

Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History Memory, Pluralism and Europe after 1989

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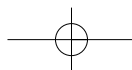
Abstract

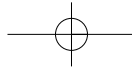
Since 1989, social change in Europe has moved between two stories. The first being a politics of memory emphasizing the specificity of culture in national narratives, and the other extolling the virtues of the Enlightenment heritage of reason and humanity. While the Holocaust forms a central part of West European collective memory, national victimhood of former Communist countries tends to occlude the centrality of the Holocaust. Highlighting examples from the Estonian experience, this article asks whether attempts to find one single European memory of trauma ignore the complexity of history and are thus potentially disrespectful to those who suffered under both Communism and National Socialism. Pluralism in the sense of Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin is presented as a way in which to move beyond the settling of scores in the past and towards a respectful recognition and acknowledgment of historical difference.

Key words

■ Europe ■ the Holocaust ■ legacy ■ memory ■ trauma

Since 1989, social change in Europe has moved between two familiar stories. The first being a politics of memory emphasizing the specificity of culture in national narratives and the other extolling the virtues of the Enlightenment heritage of reason and humanity. The tension between unique culture and common humanity can be found in the various ways that World War II has been remembered after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Rifts between old and new Europe are visible with the renewed efforts by the East European countries and the Baltic States for official recognition of Communist crimes at the European Union level and hesitancy on the part of old Europe for such official recognition. In the wake of the heated debates surrounding the sixtieth commemoration of Victory Day in Moscow (2005) and the Soviet war memorial





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controversy in Tallinn (2007), a common understanding of World War II and the Cold War which divided the continent is far from reached (Onken, 2007a; Petersoo and Tamm, 2008).

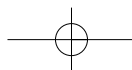
While the Holocaust forms a central part of West European collective memory, national victimhood of former Communist countries tends to occlude the centrality of the Holocaust. This article asks whether attempts to find one single European memory of victimhood ignore the complexity of history and are thus potentially disrespectful to those who suffered under Communism and National Socialism. Is there a way to respect historical difference without revisionism and a whitewashing of the past? Is there a way for different European nations to remember the past without fixating too much on difference? This question is particularly relevant in the Baltic States and Eastern Europe, where citizens were under double occupations of Nazi Germany and the USSR during and after World War II. Without arguing for relativism, pluralism in the sense of Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin is presented as a way in which to move beyond the settling of scores in the past and towards a respectful recognition and acknowledgment of historical difference. Agreeing to disagree includes respect for multiple memories, recognition of cultural difference and empathy with others. Because relations between Russia and the Baltic States were antagonistic and the memories of World War II tend to exclude one another, it is not likely that they can agree to disagree until Russia as the successor state to the Soviet Union recognizes the crimes of Communism. Old and new Europe, however, can agree to disagree because both sides acknowledge a plurality of historical experiences during World War II.

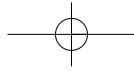
Legacies of History: The Past as Inheritance and Burden

A legacy can be interpreted as both negative and positive, as both an inheritance and a burden. Stemming from the Latin *legatus*, a legacy means 'something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor from the past'. It is this twofold meaning of legacy as inheritance and burden that I discuss in this article, first, theoretically and then with respect to different narratives about World War II since 1989. My reflections on the East European experience will draw primarily from the Baltic case of Estonia. Occupied by both the Soviet Union (1940–41, 1944–91) and Nazi Germany (1941–44), Estonia provides a kind of microcosm for clashing memories of the war and its legacy.

A Hermeneutical Understanding of the Past

Before memory studies became a subject of academic interest, the older school of hermeneutics highlighted the importance of interpretation and understanding. Indeed, it is from the perspective of hermeneutics that the historical importance of a legacy first becomes salient. As Hans-Georg Gadamer argued in *Truth and Method*, one can never truly free oneself from the cultural traditions and prejudices that one is born into:





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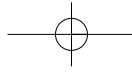
In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.* (Gadamer, 1975: 277)

Hermeneutics highlights understanding and what Gadamer calls effective historical consciousness. 'Consciousness of being affected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*] is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation' (p. 301). The effects of history are legacies of the past that are meaningful in the present. One can never totally free oneself from the past and be a purely rational being, neither is one condemned to reproduce blindly the prejudices of one's tradition. The individual has the potential to criticize and evaluate his or her own traditions. In this sense, World War II and its legacy are deeply part of contemporary European society. Each person has a finite but changing horizon of understanding. 'To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete' (p. 302). Understanding is a kind of dialogue whereby we try to put ourselves in the perspective of the other person. There is no universal common horizon, but rather many changing perspectives:

In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important point of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. (p. 306)

A legacy entails links between past, present and future. Something from the past is remembered and influences actions in the present. For the historian Reinhart Koselleck, a contemporary of Gadamer, the metaphor of horizon applies more to the future than to the past. He refers to the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation'. The past is constituted spatially, as a kind of map or place in which experiences have been completed. The future is qualitatively different because it is open to the unknown and has not yet been experienced. 'Hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectation and experience – for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory – simultaneously constitute history and its cognition' (Koselleck, 1985: 270).

While Gadamer and Koselleck emphasize the historical aspect of human understanding, it is in the work of Paul Ricoeur that imagination and narrative are brought into the picture. What links the space of experience with the horizon of expectation is imagination. Mnemosyne is the Muse of both memory and imagination, as well as the mother of Clio or history. Recollection of the past is not a static re-capturing of an event but a fluid, even imaginative, activity. Combining a Gadamerian respect for tradition with a Habermasian critique of ideology, Ricoeur calls attention to 'social imaginaries'. The social imaginary, similar to Anderson's 'imagined community', are those collective stories, histories and ideologies which inform our understanding. Ricoeur highlights the central link between narrative and time. It is through narrative that a sense of time is experienced. 'A story is *made of* events, to the extent that plot makes events *into*



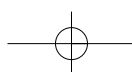
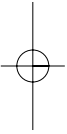
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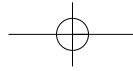
a story' (Ricoeur, 1991: 106). Each narrative has a plot that structures the development of a story – be it fact or fiction. A plot gives both a narrative order and meaning to what might otherwise be construed as haphazard and disconnected.

Collective Memory

What collective memory theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora reveal is how the legacy of the past becomes a politics of memory in contemporary societies. Rather than emphasizing a clear-cut distinction between past and present, the link between past and present is foregrounded. In his pioneering work, Halbwachs argued that memory is framed by membership in different social groups (Halbwachs, [1941] 1992; [1950] 1980). Individuals remember as social beings living in particular time periods and belonging to certain generations. Nora's interdisciplinary study of the topography of memory or *lieu de mémoire* calls attention to the symbolic places where memory is represented (1989; 1996). The wave of semiotics, cultural studies and influence of history from below marked a shift from a philosophical analysis of interpretation to an analysis of the symbolic production and reception of cultural phenomena. Thus, places of memory include not only physical spaces such as monuments, museums, film and literature, but also temporal places such as commemorative ceremonies (Connerton, 1989). Studies of oral history, post-colonialism, histories from below and histories of everyday life offer different perspectives and narratives about the past. Multiculturalism and attention to ways in which national and ethnic identity are shaped are deeply part of the democratization of history. Categories such 'memory' and 'culture' have become the subjects of academic interest, replacing 'society' or 'class'. Peter Burke carefully points out that since the 1970s culture has replaced society in both academic and popular literature (2004: 65–6). In a similar vein, Alon Confino argues that memory has replaced society as a social category for understanding collective behavior. Both are right because memories of the past are a part of the larger sphere of culture – of symbols and their interpretation (2006: 170–88). It is this cultural approach to the past which interprets museums, monuments and commemorations as meaningful symbols linked to collective identity that is of issue in the past 20 years (Burke, 2004: 3).

Recent interest in collective memory is furthermore linked to a moral acknowledgment of the Holocaust as the central trauma of the twentieth century. Before the Holocaust, legacies of the past were examined less as burdens and more as tradition, heritage or inheritance. Even Nietzsche's provocative writings on history did not discuss the past as traumatic burden. The past becomes a burden when it prevents the individual from living in the present. Whether seen as monumental, antiquarian or critical – the greatness of the past becomes a burden when it eclipses the present and the future (Nietzsche, [1874] 1980). Halbwachs also focused on the social frameworks of memory in a neutral way. Likewise, although Anderson's seminal *Imagined Communities* harkened back to Ernst Renan's famous remark that it is shared sorrows rather than joys that unites nations – it was not yet the language of trauma and mourning (Anderson, [1983]





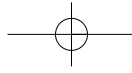
1991). The nation as imagined community was still within the framework of collective identity as a kind of cohesion and solidarity between individuals. Here tradition, symbols, heritage movements and commemorative rituals were examined without reference to questions of justice and trauma (Lowenthal, 1985; Nora, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1983; Shils, 1981). The legacy of the past was viewed as a meaningful inheritance rather than as a traumatic burden.

The Legacy of the Past as Trauma

The democratization of history and the emergence of transitional justice in the late twentieth century accompany the examination of traumatic pasts (Bell, 2006; Giesen, 2004; Sztompka et al., 2004). By emphasizing the past as trauma, three concepts are intertwined: memory, democracy and justice. According to Jeffrey Olick, the past can either be discussed as presentist, functional or psychoanalytic. While the presentist understanding of the past is about 'what *we* do *with* the past', and privileges the instrumental control of the past from the point of view of the present, the functional understanding of the past employs a moral tone by asking 'what the *past* does *for* us'. Here the past is the moral-political source of individual and collective identity. It is the understanding of the past as trauma that has become increasingly prevalent. The Freudian model of psychoanalysis interprets the legacy of the past in terms of a burden: 'what the past does *to* us' (Olick, 2007b).

What happens when the individual model of trauma is projected onto collectivities such as the nation or Western civilization as a whole? Does the metaphor foster complexities and distortions? Can the question, 'what does the past do to us?' coincide with another relevant question, 'how to come to terms with the past?' In other words, how is the traumatic model of individual memory from the psychoanalytical side, incorporating mourning, melancholia, repression and repetition linked to that other moral-political model of trauma (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*)? Adorno's famous essay, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?', written in 1959, and Karl Jasper's *The Question of German Guilt* (Jaspers, 1946) written immediately after the war in 1946 are attempts to understand the legacy of National Socialism for those who lived through the years 1933–45. Adorno argued strongly for the centrality of Freudian psychology when dealing with the past: 'The need for an exact and undiluted knowledge of Freudian theory is as imperative as ever' (Adorno, 1986: 127).

If the psychoanalytical model seems to unwittingly privilege a passive conception of the person – *what the past does to us* – the moral-political model of working through the past leaves open the possibility for a more active conception of the person. The model of *Aufarbeitung* is one of working through, coming to terms with, mastery, overcoming, in essence, acceptance and acknowledgement of the past–present link. It begins from trauma but does not remain fixated on it. Concepts such as the past as a burden, inheritance and legacy gain a new meaning when they are *not only* viewed from the psychoanalytic perspective. If trauma is



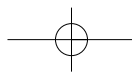
the singular hallmark of our times, is there room for individuals to learn from their mistakes and take responsibility for the legacy of past wrongdoings? Is not the very recognition of trauma linked to justice and pluralism (Minow, 1998; Olick, 2007a)? Regret indicates individual action and the freedom of the will. Regret and remorse indicate that individuals, and perhaps even societies can learn from their past mistakes and assume some kind of responsibility for the legacy of that past (Schwan, 2001). Regret and responsibility are linked to the freedom of the individual to change. The individual potential to change is deeply part of the Western tradition: from Saul to Paul, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov – regret leads to individual change and to the possibility of a new beginning.

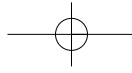
While trauma is one powerful emblem of our times, one can also make a similar case for democracy. The two emblems are linked: the recognition of a traumatic past (as mourning, regret or guilt) seems to be a fundamental cornerstone of post-war democracy. Trauma and democracy are linked together as two sides of the same coin. The language of human rights after World War II with Nuremberg's precedent of 'crimes against humanity' has enriched democratic culture with emphasis on the recognition of difference and dignity of the human being. Continuing in the tradition of Jasper's distinction between different types of guilt as criminal, political, moral and metaphysical, Gesine Schwan has developed the thesis that guilt which is silenced or repressed damages the political culture of democracy (Schwan, 2001). The repressed returns when guilt is silenced. Learning processes, individual and social change and, perhaps most importantly, trust are built during the difficult process of the acknowledgement of guilt. Schwan's work, like that of the Mitscherlichs and Bude is concerned with the dialogue between generations and democratic culture (Bude, 1992; Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich, 1975).

The relation between traumatic past and democratic renewal is what links 1989 to 1945. Interpreting the past as a burden to be acknowledged and worked through makes the very strong claim that the twentieth century or modernity itself is defined by trauma. 'Indeed, one could well argue that "trauma" has become something of an emblem of our epoch' (Olick, 2007a: 21). From Adorno, Bauman and Benjamin, a tragic understanding of history is employed whereby Auschwitz becomes the emblem for a fundamental break in Western civilization (Adorno, 1986; Bauman, 1989; Benjamin, [1955] 1968; Friedländer, 1992). The argument, however, runs into slippery dead ends: either the Holocaust is removed from history into a realm of being beyond representation or one enters into the discussion of whether the Holocaust was more of a break in civilization than other mass genocides, most notably those of Communism.

Narratives of World War II

In the hermeneutical spirit of Gadamer and Ricoeur, World War II serves as an example of the role of narrative in shaping different understandings of the past





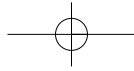
upon the present. Since the end of the war, three broad narratives have surfaced: a Western, a Soviet/Russian and (since 1989/1991) a post-Soviet/post-Communist narrative.¹ Each narrative highlights different aspects of the war which are factually true but politically charged. Indeed, it is the way in which the legacies of the same war are remembered that makes the narratives so different (Lebow, 2006). Each narrative is linked to national identity and collective suffering. Because the emergence of the mass media occurred at roughly the same time as the war, photographs, documentaries and film plays a pivotal role in the different interpretations of World War II. Contrasting iconic images of the war years are seared into the different stories of the years 1939–45.

The Western Narrative

The Western narrative of World War II highlights National Socialism as the main evil. The Holocaust is unique and the Jews of Europe represent trauma and victimhood. The war began on 1 September 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland and ended on 8 May 1945 with the capitulation of Nazi Germany to the Allied powers. The defeat and division of Germany was the result of the war and of the ensuing Cold War which divided the continent. Although both National Socialism and Stalinism may be viewed as totalitarian, the crimes of Communism are generally regarded to be in a different category from those of the Holocaust. Although increasing attention has turned to the suffering of German civilians during the war, photographs of Jewish deportation and Nazi concentration camps remain the iconic symbols of World War II (Barnouw, 2005; Sebald, [1999] 2003; Grass, 2004; 2007). Indeed, the very word 'Auschwitz' has become a central signifier for World War II. In addition to traditional war memorials, abstract monuments to genocide and the Holocaust are a part of the West European landscape. Particularly in Germany and Western Europe, the Western narrative of World War II is linked to a Habermasian conception of post-national identity and constitutional patriotism (Habermas, 1993; [1998] 2001). In many ways, the Western narrative is a loose framework shared by Western Europe, the USA and Israel in which each nation has a slightly different approach to the narrative based upon national experience.

The Soviet/Russian Narrative

In the Soviet/Russian narrative, fascism (National Socialism) is the undisputed main evil. The victimhood of the Russian people is remembered as the primary trauma against Nazi/fascist invasion. The Red Army soldier is a hero and liberator of Europe, not an occupier of Eastern Europe. The West underestimates the heroism of the Red Army and the enormous suffering of the Soviet people. The war is not remembered in Russia as World War II but as the Great Patriotic War. Beginning on 22 June 1941 with Operation Barbarossa, it ended on 9 May 1945 when Nazi Germany surrendered to the Soviet Union. The years 1939–41 when the Soviet Union was allied with Nazi Germany are downplayed and not part of



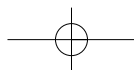
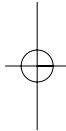
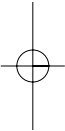
the official narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The numerous monuments to the war throughout the former Soviet Union emphasize victory, heroism and national sacrifice for the Motherland. The iconic symbol of the Soviet narrative is Khaldei's famous photograph of a Red Army soldier flying the Soviet flag over the Reichstag on the 9th of May. There is a distinctive continuity in Putin's Russia with the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The commemoration marking the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2005 demonstrated the central place of the Great Patriotic War in Russian national consciousness (Gudkov, 2005). Furthermore the refusal of the Russian Federation to officially recognize the occupation of the Baltic States (1944–91) is part of the story of the Soviet liberation of Europe.

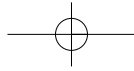
The Post-Communist/Post-Soviet Narrative

In the post-Communist/post-Soviet narrative, there are two evils: Communism and National Socialism; however, Communism is widely regarded as the main evil by way of duration and intensity. National victimhood is the primary trauma that has been silenced during the Cold War occupation years. Particularly in the Baltics, the Holocaust is seen as peripheral to national suffering due to war and dual occupations. Both the Nazi and Red Army soldiers are viewed as occupiers. The real end of the war is neither 8 May nor 9 May 1945 but the restoration of independence and end of Soviet occupation in 1991. The end of Communism marks a return to history and a return to Europe. In the Baltic States, it is the secret protocols of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact on 23 August 1939, dividing Europe into spheres of influence between Hitler and Stalin, that should not be forgotten. Furthermore, the dates of Soviet deportations of the Balts to Siberia and the Gulag in 1941 and 1949 are remembered in the national calendar much more than 8th or 9th of May. In Estonia, the national day of mourning (14 June) is officially dedicated to those were deported and murdered in the Gulag. The central iconic images of the war are of the Red Army and deportation (Kõresaar, 2005). Whereas one might argue that the genocide of European Jewry has been internalized into a post-national Western narrative about World War II, for the Soviet-Russian and post-Soviet perspective, the Holocaust is external to their national narratives of the same period of time: 1939–45. While most West European countries experienced reconstruction and democratization after the war, the post-war experience of East Europeans, the Balts in particular, are more linked to occupation, deportation, and the demographic changes due to Soviet Russification policies.

The Legacies of War after 1989

After 1989, there has been a reassessment of Western myths and grand narratives surrounding World War II and the entire post-war period. Historians such as Tony Judt, Norman Davies, Anthony Beevor and Anne Appelbaum have written forcefully about the way in which memories of the war have been used for political





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gains and to shore up national identities. Davies and Appelbaum are particularly critical of Western ignorance and relative disinterest in the Eastern Front and the crimes of Communism. While walking through Prague one summer day, Appelbaum asks why it is politically acceptable for Westerners to buy Soviet kitsch but morally reprehensible to indulge in Nazi paraphernalia:

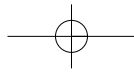
Most of the people buying the Soviet paraphernalia were Americans and West Europeans. All would be sickened by the thought of wearing a swastika. None objected, to wearing the hammer and sickle on a T-shirt or a hat. It was a minor observation, but sometimes it is through just such minor observations that a cultural mood is best observed. For here, the lesson could not have been clearer: while the symbol of one mass murder fills us with horror, the symbol of another mass murder makes us laugh. (Appelbaum, 2003: 5–6)

Appelbaum's point is an important one. Symbols of Communism seem to be taken lightly in the West, whereas symbols of National Socialism are considered sinister and taboo. Western narratives of World War II suffer from an unbalanced account privileging the Western Front and underestimating the crucial role of the Red Army in winning the war. Moreover the problem of criminality has 'been carefully avoided by Soviet apologists' (Davies, 2006: 483).

The different memories of World War II in contemporary Europe are linked to important social changes since 1989. The first is generational. As Karl Mannheim argued, historical events mark the formative years of individuals so that generations share certain lived experiences which influence their values and sense of collective identity (Mannheim, [1928] 1952). Memories of the past are linked to living members of a particular generation. Those with lived experience of the war are dying out and younger generations learn about the war and the Cold War through the cultural mediation of media, books, television, film and museums. Since the 1980s, a generational shift has been underway in which lived communicative memory is gradually being replaced by second-hand cultural memory (Assmann, 1995). The 1990s and early twenty-first century are perhaps the twilight zone when communicative memory is being overshadowed by cultural memory.

The second major social change actually occurred before 1989 when the Holocaust became a topic both academically and popularly. Beginning in the 1960s and booming in the 1980s, memories of the Holocaust and Jewish suffering reached unprecedented proportions. Narratives of the Holocaust were and still are linked with moral questions of representation and justice. Indeed, the general trend of examining traumatic pasts begins with the Holocaust. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the importance of the Holocaust as a central prism through which World War II is remembered has only increased.

Third, the largely peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe and the spectacular break-up of the Soviet Union have forever changed Europe. The largest experiment in social engineering creaked to an end. Yet, it is here that the legacies of history are most vibrant and the rate of social change most rapid (Outhwaite and



Ray, 2005: 176–96). What happened during these revolutions is important for many reasons. However, it is perhaps the legacy of what *didn't* happen that is now haunting Europe. Unlike World War II which ended with the controversial Nuremberg Trials, Communism ended without official recognition of the crimes committed in the name of the Soviet Union. Moreover the fact that Putin's government increasingly mythologized the Great Patriotic War prevents the very recognition of Communist crimes that Nuremberg in its flawed way facilitated. While one might criticize the Nuremberg Trials as 'victors' justice' because only Nazi German crimes were prosecuted and Stalinist crimes and Allied bombing of civilians were ignored, Nuremberg did establish the important precedent of crimes against humanity and ushered in an era of human rights (Cooper, 1999).

Comparing the Crimes of Communism and Nazism

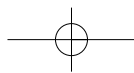
In the Holocaust Forum held in Stockholm in 2000, the Holocaust was discussed as a central narrative of modernity.² Yehuda Bauer's speech summed up the main idea of the conference:

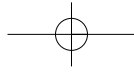
In recent decades, actually in most recent years, we have witnessed an amazing development. A catastrophe that had befallen a specific people at a specific time, in a specific place, has been accepted, all over the world, as the symbol of ultimate evil. (Holocaust Forum, 2000)

On the one hand, the suffering of European Jews has been universalized to affirm the importance of human rights and as an admonishment to future crimes against humanity. Yet, on the other hand, the Holocaust has become a kind of negative foundation for the renewal of Europe after World War II.

In a larger sense, one can speak of the new field of transitional justice in Latin America, Eastern Europe and South Africa (Minow, 1998). National apology, reparations and public redress have been labeled by Avishai Margalit as an 'ethics of memory' (Margalit, 2002) and as a 'politics of regret' by Olick (Olick, 2003: 21–32; 2007a). Each of these phrases harks back to an important human rather than cultural trait – that of *mea culpa*. The universalization of the Holocaust as a warning about the human tendency towards barbarism is a projection of individual acknowledgment of wrongdoing onto collectives such as the nation or humanity at large (Alexander, 2002). The Eichmann trial in 1961, the *Holocaust* docudrama in 1979, and President von Weizsäcker's speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II in 1985 are but a few of the major steps towards the Holocaust becoming a cultural signifier for evil. As Helmut Dubiel writes, the Holocaust acts as a catalyst for a universal or transnational ethic:

Today, the term 'Holocaust' identifies not only the historical event, but has developed into a symbolic repertoire which has been adopted by political groups all over the world who are subjected to extreme pain and distress. It has come to denote political evil itself. (2003: 59)



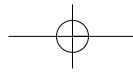


The Holocaust is a part of European history because, unlike Communist crimes, the systematic killing of European Jews occurred in both East and West Europe. As Judt writes, modern European memory shares one common reference point – that of the genocide of European Jews. ‘Today the pertinent European reference is not baptism. It is extermination. Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket’ (Judt, 2005: 803). Recognition of the Holocaust includes the acknowledgement of anti-Semitism as part of European tradition and culture. And it is perhaps *this* recognition which forms the basis of a common European memory. While one can speak of the Holocaust in universal terms of human evil, it was a particular element of recent European history.

The comparison of National Socialist crimes with those of Communism has its intellectual origin in the West German historians’ debate in the 1980s. Indeed, one might argue that the contours of the debate are central to the Western narrative of World War II. The fact that the debate, which occurred in prominent West German newspapers resonated beyond academia is tantamount to its moral and political significance. The question of how to integrate the Holocaust into German history focused on two central issues: uniqueness of the Holocaust versus comparison with crimes of Communism and historicization versus normalization of the past.³ From the numerous issues that the historians’ debate opened, one issue is echoed in contemporary Eastern Europe – that of historical comparison. Can and should National Socialism be compared with Communism or are they *sui generis* completely different? The question is an important one because comparison is a necessary tool for historical distinction. As Claus Leggewie (2006) put it, comparison raises the question of whether Nazism and Communism are ‘equally criminal’ both as ideologies and as historically existing regimes. The fact that the historians’ debate was a western discussion doesn’t preclude future debates in Eastern Europe. As Judt remarked:

The war and especially the post-war years are still largely unexplored territory in the historiography of this region (in any language), and Leszek Kolakowski is doubtless correct when he predicts that eastern Europe is in for a painful *Historikerstreit* of its own. (2002: 180)

Since 1989, two parallel discourses can be heard by European political elites and intellectuals: the Holocaust as foundational symbol of a new Europe devoted to human rights, and a subsequent plea by many East Europeans to recognize the crimes of Communism in a common European memory. If the first discourse relies on the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the second demands a rethinking of totalitarianism. In 2004, the European Peoples Party and European Democrats Group in the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning totalitarian Communism. In April of 2008, they again, and unsuccessfully, called for a common EU stance on Communist crimes (EPP-ED in the European Parliament, 2008). They met with success in April 2009 when the European Parliament passed a Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism. Although the Resolution acknowledges the suffering of those under totalitarian regimes in Europe, it carefully maintains the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The Resolution also calls

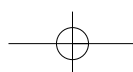
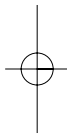
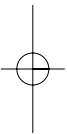


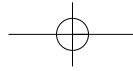
for the 23rd of August (the anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. The Resolution thus reflects the views of both new and old European member states. If new Europeans tend to emphasize the similarities of Communism and Nazism as totalitarian regimes, old Europeans maintain the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

Are the crimes of the Gulag deemed less important because we don't have pictures to direct public attention and remind us of what happened? There is, as Susan Sontag notes a 'perpetual recirculation' of Holocaust imagery in textbooks, documentary programs and museum exhibitions (Sontag, 2003: 87). Indeed, the recent proliferation of Holocaust museums, first, in Yad Vashem, then Washington, DC, and the Jewish Museum in Berlin, testifies not only to the enormity of the crimes, but to a certain desire to make sure that the crimes are not forgotten and repeated. In the Baltics, the memory of national suffering under Soviet and Nazi occupation tends to occlude the centrality of the Holocaust. In the 1990s, three new history museums were built, one in each of the Baltic States: the Estonian Occupation Museum in Tallinn, the Documentation Centre for Totalitarianism in Riga and Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius (Wulf, 2007).

American historian Charles Maier argues that one can distinguish between the memories of the Holocaust and the Gulag using the metaphor of radioactivity. Maier is not arguing about which experience was worse, 'but about which has remained engraved in memory – historical, personal – more indelibly' (Maier, 2002). Like Appelbaum and others, he asks why the moral outrage surrounding the Holocaust is stronger than that of the Gulag. 'The Communist past has been remarkably *unburdensome* [*sic*]; it lingers with an incredible lightness of being' (Maier, 2002). The Holocaust is hot because the sense of shame is so prevalent. Interestingly enough, the Communist legacy doesn't seem to promote such soul-searching. Indeed, in contemporary Russia, Stalin is widely regarded as one of the greatest Russian leaders (Gudkov, 2005).

The Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism is important because it can begin to address three difficulties. By calling for greater openness of archives, messy and uneven levels of occupation and collaboration in the different countries can be examined. The work of historical commissions in the various countries is important in establishing what happened during the war and the Communist period.⁴ Likewise, trials of high-profile individuals involved in political crimes are also important for understanding the complexity of the recent past. Second, the legacy of the West European Left has blocked a common European definition of Communism. For many in the West European Left, Communism is both a viable ideology and a political party within European parliamentary democracy. The West European Left has a completely different understanding of Communism from the East European lived experience of state-socialism. Third, the difficulty in comparing the Holocaust with the Gulag raises the question of whether Europe needs a single common memory to hold it together or whether a plurality of memories can simultaneously and respectfully co-exist.⁵ This is a very tall order given the variety of historical experiences





within the continent. I would argue that one needs to preserve the historical specificity of the Holocaust while simultaneously recognizing the crimes of Communism. Such recognition involves a rethinking of the values of pluralism and empathy that form the core of modern liberal democracy.

Pluralism, Empathy and Agreeing to Disagree

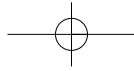
Since 1989, with the re-emergence of nation-states formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that cultural conceptions of national identity and *Volksgeist* have been passionately raised (Finkelkraut, 1995). Likewise the recent expansion of the EU emphasizing common European values appeals more to the Enlightenment heritage of reason and humanity. Contemporary disputes about recent history have their roots in the tenuous, often fragile, relation between reason and culture – between a Kantian understanding of the Enlightenment and a Romantic plea for the primacy of culture. Is there a way to respect the distinctions of the recent past without revisionism and whitewashing? Can one respect national differences without falling into the trap of relativism? It is at this juncture that the ideas of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt offer a way out of the straitjacket of monism and grand narratives.

Berlin: Monism versus Pluralism

In his clear prosaic style, Isaiah Berlin argues against the impulse to explain everything according to one simple theory. While the hedgehog knows one thing very well, it is the fox who knows many even contradictory things. The long tradition of monism, of discovering one truth to explain human nature and experience has historically proven dangerous. Berlin embraces an idea of the pluralism of values based upon different cultures. 'The enemy of pluralism is monism – the ancient belief that there is a single harmony of truths into which everything, if it is genuine, in the end must fit' (Berlin, 1998: 14). Pluralism means that some truths will conflict with one another and that not all understandings can fit together into a single narrative.

In various essays, Berlin reflects on the Romantic roots of pluralism which can be found in the thinking of Vico and Herder. In the eighteenth century, Vico emphasized that each culture has its own understanding of truth. Likewise with Herder, each culture contains the center of gravity within itself. These Romantic insights are critical for liberal pluralism because we cannot be tolerant of others without a certain degree of respect for cultural difference:

If pluralism is a valid view, and respect between systems of values which are not necessarily hostile to each other is possible, then toleration and liberal consequences follow, as they do not either from monism (only one set of values is true, all the others are false) or from relativism (my values are mine, yours are yours, and if we clash, too bad, neither of us can claim to be right). My political pluralism is a product of reading Vico and Herder, and of understanding the roots of romanticism, which in its violent pathological form went too far for human toleration. (Berlin, 1998: 13)



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Berlin is wisely cautious about making a virtue out of necessity. While each culture is unique, he does not go so far as to argue that each culture is closed to foreigners and that we can never find common grounds of understanding. His pluralism is not relativism:

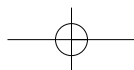
I came to the conclusion that there is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments. I am not a relativist; I do not say 'I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favour of kindness and you prefer concentration camps' – each of us has our own values, which cannot be overcome or integrated. This I believe to be false. But I do believe that there is a plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ. (Berlin, 1998: 11)

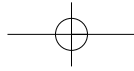
With Berlin, the door is open to toleration and empathy. In short, living in a democracy means that individuals can agree to disagree. Consensus isn't possible on all issues, particularly on ones that are based upon history or culture. The best we can hope for is respectful disagreement. Agreeing to disagree means that small narratives are an intrinsic part of democracy. A general framework of respect for pluralism as a value in itself leads to toleration and the ability to live with many different truths without recourse to violence to preserve one's cultural identity. 'Members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand (what Vico called *entrare*) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time and space' (Berlin, 2003: 10).

Because pluralism takes seriously the fact that cultural differences matter, certain truths and understandings potentially overlap. Pluralism draws from the rich tradition of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. 'That is why pluralism is not relativism – the multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men's subjective fancies' (Berlin, 1998: 12). Pluralism is linked to a deep appreciation of humanity. At the end of the day, it is our humanity that human beings have in common. It is at this juncture that Berlin complements the hermeneutic tradition of Gadamer. Tradition and history inevitably influence the perspective of individuals; likewise there exist a multitude of truths. 'Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them' (Berlin, 2003: 11).

Arendt: Pluralism, Natality and Worldliness

Hannah Arendt's discussion of pluralism is rooted in her argument that totalitarianism as a new political phenomenon of the twentieth century explodes traditional modes of understanding. Crystallizing the elements of mass terror, anti-Semitism, imperialism and ideology, totalitarianism means the superfluidity of the individual. The political achievements of the Enlightenment embodied in the dignity of man and man as a rights-bearing citizen were rendered meaningless with the totalitarian movements of National Socialism and Stalinist Communism. The opposite of pluralism is the total domination of the individual:





Kattago Agreeing to Disagree on the Legacies of Recent History

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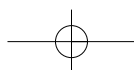
Total domination, which strives to organize the infinity, plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. (Arendt, 1973: 438)

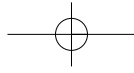
Total domination occurs in three phases. Firstly, the juridical concept of the person is destroyed removing individuals from the protection of the law. Second, the moral concept of the person is destroyed by removing possibilities for moral choice of action due to fear and mistrust. Finally, total domination results in the destruction of the uniqueness of the individual symbolized in the bureaucratic administration of the concentration camp. 'The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified' (p. 437).

Throughout her writings, Arendt highlights the theme of plurality. Similar to Berlin, Arendt is wary of forcing the complexity of political life into one theory. Just as Kant articulated that each individual is an end in himself and can never be rationalized as a means towards an ideological goal or political end, so Arendt also argues for a conception of the person as one who has the rights to have rights, as one who commands respect from others simply on the basis of his/her sheer humanity. Freedom is not about the freedom to think alone; one always thinks in the company of others. A concept of the person as an end in him/herself entails dignity, respect and an ability to think from the perspective of the other person. It entails a possibility for empathy and understanding with others. The Arendtian *polis* is constructed out of the words and actions of equal individuals who reveal their distinctiveness to one another through public debate:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. (Arendt, 1958: 175–6)

Distinction is an equal differentiation, a recognition of difference, or uniqueness; not a hierarchical categorization. Difference suggests plurality because plurality reveals a variety of equals possessing different opinions. Arendt does not conceive of difference as a hierarchical classification for the sake of excluding unwanted members from the *polis*. 'Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique being' (p. 176). She does not explicitly view difference as a tool for exclusion, but rather as a positive and indeed necessary element for political discourse. 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (p. 8). The human condition of action is plurality, or a life lived among human beings, and the human condition of work is worldliness – whereby individuals construct a common world in which freedom and equality can appear. The *polis* is not natural, but man-made, and therefore public. For Arendt,





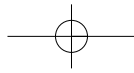
‘we are not born equal, we become equal as members of a group’ (Arendt, 1973: 301). Thus, we might say that the private world is the world in which we are naturally born unequal; however, we experience a second birth when we are born into the *polis*, into the communal clearing where equality and freedom can appear.

Each person represents a new beginning, a new and unique individual possessing the potential for action and speech. Each newcomer must answer the question ‘who are you?’ (Arendt, 1958: 10). And each time we are asked this question we have the possibility through speech and action to create a new beginning or a new story. Each individual is unique. ‘With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before’ (p. 177). Just as St Augustine located the will in the fact that each person is a beginner, so Arendt finds that our will to do something, to become something, is linked to our creativity and plurality. Likewise Arendt invoked the change of Saul into Paul as a metaphor for human beginning and the capacity for change. Each person, in their finite existence, is a beginner and therein lies our freedom. One is not doomed to a predestined life, but has the possibility to change, learn from our mistakes and to begin again. Natality is political because it involves new beginnings whether on the individual or political level.

Conclusion

The different interpretations of World War II in Europe since 1989 reveal three broad narratives: Western, Soviet/Russian, and post-Communist/post-Soviet. Each narrative emphasizes different experiences of the war and the subsequent Cold War epoch. Recent requests from East European countries for EU-wide recognition of the crimes of Communism are important because different interpretations of the past are discussed publicly. Since pluralism is a value in itself within Europe – East and West Europeans can agree to disagree on whether the crimes of Communism can be compared with the crimes of National Socialism or not. The fact that in Estonia, national suffering tends to occlude the centrality of the Holocaust does not preclude closer understanding and empathy in the future. The case is different though with respect to the Russian Federation and the Baltic States. Until the Russian Federation as the successor state to the Soviet Union publicly acknowledges the crimes of Communism, one cannot expect respectful disagreement between the countries. To the contrary, recent debates over monuments and commemorative holidays have demonstrated sharp differences between Russia and the Baltic States. If the Baltic States (Estonia in particular) view the role of the USSR as both a liberator and occupier of Eastern Europe, Russian officials remember the role of the Red Army as the heroic liberator of Europe from fascism.

Pluralism entails respect for different memories of the past and recognition of difference. If the legacy of the past is merely used as a tool for short-term political gain, the possibility of learning about the past for the sake of future is lost.



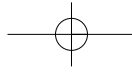
The pluralism of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt offers a way to move beyond the settling of scores in the past towards a respectful understanding of historical difference. If there is a lesson to be learned from the legacies of recent history, it is that disrespect and resentment only fuel stereotypes and misunderstanding. Agreeing to disagree is neither a whitewashing of the past nor a grand narrative, but an acknowledgement of different conflicting memories of historical events.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

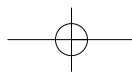
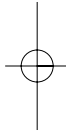
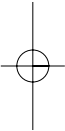
- 1 For my discussion of the three narratives of World War II that is more concretely linked to war memorials in Eastern Estonia, see Kattago (2008).
- 2 In May 1998, the governments of Sweden, Britain and the United States established the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. They were later joined by Germany, Israel, Poland, the Netherlands, France and Italy. The Stockholm International Forum took place 26–28 January 2000.
- 3 See *Historikerstreit* (1987), and Knowlton and Cates (1993). Also Maier (1988) and Diner (1987).
- 4 Partially in response to international criticism about the lack of knowledge of war crimes and in an earnest attempt to document recent history, each of the Baltic States established historical commissions in the 1990s to investigate the Nazi and Communist occupations. The work of these commissions is ongoing and may provide a forthright historical analysis of the war and Communist regimes in the different countries. Focusing on three time periods, the first Soviet occupation 1940–41, the Nazi occupation, 1941–44 and the second Soviet occupation 1944–91, the work of the Estonian History Commission is published in English only, with summaries in Estonian and Russian (Hiio et al., 2006). Because the report of the Estonian Commission is academic, lengthy and not fully available in Estonian or Russian, it has unsurprisingly inspired little public debate. Indeed, few Estonians are probably even aware of the detailed work of the commission (Hackmann, 2008; Onken, 2007b). To date, the Estonian Commission has published its findings in a lengthy book documenting the years 1940–45 (*Estonia 1940–1945*). In February 2008, the creation of a Memory Institute was announced by President Toomas Hendrik Ilves to continue the investigations from 1944 to 1991 (Foundation for the Investigation of the Communist Crimes, 2008).
- 5 For an interesting collection of articles on the diversity of memory in East and West Europe, see *Transit* 35: Summer 2008, especially Alexander J. Moryl, 'Warum ist die

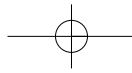


KGB-Bar möglich?' (2008) and Burkhard Olschowsky, 'Erinnerungslandschaft mit Brücken' (2008). Likewise, see Benoît Challand's (2009) article, '1989, Contested Memories and the Shifting Cognitive Maps of Europe', in this issue.

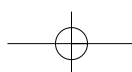
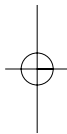
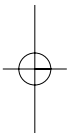
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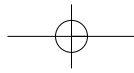
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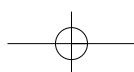


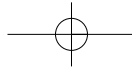
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