

# 1939 versus 1989 – A Missed Opportunity to Create a European Lieu de Mémoire?

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# 1939 versus 1989—A Missed Opportunity to Create a European *Lieu de Mémoire*?

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This article analyses the wider context of policy conflict concerning public memory of the 1989 events. It uses Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* in trying to explain why 23 August 1939 has been turned into a European Remembrance Day whereas 9 November 1989 has not. By investigating closely the role that various memory actors played during debates at the European level, it advances the idea that the anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact has been more successful in establishing itself within the European remembrance landscape because it has allowed for the promotion of a unifying narrative of the European past. In doing so, the article questions the frequently advanced idea that memory clashes in the EU form around an East–West divide that in some cases overlaps with a Right–Left divide. The analysis digs deep into the complex dynamics lying at the heart of memory contests concerning the end of the Cold War within the EU and provides a more differentiated view of discussions preceding EU decisions on policies of memory.

**Keywords:** *Remembrance; 1989; 1939; European Union; Totalitarianism; Memory Politics*

## Introduction

From Argentina to Cambodia, and from South Africa to Germany, citizens and policy makers have been struggling to find the right balance between reconciliation, restoration, and remembrance. Particularly since 1989 and the end of the Cold War, memory as an element of transitional justice has become a contested issue in the European context as well. With the inclusion into the European Union of thirteen countries that had experienced two dictatorships in the last eighty years, the question of how to deal with Europe's divisive past has acquired new saliency. Debates and discussions about the possible equivalence of the experience of Communism and Nazism often mirror divisions that exist within the nation-state but also include a new element: the struggle for recognition and justice of the new member states within the European Union. This became particularly evident in 2008–2009 when different exponents of the European institutions had to decide on a new European remembrance day commemorating the end of the Cold War. To the surprise of many,



23 August—the day Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov signed the “Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” in 1939—was chosen and not 9 November—the day the Berlin wall fell. In this article, I aim to explain this unexpected choice, answering the question of why 23 August 1939 has been turned into a Europe-wide Remembrance Day and not 9 November 1989, despite the undisputed importance that the period 1989–1991 had for Europe’s recent history, not only symbolising the end of the long-lasting artificial division of the continent but also paving the way for the enlargement of the EU to the East fifteen years later.

Previous research tried to describe memory debates and discussions taking place within EU institutions in terms of policy conflict or claim making. Scholars concentrate on the East–West divide within the EU in trying to explain the dynamics playing out in different policy venues and tend to connect memory issues closely to identity questions. While Kattago and Challand stress the ontological importance of memory cleavages and debates at the European level for making different interpretations of the past public and visible, Littoz-Monnet argues that different political actors simply use the arena provided by the European institutions as additional platforms to promote their own memory discourses.<sup>1</sup> Closa similarly focuses on the deliberative element within European debates that allows “memory entrepreneurs” from Eastern European countries to make claims for recognition.<sup>2</sup> While these are important contributions, existing research has so far overlooked the wider context of those clashes that concern in particular the events surrounding 1989. In most current research 1989 is analysed in its function as a dividing line, a watershed that marked the reconfiguration of existing memory narratives at both the national and supranational levels.<sup>3</sup> What has been missing until now are investigations that take the memory of the 1989 events as an object of research. While scholars have dealt with the question to what extent 1989 has turned into a defining moment in history in different European states (see in particular contributions by Victoria Harms, Lars Breuer, and Anna Delius in this special issue),<sup>4</sup> equivalent studies for the supranational level are largely absent. How is the end of the Cold War remembered by the different EU institutions? Can we discern the same East–West divide that in some cases overlaps with a Right–Left divide that has been individuated for debates on the Holocaust? Which role do the trans-national party groups in the European Parliament (EP) play in this context? To what extent do they manage to frame discussions of the relevance of 1989 and the remembrance of the experience of totalitarianism in Europe?

In this article, I try to answer those questions by drilling deep into the complex dynamics lying at the heart of European policy making. Adopting a constructivist perspective and using frame analysis,<sup>5</sup> I investigate how different actors in the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Commission have discussed, negotiated, and reported on the end of the Cold War and its relationship to previous conflicts. The source material comes both from the Historical Archives of the European Union and the EUR-Lex website comprising official documents published

by the three institutions since 1989. The theoretical framing is provided by Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire* which first appeared in Nora's introduction to his seven-volume publication on French sites of memory.<sup>6</sup> Juxtaposing *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory) and *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), Nora speaks of places in time where memory crystallises and secretes itself. According to him, the appearance of those "sites of memory" goes hand in hand with the disappearance of "real environments of memory" that for decades provided a repository for collectively remembered values and helped to structure society along religious, ideological, cultural, political, or social lines. Societal change, he argues, together with the dilation of the mode of historical perception through the media, has led to the eradication of memory by history and the slow disappearance of points of reference for identity formation. They only survive in sites of memory that retain the symbolic power of those intellectual, political, and historical frameworks that have vanished. Several factors have to come together before a "site" becomes a *lieu de mémoire* according to Nora: it has to be invested by a symbolic aura, become the object of a ritual, and break the temporal continuity. It furthermore needs to rest on a will to remember and has to have the capacity of metamorphosis.<sup>7</sup>

Even if Nora has been criticised for his slightly schematic description of the epochal transformations in memory cultures from the beginning of modernity to contemporary postmodernity and for his clear but somewhat artificial distinction between history and "true" memory, his work's ground-breaking influence cannot be denied. Since the publication of his multi-part oeuvre, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* has pervaded contemporary scholarship dealing with collective memory and public remembrance. Numerous scholars have since then replicated Nora's study in their own national context or reinterpreted it for the European level.<sup>8</sup> Nora's endeavour to distinguish between the material aspects, the functional and the symbolic elements, of representations of collective memory has been considered particularly fruitful for the study of public commemorations of important dates and events. I further engage with the notion of "memory events" by Alexander Etkind et al.<sup>9</sup> According to the seven authors, a memory event constitutes a revisiting of the past that creates a rupture with its accepted representation. It tends to be a deterritorialised and temporal phenomenon, a moment of agitation and transformation in the public sphere that springs from a diverse array of genres and contexts to change the way the past is commemorated. While Nora's conceptualisation will be useful to classify the different commemorative dates, the notion of memory event by Etkind et al. will help to explore the question of what happened the moment the EU decided to turn any of those dates into an official occasion for commemoration.

By both espousing Nora's analytical framework in classifying important "sites of memory" and by adopting the concept of "memory events" by Etkind et al. when looking closely in particular at debates, reports, and resolutions, I aim to determine if 1989 has turned into a sort of *lieu de mémoire* on the European level or if it has merely become a focal point for a much wider debate on Europe's divergent

memories of the past. In doing so, I am not directly dealing with the debates on the equivalence of Nazism and Stalinism as such, but am interested in the way those discussions have started to inform memory politics at the European level.

## **The Wider Context of the EU's Memory**

Any attempt to understand the role of 1989 in European memory politics has to start from an investigation of the wider context of the Union's memory framework. From the very beginning of its existence in 1951, the EU has defined itself by reference to the backdrop of its past experience of war and dictatorship. The determination to avoid another war among European nations has since then become central to the master narrative of European integration and has turned into a sort of founding myth.<sup>10</sup> As much as the experience of war and dictatorship was considered a point of reference for Western European nations during the Cold War, little attention was nevertheless paid to one of its aspects: the Holocaust. Similarly to what had happened at the national level, where the Holocaust had not permeated national public discourse and where its commemoration was not institutionalised until the 1970s, the European level was characterised by a pronounced form of silence. Political and intellectual debates during the first four decades following the war at both the national and the European level focused more on the challenge of reconstruction and the future of the on-going process of the European integration project than on questions of responsibility and accountability connected to the genocide.<sup>11</sup> This changed radically after 1989 and the end of the Cold War. The Holocaust, which had been of no significance for early western integration, turned into the central point of reference for defining the values and political goals of the European Union.<sup>12</sup> The most visible sign of this development was the official adoption by the European Parliament of several resolutions that specifically addressed World War II and the murder of European Jews.<sup>13</sup> In the year 2000, after the Stockholm International Forum, 27 January was installed as Holocaust Remembrance Day, and has since then become, together with 9 May (the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration of 1950), an important date for Europe-wide acts of commemoration that bring together politicians and citizens from different countries.

The predominance the Holocaust had acquired in Western Europe in its role as epitomising the "ultimate evil" against which to define the identity of European liberal democratic societies was not significantly challenged until the Eastern enlargement in 2004. With the inclusion into the European Union of ten Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) for whom 1945 did not signify liberation from Nazi/Fascist dictatorship but rather the start of a new period of repression, a competing memory framework came to the fore. By putting forward the idea that the experiences of suffering under Nazism and Stalinism are comparable and as such should receive equal recognition, MEPs from the CEECs started to seriously question the

established narrative according to which WWII and the Holocaust were unique events that cannot be compared to any other armed conflict or genocide. In particular, Polish and Baltic members of the European Parliament have not only vigorously criticised the Union's narrow focus on certain aspects of WWII but have also condemned the perceived imbalance of its approach to the past that granted the victims of Communism a "second-class status."<sup>14</sup> In the wake of the debates on the equal treatment of victims of different regimes, 1989 as a defining moment in Europe's recent history started to receive more and more attention. Its symbolic role in the definition of the new course that Europe had embarked upon since the end of the Cold War suddenly started to move centre-stage.

### **The European Union and 1989**

The events surrounding 1989 had been actively followed and vividly discussed by all European institutions. It was in particular the European Parliament that engaged actively in discussions of the prospect of democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe. Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it had closely monitored developments taking place behind the Iron Curtain. In 1988 it passed sixteen resolutions and dedicated eight different debates to events in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1989 the number of resolutions moved up to twenty. Thirteen debates and four reports addressed the events taking place in the CEECs. An analysis of the parliamentary records of the period between 1979 (marking the first direct election of the European Parliament) and 1991 (the collapse of the Soviet Union and the official end of the Cold War) reveals the EP's particular concern with human rights issues. The question of whether human rights and *détente* are complementary or conflicting and whether the Union should exert pressure for the respect of basic rights in the CEECs tended to dominate almost all debates.<sup>15</sup>

Underlying the preoccupation with democracy and national self-determination in a geographical area that for decades had been closed off from European integration efforts was arguably a much deeper issue: the reassertion of the EU's self-purported role as the guardian of human rights and a beacon of democracy. In particular, in debates between the different European institutions about finding the right balance between concessions in human rights issues and enforcement of international agreements, this concern clearly emerges. This might be one of the reasons why economic considerations initially played a surprisingly small role in most debates on the repercussions of 1989. They only emerged in connection to the importance of political stabilisation in the CEECs and the implications that political, cultural, and scientific cooperation might have for the transition to a market democracy—issues that all political actors agreed upon. Diverging opinions appeared mainly in relation to two problems: (a) German unification and (b) the right to self-determination in the Baltic states, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and Yugoslavia. Debates were

heated, with marked security concerns dominating discussions in both cases. As the events of 1989 unfolded, confrontation between the different actors diminished. Even if the Council, Commission, and European Parliament often had initially diverging policy preferences, an agreement was usually reached as soon as decision making became more pressing. The extent to which political representatives from all sectors were aware of the historical importance of the developments becomes evident when looking at the sort of rhetoric employed in debates and subsequently published policy documents right after the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November. In all speeches and public papers, 1989 was defined as one of “the greatest historical, political and cultural happenings,”<sup>16</sup> “the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . that has changed the face of Europe,”<sup>17</sup> and will “lay the foundations of a new international order.”<sup>18</sup> It was met with unrestrained expressions of joy and enthusiasm by all representatives even if most of them felt clearly overtaken by the breathtaking speed of the events.

### 1989 as *Lieu de Mémoire*

Given the importance that the period 1989–1991 had for Europe’s recent history, symbolising not only the end of the long-lasting artificial division of the continent but also paving the way for the enlargement of the EU to the East fifteen years later, one would expect it to take centre-stage in subsequent commemorations and to turn into a sort of European *lieu de mémoire*. Applying Nora’s concept to the events of 1989, I would argue that theoretically speaking the upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe fulfil all conditions for being classified as *lieux de mémoire*. They can be understood in Nora’s sense as “great events that are immediately charged with heavy symbolic meaning and that, at the moment of their occurrence, seem like anticipated commemorations of themselves.”<sup>19</sup> They do have a material aspect in the form of their close connection to topographical places. The most prominent of them is constituted by the Berlin Wall (or what is left of it). The functional and symbolic elements are conferred on 1989 by the role it plays in embodying an incommunicable experience: the transformation of a political system by peaceful means through the political activism of its own citizens. It is in particular its meaning as “rupture”—as a new beginning, shedding all previous social and political structures that until then had constituted different forms of *milieux de mémoire*—that gives 1989 a particular significance.

We should obviously not neglect the fact that 1989 did not mark undifferentiated liberation from communism for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, which might explain why 1989 does not resonate to the same degree in post-Soviet Europe (such as the Baltic states) as does 1991. Research on the multiple endings of the Cold War suggests for example that while the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the reunification of Germany were generally understood as marking the end of an era in Europe, no major structural changes were initially sought in the Soviet

Union.<sup>20</sup> A similar argument could be made for the various CEECs. Most of them (especially Poland and Romania) take issue with the exclusive focus on 9 November 1989 and would rather see a date commemorated that corresponds better to the specific developments in their own country leading eventually to the system's collapse (i.e., the Polish Roundtable Agreement of 4 April 1989 or the beginning of the Romanian revolution on 22 December). Furthermore, there continues to be considerable disagreement between actors on the legacy that 1989 left behind. Many conservative and populist politicians cherish critical to militant attitudes towards 1989, focusing on the insufficiencies of transitional justice in the post-1989 period (which they view as a side effect of the "peaceful revolutions" and/or of the "betrayal" by liberal dissidents in 1989).

However, despite the different connotations the events had in the different national contexts, for many citizens in the CEECs they symbolised the break with the previous regime, the long awaited "return to Europe," and in many cases the possibility of redefining their identity through reconnection to a much older democratic tradition. Considering this together with the importance that 1989 has acquired in public and private recollections (see contributions by Lars Breuer, Anna Delius, and Ljubica Spaskovska in this special issue), it was to be expected that the end of the Cold War would take a prominent place in commemorations not only at the national but also at the European level. As we have seen above, history has always played an important role for the EU's self-definition and self-understanding. In particular, the memory of a negative past has served as a reference point for the definition of positive values for the future. The peaceful revolutions of 1989 could serve as an additional milestone signifying the EU's development away from a narrowly defined economic community towards a political union of independent nation-states that are united by the importance attached to principles of human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

Considering this, it is thus all the more surprising that there are no regular official commemorations of the events of 1989 as such on the European level. Reference to 1989 as being the moment in which "the double burden of totalitarianism was lifted from Europe" appears in some commemorations of WWII, and 1989 is also mentioned in almost all debates and EU policy documents dealing with accession and human rights issues, but no special occasions for official remembrance of 1989 were created by the European institutions. The only exception was in 2009 when the European Parliament organised a formal sitting on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe on 11 November and in 2010 when it gathered on 7 October in occasion of the twentieth anniversary of German unification. In 2014, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall was celebrated by the EP on 12 November. No special session was organised, but the plenary was opened with an exceptional statement by the President of the Parliament Martin Schulz. Interestingly, the tenth anniversary had passed unobserved. Besides these four incidents, there seems to be no regular institutionalised remembrance of 1989 at the European level.



1989 as *lieu de mémoire*, as a moment in time where memory crystallises, has evidently not permeated the European commemorative landscape to the same extent as it has the national one. It can also not be compared to the prominence that 1945 (the end of WWII) or 1950 (the year of the Schuman declaration whose anniversary on 9 May has been officially celebrated since 1985 as “Europe Day”) has acquired for European symbolic politics. What we can observe instead is a focus on a completely different date: 23 August 1939, the day the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed, paving the way for Hitler’s invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 and Stalin’s occupation of the Baltic states in 1940. And this despite the fact that the Pact did not affect all the CEECs to the same extent but had only a marginal effect on countries like Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Why did this day move centre-stage even though its meaning was not uniformly shared across the region?

### 23 August 1939

The 23rd of August had been an important day of remembrance for many citizens in Europe for some time. Since the 1980s the so-called Black Ribbon Day was used by Western protest movements to draw attention to human rights violations in the Soviet Union, for example. The slogans used during demonstrations were often taken up in some of the CEECs (namely, in the Baltic states and in Poland), where great symbolic importance was attached to the date as the start of Soviet repression. Commemorations culminated in 1989 when approximately two million people formed a 675.5 km long human chain spanning all three Baltic States.<sup>21</sup> Despite its evident transnational character, 23 August initially remained a national day of remembrance in many CEECs with no repercussions for the European commemorative calendar even after the Cold War had ended. The idea to turn 23 August into a date for commemoration also on the European level appeared for the first time during the Slovenian presidency in April 2008. In 2007 the Justice and Home Affairs Council had asked the Commission to organise together with the Slovenian presidency on 8 April 2008 a special hearing in the European Parliament. The hearing on “crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by totalitarian regimes” can arguably be considered a compromise that was supposed to signal the willingness of the Council and the Commission to continue considering the requests by representatives of the CEECs to deal with the recent legacy of totalitarian regimes in Europe after the failure of appeals by Lithuanian representatives to include the denial of Communist crimes in the 2007 Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia.<sup>22</sup> It also marked the beginning of a period of intense activity regarding the remembrance of Nazi and Communist crimes in all European institutions. Indeed, even during the Slovenian presidency, the Czech Republic, which was going to hold the next Council presidency, started to take up this subject. In June 2008, the Czech government sponsored a conference on

“European Conscience and Communism” organised by the “Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.” The so-called “Prague Declaration” that was drafted during the conference was signed later on by, among others, a large number of MEPs and served as one of the reference documents when the European Parliament two months later adopted a declaration on the proclamation of 23 August as “European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.”<sup>23</sup> The declaration stresses the similarities between the Nazi and the Communist regime and calls for equal treatment of victims of both ideologies. Even if it clearly states that “both the Nazi and the Communist totalitarian regimes [should] each be judged by their own terrible merits,” it nevertheless engages in clear comparisons. The thus established parallels between Nazism and Communism are then used to justify the establishment of 23 August “as a day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, in the same way Europe remembers the victims of the Holocaust on 27 January.”<sup>24</sup>

An analysis of the document texts shows clearly that the already well-institutionalised remembrance of the Nazi crimes served as a model for the remembrance of Communist crimes but that it was also understood as a competitor within an all-encompassing European heritage. This idea forcefully reappeared during the hearing “European Conscience and the Crimes of Totalitarian Communism: Twenty Years After” that was organised on 25 March 2009 by the Czech presidency with support from the Commissioner for Culture Jan Figel and some of the MEPs who had signed the Prague Declaration. It was also this idea that triggered most resistance among many left-wing MEPs who saw the equalisation of Soviet and Nazi crimes as an unacceptable distortion of history. The most obvious result of this perception was the creation of a “Working Group on History,” in the run-up to the hearings, by the Party of European Socialists (PES) in order to “invite the EU to act against any attempt to rewrite history.”<sup>25</sup> The group prepared the PES official line of argument during the negotiations on the Resolution. Its “hidden” mission was probably also to provide a counterbalance to the dominant presence of members of the European Peoples’ Party–European Democrats (EPP-ED) in the assembly that had prepared the Prague conference. Despite efforts by the Socialists to set the terms of the debate, it was nevertheless members of the EPP-ED who first tabled a motion for a resolution on 25 March 2009. In response, the PES Working Group immediately proposed its own motion. A day later, the Conservative Union for a Europe of the Nations (UEN), the Liberal Group (ALDE), and the Greens also tabled their own motions. The only two groups that did not contribute with a proposal and refused to take part in the debate were the Far-Left (GUE) and the Eurosceptics (IND/DEM). The different motions for a resolution distinguished themselves mainly by the varying importance given to Nazi crimes in comparison to Communist crimes and in the actions proposed to deal with the regimes’ legacy. While the PES proposal moved away from the binary focus on Nazism and Communism by using the neutral expression “authoritarian and totalitarian regimes” and clearly separated Stalinist and Communist ideologies, the

PPE-ED motion talked about “totalitarian Communist regimes” and did not give primary attention to the memory of the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> The measures suggested for coming to terms with this memory varied from giving support to historical research to the creation of an international court of law. The only element featuring with the same degree of prominence in all motions concerned commemoration: all groups called for the proclamation of a European-wide remembrance day for the victims of totalitarian regimes. Considering the stark differences that existed between the different groups, in particular between the Socialists and the Conservatives, it is not too surprising that the PPE, UEN, ALDE, and Greens managed to agree on a joint motion in the run-up to the plenary debate whereas PES refused to join. This put the Socialist group in an advantageous position for negotiation, with the result that they succeeded to impose almost all—namely, eight of eleven—of the proposed amendments during the two plenary sessions held on 25 March and 2 April 2009.

The debates were heated. A detailed analysis of the parliamentary records reveals that diverging opinions cut across existing lines of division, opening up new cleavages that ran along both national (East vs. West) and ideological (Right vs. Left) lines. At a first glance, the picture that emerges seems very clear: the Conservatives, backed by the Liberals and the Greens, opposed the Socialists while the Far Left refused to join. A deeper analysis of the minutes reveals a much more complex picture: the situation within the transnational party groups was far from homogeneous, with clear splits existing within them. In the PES, for example, four of the five members who had prepared the proposed amendments came from Western Europe. Looking at the results of the roll-call vote, it becomes evident that it was mainly MEPs from “old” member states who supported the PES line. However, this observation does not hold true for all party groups. In the PPE-DE, for example, a clear-cut East–West voting pattern cannot be discerned, which points at the presumption that MEPs’ voting preferences can only be understood when taking differing national historical contexts and experiences with Communism into account. In Greece, for example, the Communists had played a prominent role during the civil war fighting effectively against the military regime. This might explain why Greek MEPs were very hesitant to vote on a resolution that treated Communism and Nazism on a par. Almost all Greek MEPs in the PPE-DE group abstained from voting. In Germany, the experience of Communism in the German Democratic Republic caused a similar effect, with almost all of the thirty PSE members who voted against the resolution being German.

The final resolution was adopted on 2 April 2009 with an overwhelming majority of 553 to 44 votes. Thirty-three MEPs abstained from voting. When comparing the different motions with the adopted resolution, it becomes clear how strongly the position of the Socialist group had influenced the drafting process of the final text. The “European Parliament Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism” distinguishes Stalinism clearly from Communism, includes also Southern European dictatorships in the list of totalitarian regimes, and explicitly mentions the

uniqueness of the Holocaust. It proclaimed 23 August as the “Day of Remembrance for the Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes.”

### **23 August 1939 as *Lieu de Mémoire*?**

Since 2009, the 23rd of August has been observed in various ways by the European institutions. Every year, a special address by either the president of the European Parliament or the vice president of the Commission has been organised. However, parliamentary debates do not take place any more. It seems as if once a compromise was found between the different positions, the memory conflict disappeared altogether. This is particularly surprising considering the aggressiveness with which MEPs had confronted each other during the preceding discussions, with accusations of “vulgar anti-Communism” and “impudent relativisation of Nazi crimes” being thrown into the ring.<sup>27</sup> That this observation only seems to be true on the surface and that memory conflicts nevertheless continue to smoulder can be inferred from the fact that both the Council and the Commission were very slow in recognising the new Remembrance Day. In June 2009, the Council expressed its support for the Parliament’s desire to strengthen “European awareness of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes” but refrained from giving its unconditional support to a special remembrance day to reach this goal.<sup>28</sup> Also the Commission welcomed the EP resolution in July 2009 as an “important initiative” but waited until 2011 before giving special attention to 23 August, with Vice President and Commissioner Viviane Reding making an official statement on that day.<sup>29</sup>

23 August evidently did not manage to secure itself a firm place in the European remembrance landscape. It has been added to the list of European remembrance days that are being observed with manifestly little enthusiasm at the official, supranational level.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that the Council, which initially had not shown a lot of support for the new remembrance day, adopted in 2011 the Warsaw Declaration in which it urged the European member states to observe the “European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of all Totalitarian Regimes.”<sup>31</sup> It is probably no coincidence that this happened under the Polish presidency, whereas the period between the adoption of the resolution in April 2009 and the renewed attention by the Council in 2011 had been under the presidencies of Western European member states. The Polish government evidently tried to revive a project that had started to fade into oblivion. The diplomatic cautiousness with which it proceeded is remarkable. In both the Warsaw Declaration and the “Council Conclusions on the memory of the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes in Europe,” it is stressed that 23 August should be commemorated “in the light of their [the countries’] own history and specificities.”<sup>32</sup> This cautious formulation points clearly to the EU’s awareness of the sensitivities of its member states when it comes to institutionalising a remembrance day that is characterised by diverging, and often conflicting, historical

connotations in different countries. That the EU evidently does not want to impose any rules on any of its member states on how to foster remembrance among its citizens became clear most recently with the document published right after the EP resolution had been adopted in which the Commission underlined that “it is of course for the Member States to find their own way forward when dealing with victims and promoting reconciliation.”<sup>33</sup> Besides the fact that the EU would not have the legal means to impose any form of memory politics on its member states, the difference with other official remembrance days is nevertheless striking. In the case of 27 January (Holocaust Remembrance Day), the EU was much less hesitant to provide clear guidelines on how this day should be commemorated.<sup>34</sup> The only viable explanation for this difference is the fact that 23 August 1939 is a much more controversial date than 27 January 1945 and that the EU tries to stay clear from interfering too much into a policy field that until recently has been seen as one of the undisputable prerogatives of sovereign nation-states.

What this does not explain, however, is why 23 August has been turned into an official European Remembrance Day while 9 November 1989 has not. If the EU’s amount of involvement in memory politics can be partly explained by the degree of controversy this generates, then 9 November would be a much more obvious candidate for a symbolic Europe-wide remembrance day than 23 August. Going back to our theoretical framing at the beginning of the article, the question arises to what extent 23 August fulfils the criteria for becoming a European *lieu de mémoire*? Applying the parameters set out by Nora, the answer is mixed. Like 9 November 1989, 23 August 1939 can be considered a “great event” that was immediately charged with heavy functional and symbolic meaning. The signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact signified the start of a period of repression that would last for six years in Western Europe and for fifty years in Eastern Europe. It is thus not surprising that it was turned into a point of reference for identity formation as soon as this period had ended. Because of its special place in European WWII and post-war history, it has been invested with a symbolic aura. As we have seen, it also proved to have the capacity of metamorphosis, turning from a date used by Western European social movements for mobilisation against Communism into a reference point for many Eastern Europeans who were trying to assert their victim status and identity. Where it fares less well is the “will to remember.” This becomes particularly evident when directly comparing 23 August 1939 and 9 November 1989. If the latter has turned into a symbol for the peaceful overcoming of an authoritarian regime, an image shared by citizens in both East and West (despite the often contested legacy of 1989 within the different CEECs),<sup>35</sup> the former stands for the forceful imposition of a totalitarian system, an experience that resonates more strongly with Eastern Europeans than it does with Westerners. While there has evidently never been a perceived need to organise a public commemorative session (with the exception of the two formal sittings for the twentieth and the twenty-fifth anniversary) or parliamentary debate in occasion of the recurrence of 9 November 1989, yet I would argue that

the will to remember this date has never openly been questioned at the European level. The fact that it has found its way into almost all documents referring to the basic values of the European Union, namely, human rights, national self-determination, and democracy, allows for the supposition that it plays a much bigger role for the EU's self-understanding than appears on the surface. In this, it is not necessarily the specificity of 9 November marking the fall of the Berlin Wall—a date that naturally resonates more with German citizens than with citizens from other countries of the former Soviet bloc—but its symbolic connotation signifying the end of the post-war European order that is of importance here.

As we have seen from the analysis above, the situation for 23 August looks quite different. With little or no resonance at the national or local level, what underlies the “Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes” is, more than a genuine will to remember, an attempt to recognise the different historical trajectories of the various EU member states. It thus has a very different function compared to 9 November 1989. The two dates appear almost like antidotes: one controversial and limited in reach, the other universally shared and uncontested (at least at the European level). The puzzle of why the former was more successful in establishing itself within the European remembrance landscape can in my opinion only be resolved by taking into account the function it has for the promotion of a unifying narrative of the European past. This makes the debates leading to the adoption of the 2009 European Parliament Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism a perfect example for a “memory event” as conceptualised by Etkind et al. The moment the EU institutions decided to officially make 23 August a European day of commemoration, they contributed to a functional “revisiting of the past.” It created a moment of agitation and transformation in the public sphere that sprang from a diverse array of genres and contexts to change the way the past is commemorated.

That the imposition of one single legitimate regime of remembrance in Europe was neither possible nor desired had already been proven in the context of the memory of WWII and the Holocaust.<sup>36</sup> The discussions surrounding the establishment of 23 August only further confirmed this. The EU's decision for one date rather than another can be understood as a conscious choice made in light of the continuous struggles between different actors to get their particular memories recognised. While there may be no need to confer extra meaning on 9 November 1989 by making it a special remembrance day, 23 August marks the official acknowledgment of the painful experiences of those member states of the EU who were able to join the Union only after the division of Europe had ended. As with 9 November 1989, the specificity of the date commemorating the anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which echoes more with the Baltic states and Poland than with Czechoslovakia or Slovenia, plays a comparatively small role here. Given the continuous struggles of different domestic actors concerning the meaning of 1989, the larger temporal distance from the 1939 events—which could more easily be considered “closed”—certainly played a role

here as well. This, together with the fact that in some countries (i.e., the Baltics) the events of 1989 have always been very much contextualised by making direct references to 1939, explains why MEPs from all the CEECs, regardless of the impact that the Pact has had in their respective countries, had been so much in favour of the European Remembrance Day for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. How deep-seated the need for symbolic politics that gives the same status to both Eastern and Western member states is can be seen in the “Follow-up to the European Parliament Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism” that was adopted by the Commission on 2 July 2009. With this text, it recognises that “Member States in Western Europe need to be more aware of the tragic history of the Member States in the East, which is also part of our shared European history.”<sup>37</sup> The decision to make 23 August rather than 9 November one of the few European-wide remembrance days can be seen as a conscious choice to reach this goal.

### Concluding Remarks

When the various European institutions first reacted to the events unfolding behind the Iron Curtain, one of the recurrent preoccupations of all actors was the concern for the right course of action if the Community wanted to maintain its role as guardian of human rights, democracy, and national self-determination in the future. This anxiety seems to run like a red thread also through every initiative the EU has taken with regards to the public management of the memory of those events that have marked Europe’s recent history so lastingly. Despite the fact that 9 November 1989, because of its symbolic weight, would have been a perfect candidate for a European remembrance day and a lasting point of reference for European identity formation in the future, 23 August 1939 was chosen instead, a date that resonates little with many European citizens and so far has failed to gain the same symbolic significance that other European remembrance days have been invested with (e.g., 27 January). As the dates mark two sides of the same coin, signifying the beginning and the end of oppression and dictatorship in Central and Eastern Europe, the question of why one was chosen over the other can only be explained by taking into account their function, not only as places in time where memory crystallises but also as expressions of symbolic politics that signify more than pure remembrance. The fact that 23 August was chosen exactly seventy years after the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact had been signed has to be understood within the much wider context of the EU’s attempt to integrate all member states with their specific histories. Lying below all debates over European days of remembrance and potential *lieux de mémoires* is the question of whether the EU should promote one vision or multiple perspectives on historical events. By choosing 23 August, the EU has sent a very strong signal towards its new member states, a symbolic gesture that signifies nothing less than the recognition of their painful historical trajectory and with it the unconditional assurance of full membership within the Union.

This does not mean that 1989 is of no significance for the European project. On the contrary, the fact that it found its way into almost every major document that makes a reference to the basic values of the Union testifies to its role as a symbolic signifier. In this, it fulfils maybe even more than any other remembrance date the requirements for a true European *lieu de mémoire*. The fact that the Commission's funding priorities for the "Europe for Citizens" programme cycle 2014–2020 focus on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tenth anniversary of the arrival of the CEECs only further proves this point. In that sense, the role that 9 November 1989 plays for the EU is comparable to the one played by 9 May 1950: more than a day of remembrance it is considered a day of celebration, a second 'Europe day' that could potentially at some point take on the same significance as founding moment as the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration. In not turning it into an official European remembrance day, the EU in that sense has not missed an opportunity to create a European *lieu de mémoire*, it has simply given preference to a date whose official acknowledgment aims at promoting an inclusive European memory framework and symbolises for the CEECs nothing less than the guarantee of full and equal membership within the European Union.

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