159). 'Collective memory simplifies,' wrote Peter Novick much later, 'it sees everything from a single, emotionally charged perspective. It can't bear ambivalences and reduces events to archetypes' (Novick 1999, 4).

After the end of the Cold War, however, a new format of national memory emerged in the EU as an absolute historical innovation. It also emphasizes positive events but at the same time expands the frame to also assign a place to the victims of one's own history. This dialogic memory, as I call it, was not imposed by politicians from above but created by civil society and its demand for historical truth. When, after 1989, hitherto sealed archives were suddenly accessible, archival documents, historical research, historical commissions, and the collection of oral testimonies significantly enlarged the scope of historical knowledge, challenging some firmly established national self-images and causing the revision of national narratives in the EU.

Here are a few examples: new documents about Vichy and the lack of awareness of the history of Jews in East Germany put an end to the self-image of France or the GDR as pure resistor-nations; after the scandals about the NS-past of Austrian president Kurt Waldheim and information about Polish pogroms in Jedwabne and Kielce, Austria and Poland were no longer able to exclusively claim the status of victim-nation, and even the seemingly neutral Swiss were confronted with their own 'sites of memory' in the shape of their banks and borders. In contact with the crime of the Holocaust, national memories became more dialogic, integrating negative instances of their past into the national narrative.

Since the 1990s, national memories no longer exist in isolation but are tied together in the EU with other national memories across the borders. The Holocaust has become part of a global memory, the Second World War part of a

European memory. Richard Sennett once remarked that it takes a plurality of contending memories in order to acknowledge uncomfortable historical facts. (Sennett 1998, 14) This explains why the constellation of the EU provided a unique frame for the transformation of monologic into dialogic memories.

‘It is good that we exchange memories and learn, what the others think of our stories. [...] the whole European history becomes increasingly a common stock, accessible to everyone without the constraints of national prejudice or other restrictions of bias.’ György Konrad made this statement in 2008. Eleven years later, the situation has again changed dramatically. We are experiencing a roll back of nationalism with a return of the old monologic patterns. After the opening of hitherto closed borders in the EU we are now experiencing the erecting of mental borders.

Here is another example. A new museum of the Second World War opened in March 2017 in Gdansk and was closed after only two weeks. It was initiated by Donald Tusk who accepted with enthusiasm the plan of historian Pawel Machcewicz who had drafted a sketch for a truly European Museum of the Second World War. Tusk installed Machcewicz as the founding director, who worked for 8 years together with a team of illustrious international experts. This museum presented the Second World War as an entangled European history in a dialogic framework,

- focusing on transnational relations,
- introducing different perspectives,
- honouring the civil victims of war, and
- emphasizing pacifistic values.

This, however, was not at all to the taste of Jarosław Kaczyński’s PiS party. His plan is to replace the museum as soon as possible by another museum, of the so-called Westerplatte, the place where eight heroes resisted German aggression at the outbreak of the war. The plan of this museum is the very opposite:

- it allows only one perspective,
- it supports the national narrative,
- it presents only heroes and martyrs, and
- celebrates a cult of war.

We are back under the rule of thymos and age-old principles of monologic national memory, with the state constructing its history as dictated by the emotions of pride and honour. In its media and new museums, Polish history is again being reduced to a narrow version in which the Poles are allowed to be shown only as heroes or as victims while victims of the Poles are carefully cut out of the picture. Similar transformations are happening in Hungary. To repeat Peter Novick: in Poland or Hungary, national memories ‘can’t bear ambivalences and reduce events to archetypes’. Pride rules again, but in the third and fourth post-Holocaust generations, the emphasis is no longer on guilt and shame, but on responsibility and empathy.

Those who prolong the language of guilt and shame are hysterically protecting the honour of the nation against better knowledge and conscience. Access to historical truth and education, however, are basic rights in a democratic state, and educated citizens do not weaken the nation but strengthen it.<sup>4</sup>

### George Mosse as a Pioneer of Memory Studies

In the last part of this article, I want to introduce you to an as yet unacknowledged pioneer of memory studies. I am speaking of George Mosse (1918–1999), an emigrant from Berlin and professor of history at the university of Madison in Wisconsin. In his book *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (1990), the word memory appears prominently in the title, although at the time it had neither been an analytic tool nor an established term of reference. Mosse, as I want to show, was not only a famous scholar of nation-building and nationalism, but also an important memory scholar *avant la lettre*. His Jewish and gay focus turned him into an innovative cultural historian with a great sensibility for the gendered body, implicit norms of respectability, and national rites and symbols. Instead of writing another history of the Great War, Mosse focused on the memory-making of this war and how it was continued into the post-war period. Although the ceasefire on 11 November 1918 was a huge relief, the war, he argued, was not so easily terminated. Mechanical warfare, the daily encounter with mass death and the loss of 13 million soldiers, all this had a tremendous impact on the hearts and minds of the people and demanded new responses. A huge gap had opened up between the horror and the glory of war, and it was the great challenge for all the nations involved to fill that gap by creating symbols that mask and transcend death in war. In this situation, all nations adopted ‘the memories of those veterans’ as true and legitimate ‘who saw the war as containing positive elements, and not of those who rejected the war’ (Mosse 1990, 6). As the emphasis was on consolation and justification and not on the general tragedy of the war, the nations constructed ‘a myth which would draw the sting from death in war and emphasize the meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice’ (Mosse 1990, 6–7).

The result of this memory-making was what Mosse termed ‘the Myth of the War Experience’ (MWE). It displaced the reality of war experience and refashioned it as a sacred experience, involving new ‘saints and martyrs, places of worship and a heritage to emulate’ (Mosse 1990, 7). This sacralization of war went hand in hand with the sacralization of the nation. Mosse did not use the term ‘myth’ to expose and explode it as a lie. *Deconstruction* of the myth was the job of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and the post-war generation and international anti-war movement that Astrid Erll (2014) has so impressively

4. A new upsurge of thymos is not just a feature of Polish museums but is also happening in Russia, where the cult of war has become a dominant feature of the 9 May celebrations, where the second and third generations of young Russians are marching in the so-called ‘Immortal Regiment’ of the Red Army.

retraced. Mosse, on the contrary, was interested in the circumstances and ways in which it was *constructed* and how it shaped human behaviour and the self-image of nations. He wrote: 'It was the accounts of the volunteers which were most apt to become part of the national canon' and concedes that this was only a small minority, 'but as other volunteers remained silent, it was the minority's poetry and prose which attracted attention' (Mosse 1990, 8).

The European nations developed different versions of the myth. While the victorious nations, France and Britain, transformed it into the dominant emotion of mourning, in German politics the myth was saturated with resentment and eventually became the medium to prolong the Great War into peace-time and into the next war. Here, the memory of the Great War was kidnapped by the NS-State who raised its version of the MWE into its central ideology: nationalism became national socialism, 'a manly faith steeled in war' (Mosse 1990, 28). This furthered a new brutalization that invaded public life. The nascent democratic spirit was up against a radical mode of constant political mobilization. The emphasis on heroic action, the normative ideal of male-manliness and a vocabulary of 'friend against foe' dominated more and more, leaving little space for the normalization of post-war life and a civil spirit: 'The vocabulary of political battle, the desire to utterly destroy the political enemy, and the way in which these adversaries were pictured, all seem to continue the First World War mostly against a set of different, internal foes' (Mosse 1990, 160). Without ever mentioning Carl Schmitt, who is today such a popular and esteemed reference among younger male intellectuals, Mosse aptly characterized his political style in the political climate and context from which his thinking emerged.

For Mosse, it was the business of the historian to analyse how ideas are constructed to serve the purposes of a society, and to show how these constructs gain influence, hold sway over collectives and individuals and become tools of making history. His use of the term *myth* was not that of Roland Barthes but much closer to that of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who used the term for the stories we live by, stories that interpret and express our values and explain where we come from, who we are or want to be. There is nothing wrong with the myth as such, but certainly with the way in which the 'Myth of the War Experience' (MWE) was turned into the state-ideology of the militant Third Reich<sup>5</sup> (Stargardt 2015). 'Remembering the dead' did not only mean honouring them retrospectively, but

5. One of the important effects of the MWE was that Germans perceived the Second World War in terms of the First World War – not as a war of ruthless aggression and expansion, but as a patriotic war of defence under ultimate threat. 'How was it possible', asks Nicholas Stargardt, another historian of emotions and perception in a recent book, that 'the Germans took a brutal war of conquest for a war of defense? How could they see themselves as endangered patriots and not as warriors for Hitler's manly race?' (Stargardt 2017, 32). Mosse's book provides an explanation for this false perception of the Second World War: the MWE shaped the German perception and memory of the Second World War by 'obliterating', which means literally: 'overwriting' it in the imagination of the people with the perception and memory of the First World War. There are still lingering effects and long-term consequences of this collective self-deceit today that are apparent in blocking German perception and emotions when it comes to the Polish and Russian victims of German aggression. Eighty years after the German assault on Poland there are plans now to erect a monument for the Poles in the centre of Berlin.

perpetuating forever the cult of their sacrifice and projecting it into an unlimited future.

### **How to Bring Wars to an End**

At first, this MWE may sound rather far from our contemporary problems. But it is not history, as I want to argue, it is still memory. There is still emotional pressure in the unresolved issues that are part and parcel of the dynamics of forgetting and remembering and thus a seminal part of an ongoing battle over emotions and values in Europe. The MWE is key to a better understanding of how wars are ended – or not ended. In a later interview Mosse warned us: ‘There are no full-stops in history, when suddenly everything changes. There are long continuities in history’ (Runge and Stelbrink 1991, 95). With this wary and critical stance he alerted us to one of the most important questions that historians can ask, namely: how are wars ended? And, we may add: what is the role that remembering and forgetting play in this process?

In Europe, the Myth of the War Experience was effectively ended after 1945 by forgetting it. Already in 1946 Winston Churchill made this very clear in a speech on the future of Europe, addressing young students at the University of Zürich:

We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past and look to the future. We cannot afford to drag forward across the years to come hatreds and revenges which have sprung from the injuries of the past. If Europe is to be saved from infinite misery, and indeed from final doom, there must be an act of faith in the European family and an act of oblivion against all the crimes and follies of the past. (Churchill 1948, 200)

This strategy of forgetting draws a finishing line under the past and lets bygones be bygones. In Europe, it laid the ground for a new transnational cooperation and was gladly accepted by the Germans. Such a policy of forgetting has worked many times in history after civil wars, when two parties were fighting in a more or less symmetrical power relation. When warfare, however, is accompanied by atrocities perpetrated against civilians and defenceless minorities, when, in other words, wars become genocidal, the policy of forgetting has a serious drawback, because it supports the perpetrators and harms the victims. The forgetting policy worked in Germany after 1945 for four decades, empowering the trans-national union of a new Europe, but it did not bring the war to an end.

The policy of forgetting ended itself in the 1980s and 1990s. Owing to a generational change and the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new era started that saw an overwhelming return of repressed and excluded memories that had been held at bay by the social, cultural and political frames constructed in the period of the Cold War. I know what I am talking about, because I grew up in this period. There were many ways in which the silenced past returned to European nations, cities, families in the 1980s and 1990s. The Second World War was thus twice brought to an end: first after 1945 with a conscious collective act of forgetting, and then 50 years later with a collective will to remember.

### **Commemoration of the Great War**

But what about the First World War? It returned after one hundred years not as a repressed memory but in the conscious format of a centenary commemoration. Public anniversaries mark particular dates and offer the chance to bring a historic event back into the present, not necessarily only for the mere continuation of a memory, but also for its re-inspection and re-interpretation. This happened on a large scale in the commemoration period 2014–2018, which brought the First World War back to European nations, an event that had been commemorated annually in some countries, while in others such as Germany or Austria it had dropped completely from memory, school curricula, and public consciousness. While on every 11 November, the day of the truce, the French, the Belgians and the Britons mourn and commemorate their war dead, the Germans start their Carnival Seasons.

President Francois Hollande's contribution to the commemoration years on this day in 2014 was an impressive gift called the 'Ring of memory' in the north of France near Arras. It is an outstanding monument; not only in terms of its large scale, but also in its design. The 500 brass plates of the huge cyclical structure list more than half a million fallen soldiers in the region, irrespective of their origin, regiments or nations – in alphabetical order. This is a huge shift in the use and meaning of war monuments. It is a truly European monument in so far as it is dedicated to all the dead and a shared mourning and memory of the mutual slaughter. This monument abstains from the former rhetoric of honour and glory and clearly brings the war to an end. We may perhaps even call it a monument to the death of the Myth of the War Experience.

But while president Hollande opted out of a narrow national tradition of commemoration, David Cameron did the opposite. When he presented his plans for the commemoration year in the Imperial War Museum in 2012, he opted out of the European commemorative network and strongly reinforced the British version of the MWE. In his 'truly national commemoration' he included the colonial troops of the glorious former empire. Cameron praised repeatedly 'the service and sacrifice' of the fallen soldiers and promised to project their memory into the future for another 100 years, 'Lest we forget!'. This British exceptionalism is also clearly visible in the continuing annual rites of 11 November in the United Kingdom, a national commemoration day that is celebrated with growing ardour, judging from the size of its central symbol, the red poppy. What fell totally flat in Cameron's commemoration plans was a reference to the partners of the EU. This emphatic affirmation of national sovereignty was already a clear signal of British isolationism four years before the Brexit referendum. While the national MWE was laid to rest in France to make room for a shared and more dialogical European memory, it continues fervently in the UK where such a shared memory is not yet in sight.

Let me point in passing to other instances where a war has not been ended in the hearts and minds of the people but continues to exert pressure on the EU. In Italy, for instance, 25 April was a national anniversary day commemorating the end of the Second World War. On that day in 1945, the allies liberated Italy by putting an

end to the fascist regime. In 2019, however, the defeat of the fascist forces was no longer a date to be remembered for the then premier Matteo Salvini from the right-wing Lega party. Ostentatiously disrespecting the commemoration date, Salvini complied with a new, or rather old, trend in Italy that has rehabilitated Mussolini as a national hero and put him back on his pedestal in public space.<sup>6</sup> Co-Vice-Premier Luigi Di Maio of the 5 Stars movement, however, objected to Salvini's provocation and confirmed that he stands behind those who liberated Italy, the resisters and partisans. This dissent among the leaders of the state is a visible sign that the Second World War has not ended in this country. The eruptions of dissent and protest show that a shared dialogic narrative that acknowledges and accommodates the perspectives of both sides in a national frame is still missing.

Spain is another obvious example where the unity of the nation is under the double stress of political polarization and regional partition. These issues have their origin in twentieth-century history, reaching back to the civil war. The pact of silence in 1977 had been a pragmatic decision that enabled a successful and sustainable transition to democracy. But today there are also symptoms that this policy of forgetting is not a permanent solution and that the war is far from having been ended. The exhumation movement, which started after 2000, when many families recovered the bones of their republican ancestors from mass graves in order to trans-locate and bury them privately, was an obvious signal that a shared memory of this seminal event in the nation's history has not yet been achieved. Franco's massive monument in the Valley of the Fallen had been an attempt to end the war symbolically, by sealing it with his stamp, but in doing so he has not laid the memory of the past to rest. Instead, after 80 years we find that he left future generations with a huge scar and a historical wound. It is obviously difficult to hold the nation together without some kind of consensus about seminal events in its history. Imagine for instance a Germany in which half of the population believes that erecting a wall in Berlin and Europe was a good thing.

### **Brutalizing or Civilizing the Nation?**

In the 1980s, Mosse registered that the MWE 'as a whole seems to have passed into European history'. But he also added: 'the future is open. [...] If nationalism as a civic religion is once more in the ascendant, the myth will, once again, accompany it' (Mosse 1990, 224). For Mosse, 'war itself was the great brutalizer', so it followed for him that 'some of what has been called the civilizing process was undone under such pressure' (Mosse 1990, 162).

6. As after the Great War, brutalization becomes immediately obvious in the use of language which is no longer used to communicate but to engage in battles. There are many examples not only of a vocabulary of invectives but also of a transcoding of words and a revaluation of values. The term 'Gutmensch', for instance, the do-gooder, has turned into a polemical weapon. To quote Matteo Salvini: 'The European dream is being buried by the bureaucrats, the buonistas and the bankers who are governing Europe for too much time' (*New York Times*, 15 April 2019, 3).

Brutalizing and civilizing are opposite tracks along which nations may aspire. We must not forget that many Europeans saw the First World War as a recipe for regeneration through violence. What was denounced as a degenerate and effeminate culture had to be replaced by a strong ideal of heroic manliness. In civil times, these fits of megalothymia quickly lose their grip and are banished from the scene. But for how long? When Norbert Elias (1939; 1969, 1982) wrote about this topic, he spoke of a ‘process of civilization’. Civilization, however, is not a process but a project, and only humans themselves can drive this process according to their cultural values, programmes and continuous education. Nations are never brutal or civil per se, but only in relation to their cultural programmes. Do they opt for thymotic pride or anti-thymotic self-civilizing dignity? Do they declare the nation, the collective, the state or the institution to be sacred or do they place that sacredness in the individual? Re-imagining the nation is a pressing problem and a huge task, but as I hope I have shown, worthy of our individual and collective attention.

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