

IS SOVIET COMMUNISM A TRANS- EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE?

Politics of memory in the European Parliament, 2004–2009

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Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, politicians in the EU have tried to create a master narrative depicting how the EU, thanks to its founding fathers, rose from the ashes of the Second World War and the Holocaust and forged a unique and successful cooperation. In this master narrative, the EU stands in contrast to the Holocaust, which is portrayed as a fundamental break with basic values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law – values that the EU stands for, protects, and promotes.

The master narrative became visible in and was used to legitimize the fight for human rights and against racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in the EU. The memory of the Holocaust was used as an extreme example of what uncontrolled racism can lead to and thus as an argument for the need to prevent it from happening again by fighting racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, and by promoting human rights. But the memory of the Holocaust became more than that, since the memorialization of the Holocaust could be used to strengthen the EU's identity and inner cohesion. It may sound paradoxical, but the memory of the Holocaust also served a positive purpose since the Holocaust was seen as a trans-European experience that could unite all the citi-

zens of the EU – an experience that all citizens could use as their constitutive “Other”.

By using the Holocaust as a negative counter-image, the politicians in the EU created a narrative that focused not on the national conflicts of the Second World War, but on the ideological conflicts of the war and the fight between democracy and dictatorship. It was a narrative in which the Holocaust was a shared European responsibility, and thus a narrative that tried to circumvent the question what role the different member countries had played in the war. It tried to avoid portraying some nations as worse or as more responsible than others. In this way, EU politicians created an ideological image of membership in the EU's community of memory. The Holocaust narrative was separated from the narrative about the Second World War. It was dehistoricized and turned into a symbolic narrative about good and evil, about democracy and dictatorship, rather than a historic reality.¹

ON MAY 1, 2004, the EU admitted ten new member countries, eight of them former Communist states in Eastern Europe whose 20th-century history differed considerably from that of the “old” EU members. While the countries in the West had established stable



The Memorial to the Victims of Communism in Prague. It was unveiled in 2002, and is the work of the Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek.

and wealthy democracies after 1945, the countries behind the Iron Curtain had experienced dictatorship and planned economy. And while Western Europe had built a community based on a desire for peace and prosperity, the countries to the East were subordinate to a Soviet regime that closely controlled the Eastern bloc.

The post-communist countries did not see the Holocaust narrative and its relation to the history of the EU as part of their own narrative. On the contrary, they saw it as a Western European memory norm that they were expected to adjust to in order to join the club.² The eastward enlargement in 2004 showed the weaknesses of a self-definition primarily by opposition to the memory of the Holocaust. The new members' perspective made it clear that the narrative the EU politicians had created could also have an excluding effect, and indicated that creating a shared memory in the EU required an acceptance of several different memories.

SINCE ENTERING THE EU, a number of Eastern European countries have tried to free themselves from such Western memory standards and gain acceptance for – and draw attention to – their

memory of Soviet Communism. They have challenged the EU's master narrative and the position that the memory of the Holocaust was given in the 1990s. But how has this affected the EU's master narrative and the politics of memory in the European Parliament? That is the main question that I wish to answer in the present article, and I will address it by focusing on the efforts to make August 23 a European Day of Remembrance.

A new memory on the agenda: August 23 as European Day of Remembrance?

After 2004, the members of the European Parliament tried to create an inclusive memory that would encompass both East and West and still portray the EU as the positive answer to a negative prehistory – a prehistory that would no longer be associated only with the Second World War and the Holocaust, but also with the Cold War, the division of Europe, and the crimes committed by Soviet communism. Creating a unified narrative and a shared memory was a way of integrating the new member states and thereby strengthening the EU. It was important for the parliament to include the new members and send a signal that the Union accepted them and acknowledged their history.

The call to make August 23 a European Day of Remembrance for “the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes” was such a signal. The European Parliament proposed the date in 2009 in a resolution on “European conscience and totalitarianism”, which can be seen as the culmination of the prior efforts to create a shared memory in the EU.³

A number of countries in the EU commemorate the victims of the Holocaust on January 27, the day that Auschwitz was liberated in 1945. Moreover, the European Parliament observes that day, and has encouraged all member states to do so.⁴ In 2008 – and again in 2009, with changed wording – the parliament proposed another European Day of Remembrance on August 23 for the victims of both Nazism and Stalinism. The Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, which facilitated the Nazi assault on Poland of September 1, 1939, and the Soviet occupation of the three Baltic countries in 1940, was signed on August 23, 1939.⁵

The proposal to remember these two groups of victims was put forward after a hearing held by the Slovenian presidency in April 2008.⁶ In May 2008, the European Parliament followed suit with a written declaration that was adopted in September 2008.⁷ In the meantime the proposal had also been put forward in the “Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism”, which proposed honoring the victims of “Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes”.⁸ Finally, in a resolution adopted in April 2009, the European Parliament called for the proclamation of August 23 as a “Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes”.⁹

Designating August 23 as a Day of Remembrance was not new. In the 1980s, a Western protest movement used August 23 in an effort to attract attention to human rights violations in the Soviet Union, including the occupation of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. In 1986, this led to a number of demonstrations in Western cities on August 23, then called “Black Ribbon Day”. In 1987 the protest movement also spread to the Baltic States where it culminated in 1989 in a human chain through all three countries.¹⁰

THE SOVIET OCCUPATION of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia also left its mark in the European Parliament. In 1983, the parliament adopted a “Resolution on the Situation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” which condemned the Soviet occupation of the three countries and drew attention to their struggle for freedom, and to “the thousands of victims of this struggle and the 665,000 Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians who have been resettled and removed to labor camps in Siberia by the Soviet rulers since 1940”.¹¹

August 23 was already associated with Soviet oppression of the population of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Especially in the Baltic States, but also in Poland, the date was of great importance since it was understood both as the beginning the war and as the beginning of decades of repression.¹² But the date does not

seem to have attracted much attention between 1989 and 2008, when it came up again repeatedly in proposals to make it a Day of Remembrance for the victims of Stalinism and Nazism and/or the victims of totalitarianism. The resolution “European Conscience and Totalitarianism” in particular, adopted in 2009 by the European Parliament, sparked debate about August 23 and about European memory in general.

Strong opposition to the resolution came from Yehuda Bauer, a key figure in the international and transnational efforts to confront the Holocaust, and a strong advocate of memorializing the Holocaust.¹³ Bauer called the resolution “totally unacceptable”, and wrote further, “[T]o compare this [communist brutality] with the murder of many millions of Europeans by the Nazi

regime, and especially with the state-planned genocide of the Jews (Holocaust) in the context of Nazi crimes generally – although the EU statement makes specific mention of the Holocaust, no doubt as to make the acceptance of the comparison easier – is a distortion of history.”¹⁴

Bauer’s viewpoint was also put forward in the European political arena, including the European Parliament, where a small group of mostly left-wing parliamentarians opposed the resolution, mainly because they, like Bauer, thought that the two regimes could not be compared and that such a comparison would challenge the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Others, and especially the Eastern European right wing, thought that the two groups of victims ought to be put on the same footing

and should be remembered together.

The purpose of the resolution and the call to make August 23 a European Day of Remembrance was to create a more inclusive memory in the EU: a memory that could encompass the victims of Soviet Communism and of the Holocaust, as well as the victims of the regimes in Spain, Portugal, and Greece that were categorized as totalitarian. The parliament tried to take into consideration divergent national memories in Europe, and to adapt to them by the creation of a shared narrative about the EU as a story of success. But the question remains whether it succeeded.

In the resolution, the European Parliament pointed out that the EU was an answer to both Nazism and Stalinism and that European integration was a success. At the same time, it emphasized that Europe could not be reunited unless it “is able to form a common view of its history, recognizes Nazism, Stalinism and fascist and Communist regimes as a common legacy and brings about an honest and thorough debate on their crimes in the past century.”¹⁵

THE PARLIAMENT TRIED to encompass what they labeled “all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes” in European history, as opposed to the previous 2008 “Declaration on the Proclamation of August 23 as European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalin-

“THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE NEW RESOLUTION WAS TO CORRECT THE ASYMMETRY IN THE WAY THAT STALINISM AND NAZISM WERE REMEMBERED. HOWEVER, THE RESULT WAS A NEW ASYMMETRY.”

ism and Nazism". Despite the new title, Nazism and Stalinism were given special attention in the resolution, while the fascist regimes in Greece, Spain, and Portugal were only mentioned once.¹⁶ The main purpose of the new resolution was to correct the asymmetry in the commemoration of Stalinism and Nazism. However, the result was a new asymmetry in which Stalinism received greater emphasis.

THE PARLIAMENT POINTED out that the Europeans should have special understanding for the situation in Eastern Europe and expressed regret that access to archives was still limited.¹⁷ Parts of the resolution also seemed to be written with communism in mind. For example, the resolution's reflection on the need to collect information in order to increase the awareness of "crimes committed by totalitarian and undemocratic regimes" can be read as a paraphrase of the appeal to collect information on communism that was put forward in the Prague Declaration.¹⁸ Furthermore, the resolution ends with a reference to communist crimes, attesting to their special status in the resolution.¹⁹

In general, Soviet crimes and the memory of them received special attention during the debate, in which the majority of the speakers focused on the need to recognize and come to terms with Eastern European memory in particular. Thus the parliament did not succeed in balancing the different narratives in the EU.

Considering the history of the date – both the severe consequences of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact for Eastern Europe and the fact that the date had taken on a further meaning there after 1945 – the impression arose that the victims of the Holocaust were secondary to the victims of Soviet communism. On the other hand, the memory of Soviet communism could be seen as secondary to the Holocaust, since August 23 commemorates both groups of victims, while January 27 exclusively commemorates the victims of the Holocaust, and no separate Day of Remembrance was dedicated to the victims of Soviet communism.

In October 2009, the European Parliament commemorated the 70th anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact with a conference organized by Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.²⁰ August 23 also attracted the attention of Jerzy Buzek, then president of the European Parliament, in 2010 and 2011.²¹ Among the member states, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Hungary, and Sweden observe August 23,²² which indicates that it is still a primarily Eastern European Day of Remembrance.

The Eastern European right wing as memory lobby

As mentioned, certain groups of politicians have been more active than others in putting the memory of Soviet Communism on the EU agenda, and they have succeeded. But who in particular



In 1985 this group of figures by Will Lammert was installed next to a memorial stone outside the gates of the Jewish cemetery at Große Hamburger Straße in Berlin.

has contributed to changing the memory agenda?

According to Maria Mälksoo, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland stand out as memory agents in Europe. They have tried, especially since their accession to the EU, to oppose "the hegemonic 'core European' narrative of what 'Europe' is all about."²³ Mälksoo points out that "Polish and Baltic Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have been particularly vigorous in criticizing the imbalance of the EU's historical approach that grants the victims of communism a 'second-class status', calling for a common European effort to urge Russia to assess its own history and to apologize for the crimes of Soviet totalitarianism".²⁴

Polish and Baltic members of the European Parliament have actively participated in the parliamentary debates and co-authored a number of motions for resolutions dealing with memory politics.²⁵

THE CZECH REPUBLIC and Czech politicians have also been very active in drawing attention to the memory of Soviet communist crimes after taking up the issue during the Slovenian EU presidency. An international conference was held in Prague in June 2008 at which the Prague Declaration was adopted. In contrast to the European Parliament, the point of departure for the Czech Republic was a focus on the crimes of Soviet communism, while Nazism and Nazi crimes played a minor role. The conference was organized by Martin Mejstřík, a senator in the Czech parliament, and Jana Hybášková, a Czech member of the European Parliament (Conservative/Christian Democrat, PPE-DE).²⁶ The Robert Schuman Foundation for Cooperation between Christian Demo-



crats in Europe and the office of Jana Hybášková contributed financial support to the conference. The conference was not held under the auspices of the EU, but it did have connections to activities and agents deeply rooted in or with strong ties to the EU. According to the organizers' description, the conference "follows freely upon the work of the EPP/ED [PPE-DE] fraction in the European Parliament (the 'Reunification of European History' project) and on the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe."²⁷

Among the panelists who were members of the European Parliament, a large proportion were members of the Conservative/Christian-Democratic group.²⁸ Hence the European Conservatives/Christian-Democrats and especially the PPE-DE Group in the

European Parliament seem to have played a significant role both at the conference and in planning it.

The conference was followed by a hearing on "European Conscience and Crimes of Totalitarian Communism: 20 Years After", held during the Czech presidency in March 2009. The hearing was organized by the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, the Czech government, and twelve members of the European Parliament. The material from the hearing does not tell who the twelve were, but according to the program, several Eastern European members of the PPE-DE participated as panelists and in the panel debates. Among them were Tunne Kelam and Vytautas Landsbergis, who had also participated in the Prague conference; Sandra Kalniete, later MEP for PPE-DE; Jana Hybášková, MEP; and Martin Mejstřík, not an MEP, who was also one of the organizers.²⁹

The same picture emerges at another conference, "Crimes of the Communist Regimes", held in Prague in February 2010, after the Czech EU presidency. The Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and a number of members of the PPE-DE were among the organizers, including Sandra Kalniete, Tunne Kelam, and Jana Hybášková, as well as Martin Mejstřík, who had also coordinated the previous events in Prague. The Robert Schuman Foundation for Cooperation between Christian Democrats in Europe also contributed funding.³⁰

These activities have affected the European Parliament. The phrase from the Prague Declaration for example, "whereas Europe will not be united unless it is able to reunite its history, recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy and

bring about an honest and thorough debate on all the totalitarian crimes of the past century,"³¹ is echoed in one of the parliamentary resolutions: "whereas Europe will not be united unless it is able to form a common view of its history, recognizes Nazism, Stalinism and fascist and Communist regimes as a common legacy and brings about an honest and thorough debate on their crimes in the past century".³² The official title of the Prague Declaration, "Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism", is likewise comparable to the title of the resolution cited above, the "Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism". In addition, the parliament repeated the proposal to create a "Platform for European Memory and Conscience" and a pan-European documentation center or place of memory.³³

IN ADDITION TO EASTERN EUROPEAN right-wing organizations, politicians, and members of the European Parliament, various institutions concerned with memory in Eastern Europe have also contributed to putting Eastern European memory on the agenda in the European Parliament. One is the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, mentioned above, which was founded in June 2007.³⁴ Others include the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity³⁵ and the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, which was the first of its kind and remains the largest.³⁶

The activities of these institutions also underscore the fact that attitudes toward the memory of recent European history are influenced not only by political standpoints, but also by nationality or geography. Furthermore, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet considers the new member states' wish for recognition of their sufferings under Soviet rule as an expression of their endeavors to build stable democracies.³⁷ The Eastern European right wing, for example, has seen the European Parliament as a useful arena for attracting attention to its memory. While these countries have tried to use the EU to morally resurrect the victims of Soviet crimes, they have also found it important to show that Eastern Europe has confronted its past, since such confrontation is regarded as an important part of consolidating a well-functioning democracy and a prerequisite for acceptance and recognition as equal members of the EU. The issue of recognition thus involves not only gaining recognition for victims, but also gaining recognition as democracies.

Equalization, hierarchy, dialogue?

The differences between left and right and between East and West can be further illustrated by the following example from the negotiations on the 2009 resolution "European Conscience and Totalitarianism". The example also shows how the efforts to unite and equalize memories could become a contest of who suffered the most and whose memory is more important.

The socialist group in the European Parliament, PSE, proposed adding a clause to the resolution that read "whereas the dominant historical experience of Western Europe was Nazism, and whereas the Central European countries *had the added experience of Communism*".³⁸ Following a suggestion from the Conservative/Christian-democratic group, PPE-DE, the italicized

words were changed to “have experienced both Communism and Nazism”.³⁹

The amendment is interesting because it reflects different attitudes towards the communist regime in groups of different political orientations. The PSE saw Nazism and the Holocaust as the primary suffering, with Soviet communism as an additional factor. The PPE-DE, on the other hand, did not see Soviet communism as an “added experience”; they saw the two regimes and the sufferings they had inflicted on Eastern Europe as equal. Tunne Kelam, who suggested the wording “have experienced both Communism and Nazism”, said, “To Eastern European nations, nothing was ‘added’ by Communism: most of them had Communism first, then Nazism, and then Communism again.”⁴⁰

The contrast is apparent in another amendment. The PSE proposed changing the following paragraph: “[The European Parliament] is convinced that the ultimate goal of disclosure and assessment of the crimes committed by *the Communist totalitarian regimes is reconciliation, which can be achieved by admitting responsibility, asking for forgiveness and fostering moral renewal.*”⁴¹ The proposed amendment would have deleted the last clause and changed the first part to read, “is convinced that the ultimate goal of disclosure and assessment of the crimes committed by *all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, including Communist dictatorships, is reconciliation.*”⁴² The PSE amendment would have generalized the demand for reconciliation at the cost of de-emphasizing the memory of Soviet communism. The amendment was not adopted, and it is interesting to note who voted for and who against it. The majority of the liberal ALDE, the conservative/Christian-democratic PPE-DE, the national conservative UEN, the EU-skeptical IND/DEM, and the unaffiliated members voted no. The majority of the communist GUE/NGL, the socialist PSE, and the greens (Verts/ALE) voted yes. In short, the right-of-center parties and the EU-skeptical IND/DEM opposed toning down the emphasis on communism, while the left wing voted favored the amendment.

It is understandable that there are different views on Soviet communism in East and West: Western Europe does not share the Eastern European experience of living under Soviet rule. However, as illustrated above, the discussions also showed a difference between left and right.⁴³

United in diversity?

The differences described above show first and foremost that the question how to interpret and remember the past is always political in some sense. It is significant that both left and right found it difficult to distance themselves from an ideology that repre-



sented their own political position, and found it easier to criticize a past connected to their political opponents. The differences between left and right, and between West and East, also indicate that Europeans had not yet come to terms with the memory of Soviet communism. Europe might not be ready to overcome possible conflict between victims or memories, and to create a community of memory that includes both the memory of Nazism and of Stalinism.

“DIFFERENCES OF OPINION AND DISAGREEMENTS ARE IMPORTANT INCENTIVES FOR CONTINUING TO SHAPE COMMUNITIES OF SHARED MEMORY.”

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION and disagreements are important incentives for continuing to shape communities of shared memory. However, the differences between Eastern and Western Europe are of a special kind, since different parts of the EU are expected to take part in a narrative that, in a sense, is “not theirs”. Western Europeans did not experience communism and life under Soviet rule. And Eastern Europeans did not participate in shaping the European community since its beginnings in the 1950s or in working through the memory of the Holocaust.

Adopting experiences that are not necessarily your own is an important part of shaping a community of memory, which consists of a group of people who share certain memories of events that each individual may or may not have experienced personally. Creating such a shared memory might not be so straightforward in the case of the EU. The question whether it is possible to create a united European memory, and what role the EU can and should play in this regard, still remains to be answered. Perhaps it is not so important to create a single shared memory. Instead, it might be more fruitful to focus on accepting one another’s different memories and creating a community of memory based on heterogeneity and diversity, especially after 2004. x

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