Learning from History? Why European Societies Remember the Holocaust Today

Apprendre de l'histoire ? Pourquoi les sociétés européennes d'aujourd'hui se rappellent-elles de la Shoah

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/7157>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.7157

ISSN: 2506-6390

This article is a translation of:

Apprendre de l'histoire ? Pourquoi les sociétés européennes d'aujourd'hui se rappellent-elles de la Shoah - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/7135> [fr]

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 2 April 2018

Number of pages: 48-53

ISBN: 978-2-930953-06-9

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Heidemarie Uhl, "Learning from History? Why European Societies Remember the Holocaust Today", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 126 | 2018, Online since 20 January 2022, connection on 04 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/7157> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.7157>

Learning from History?

Why European Societies Remember the Holocaust Today

→ Heidemarie Uhl

Translation from the German:
Elisabeth Tutschek

Memory – how societies appropriate their past – is a dynamic process that is subject to constant change. A good example of this is the memorization of the “breach of civilization” that was Auschwitz, the Holocaust or the crimes committed by the NS regime. This shows in the experience of a teacher who reported the following at a workshop a few years ago: in the early 1980s colleagues at school and also parents would be hostile when she decided to visit the Concentration Camp Memorial in Mauthausen with her class – still a bold project back then, since the Memorial in the former concentration camp was considered an “extraterritorial” place with the aura of a “leftist”, communist shrine. Today, she continues, it is the parents who ask her when she would finally go to Mauthausen with the students. What used to be a controversial counter-memory to the mainstream in 1980 is now part of the mandatory programme.

This little anecdote gives us an insight into the drastic paradigm shift within the social culture of memory since the 1980s. And it leads us straight to the questions up for discussion here:

1. Why has the Holocaust become the European and, beyond that, global place of memory since the end of the 20th century?
2. What does it mean to learn from the “breach of civilization” that was Auschwitz? What is to be achieved with the commemoration of the Holocaust? Which hopes or expectations are associated with the much vaunted “memory work” at schools and memorials?

I would like to begin with the following question however: what is *new* about Holocaust remembrance? Where is it distinct from previous forms of memorization of National Socialism and World War II? Before answering this, I must start by giving the following two arguments:

1. The idea that societies relate to their past time and again anew is not a novel phenomenon. The term “collective memory”, coined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, is downright defined by that: according to the famous last sentence of his 1925 publication *On Collective Memory*

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– Veerle Vandendaele, deputy general director and curator of Kazerne Dossin (Memorial, Museum & Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights in Belgium) at a plenary meeting of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in Iași, Romania, November 2016.

(*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), what remains from the past is only that, “which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference” (Halbwachs quoted in Assmann 1995, 130). The publication was not translated into German until 1985, which is another indicator of a novel interest in memory emerging in the mid-1980s.

2. What Halbwachs reflects on in theory – and which gets revived and continued by Jan Assmann, Pierre Nora and others in the 1980s – has already been relevant to cultural practice since the late 19th century. This is because the search for self-reassurance and identity through historical heritage is nothing new either. Since the 19th century the “invention” of tradition and historical heritage has been considered one of the most important tools of nation building (see Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). The “imagined community” of the nation needed a sense of belonging – a sensation for the individual to belong to the abstract concept of the nation was, and still is, an essential prerequisite for a community of solidarity in modern societies. Nation or state symbols serve as a means to build that identity: flags and banners, national emblems, hymns, national holidays, but also the derivation of the nation based on a centuries- if not millennia-old history.

In the successor states of the Third Reich after 1945, it was not possible any longer to seamlessly continue a discourse of the nation’s historical greatness. The identity of the Federal Republic of Germany absolutely required a break with its nationalist past – the public self-conception now referring to the constitu-

Learning from History?
Why European Societies
Remember the Holocaust
Today
(continuation)

tion and basic free democratic order. The GDR legitimized its national identity with anti-Fascist resistance against National Socialism. Post-1945 Austria was overshadowed by the “victim-thesis” – despite the fact that Austria had been a genuine part of the National Socialist state rather than an occupied country. The victim myth made it possible for Austria to deny any accountability for a shared responsibility for the crimes committed by National Socialism until the Waldheim debate in 1986.

The memory of European nations was characterized by National Socialism’s externalisation under the sign of political postwar myths until the mid-1980s – not only in the “societies of perpetrators” Germany and Austria, but also in the countries occupied by the German Reich (see Judt 2005). Naturally, national narratives referred to different historical events, yet they had one common pattern: their own people appears as innocent collective victims, brutally suppressed by a cruel occupation regime. As a result, official state commemoration focused on the heroic resistance against the Nazis; Holocaust victims played no role. It was not the victims of racial persecution that took centre stage, but the heroes, militants, people (mostly men) who had sacrificed themselves for the nation or a political belief. There was no talk of assimilation, collaboration, and involvement in Nazi terror at all.

From the mid-1980s, in many European states postwar myths start to erode and a fight for memory ignites, for example, due to the “historians’ quarrel” in the FRG or the Waldheim debate in Austria, and a book on the Vichy Regime in France. For a whole generation – the “generation of memory” (Winter 2000) – the fight against postwar myths and for a tribute to those victims, who had so far been blanked from state-official memory, becomes a project of the heart.

Starting point is a common generational experience: the irritation about the fact that a historical event, which is now seen as being at the centre of 20th century history, or even of the history of modern societies for that matter (the term “breach of civilization” was coined by Dan Diner in a 1988 publication with the same title), had so far only been a marginal topic. It was marginal in history lessons, in the science of history as well as in national and local remembrance, and in family stories.

The result of these deep conflicts on the symbolic “battlefield” of memory at the end of the 20th century is a new form of social remembrance: the “negative commemoration” of those crimes, of which their own society was (co-)responsible. And this negative commemoration would not only shape the societies of perpetrators like Germany and Austria, but also those European countries and territories that had been occupied by Germany, on which war had been inflicted, and beyond. In their noteworthy 2006 publication *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (2006), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider talk about a globalization of the Holocaust as the historical reference point of a transnational cosmopolitan memory of humanity. The authors state that “[i]t is indeed Europe’s disaster that has become the starting point of transnational solidarity” which is sustained by the hope for universal human rights-morals that are not tied to a “we-community” of the nation: “At the begin-

– On 6 March 2018, Italy took over the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The Italian Ministry of Economic Development presented a new stamp celebrating the occasion as part of its “Civic Sense” programme. Against a tricolor background which recalls the Italian flag, the stamp features barbed wire with thorns transforming into butterflies.

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– The hashtags #holocaust-remembranceday and #weremember are used on social media to commemorate the Holocaust on 27 January each year.

Top: photo of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, posted by an Instagram user.

Bottom: photo of Jean-Claude Juncker reminding his followers on Twitter to be “vigilant in the face of hatred, discrimination and dehumanisation”.

ning of the third millennium, memories of the Holocaust facilitate the formation of transnational memory cultures, which in turn have the potential to become the cultural foundation for global human rights politics.”

The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust with the adoption of the *Stockholm Declaration* in January 2000 is considered the key event for the universalization of the Holocaust. 600 delegates from 46 countries – among them more than 20 Heads of State and Government – gathered at the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust from 26 to 28 January 2000, one of the first high-level international conferences of the new millennium. The symbolic date of the anniversary of the liberation of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau had been “discovered” as day of remembrance just a few years earlier. At this conference, the Holocaust got acknowledged as a unique historical event and reference point of a European and, potentially, global culture of memory on a high-level political endorsement for the first time. The *Stockholm Declaration* – a final document following the example of UN world conferences – bindingly codified this commitment not only morally but also politically:

The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization. The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning. [...] The magnitude of the Holocaust, planned and carried out by the Nazis, must be forever seared in our collective memory. [...] With humanity still scarred by genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia, the international community shares a solemn responsibility to fight those evils. [...] It is appropriate that this, the first major international conference of the new millenium [sic], declares its commitment to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past. (Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust)

In 1998 the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF, renamed in 2012 to International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – IHRA) was founded at an antecedent congress to the Stockholm conference. It should become the institution implementing these principles: one admission criterion for the by now 31 member states is a declared belief in the *Stockholm Declaration* and the establishment of a Holocaust Remembrance Day.

What, then, is *new*? In what does Holocaust Remembrance differ from European postwar myths? Which novel needs for remembrance become effective here? Why is it that the Holocaust is at the centre of European societies’ culture of memory today?

Some thoughts and observations to sum up, and in which, in each case, arise questions about chances and the risks regarding those chances. This leads us straight to the future of memory:

1. Holocaust Remembrance is denationalized. It is not about national belonging – this seems so bewildering nowadays, in the context of a national affil-

iation of the Righteous – but about virtually anthropological categories: perpetrators, victims, bystanders, sometimes even helpers.

2. Risk of anthropologization, historical decontextualization. The questions of the 1970s and 1980s were still: how was the NSDAP able to take over in 1933? Why did the parties fail? Today, the primary question is: How do perfectly ordinary men turn into assassins? Research in the field has been carried out by Daniel Goldhagen (particularly his thesis on virulent “eliminationist anti-Semitism” in German political culture; 1996), Omer Bartov (1992) and Christopher Browning (1992).
3. Holocaust Remembrance is de-ideologized. Postwar memory of resistance, the heroic pathos of national patriotic or political (communist, social democratic, conservative) resistance has lost its appeal and binding power in the 1980s. With the disappearance of an era in which social imagination was characterized by ideological devotion (see Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) we struggle to explain today – especially to the youth – that people risked their lives for political beliefs.
4. Victims are individualized, serving as the “silver bullet” to stimulate consternation, to move audiences. Rather than the heroes or the victims of political persecution, it is the innocent victims of racial persecution that take centre stage. A critical debate has recently emerged about the tendency to trigger identification with the victims. ■

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