

The bright future of memory

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The memory of the Second World War clearly remains very much alive. To give just one example, the conflict triggered in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 by Vladimir Putin explicitly evoked the ghosts of the Great Patriotic War, with the master of the Kremlin aiming to “denazify” his neighbour.

The significance of memory-related issues in today’s world results first of all from the harsh experiences of the people living between 1939 and 1945 (or as far back as 1937, if we include the Marco Polo Bridge incident and the Japanese conquest of China). The Second World War is indeed characterised by incredible violence unleashed on the world. An unprecedented phenomenon, this violence primarily struck civilians, victims of the extermination undertaken by the Nazis, the enslavement of millions of workers in Asia and Europe, the merciless repression imposed by totalitarian regimes and massive bombing by the Axis and Allied Powers. This war was also first and foremost framed as one of nationalism. Instead of fighting in the name of Marx or Lenin, the communists in both Russia and China put a damper on their red dogma and chose to exalt the nation, as confirmed by Stalin’s famous speech of 3 July 1941. Therefore, in their intimate circles, the survivors of the great ordeal and their descendants hold on to an experienced memory of the Second World War that is passed down to future generations intact or distorted. Some memories, notes the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami “refuse to sink into oblivion, no matter how much time has passed and regardless of the fate that life has in store for us. These



1. Japanese Embassy in Seoul and watched from behind a bronze statue of comfort women. Picture by Sakaori, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

memories keep all their intensity and remain in us like the keystone of our inner temple”. That being said, collective memory is not just the addition of individual memories. Its collective (and therefore social and political) dimension is largely shaped by the action of institutions, whether associations, parties or the government (in its local, regional or national variations). However, this management has proven to be highly problematic.

Honouring the dead

Collective institutions have above all sought to pay tribute to their dead. According to Victor Hugo, this is because “those who died for their country have the right that the crowds come to their tombs and pray”. However, this seemingly obvious undertaking has run up against severe obstacles. For example, in a France ravaged by destruction and shortages, the public authorities were hardly eager to waste precious raw materials. They were also stingy when associations and political parties asked to install headstones and build monuments. As a general rule, moreover, the names of the victims of the conflict were purely and simply added to the monuments that had flourished after the First World War in all the communes of France. Yet the problem, all over the world, lay in knowing which categories of victims were appropriate to honour. Indifference and ideological biases got involved. The fate of the



2. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, U.S. Ambassador to France Denise Bauer and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley arrive at the Normandy American Cemetery for events commemorating the 79th anniversary of Operation Overlord and the invasion of Normandy during World War II, June 6, 2023. (DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley).

Jews provoked nothing but indifference in post-war Europe and the unique nature of the Shoah was not discussed until the 1970s. It was therefore in the 1970s that a memorial effort was undertaken in France by affixing plaques on schools, for example. However, ideological assumptions had just as much weight. In the Soviet Union and in Poland, the public authorities concealed the Jewish identity of the dead when they did not deny it, both because of a still-vivid anti-Semitism and out of loyalty to a Marxist-Leninist heritage that promoted social class over any other determinant of identity. On a radically different level, West Germany was uncertain about disclosing the fate of fallen soldiers, particularly regarding the distinction to be made between the men of the Wehrmacht and the combatants of the SS. Some theatres of operation posed no problem, such as North Africa. Rommel indeed benefited from his accepted—if not consistent—reputation of having waged a “war without hate”, to use the title of his posthumous memoirs. On the other hand, the perpetrators of the plot of 20 July 1944 waited for many years to be placed in the spotlight. In 1956,

49% of the Germans questioned were opposed to giving the name of Stauffenberg to schools. And while five barracks were named after former resistance fighters in 1961, others were named after Nazi generals, including Eduard Dietl (one of the Führer’s favourite leaders) and Ludwig Kübler (sentenced to death in absentia for war crimes in Yugoslavia in 1947). Finally, some groups tried to defend the interests of their constituents. In France, those conscripted into the Compulsory Labor Service (STO) tried to obtain the title of “labour deportees”, which they were refused after long and unsuccessful campaigns.

From this point of view, memories were reconfigured according to sensitivities and changes in the political and geopolitical context. Thus, the fall of the Berlin Wall made it possible to integrate into the collective memory groups that had been ignored, if not persecuted, under Stalinism. Finally, the rapes suffered by German women during the arrival of the Red Army gradually became worthy of mention. Similarly, East German authorities had covered up the hundreds of civilian suicides in the West

3. Utah Beach D-Day landing site, towards the south. Manche, Normandy, France.. Picture by Jebulon, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



Pomeranian town of Demmin. The local museum presented them as victims of “acts of war and disease”, while the destruction of the historic centre was claimed to result from the self-defence of the “Soviet friends” who had liberated the population from fascism. The Christian Democrat municipal team elected after reunification set the record straight, particularly by collecting testimonies. However, the memory of this tragedy has been (and still is) exploited by the AfD, the far-right party that organises an annual demonstration “in memory of the many innocent children, women and men who lost their lives in April–May 1945”. That said, other categories of victims are still awaiting justice. Often of Korean origin, the so-called “comfort women” who had been forced into prostitution in Japanese brothels have still not received the symbolic and material recognition that they were entitled to expect from their tormentors. The truth is that the Japanese authorities are reluctant to stitch the open and bleeding wounds of the past.

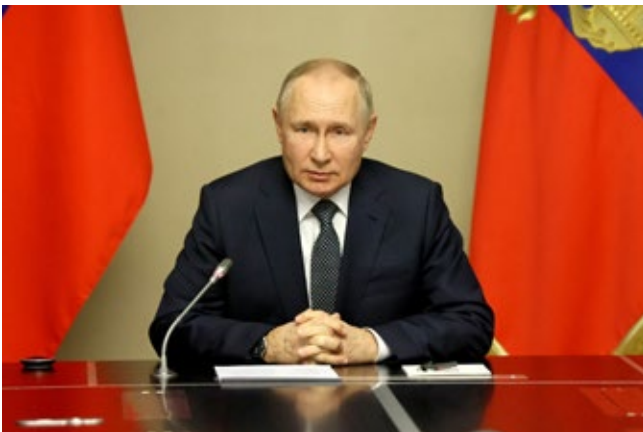
Divergent policies

In fact, the public authorities have conducted divergent—if not antagonistic—policies in terms of memory. As we have said, the Second World War left a deep mark on contemporaries. Such had been the case, though to a lesser extent, of the millions of combatants in the First World War. In order to deal with the pain, resentment and claims of these wounded people, states’ only alternative is to try to appease the anger or to make cynical use of it.

The first option was taken in Western Europe. Rather than stoking the flames of hatred, the authorities tried to extinguish them. This policy was notably followed by France and Germany, which were anxious for reconciliation, deemed essential after three deadly conflicts. The construction of Europe provided both a framework and a perspective, but the impetus was also bilateral. On 14 September 1958, Charles de Gaulle invited Konrad Adenauer to his secondary residence, La Boisserie, while the Élysée Treaty signed in 1963



4. A WWII photo portrait of General Charles de Gaulle of the Free French Forces. Image cropped by Emiya1980 using befunky.com. Office of War Information, Overseas Picture Division.



5. Vladimir Putin during an operational meeting with permanent members of the Security Council on November 25, 2022. Picture by kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

initiated close cooperation between both states, including the twinning of French and German municipalities (more than one thousand in 1981), intertwining their peoples as close as possible. Of course, this policy did not make a clean sweep of the past or suddenly eliminate old reflexes. While the French Parliament unanimously made war crimes imprescriptible in 1964, West Germany protected its former Nazis for many years, though the Frankfurt trials of 1963 did mark a change by putting 22 former SS soldiers who had worked in Auschwitz in the dock before their victims. Be that as it may, reconciliation tended to prevail over anger, as the ceremonies celebrating D-Day suggest. Until 1984, the commemorations were first and foremost dominated by Anglo-Americans. The French, led by de Gaulle, did not want to recall the memory of D-Day, from which France had been excluded, and which was the prelude, as de Gaulle described it, to a new US occupation. The man of 18 June therefore refused to visit the beaches of Normandy in 1964. The ceremonies therefore gave pride of place to the former leaders (Omar Bradley in 1969, for example). This configuration did have ulterior motives. By acting in this way, the Anglo-Americans undoubtedly wanted to recall that the Second World War had also been won in the West, while the Soviets reasonably recalled that the Red Army had carried the brunt of the effort until June 1944. Perhaps they also wanted to show that the democracies remained united in the face of the Eastern bloc. By exalting the solidarity of Great Britain and the United States united to triumph over Nazism, the commemorations fulfilled this purpose marvellously.

However, everything changed in 1984 under the leadership of President François Mitterrand. The ceremony became a civilian one, in that it granted primacy to heads of state and no longer to soldiers. As such, Ronald Reagan, Queen Elizabeth and others came to the beaches of Normandy. The number of nations represented also increased. The first to be included was West Germany. In 1984, Chancellor Helmut Kohl ruled out attending, explaining that he had no reason to celebrate “victory in a battle in which tens of thousands of Germans had died”. In



6. Meeting of François Mitterrand in Caen during the 1981 presidential campaign. Picture by Jacques PAILLETTE, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

1994, however, he was indignant at having been pushed aside by French Minister of Veterans Affairs Louis Mexandeau. “Here was a perfect opportunity to celebrate the reconciliation of the different belligerents before the world, giving the ceremonies the value of bestowing official forgiveness by the Allied nations”. At last, in 2004, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder came to Normandy and marked a turning point by explaining: “the victory of the Allies is not a victory over Germany but a victory for Germany”. In the same vein, the Soviets were also included, as Vladimir Putin was invited to the 2014 commemorations.

The message sent during the ceremonies has also evolved. Over time, it has promoted two lines of thought. On the one hand, D-Day was no longer presented as a military operation leading to victory, but as an enterprise of peace, freeing Europe from Nazism and ushering in Franco-German reconciliation. In this spirit, Operation Overlord is also considered the beginning of the construction of Europe, as François Mitterrand said in 1984: “The adversaries of yesterday have reconciled and are building the Europe of Freedom together. May they now dare to go beyond themselves to overcome the contradictions of a common victory that has brought us peace”. In 1994, he added: “Reconciled, the adversaries now walk in step”. This is clearly an act of construction or, if you may, of storytelling. Eisenhower certainly did not think that he was laying the groundwork for the construction of Europe. He sought above all to annihilate the German armies and not to achieve an improbable reconciliation between France and Germany. Yet this vision was accepted. Today, it shapes how we represent the liberation in general and Operation Overlord in particular.

However, other countries have not embarked on this path and instead cynically use the sad passions of their peoples for other ends. Far from carrying out a memorial reconciliation with Germany and Russia, Poland recalls the very real suffering it endured, a memory reawakened by the attack against Ukraine. Similarly, at the height of the 2015 crisis, the Greek authorities were quick to evoke the occupation of Greece between 1941 and 1944, stressing in passing that Germany had not compensated the country for the suffering inflicted.

In Europe, as in the world, the paths of memory are therefore being undermined. The issue is not about the memory that individuals, or even groups, retain of a trying period that left an enduring mark on millions of people and their descendants. Rather, it is about the definition of policies of memory. After the First World War, governments used the memory of the sacrifices borne to challenge the Treaty of Versailles. Germany had never stopped demanding its revision, as the Weimar Republic had done longer before Hitler. Italy had endlessly exploited the theme of a “mutilated victory”. Japan, considering itself unjustly wronged, had engaged in nationalist one-upmanship. These trends did not resume after the Second World War for two main reasons. First, the Cold War prompted governments to channel popular resentment. At a time when Moscow was condemning Berlin to a gruelling blockade before building the Wall of Shame, Western Europeans could hardly give free rein to their demands, especially if they were counting on the young Bundeswehr to shoulder a share of their joint defence. Second, this was especially that case since Europe was embarking on the construction of the Common Market and the European Union, which supposed relative moderation in terms of memory. This double constraint does not mean that all the disputes were settled. Thus, the German Democratic Republic denounced the protection that its western neighbour provided to former Nazis and undoubtedly helped to make some embarrassing revelations to embarrass the authorities in Bonn. Yet neither Poland, nor Hungary nor Czechoslovakia could express their pain over the drama of Katyn or the conduct of Soviet troops in 1945. With the fall of the Berlin Wall on the one hand and the aggression against Ukraine on the other hand, these safeguards have been broken. The memory of the Second World War therefore risks plotting a new course. In view of Vladimir Putin’s cynical evocation of the Great Patriotic War and Poland’s aggressive tone, we believe that the reconciliation initiated in Western Europe has had its day. Far from being placed at the service of peace, the memory of the Second World War now risks being brandished to justify and legitimise new tensions and even new conflicts: a very discouraging prospect indeed.



7. The Motherland Calls, the compositional centre of the monument-ensemble "Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad" on Mamayev Kurgan in Volgograd, Russia. www.volganet.ru, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons