



## IMAGINE ALL THE PEOPLE

// Peace requires transnational remembrance

Across the world countries celebrate annual Remembrance Days for the dead of their armed forces in past and ongoing conflicts. Germany does that too on the National Day of Mourning, but with an unusual formula of remembering the victims of violence and war of all nations. The purpose is to remind the living of the preciousness of peace rather than of any great mission of the own nation. This is due to Germany's responsibility for the war of extermination and the Shoah. While the broad mourning formula is not uncontested, perspectives which run across national collectives are indeed promising ways to build a shared culture of peace.



The plenary hall of the German Bundestag decorated for the National Day of Mourning on 17 November 2019 (Photo: Deutscher Bundestag/Achim Melde).

by Sabine Mannitz

'Those who have doubts about Europe should visit our war cemeteries,' Jean-Claude Juncker, former President of the European Commission, stated on different occasions to underline that the European Union represents a peace project: the Union has guaranteed the longest period of peace on its soil in European

modern history. In the face of the upsurge of nationalist parties, it appears to be necessary again, seventy years after WWII and a hundred after WWI, to remind Europeans of the toll attributable to past nationalist politics. However, the allusion to war dead alone has never prevented wars. And while it is true that the European integration can be understood as one answer given to a history of violence, this allusion alone will not be sufficient either to invalidate 'doubts about Europe'. Above all, since opting out of the EU and out of multilateralism has become a political reality, a peaceful common future needs to be built irrespective of EU membership. To meet this end commemoration in the EU should not rely on mere rituals. A reflective transnational remembrance culture should be developed which is built on historical evidence and at the same time based on the recognition of the complexity that has interwoven Europeans throughout their violent past and which, in many cases, transcends national boundaries. The commemoration practice that has evolved in Germany under the shadow of the Nazi past is an informative case in point, although it may appear counterintuitive: German society had to come to grips with multi-layered, conflicting experiences and narrations of the common past.

### Conflicting memories and clientelistic remembrance after WWII

Strikingly enough, the two World Wars have remained the most important focal points in many European states' dealing with the past. Neither were these the last wars fought on the continent nor have European nations refrained from the use of weapons after 1945. The war in Yugoslavia following the breakdown of

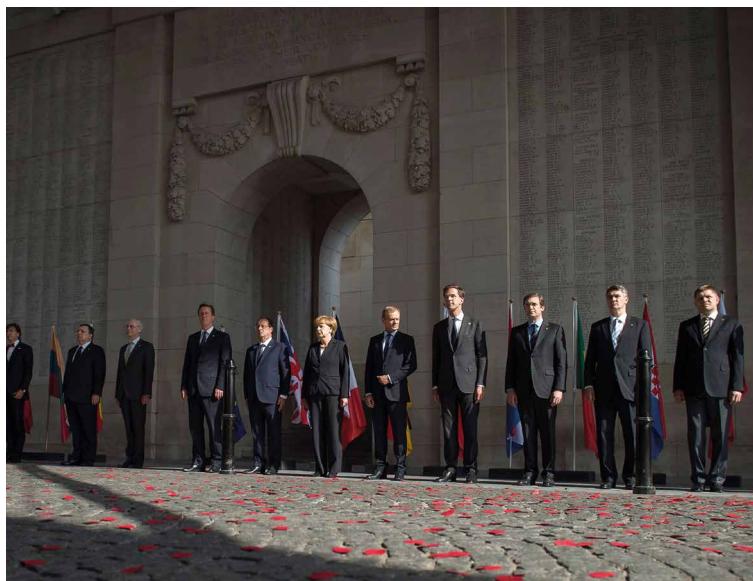
communism even involved NATO strikes but has not entered remembrance outside the Yugoslavian successor states to any comparable extent. Personal relations to those counted in wars' death tolls may be a crucial factor. For many Europeans WWII stands out because it claimed the lives of millions of people, leaving behind mourning families, friends and neighbors. In the UK and Belgium, but partly also in France, WWI figures prominently with 11 November (1914, Armistice Day) the central day of mourning; compared to WWII three times as many British soldiers lost their lives in the 'Great War' 1914-18.

While differences in emphasis laid on, e.g. WWI vs. WWII point to different formative experiences that matter for collective identity, wartime memories and casualties are also contextualized distinctly across Europe: for the majority of Europeans taking up arms against the German Empire or later against Nazi Germany represents a historical moment of national strength and patriotic spirit of resistance. Obviously, postwar Germany had to come to terms with the past in fundamentally different ways. Nationalism and the super-elevation of military death had been disavowed and major conflict lines were running straight through society. There were former Nazi functionaries and *Wehrmacht* veterans whose shares in war crimes and serious crimes against humanity were unsettled; survivors of persecution and war crimes; displaced persons; supporters of the lost regime, tacit bystanders, silent opponents as well as members of resistance. In short, there was neither a consensual interpretation of the past nor any common narrative. People may

in their private realms ignore the very ambivalence inherent to such a setting - personal mourning does not require any justification. But with a view to acts which serve the formation of collective positionings contradictory strands imply normative and practical problems. A minimum consensus in assessing history must be worked out to anchor normative interpretations of the nation's past in collective memory. And a society needs to grapple with this challenge in particular when radically competing meanings are circulating; as shows the post-WWII situation in Germany: judgements of the past were divergent, and commemoration practices were correspondingly clientelistic.

In the GDR an official historiography and remembrance was quickly established under the influence of Soviet occupation: mainly the memory of those who died in the Red Army and Communist resistance was to be preserved. Since there was no comparable intervention by the Western Allied powers in the FRG, it took longer before locations, forms and rituals of official remembrance were developed, and the issue remained controversial. Following pre-war traditions, after 1945 many municipalities returned to an uncritical honoring of fallen soldiers on National Day of Mourning. The concentration camp criminal court cases of the 1960s were significant in questioning such routines and in making crimes during the Nazi period a focal point of remembrance policy. And yet, former NS functionaries had come into office again in the new state. The absence of societal consensus in evaluating the past favored a fragmentation of commemoration narratives and practices.

The necessity to enter painful debates will never end but the stalled clientelism in remembrance has been overcome in Germany, at least at the level of the centrally organized ceremonies. An inclusive form of mourning is nowadays expressed in the remembrance speech held on National Day of Mourning: all war dead and victims of political violence of all nations are mourned for. There is no 'honorary commemoration' any more, no singling out of allegedly 'heroic' deaths of soldiers and no restriction to German war dead either. The core message is that remembrance of all those lost lives means an appeal for peace and humanity. Certainly, all this is not uncontested, e.g. because it embraces dead German soldiers of the past and the present together with victims of military violence and genocide. Yet, no appeasement is entailed. The core message is to move away from the traditional projection figure of heroic military sacrifice for the nation and shift attention towards the preciousness of peace. In spite of the particularity of the German situation, which has triggered this path, transnational perspectives are promising in the interest of peace culture.



In 2014, European heads of state and government commemorated the start of World War I in Ypres, Belgium (Photo: Bundesregierung/Guido Bergmann).

### **Remembrance speech held on the National Day of Mourning**

At the events organised on the German National Day of Mourning centrally in the chamber of the German Bundestag and de-centrally in the German states and many municipalities, this remembrance speech is held:

"Today, we remember the victims of violence and war, children, women and men of all nations.  
We remember the soldiers who died in the world wars,  
the people who lost their lives as a result of acts of war or subsequently in captivity, as displaced persons and refugees.  
We remember those who were persecuted and killed because they belonged to a different people, were assigned to another race, were part of a minority or whose lives were designated 'unworthy of life' because of an illness or a disability.  
We remember those who died because they put up resistance against tyranny  
and those who met their deaths because they abided by their convictions or their faith.  
We mourn the victims of the wars and civil wars of our age,  
the victims of terrorism and political persecution,  
the German soldiers and other emergency personnel who have lost their lives on missions abroad.  
We also remember those who have been victims of hate and violence towards foreigners and the weak here.  
We mourn with everyone who mourns the dead and share their sorrow.  
But our lives focus on the hope of reconciliation between people and nations,  
and our responsibility is for peace amongst men at home and throughout the world."

### **How to deal with competing narratives of wartime history?**

The form developed in Germany is an immediate result of Germany's responsibility for crimes against humanity and cannot be seen as model of any kind. Nevertheless it offers opportunities to think about commemorative conventions and to reflect upon their implications. Side by side with the broader political commitment to cooperation and reconciliation, European states have continued cultivating their own self-assuring narratives and interpretations of the past. Some do not only maintain own memories but have – like Poland – passed laws in order to push through and fortify specific national historiographies. This in itself can be read as an attempt to drive competing interpretations to the margins and hence as a way of suppressing discussion of the existing varying perspectives. The upsurge of right wing parties across Europe threatens to bring a host of nationalizing strategies to the fore and to foster a disquieting 'memory competition'. The gradual vanishing of the contemporary witnesses of WWII enhances these critical moments.

Surely, with later generations and a growing diversity within societies, the meaning of 20th century wartime history becomes re-negotiated. In general, the passage of time affects the levels of recollection: Aleida Assmann differentiates among individual, social, political and cultural remembrance. These change in their relative weight when those pass away who witnessed a certain time period (and once grieved themselves). In this process, the validity of historical experience is put to the test and becomes the subject of re-evaluation. To avoid backlashes into comforting fiction, historical curiosity

is needed as much as the principle openness to over-step boundaries of the nation.

Places that confront visitors with concrete acts of violence are a case in point, as manifold cross-cutting entanglements are condensed there. For example, at the graves of murdered forced laborers, the cemetery function is in the foreground for survivors and relatives. In addition, however, the sites also have significance as places of collective remembrance, in which history becomes concrete in its transnational linkages, and memory acquires meaning as a practice that allows victims of violence to experience some late justice. Those who look back at conditions that made possible the emergence of such collective violence may become prey to manipulations and flawed versions of history. However they may also use the opportunity of their greater distance. Varying representations of what happened may raise questions about involved people and motives, and about their own norms. Such an approach requires working on competing narratives, trying to differentiate evidence from interpretations based on vested interests, and understanding the ambivalent multiplicity of experiences. Cross-border networks of memorial site pedagogy that run international encounter programs and work-camps aim at exactly this type of learning at eye-level exchange with others.

Decision-makers across Europe should use this as a guiding principle in remembrance: a perspective towards our common history of violence that aims at an understanding of the cross-cutting lessons is more productive for securing peace than any exclusively national narrative. Transnational views must not imply

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qualifications of factual shares, on the contrary: developments must be considered in their local root causes. At the same time however, the meanings they bear beyond the specifics can only be recognized if remembrance transcends the framing of the particular: 'Those who understand memory as a form of competition see only winners and losers in the struggle for collective articulation and recognition', states Michael Rothberg, and thus hamper a deeper understanding of the complexity of every (not just historical) situation that leads to political violence.

### Make transnational dimensions of violence clear to foster peace

The historian Christoph Cornelißen believes that the fundamentally new, transnational reception of war history after 1945 deprived 'the metanarrative of national cultures of remembrance' of any justification for its existence. In practice, however, the tension between particular histories and their transnational meanings is not resolved. National commemorative cultures dominate, remembering is fragmented and often characterized by competing interpretations. In order to promote a cross-cutting remembrance culture, experiences need to be highlighted that disturb the familiar frame of the 'own' nation and address further-reaching questions; on general social conditions leading to inhumanity and mass violence. Sadly enough, historical examples where civilizing norms and humanitarian values were dismantled are not scarce. Europe should make use of its historical experiences and, such argues Micha Brumlik, of the latter's sites for a 'historically informed human rights education'. To this end, one must also speak about those whose individual shares in collective violence vary. While it is easy to empathize with true

victims of violence and to despise true perpetrators, the grey zone of agency that paves the way is possibly larger. Understanding the making and functioning of norms which guide human behavior is therefore a key concern of peace pedagogy. Yet it remains limited if confined within national boundaries. A lot is gained if younger generations comprehend and learn to disentangle the transnational complexities of Europe's history of violence.

### Further Reading

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