

# The European Union as a Memory Region

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*Aline Sierp*

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## The European Union as a Memory Region

The question of what Europe is and how it can best be defined has not only been instrumental to the recent «narrative turn» in European integration history but has occupied scholarly writing since the very beginning of what today is the European Union. While there is discussion whether the EU can be described as a confederation, a state *sui generis* or an international organisation, most scholars are in no doubt that nation states continue to be the main building blocks of the European Union. This academic over-emphasis on the EU's member states has led to a certain number

of blind spots when it comes to research areas that by definition cut across national boundaries. One example is scholarly work on memories and memory politics. The academic focus continues to be on the nation-state as the prime locus for the formation of memories, despite the widespread recognition that memories usually form in discursive arenas above and below the state. With this in mind, the concept of the European Union as a memory region has started to appear in the last decade<sup>1</sup>. Scholars working with this concept highlight the fact that memories in Europe are multifaceted with

<sup>1</sup> J-W. Müller (ed.), *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002; R.N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, F. Claudio (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006; M. Pakier, B. Stråth (eds.), *A European Memory? Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010.

interaction taking place both at individual and institutional levels. Because (national) borders play a secondary role in this definition, the notion of memory regions cannot be tied to a nation-bound conceptualisation of memory. This raises the question of what exactly a memory region is? What unit of analysis are we talking about? Is a memory region bigger or smaller than the nation-state? Is it transnational – and thus going beyond the narrow boundaries of nation states – or is it transcultural – and hence cutting across divisions present within national societies? Can it encompass two or more regions (border areas) or can we talk about regions (plural) of memories? In the following, I will develop a few critical thoughts concerning those questions.

## European memories

Memory by definition has a double function. It can be a vehicle for community building as it can be a battlefield for (political) hegemony. Both elements make it pervasively present in contemporary politics. Both aspects were also acutely present in early European integration history. While the memory of WWII and with it the promise of peace was one of the drivers for integration (as mentioned by Robert Schuman in his famous declaration on May 9, 1950), it became quickly overpowered by economic motivations, before being forgotten in the heat of the Cold War when memo-

ries were considered a dividing rather than a uniting factor. EU activism in the field of memory and identity building remained for many decades exclusively on the level of symbolic politics. No active attempt was made to devise concrete EU policies dealing with questions of memory and remembrance until the 1970s. Triggered by the oil crisis and the ensuing loss of confidence in the European integration project, policy makers understood that «one could not fall in love with a common market» – as famously noted by former Commission president Jacques Delors<sup>2</sup>. Instead they started to concentrate their efforts on devising strategies aimed at fostering popular support for European integration. The perceived legitimacy crisis pushed the European Commission in particular to demonstrate actively that there were new *raison d'être* to European integration that went beyond pure economic growth<sup>3</sup>. In this context culture and cultural policies acquired a new meaning as glue that could hold Europeans together in times of crisis. Efforts of the European political elites consequently concentrated initially on activities promoting a common European heritage. The ideological division during the Cold War years may have at the same time fostered stylized and standardized ideas of the European past that cultivated a sense of community and alliance able to cover the real existing differences between countries. 1989 was a

<sup>2</sup> J. Delors, *Have we Betrayed the European Economic and Social Venture?*, in E. Gabaglio, R. Hoffmann (eds.), *European Trade Union yearbook*, Brussels, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Commission of the European Communities, «The First Summit Conference of the enlarged Community», *Bulletin of the European Communities*, no. 10, 1972. This concern was first expressed at the political level in 1972, in the final communiqué of the Paris Summit (19–20 October 1972) and then made its way into almost all other communications by the EU institutions.

real turning point in many ways. It marked not only the breaking open of the bipolar world but also a shift of focus that led to a renewed attention towards Europe's potentially divisive past. The EU's aperture to the post-communist countries brought with it the at times painful confrontation with and reflection on what *European* values, *European* wars and *European* political tragedies were. The Holocaust, which had not played any role in the early integration years, became a central tenet, a source of legitimacy and a founding myth<sup>4</sup>. The memory of human rights violations during WWII turned into a vital element of transitional justice, and a value that the EU prides itself on advocating to the rest of the world. That the idea of what a European memory is or should look like is nevertheless far from uniform across European countries, became particularly evident after ten Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU in 2004. EU institutions – first and foremost the European Parliament but also the Justice and Home Affairs Council – turned into an additional arena of debate for national politicians. A clear East-West divide manifested itself that cut across already existing ideological differences. The question if the experience of Nazism can be compared to the one of Stalinism and whether the Holocaust was unique became particu-

larly pertinent in 2009 when the 25 August was introduced as a European wide day of remembrance for the victims of Stalinism and Nazism. The debates surrounding its introduction can be seen as an excellent example of how memory actors of both national and supranational origin negotiate the existence of multiple collective memories on the European level<sup>5</sup>. It also made pertinent the challenges associated with the integration of different narratives into a common historical consciousness whose existence could foster the development of a European public sphere.

### The concept of memory region

What does this mean for the concept of «memory region»? Can the EU be defined as a memory region? If we consider that memories have started to form in discursive arenas below and above the nation state, it is possible to move away from nation-bound considerations and describe the EU as a memory region. The question remains where exactly the boundaries of this region are. Regions by definition are «a cohesive area that is homogeneous in selected defining criteria and is distinguished from neighbouring areas or regions by those criteria»<sup>6</sup>. Regions are often crossing national frontiers (one only has to think of the EU's Interreg programmes that support

<sup>4</sup> A. Assmann, *Europe: A Community of memory*, «GHI Bulletin», 2007, p. 40; A. Beattie, *Learning from the Germans? History and Memory in German and European Projects of Integration*, «Portal Journal of Multi-disciplinary International Studies», 2007, 4.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Sierp, *1939 versus 1989 – A Missed Opportunity to Create a European Lieu de Memoire?*, «East European Politics & Societies», 2017, p. 3; L. Neumayer, *Integrating the Central European Past into a Common Narrative: The Mobilizations Around the «Crimes of Communism» in the European Parliament*, «Journal of Contemporary European Studies», 2015, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, *Region*, available at [www.britannica.com/science/region-geography](http://www.britannica.com/science/region-geography), accessed January 10, 2020.

regional development across borders) and can therefore cover more territory than a single country. Often the term «memory region» is used to mark the division between East and West, claiming that narratives in Western Europe are different from the ones in Eastern Europe. «Memory region» here replaces the term «memory framework» that I have been advocating for in my work<sup>7</sup>. This is particularly the case in scholarly writing by Eastern European scholars and was the main tenor of the series of conferences organised by the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity between 2012 and 2016. The main issue with this type of conceptualisation is its inherent geopolitical connotation. Describing Europe as a memory region or a group of memory regions plays into the traditional East-West divide that has characterised memory politics in Europe since the 1990s. It potentially complements a homogenising reading of memory problems and interactions across identities in Europe to only fuel simplification tendencies (something that Eastern European politicians have repeatedly accused European institutions to do). However, neither Western nor Eastern Europe are homogeneous units with one single narrative. By subdividing the EU further into memory blocks that correspond to the previous Cold War divisions, the complexity of ever shifting memory frames within and between countries is being disregarded. In short, the notion of a region replaces the previous limiting notion of a nation as being a container unit, risking to

repeat the mistakes of methodological nationalism that has characterised so much of European integration research in the past. So, what is the alternative here? How can this dilemma be addressed?

### **Memory regions – A proposal**

I propose to follow a more critical, nuanced conceptualisation by keeping the idea of Europe as a memory region but by connecting it to memory typologies and typographies rather than to geopolitical distinctions innate to nation-states. This would give it analytical power based not only on shared historical contexts but on the existence of common issues and, very importantly, on the framing of these issues. By concentrating on the formation, elaboration and diffusion of narratives it is possible to break open the nation state container and analyse memories as transcultural (in contrast to transnational) elements. Such a notion would pay sufficient attention to the fact that both Eastern and Western Europe as regions are complex, and that there are Western countries (such as the Southern European countries who experienced dictatorships until the 1970s) that are as far from the Holocaust-centred narrative as many Eastern European countries. It would allow memory competition to be seen as an inherent component of a developing European public sphere instead of a dividing factor that threatens the future of the integration project. It can hence complement current analyses of memory actors and their relations that include institutional

<sup>7</sup> See A. Sierp, *History, Memory and Trans-European Identity. Unifying Divisions*, London/New York, Routledge, 2014.

interaction across local or national borders<sup>8</sup>. It would also make it transferable to other memory constellations in the world whereas a notion exclusively tied to the nation-bound imperative risks to perpetuate already existing cleavages in European memory politics.

In conclusion I think we can say that describing Europe as a memory region has the potential to overcome the current academic over-emphasis on the nation-state that characterises so much of existing European integration history writing. It never-

theless also carries the risk of oversimplification and homogenisation by introducing a new category that might do nothing else but replace the already existing units of analysis. One of the big challenges of the recent «narrative turn» in the history of European integration is exactly that: to analyse the fluid layer that stands between the national and the European/global without losing sight of the basic historiographical and methodological issues that have occupied scholars long before memory became a contested topic on the European level.

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<sup>8</sup> See the forthcoming book A. Sierp, J. Wüstenberg, *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*, New York, Berghahn, 2020.