Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory

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Not ideas, but material interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switches, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.¹

Max Weber

Today Europe rummages through drawers of memories, particularly those which contain the traumatic files of the First World War, the Second World War, fascism and communism.²

Dubravka Ugrešić

The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what [the past] was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring.³

Hannah Arendt

Memory matters. It matters for the simple reason that memory is an anthropological given, since ‘all consciousness is mediated through it’.⁴ However, stressing this fact at the current historical juncture risks invoking a cliché, since ‘memory’, both individual and collective, lies at the intersection of so many of our current concerns and organises many of our current projects. As Ian Hacking has pointed out, memory has become ‘a powerful tool in quests for understanding, justice and knowledge’.⁵ Yet, for all the present obsession with ‘memory thinking’ (Hacking), there have been almost no studies of the nexus between memory and political power,

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especially if one defines politics rather narrowly as the output of political institutions. To be sure, memory is crucial to some of the fields of scholarly inquiry that have been most prominent in recent years: the study of nationalism, questions of ethnic identity and the ‘politics of recognition’, in which groups are given recognition not least for their past experiences of exclusion and suffering. Moreover, there have been numerous studies of cultural memory as expressed in monuments, memorials and works of art, as well as in school textbooks. But while very few would doubt that memory mattered and exercised power in the Yugoslav wars, even fewer would be able to explain precisely how it mattered. Thus, despite the intense focus on memory in history, sociology and cultural studies, the memory–power nexus remains curiously unexamined. And while it has become a commonplace to stress the imaginary quality of the nation, tradition, and implicitly, memory, that is their sheer ‘constructedness’, just how these imaginations and constructions come to have real political consequences is far from obvious.

The premise of this book is that memory matters politically in ways which we do not yet fully understand; its purpose is to clarify the relationship between memory and power. The essays collected here investigate how memory is personally reworked, officially recast and often violently re-instilled, especially after wars. They examine the ways in which memory shapes present power constellations, in particular the way in which collective memory constrains, but also enables, policies. They are not just about political measures explicitly dealing with the past, such as restitution, retribution and amnesty, but also about how memory shapes frameworks for foreign policy and domestic politics. They touch on the relationship between memory and justice, since, as I will argue later in this introduction, the concept of legitimacy inevitably connects memory and normative as well as legal questions. But the main focus of this book is political, not judicial or cultural.

However, how is one to get a handle on a seemingly vague concept such as memory in relation to politics? Can memory be measured, and is it necessarily in competition with material interests? Is it money or memory,
Introduction

as a sceptic of historical studies of memory has asserted. To avoid such false dichotomies and confusions, the contributors to this volume draw a number of important distinctions. At a basic conceptual level – which I shall further explicate below – the essays collected here distinguish between ‘collective’ or ‘national’ memory on the one hand, and mass individual memory on the other. The latter refers to the recollection of events which individuals actually lived through. The former establishes a social framework through which nationally conscious individuals can organise their history; it is possible, but perhaps somewhat misleading, simply to call this memory a form of myth. It is this national-collective memory and national identity which are mutually constitutive. This type of memory influences, but also sometimes conflicts with, individual memories. Finally, for the sake of analytical clarity, the contributions also distinguish between national as well as individual memory on the one hand, and the use of memory in the sense of historical analogies on the other – in other words, the use of national or personal memory by individuals in political reflections and decision-making processes. While keeping to these conceptual distinctions, the contributors aim at a nuanced combination of political, sociological and legal perspectives. They insist that it is crucial to identify the relevant political carriers of personal and collective memory and the exact historical and sociological locations of these memories – or else memory studies are in danger of deteriorating into a mere enumeration of free-floating representations of the past which might or might not have relevance for politics. The chosen context to test this approach and examine the relationship between memory and power is the period after the Second World War and the very recent past and present, that is, the period after the Cold War. In many of the following chapters, specific parallels are drawn between these two periods.

Two post-war periods

In both periods, the past has not been what it used to be. The relationship between memories and the present, or so it seems, has been stronger and more immediate than at other times. One reason might be that the past returns with a vengeance during times of political crisis. According to John Keane, ‘crisis periods . . . prompt awareness of the crucial political importance of the past for the present. As a rule, crises are times during which the living do battle for the hearts, minds and souls of the dead’. But the dead also seem to be doing battle for the hearts, minds and souls

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of the living, as the latter often resort during times of crisis to a kind of mythical re-enactment of the past.

Both patterns of historical action were certainly present in the immediate post-war period: raw individual memories of life during the Second World War, and of occupation and resistance in particular, were overlaid with collective national memories – or myths – which served to legitimate – and stabilise – the political order after 1945. In particular, as Tony Judt argues in chapter 7, a myth of complete common victimisation by the Germans produced social solidarity even among peoples who had in fact benefited from the occupation. But not only memories, also ‘instant amnesia’, in particular of collaboration, served the purpose of legitimating power.

War itself also seemed to encourage amnesia, or at least a kind of psychological ‘numbing’. As Michael Geyer has pointed out with regard to Germany, when the population emerged from an ‘extended death zone’ during the Third Reich, it entered a state of mind in which a ‘permanent numbing of body and soul’ was coupled with an effort to pour all energies into reconstruction. ‘Instead of sorrow and mourning as an expression of the reaction to mass death’, there was ‘an exclusion and a quarantine of the dead and of the experience of death among the survivors’, and consequently not a simple forgetting or silence, but ‘a convulsive closing of injuries as a result of the experience of mass death’.11 There was no repression of memory tout court, as scholars of post-war Germany have too long insisted, but rather selective memories and survival stories.12 In these memories individual agency became central and broader historical developments – and the Holocaust in particular – as well as the constitutive roles of individuals in them, vanished from the picture of the recent past.13 Mythmaking and what one might call a radical ‘individualisation’ or ‘disaggregation’ of history went hand in hand.

11 Michael Geyer, ‘The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History’, New German Critique, 71 (1997), 5–40, 10, 17. For the issue of a ‘flight from reality’ and the temptation to close all injuries, see also Hannah Arendt’s ‘Besuch in Deutschland 1950: Die Nachwirkungen des Naziregimes’, in Hannah Arendt, Zur Zeit: Politische Essays, ed. Marie Luise Knott (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989), 43–70. For the damage which silence about the past might have done to German democracy, see Gesine Schwan, Politik und Schuld: Die narzisstische Macht des Schweigens (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1997). The Yugoslav wars also seemed to have encouraged a new form of amnesia. See Ugrčić, The Culture of Lies, 225.


The aftermath of war in 1945 was also fundamentally different from the period after 1918: traditional languages of mourning were no longer available in the face of the Holocaust, the atom bomb and the enormous death toll among the civilian population. But neither did apocalyptic images – and adjacent promises of redemption through historical cataclysms – proliferate in the way they had after the First World War. Instead, it became much more difficult – if not impossible – to extract meaning from the war. What George Mosse has called the ‘Myth of the War Experience’, that is, the myth of heroism and brotherhood at the front, declined and finally died in most countries after 1945.

Most importantly, memories of the war were themselves instantly caught up in the political constraints and incentives imposed by the Cold War, but also by the projects of constructing socialist societies in the East and European unity in the West. European borders – and identities – were shaped and frozen by the division of the Cold War and the ‘desire, common to both sides, to forget the recent past and forge a new continent’. However, as Judt has pointed out, saying that post-war Europe was built on ‘founding myths’ and forgetting is not necessarily cynical: after all, the myths were often helpful in building a liberal order, and there was much that needed to be forgotten. Some myths arguably contributed to the fact that in 1945 the mistakes of 1919 were not repeated: lessons were drawn from the disastrous inter-war economic policies, the two Germanies were more or less forcibly integrated into Western and Eastern alliances, and potential civil wars in Italy and France were nipped in the bud. But all this came at a price. As Jeffrey Herf shows in his chapter on the memory of the Holocaust in Germany after 1945, memories became divided (and distorted) according to the logic of communism, anti-communism and antifascism. In other countries, the memory of national divisions during the war itself became translated into opposing post-war party political memories, and, as Ilaria Poggiolini argues in her chapter on post-war Italy, also led to deep rifts between state and civil society, in which competing collective memories were cultivated. In that sense, the period of the Second World War was never quite properly closed, there

15 For the disappearance of redemptive apocalyptic images among German intellectuals after the Second World War, see Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
17 Tony Judt, ch. 7 below.
was no peace treaty as there used to be after conflicts of this magnitude, and despite Nuremberg, there was, overall, no proper justice or reckoning for the guilty. In other words, there was no distinctive framework for the war in time – and memory. Now, after the end of the East–West conflict, the period has arguably been ‘closed off’, a historical framework is being established and the pressure to mould the past to provide identity and social cohesion has weakened. The recent controversies in Switzerland, Portugal, Norway, the Netherlands and Germany about ‘Nazi gold’ and Nazi slave labour might at first sight seem to signify a ‘return of the past’. But in fact the resolution of these claims and controversies might mean that history can be salvaged from moralising abuse, be judicially dealt with and be laid to rest, before the last survivors of the Second World War and the Holocaust vanish.

After the collapse of communism, memories of the Second World War were ‘unfrozen’ on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. This is not to say that some pristine, pre-representational memory, free of any political instrumentalisation, could suddenly be recovered. But it is to say that both personal and collective memories were liberated from constraints imposed by the need for state legitimation and friend–enemy thinking associated with the Cold War. In the West, this unfreezing has taken a relatively benign form so far. Memories of the Second World War were omnipresent after 1989, and not just because of the string of half-century anniversaries stretching from 1989 to 1995. In addition, the policies of retribution after the war have increasingly become subject to historical scrutiny. An increasing number of detailed studies have demonstrated how punishment contributed to a myth of expiation and rebirth. These pasts have been ‘released’ in France and Italy, where local communist parties and the structure of the post-war party systems at least partially collapsed, and also became the subject of major historical controversies in Germany. It was ironically the decline of the communist or at least
anti-fascist left in the West which made a more open treatment of the history of fascism in countries like Italy and France possible. Given this overall ‘closure’, the period after the war now provides an ideal field for case studies on how memory and power interacted in various European countries.

However, the post-Cold War period has supposedly also seen the so-called ‘return of history’ on yet another, and more immediately political level in the West. In fact, however, as Mark Mazower has pointed out, ‘history had never left Europe nor returned to it’. Rather, what has happened is that since international relations have been released from the straitjacket of the Cold War, policy-makers are searching in the ‘grab-bag of history’ for viable historical analogies and political orientation. Only in this limited sense of a ‘rummaging through personal and collective memories’ for the purpose of finding analogies has there been a ‘return of history’. While postmodern historians and cultural theorists have claimed for years that we now live ‘after learning from history’, more traditional historians and most certainly policy-makers and their advisers are routinely ignoring the supposed ‘depragmatisation’ of historical knowledge and the passing of Cicero’s *historia magistra vitae* itself into history. Historians saw a particular opportunity in the post-1989 constellation and its supposedly new – and at the same time supposedly familiar, all-too-familiar – geopolitical challenges. They cast themselves as national preceptors by offering parallels with the past. German scholars, for instance, saw unification in 1990 as, above all, the ‘chance for the German historians’ to offer policy prescriptions based on such rather dubious claims as that the country was ‘back in the geopolitical position of the Bismarck Reich’. These self-appointed national preceptors once again seemed to confirm Khrushchev’s wary assessment that ‘historians are dangerous. They have to be watched carefully’. As Mazower has pointed out, it is often ‘easier to dream the old dreams – even when they are nightmares – than to wake up to unfamiliar realities’. And arguably, the historical frameworks employed to interpret post-Cold War

30 Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 403.
Europe – especially the old nightmares – have more often than not been counterproductive. Such resort to analogy instead of argument as a default option for legitimating policies was particularly obvious in the Kosovo war. US observers drew implicit parallels with the Holocaust, while members of a German left-wing government claimed that the correct lesson of history had not been ‘Never again War’, as the generation of 1968 had previously believed, but ‘Never again Auschwitz’. Arguably, the rhetorical resort to such analogies and moral appeals did little to mobilise genuine political support or to illuminate the actual moral and political stakes in Kosovo, but much to ease the crise de conscience of the politicians. And, for better or for worse, such facile moralising and analogising was much less present during the 2001 war in Afghanistan. If anything, when support for the war seemed to flag, Tony Blair and other Western leaders attempted to bolster approval by invoking the immediate memory of 11 September and the actual victims. Such appeals easily proved stronger than cautionary distant memories of Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires.

On a more positive reading, however, policy-makers have embarked on a genuine ‘historical learning process’, which is comparable to the learning of the lessons from the inter-war period which – at least to some extent – took place after 1945. In this context, it is of particular interest how countries which so far have emerged as relative losers of the post-Cold-War world – such as France and Russia – are recasting their memories of the twentieth century, and reorienting their policies on the basis of particular ‘lessons from the past’. Often, this recasting has taken a radical turn, and memory has become shorthand for a glorious national past that needs to be regained in the near future (and the ‘near abroad’). As John Lloyd has argued, it is the mobilisation of an older collective memory of Russian victimhood and slavophile messianism

31 For the influence of myth and memory in Kosovo itself, see Julie A. Merthus, Kosovo: How Myths and Truths started a War (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Tim Judah, Kosovo: War and Revenge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

32 Paul W. Schroeder has used the notion of metanoia, a ‘turning around of the mind’, to describe the collective learning process of European statesmen in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, which then resulted in profound change in ‘the field of ideas, collective mentalities and outlooks.’ See Paul W. Schroeder, The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). For the collective learning process and attendant policy innovations after 1945, see in particular Michael J. Hogan, The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). I thank Patrick O. Cohrs for drawing my attention to this.

which has reshaped the Russian right. Is it surprising, then, that its most nasty outgrowth is called *Pamyat*: ‘Memory’?

In central and eastern Europe, memory has of course also returned, with a vengeance that the West has been spared. This ‘return’ has led to yet another temporal fault line across the continent and an unsettling ‘contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous’. As Dubravka Ugrešić has put it, ‘in this “post-communist” age it seems that “Easterners” are most sensitive to two things: communality and the past’. The ‘return’ of memory has taken place on multiple levels: first, the geopolitical ‘business’ left over from the Second World War is in the process of being ‘finished off’ – in an often extremely bloody manner, as the most obvious example of Yugoslavia shows. Second, there has been a process of a *nachholende* (catching-up) nation-building, for which collective memories have been mobilised and for which often a more distant past has been invented. Where national collective memories have been increasingly ‘desacralised’ and democratised in the West, there seems to be a desperate need for founding myths – just as there was after 1945 – in the East (despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that communism had a ‘desacralising’ effect in many countries). Consequently, historians are busy with excavating national pasts, imagining traditions and writing certain groups out of their history – not surprisingly, primarily minorities and Jews in particular. This nation-building process explains the prominent – and, some might say, pernicious – role of historians in politics, but also why memories have been mobilised in conjunction with ‘inflamed’ national passions. Equally, the question of memory is often at the heart of issues about national self-determination, arguably the most salient political issue in eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. Third, as in the West, the period during and after the Second World War has been ‘unfrozen’. Questions about patterns of complicity, resistance and the

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56 Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*, 221.

treatment of minorities such as the Jews have come to the fore. But in addition, there has been the challenge of how to deal with the most recent past under communist rule, and the various possible responses to it: purges, trials, forgetting or ‘history lessons’, as Timothy Garton Ash puts it in this volume, seem to be the – sometimes tragic – choices on offer.

At the same time, the period under communism itself seems to have been consigned to a ‘limbo between history and memory’. As Judt argues, ‘in a region whose recent past offers no clear social or political descriptors it is tempting to erase from the public record any reference to the communist era… – and in its place we find an older past substituted as a source of identity and reference’. The reconstitution of a national, collective memory, much more so than in the West, has served to shore up social cohesion under conditions of economic dislocation and anomie caused by the move towards market economies. But as in the West, memory has also played a role in foreign-policy-making, both in the sense that policy-makers themselves are casting around for historical analogies, and in the sense that foreign policies are legitimated on the grounds of historical experience. The most obvious example here is the effort of central European countries to enter Western institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union, based on the collective memories of betrayal by the West before, during and after the Second World War. To this effort the West has responded with a kind of ‘selective sentimentality’ which in turn served to legitimate NATO expansion. At the same time, as Iver Neumann shows in his chapter on western European collective memories of the ‘East’ after the end of the Cold War, central European elites have successfully manipulated a collective memory of ‘Central Europe’ as distinct from ‘Eastern Europe’ – and an image of Russia as an ‘eternal’ threat.

Finally, the project of a united Europe will probably require the readjustment of historical narratives – and possibly the recasting of various collective memories from East and West. If East and West are to grow together – and surely this is the prime historical task in Europe today – then one needs not just a politics of enlarging milk quotas and concluding passport agreements, but also what Wolf Lepenies has aptly called a ‘politics of mentalities’. Such a politics of mentalities will have to deal with the different national (and imperial) memories of Europe’s political

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