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# THE VALUE OF MEMORY A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Sarah Gensburger



Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik #18*, erected in 1952, commemorates the 1941 Battle of Kadinjača, which was fought in defence of the first liberated territory within Axis-occupied Europe, Serbia, 2009

The *Presence of the Past. A European Album* exhibition takes place at a turning point for the European Union (EU), the European continent and the world. Over the past decades, European institutions, governments, non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions and some citizens have turned to the evocation of the past and the transmission of memory as a major tool in the democratisation and pacification of societies, hoping to promote tolerance, inclusion and equality. Taking stock of this development, on 19 September 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution affirming this ‘importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe’.

However, in recent years, the rise of populism, right-wing parties and hate crimes has led to a reconsideration of the assumed civic effect of memory, and a new approach has been called for. This critical perspective was first developed in academic works that include *Can we really learn from the past?* (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020) and *The past can't heal us* (David, 2020). Governments and public institutions have also started to reflect on this issue. For example, on 17 January 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on ‘European historical consciousness’. While reaffirming ‘the ideal of a ‘culture of remembering and historical consciousness based on shared European values and practices’, it stressed ‘the need for

an honest assessment of the EU’s ‘politics of the past’, through which it has striven to add legitimacy to the European project, strengthen a European sense of belonging and foster the peaceful coexistence of the continent’s peoples, by equally acknowledging achievements and existing shortcomings, and by scrutinising the ways in which citizens have been encouraged to engage with the past’.

Indeed, too few studies have engaged critically on European citizens’ relationship to the past and to this ‘culture of remembrance’. Yet, even the limited scholarship invites us to think differently about these issues and to question the central assumption regarding the link between values and memory. What do European citizens think of the European ‘culture of remembrance’? How do they position themselves in relation to public policies on this matter? How can we take stock of this European promotion of values through memory? This chapter aims to understand how contemporary societies contend with the presence of the past in their midst.

Remembrance as a core  
European value

Since the 2000s, the EU’s democratic deficit and the public’s distrust of EU institutions have become major concerns. To remedy this, European public policies have

mobilised memory and the transmission of the past, foremost that of mass violence, as a tool of action. After the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009, the European Commission launched the Europe for Citizens programme to raise ‘awareness of remembrance, the common history and values of the Union’ and ‘encourage democratic and civic participation of citizens at Union level’. To do so, the EU funded more than 2500 initiatives between 2014 and 2020, spending EUR 170 million and involving 34 countries and 1500 partners. ‘The projects fostered intercultural dialogue and solidarity, promoted cultural heritage and diversity and reflected on European history, drawing lessons for today’ (Report of the European Commission, *Europe for Citizens in numbers. Europe for Citizens Programme: 7 years of support*).

The programme was divided into two parts. The first was entitled ‘European remembrance – the EU as a peace project’. It was designed to support discussion of ‘why and how the totalitarian regimes that blighted Europe’s modern history came into power’ and consideration of ‘the EU’s other defining moments and reference points’ and ‘different historical perspectives’.

The new version of this programme, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, running until 2027, continues to dedicate one of its four pillars to encourage Europeans to ‘remember, research and educate about defining events in recent European history, including the causes and consequences of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes’ and to raise awareness among European citizens about ‘their common history, culture, cultural heritage and values, thereby enhancing their understanding of the Union, its origins, purpose and diversity’ (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values). This short public policy description illustrates the constitution of memory as

a core European value and as part of the civic identity that European citizens are thought to share. Its exponential growth begs the question: do citizens share this European culture of remembrance and this belief in the importance of memory?

To answer this question from a social sciences perspective, several sets of data can be used. The first is a survey carried out in the summer of 2014 by Ipsos on the initiative of two French foundations, *Fondation pour l’innovation politique* and *Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah*. This questionnaire survey was carried out among a representative sample of 1000 individuals, aged between 16 and 29, per country. It involved 31172 young people from 31 countries, including 20 countries in Europe. Its aim was to understand young people’s relationships with memory. Although the results are from 2014, they are very rich and are still relevant to the current reflection. They are particularly interesting because they enable us to compare the positions of young Europeans with those of people living on other continents.

The respondents were first asked to pick what they considered to be the most significant event from a list of 17 events that had taken place around the world since 1989. The responses showed that some events were more meaningful to Europeans than to others. For example, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was cited by 43% of the respondents from European countries, compared with 21% of the respondents from 10 non-European countries, including China, the United States of America, India, Türkiye and Israel. Conversely, only 12% of European respondents cited the war in Iraq, compared with 24% of respondents from elsewhere in the world. This showed that the historical events that are meaningful to Europeans are different from those that are meaningful to the

rest of the world. Events are made memorable through their territoriality and their political importance for the continent’s history.

However, this initial observation should not lead us to deduce that young Europeans share a common, shared narrative of the past. The case of the memory of terrorist attacks is particularly relevant in this respect. Every year since 2005, on 11 March, the EU has celebrated European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism, in reference to the Madrid bombings in March 2004. However, the presence of the terrorist past differed greatly among the young Europeans surveyed. Several terrorist attacks featured among the events listed in the questionnaire: the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Madrid bombings of 2004 and the London bombings of 2005. The 9/11 attacks were the most frequently chosen of the 17 proposed events. They were cited by 47% of respondents, regardless of their place of residence. For non-European respondents, the average was 50%, with highs of 70% for Israelis and 67% for Americans. For EU nationals, the average was lower, at only 41%. However, this European average hides large disparities, from highs of 64% in France and 60% in the UK to a low figure of 22% in Finland. The responses received for the European attacks, in London and Madrid, were more diverse still. The London attacks were almost never mentioned – by an average of just 4% across the whole panel. Only the UK and two Commonwealth countries that lost nationals in the bombings mentioned them in any notable way, with proportions of 27%, 13% and 11% for the UK, Australia and India respectively. Similarly, the Madrid bombings, which at the time of the survey had inspired 10 years of annual commemoration of terrorism victims by the EU, were cited by just 3% of respondents on average, with only 25% of Spanish respondents

choosing the event. These few pieces of data highlight both the limits of a European narrative of the past and the limits of the impact of commemorations and public policy in the field of memory.

But – and this is what makes that survey so interesting – the European culture of remembrance is not only apparent in the choice of events that seem to be more (or less) meaningful to Europeans than to others. It is also obvious in the very strong adherence of young Europeans to the importance of remembrance. The European culture of remembrance gives a central place to the memory of the Second World War and, in particular, that of the genocide of Jews and European Roma. The following question was asked in all 31 countries: ‘In your opinion, should what remains of the extermination camps be preserved to enable the public to visit them?’ All respondents, whether from Europe or elsewhere, answered overwhelmingly in the affirmative. However, this support was even more pronounced among young people from EU countries, with 86% of respondents answering positively, compared with 79% for the rest of the world. Respondents were then asked: ‘What is the main reason for preserving the extermination camps?’ Four answers were suggested. The responses, for all 31 countries, were 33% for ‘to learn more about the history of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime’, 14% for ‘to help build Europe by understanding the mistakes of the past’, 19% for ‘to honour the memory of the victims’, and 34% for ‘to prevent it from happening again’.

We can put the European responses into perspective by comparing them with those of the three countries outside Europe that are most similar to the EU, namely Canada, Australia and the United States. In fact, these three countries had very similar results: 41% saw knowledge

as the main reason for preserving the extermination camps; 5 % considered preservation a means of helping to build Europe by understanding the mistakes of the past; 26 % saw it as honouring the memory of the victims; and 26 % responded that it prevented such atrocities from happening again. However, these figures differ markedly when we consider European respondents only; the respective proportions were 31 %; 15 %; 19 % and 31 %. Thus, Europeans, on average, made a stronger link between the preservation of traces of the past, in this case the preservation of extermination camps, and the fact of learning from the past and from past mistakes. It is not just a question of knowing and honouring, but of learning from the past and passing on the lessons to the present.

However, the conclusion is quite different, and the European responses are sometimes closer to those from other countries, when it is no longer a question of affirming the principle of the lessons of the past, but of qualifying those lessons in terms of value. Another question asked of young people was: 'In your opinion, does knowing the history of the Second World War help us learn to respect those who are different from us?' 84 % of respondents from EU countries answered positively, although this was a smaller proportion than in the group from Canada, Australia and the US, where 91 % said they strongly or somewhat agreed with this proposition. At the same time, 93 % of the respondents from Canada, Australia and the US felt that knowing the history of the Second World War helped them to 'understand the history of [their] country', while this response was 90 % for the EU countries.

A European culture of remembrance – understood as a commitment to remembering the past in order to build a better future – has thus truly taken shape amongst the European

youth. However, it is also marked by a wide diversity of shared historical narratives and of values on which to build this future. If memory has become a policy tool in Europe, the political values it is thought to convey are likely to diverge.

In 2006, sociologists Howard Schuman and Amy D. Corning carried out a detailed, questionnaire-based study in the US, comparing Iraq War to the Vietnam War. They showed that the analogy between the two conflicts was clear and almost obvious to a very large proportion of the American population. However, not everyone drew the same lessons from this common reference to the past. In similar proportions, some respondents felt that the Vietnamese precedent should, above all, lead their country to refrain from going to war in Iraq, while others felt that this history left them no choice but to send soldiers overseas. Numerous factors are likely to explain these differences in the values given to the past, and the lessons to be learnt from it to act in the present; they range from level of education to political position, income level, ethnic identification and place of residence. In this respect, studies of European memory have hitherto paid attention almost exclusively to differences between countries, to the detriment of other variables, notably socio-economic ones, which the current rise of populism invites us to consider more fully.

#### The social frameworks of the European culture of remembrance

In 2018, Catherine de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann conducted a survey, for eupinions, of 10 885 individuals, aged 18 and over, from the then 28 countries of the EU. The study is entitled *The power of the past. How*

*nostalgia shapes European public opinion*. Their findings 'show that a majority of the European public can be classified as nostalgic [...] A majority of those over 35 years of age think the world used to be a better place'; the average was 67 %, with a high of 77 % among Italian respondents and a low of 59 % among Polish respondents. In this study, the presence of the past is strong but it is not associated with values of tolerance, coexistence or the fight against racism. As the authors summarise:

- The majority of those (53 %) who feel nostalgic place themselves on the right of the political spectrum, while those who do not feel nostalgia (58 %) place themselves more on the left.
- 78 % of those who feel nostalgic think that recent immigrants do not want to fit into society, while 63 % of those who do not feel nostalgic think the same.
- 53 % of those who feel nostalgic think that immigrants take away the jobs of natives, while only 30 % of those who do not feel nostalgic think the same.
- Those who feel nostalgic do not differ much from their non-nostalgic counterparts when it comes to their views on Europe – with one exception. While a large majority of those who are not nostalgic want to remain in the EU (82 %), a lesser share of those who feel nostalgic do (67 %).
- Fighting terrorism is the biggest priority for those who feel nostalgic (60 %), followed by managing migration (51 %). Only 47 % of those who are not nostalgic think that terrorism should be the top political priority in the future, followed by 43 % who say that migration should be.

Here again, the difference between countries appears to be less important than the

socio-economic differences in terms of gender, employment and social integration. The study 'suggests that those most likely to harbour feelings of nostalgia are men, the unemployed, those who feel most economically anxious, and those who feel that they belong to the working class'.

So far, the concept of 'collective memory', originally forged by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s, has been central to the study of memory. However, it seems important to pay equal attention to another concept he suggested, that of 'social frameworks of memory', which describes the social organisation and the mental categorisation that structure the way people not only remember but make sense of remembrance and narratives of the past.

Indeed, behind the shared belief that memory is an important dimension of European culture lies a wide diversity of associated values. A recent survey enables us to take this analysis a step further. With European colleagues, including Margaux Aupoil (CNRS, France), Valérie Rosoux (Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium), Benoît Tudoux (CNRS, France) and Jenny Wüstenberg (Nottingham Trent, UK), we designed a panel entitled 'Public attitudes toward memory policies' as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) CRONOS panel. Referred to as the ESS memory module, this was an online survey system to complement the ESS. The system offered research teams the opportunity to interview over 6 000 people aged 18 and over, living in 12 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK. The data was collected in 2023, and the survey is one of the very first large-scale surveys providing reliable quantitative data to study the relationship between memory and values. In the study, people were not asked about narratives



Roger Cremers, *Re-enactors wearing Soviet uniforms in Beers, Netherlands, 2010*

of the past or about their relationship with the past (as in the study of nostalgia), but about the very principle of memory policies and commemorations – in short, about their relationship with the culture of remembrance which is at the core of European identity today.

The insertion of our memory module into the ESS was intended to enable us to answer key questions such as: Who cares about the past? Who experiences these memory policies and the instruments that governments and organisations use to implement them? To what extent does engaging with these memory policies coincide with specific attitudes, values and social characteristics, and with specific relationships to the institutions? How do people talk about memory and what do they think of the way it is promoted? Answering these questions constitutes a first step toward understanding why memory policies in Europe do not work fully as expected.

The survey contained 12 questions. Its analysis leads to a clear conclusion: Europeans, here restricted to people from the 12 countries included in the study, share a culture of remembrance. In terms of methodology, the participants were presented with two statements and asked to pick the one closest to their view. Three-quarters of the respondents chose ‘It’s important that we spend time remembering, commemorating and learning from historical events’ while the remaining quarter, a small minority, agreed with the following: ‘We spend too much time being concerned about what happened in the past. We should focus on the present’.

When asked about the reasons for erecting monuments or memorials, or about who monuments and memorials should be mostly aimed at, only very few people (7 %) replied that they thought there should be no new monuments.

The call for monuments appears to be driven by universalism and inclusivity. People were asked who monuments and memorials in their country should be mostly aimed at. An average of 50 % of respondents from all the countries, and shares of between 40 % and 60 % depending on the country, answered ‘No specific group should be aimed at: everyone should be aimed at’ while all other answers had low scores: 18 % for ‘people interested in history’; 15 % for ‘those who experienced the events’; 14 % for ‘tourists and visitors’; 13 % for ‘younger people’; and only 2 % for ‘immigrants’.

When asked about the number of commemorations, at the national, regional or local level in their country, almost 80 % of the respondents agreed that ‘there are the right number of commemorations’, and they expressed their clear support for the culture of remembrance. Finally, in answer to the question, ‘Thinking generally, how important are monuments and memorials in your country to you?’, 56 % of the respondents said that they were rather important, compared with 27 % who deemed them to be rather unimportant, while the rest (17 %) had no opinion. Commemorations, monuments and memorials are the main public policy tools for the implementation of a culture of remembrance in Europe. The ESS memory module makes it clear that they do make sense for European citizens in a framework where ‘remembering, commemorating and learning from historical events’ is a core value for most of them.

Of course, there are differences across countries and socio-economic situations, in particular in relation to age, level of education, income and political orientation. Although the ESS memory module did not include explicit questions regarding partisanship, some data about positions on immigration or gender equality or regarding the degree of religiosity could be

used as indicators of partisanship. In any case, even if some differences exist, they are quite limited when we focus only on the extent to which Europeans believe in the value of the European culture of remembrance. Moreover, some key variables that are usually used to gain an understanding of contemporary societies, such as gender, seem to have no effect on this shared belief. Beyond their diversity, Europeans are clear believers in the importance of the ‘presence of the past’ for the future of society.

However, the conclusion is quite different when we move beyond the study of the prevalence of the culture of remembrance to try to grasp what kind of values people associate with it in European societies. For example, we included in the list of items some questions to enable us to understand people’s views on controversial issues such de-commemoration, defined as ‘processes in which material and public representations of the past are taken away, destroyed or fundamentally altered’. We studied this in depth with Jenny Wüstenberg and colleagues (*De-Commemoration. Removing statues and renaming streets*, 2023). To grasp people’s positions on de-commemoration, we asked the participants to choose one of the following two statements: ‘We should consider present social values when deciding which heroes of the past should still be honoured’ and ‘We should honour the heroes of the past, even if their views of actions do not reflect present societal values’. The answers to this question revealed two groups of people, of almost the same size, 47 % and 53 %. This distribution shows that there are irreconcilable opinions about the lessons to be learnt from the past in terms of values for the present. The discrepancy between countries was also very large. While 60 %, 53 % and 55 % of the respondents from Austria, Belgium and Sweden respectively agreed with the first option,

the second option was chosen by 77 %, 62 %, 61 % and 56 % of respondents from Hungary, Slovenia, Czechia and the UK. These views regarding de-commemoration highlight the contradiction in moral and political values derived from the past which can go hand in hand with a shared European culture of remembrance.

In response to the question, ‘What should be the primary purpose of creating monuments or memorials?’, five options were offered: ‘To honour our heroes’; ‘To honour the victims’; ‘To repair historical injustices’; ‘To make us proud of our country’; and ‘To promote tolerance and peace’. Respondents could choose two of these options, and their responses once again showed wide variation between European countries.

52 % of the Hungarian and British respondents mainly subscribed to the principle of honouring ‘our heroes’. By contrast, 48 % of the Austrian respondents said it was a question of honouring ‘the victims’, while, at the other end of the spectrum, only 23 % of the Portuguese respondents agreed with this perspective. And yet, contrary to an often standardising reading of the European culture of remembrance as a supposedly victim-repentant model, few Europeans as a whole (never more than 17 %, and on average around 10 %) considered that monuments and memorials had the function of repairing historical injustices. The second least frequently selected option (26 %) was ‘to make us proud of our country’, and there was some consensus on the function of promoting tolerance and peace, which was chosen by 38 % of respondents, despite variations between countries.

Variation in opinions within countries were also observed. Taking the French respondents as an example, 48 % considered that it was a question of paying tribute to the victims, 41 % of promoting tolerance and peace, 31 % of honouring their heroes, 14 % of making them proud

of their country and 12 % of repairing historical injustices. Thus, behind the importance given to monuments and memorials by most Europeans lies a wide variety of moral and political values associated with them, both between and within EU countries.

If we shift the focus away from people’s adherence to a European culture of remembrance to examine what they expect of it in terms of the lessons to be learnt, we find that, there too, the construction of a common frame of reference is by no means obvious. Using statistical methods, we looked at the relations between the different answers to the questions. We were able to identify a typology of five attitudes held by Europeans concerning the values associated with remembrance. These reflect very different expectations regarding the lessons to be learnt from the past. Four of the five attitudes are outlined below. This analytical model highlights the social frameworks that structure the moral and political values assigned to memory. In this analysis, gender is seen as a structuring factor in the relationship between values and memory.

The ‘heroic’ group, in which men are over-represented, is characterised by the belief that commemoration is important, that it should concern both successes and failures, that there is no need to apologise for past crimes, and that heroes should continue to be honoured even when their actions contradict present-day values.

The second group, in which nearly 8 out of 10 people are women, is the ‘exemplary’ group. They shared the heroic group’s adherence to the first two principles, but believed that the present should be taken into account in honouring the heroes of the past, and that apologies should be made for past crimes.

The third group, the ‘presentists’, are all about the present, honouring heroes, but not if

their actions do not conform to the values of the present, while considering that there is no need to apologise for the past. In fact, they do not think it is all that important to commemorate, but rather they want to focus on the present.

Finally, the ‘illegitimate’ group stands out for its total lack of interest in these issues, thus challenging the notion that all citizens are passionate about remembrance. These attitudes to commemoration are also linked to a number of other variables, including gender, age, level of education and political position.

This analysis, linking values and memory, revealed three main attitudes within the 12 European countries. The ‘exemplary’ conception of the culture of remembrance was heavily represented in a set of countries comprising Austria, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. The ‘heroic’ vision of the role of the presence of the past dominated in a second set made up of Hungary, Czechia, the UK and Slovenia. Finally, an intermediate position was held by Italy, Portugal, France and Belgium, the third set. Thus, the data from the ESS memory module highlight the diversity of values that accompany the shared European culture of memory, depending on national belonging, gender, age, level of education or partisanship. This conclusion invites us to reflexively reconsider the use of memory as a tool by European, national and local institutions and governments to build democratic consensus and foster institutional legitimacy.

On this last matter, there seems to be consensus on one aspect of European citizens’ attitudes toward memory, namely the identity of who should drive commemoration and make decisions about public narratives of the past. Respondents were asked which two groups of people should have the power to decide which events should be commemorated by

public authorities. By far the most common responses were, ‘historians’ (45 %) and ‘people directly involved in the events or their families’ (52 %). Only 23 % chose ‘governments and politicians’. Here again, some huge differences existed. 21 % of French respondents considered that the choice should be left to governments and politicians, compared with 9.1 % in Hungary (the smallest proportion) and 42 % in Portugal and Sweden (the largest). Similarly, while 62 % of the Austrian respondents chose ‘people directly involved in the events or their families’, only 29 % of the Portuguese respondents did so. There was a little more agreement on the choice of ‘historians’, ranging from 30 % in Sweden to 62 % in Czechia.

Finally, cross-referencing data on respondents and the answers they gave indicated that, among individuals with the lowest levels of education and income, support for the very principle of commemoration was strong, but at the same time, contestation of the measures taken to implement it – whatever they may be – was high. While European remembrance policy has been forged to help Europe to gain democratic legitimacy, it may also become a space for contestation of the EU. Thus, the relationship between memory and values appears to be simultaneously a core strength and a vital challenge for the EU.

More studies and data collection would be needed for memory to become a genuine tool that would ‘add legitimacy to the European project, strengthen a European sense of belonging and foster the peaceful coexistence of the continent’s peoples’.

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