Sleepwalking into the Future?

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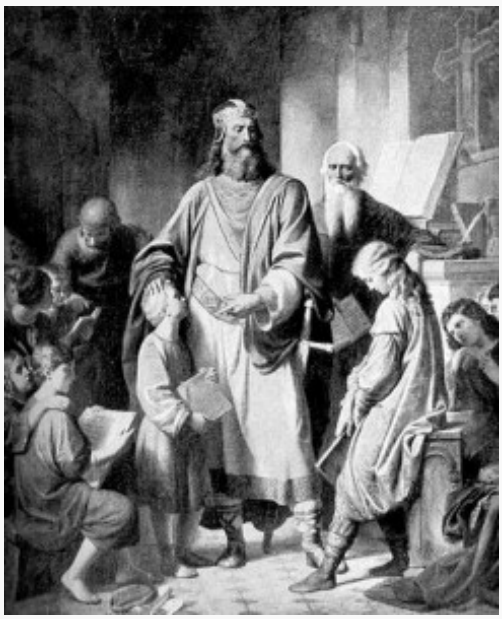
This is the prepared text of a contribution to a conference of the Europe for Citizens Forum in Brussels on January 28th, 2014. Irit Dekel, Anna Lisa Tota and Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, also contributed to the Forum. Their texts are forthcoming.

It is an honour to reflect on European remembrance at today's forum. As one who teaches political philosophy at Tallinn University in Estonia, the tradition of European philosophy is my bread and butter. Where would philosophy or politics be without Europe? Our very language of politics stems from the Athenian polis. Likewise, civil law is rooted in Roman Justinian code. From Machiavelli's grammar of the modern state to Kant's dream of perpetual peace, the tradition of European political philosophy is extraordinarily rich.

Before discussing some fissures in 20th century European memory, we might reflect on the symbolism of today's "Europe for Citizens Forum." If the 27th of January commemorates International Holocaust Remembrance Day, today, the 28th of January marks the 1,200th anniversary of the death of Charlemagne in 814. As father of Europe, Charlemagne is remembered as the leader of the Holy Roman Empire and the one who forged unity out of divided Western Europe. The 27th of January commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army and the 28th honours the death of one, who unified part of Europe and encouraged liberal education, a common currency and Christianity.



"Charlemagne Visiting a Boys' School" or "Charlemagne and his Scholars" (detail), engraving by Karl von Blaas © Unknown | iamachild.wordpress.com

To respond to the question posed to our panel: How is the 20th century reflected in the memory of Europeans and are we sleepwalking into the future? The very institutional structure of the EU and project of European political and economic integration are answers to a century marred by totalitarianism, political extremism and two world wars. Indeed, as the dates of 27 and 28 January clearly demonstrate, memories of the past can recall negative events such as the Holocaust as well as the positive heritage of political continuity, as commemorated around the historical figure of Charlemagne.

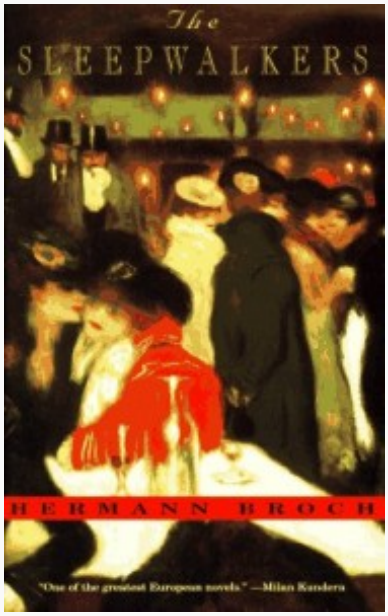
The historian Pierre Nora wrote that we live in an "era of commemoration." Because the past seems lost to us, we hastily build monuments, museums and memorials to commemorate a lost time. In contrast, Timothy Snyder warns that we are suffering from a "commemorative causality" by memorializing too much of the past. So, is Europe sleepwalking into the future or feverishly living in the past? The metaphor of sleepwalking is an apt one. If Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924) symbolized how many wealthy Europeans were far removed in their chilly sanatoria before the First World War, Hermann Broch's novel *The Sleepwalkers* (1931) captured the volatile combination of insomnia and sleepwalking during the interwar years.

I don't think that Europeans were sleepwalking after WWII. On the contrary, with a divided and destroyed continent, the European project of economic and political integration is an extraordinary accomplishment. Likewise, the memory-based human rights discourse that the EU actively supports is vitally important for keeping Europe and the rest of the world wide-awake.

What are some of the dominant memories shared by today's Europeans? With the fall of communism in 1989 and fall of the USSR in 1991, interest in 20th century history has increased dramatically – particularly in the East. As nations re-claimed their independence, and "returned," as it were to Europe, sharp differences emerged in how communism and World War II are remembered and understood.

Riots in Tallinn in April 2007 revealed how WWII or the Great Patriotic War was politicized and divided. Crystallizing around war memorial depicting a Red Army soldier in mourning, many Estonians interpreted both the statue and the

commemorations of the 9th of May as symbols of Soviet occupation. Members of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, on the other hand, viewed the war memorial as a symbol of victory over fascism by the Red Army. Both interpretations contained elements of truth: without Red Army soldiers, Hitler would not have been defeated. And yet, those same soldiers occupied half of Europe under totalitarian regimes of communism. Thus, the riots in Tallinn revealed two different memories about World War II: liberation versus occupation, heroic soldier versus occupier.



Book cover of *The Sleepwalkers* by Hermann Broch © Vintage | Amazon.com

With the inclusion of former communist and Soviet countries into the EU, East European politicians have lobbied hard for recognition of those who suffered under communism. Indeed after much work, a new commemorative day has been added to the European calendar: the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Nazism and Stalinism. Since 2009, the 23rd of August commemorates both the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939 and the Baltic Chain of two million citizens from the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who held hands for freedom on 23 August 1989.

Since 1989, different memories of war, communism and the Holocaust have surfaced. If Western European memory tends to centre on the Holocaust, many east European countries (like the Baltic States) focus on national suffering at the hands of dual occupations. Indeed, there seem to be two dominant European frameworks of memory: one arguing for the uniqueness of the Holocaust and another comparing National Socialism and Communism under the rubric of totalitarianism. In Estonia, Holocaust Remembrance Day is not an official one on the national calendar, while European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Nazism and Stalinism is. Perhaps a balancing of the scales is needed so that West Europeans learn more about East European history and East Europeans learn more about the Holocaust that was primarily perpetrated in the East. How can such knowledge be shared? Through school history books or common reading lists of important authors such as Anne Frank and Alexander Solzhenitsyn? The writing of schoolbooks is a major and important endeavour in all European countries. With respect to finding a common European past, the biggest challenge is how to avoid an *oversimplification* of the past into myth. Myths contain a grain of truth — but only a grain. Overly simplistic explanations rely heavily on the emotions and are often one-dimensional or Manichean.

Bronze Soldier, Soviet World War II monument in Tallinn, Estonia, quarantined off in hopes of preventing conflicts between demonstrators on Victory in Europe Day. © 2006 Petri Krohn | Wikimedia Commons

Although much of today's culture of European remembrance focuses on the fissures between Eastern and Western Europe during the Second World War and Cold War, we might also ask about the differences between Northern and Southern Europe. Singular emphasis on the Holocaust and communist crimes might seem removed from the reality of long-term unemployment for young Spanish and Greek citizens. How can the culture of European remembrance also include the negative experiences of fascism in Southern Europe, as well as the hopes of modernization, integration and prosperity offered by the European project?

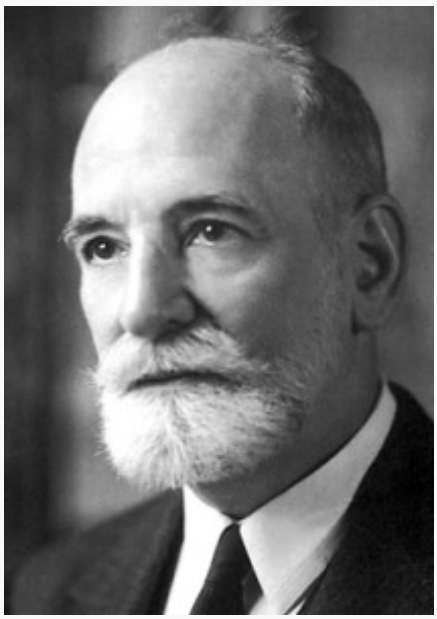
In addition to the negative memory of totalitarianism and fascism, Europeans share democratic revolutions that resulted in the expansion of the EU and peace among its member states. From Portugal, Spain and Greece to the peaceful mass movements for freedom and democracy in the East, Europeans share a positive tradition of peaceful protest and democratic values. Likewise, the international framework of human rights, supported and often spearheaded by the EU, is based on a strong collective memory of war and genocide during the 20th century. It is perhaps this last response of human rights that keeps Europeans from sleepwalking into the future. If the government in my own country, the United States, fell asleep at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the EU's strong support of human rights is based on the living memory of 20th century violence.

Indeed, one has only to recall a great Frenchman and European, René Cassin, who helped to draft the Universal Declaratio of Human Rights in 1948, which was signed by the Council of Europe in 1950. Having fought in WWI and lost family members in Auschwitz, Cassin's contribution to human rights and his desire to protect the dignity of individuals is one that could arguably be the basis for a common European memory. Constructed on the memory of those who were denied humar dignity and life due to religion, ethnicity and ideology, Cassin (and others) left not only a moral, but a legal framework for

future generations of Europeans and non-Europeans alike.

I would agree with the historian, Jay Winter's thesis that it is European memory, based on the experience of war and violence that forms the basis of human rights discourse today. Hence, for those of us involved in the field of education, civic engagement and NGOs, the promotion of tolerance, democracy and human rights is based heavily on the memory of 20th century violence. Recognition of the Holocaust and communist crimes are certainly very important parts of European memory. There are other stories though that also belong, those of *fascism*, *colonialism* and *imperialism* to name but a few. Because human rights are universal, it is neither a zero-sum game nor a hierarchy of victimhood. Rather as future educators and members of civil society, the task ahead is how to foster *empathy* for the suffering of others, as well as how to promote tolerance and respect. Memories of past violence in 20th century Europe remind us of the fragility of human rights. To close on a note of cautious optimism, it is perhaps the legal, political and moral framework of the European Union, in addition to numerous human rights activists and a robust civil society, that prevent Europeans (and others) from sleepwalking to the future.

Official Holocaust Memorial Day logo © HMDT | Wikimedia Commons



René Cassin © Unknown | nobelprize.org