

WHY A COMMON EUROPEAN CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE SHALL NOT EMERGE

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It is an annual ritual in the Netherlands. In late April, the first documentaries on the Nazi occupation of the small country and movies inspired by it are broadcast on TV, while numerous articles concurrently appear in newspapers and magazines and dozens of new books are published. They all offer a reconstruction of the traumatising German attack of May 1940, the activities of the underground resistance, the bloody battle near the town of Arnhem (September 1944), the *Hongerwinter* (the ‘Winter of Hunger’ of 1944-45, when the Nazi’s cut off the food supplies to the western part of the Netherlands), and the *Endlösung* that hit the Jewish citizens so hard (eighty percent of the Dutch Jews were annihilated in the extermination camps). This massive stream of information reaches its peak on 4 and 5 May, when the War dead are commemorated and the liberation by the Allied forces, mainly Canadians, is celebrated. Over the past few years, more attention has been paid to the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, as well. Thousands of Dutch lost their lives in Japanese concentration camps, or while working as slaves on the Burmese railway line.

This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the German invasion and the sixty-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, i.e., Nazi occupation, and even more documentaries, books, etc. have seen the light, including many that reflect personal stories and tragedies. The commemoration cult has thus reached its absolute zenith. Thomas Läufer, German Ambassador to the Netherlands, was not invited to attend the ceremony at the National Monument on Dam Square in Amsterdam, the most important commemoration event on 4 May. This entailed some discussion in Dutch media, but the hardliners prevailed: *De Bezetting* (‘the occupation’) should remain a strictly *national* matter, a symbol of national victimhood, and a cornerstone of national identity. Diplomatic relations between the Netherlands and Germany are excellent, and anti-German sentiments and

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stereotypes have evaporated in the course of time, yet on 4 and 5 May it is ‘Us and Them’ again. The wise words that (West) German President Richard von Weizsäcker spoke in 1985 – many German people also experienced the Allied victory over Nazism in 1945 as a form of liberation – are still being ignored in the Netherlands.

However, if two post-modern nations in Western Europe, who were front-runners of European integration in the 1950s and 60s, are not able to reach a *modus vivendi* on a common commemoration – although the Dutch-Calvinistic stubbornness seems to be a major problem here – how should the European Union as a whole accomplish a common culture of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (‘dealing with past’), as the Germans put it so beautifully? On this European macro-level, the complicating, disturbing factor has been the ‘rivalry’ between Nazism and Communism. From the moment of their EU accession in 2004, the former Soviet satellites, especially Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, have emphasized the necessity of integrating the crimes of Communism, i.e., the Soviet Union, into the pan-European historical consciousness. In their view, the ‘moral monopoly’ of Auschwitz has to be broken; the Gulag deserves an *equal* status. The ‘privileged’ position of Nazism as the ultimate symbol of Evil has to be replaced by a *broader* notion of *Totalitarian* Evil. The Latvian film *The Soviet Story* (2008) – “These people were not killed by the Nazi’s”, the voice-over impresses on us – tries to convey this vision to a wider, Western audience.

Such a pro-active approach towards the ‘naïve, Russia-friendly’ Western Europeans is considered to be of the greatest importance by most so-called new EU member states. As Vytautas Landsbergis, Member of European Parliament and former Head of State of Lithuania, wrote in his column in Lithuanian weekly *Veidas* (19-26 May 2008): “So far, the Soviet propagandists are still cultivating their seeds in the West and go on putting facts upside down and wrong side up, hiring professional allies or at least enforcing a total relativism.” It is indeed correct that the greater part of the German, Dutch, British, French, etc. journalists and intellectuals truly believe that Nazism was worse than Communism – and didn’t the Soviet Union last a crucial contribution to the defeat of Hitler? The lasting presence of Fascist regimes within Western Europe after 1945 – Franco’s Spain, Salazar’s Portugal and later the Colonel’s Greece – only entertained this sentiment. Many progressive minds in Western Europe simply sympathized with the Communist Utopia (including Mao Zedong’s and Pol Pot’s versions of it) and radicalised after the cultural revolution of 1968 – in the 1970s, the Dutch Communist Party

(CPN) could count on a lot of support at the Universities of Amsterdam and Nijmegen, not to mention the Sorbonne in Paris. These *Fellow-Travellers*, as Leon Trotsky labelled them in his book *Literature and Revolution* (1924), a description that British historian and novelist David Caute took over in his famous book with the same title (1973), have left their traces in the Western European mindset. This is one of the reasons why Russia continues to strike up lamentations about 'the revival of Fascism' in the Baltic States. Some editors/journalists in Berlin, Amsterdam, London, etc. took Russia's 'arguments' for granted during the Bronze Soldier (*Pronkssōdur*) crisis in Spring 2007. Landsbergis has a point, so it seems.

The '*Loony Left*' defending Russia's glorious anti-fascist Soviet heritage is only *one* piece of the puzzle. In his book *The New Cold War* (2008), Edward Lucas points out that the *Fellow-Traveller* has changed his shape; nowadays, it is mainly Western European businessmen and (ex-) politicians longing for lucrative energy contracts who are trying to appease Moscow and are taking its interpretation of history for granted. Lucas presents Jeroen van der Veer, then *CEO* of Dutch-British energy giant *Shell*, as a clear example of what, in his opinion, is a credulous Kremlin-obeying elite. The editor of *The Economist* and long-term friend of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would not find it surprising that Van der Veer, a member of the Albright Group that is currently developing a new strategic concept for NATO, in a recent interview with Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, declared that "it is also in the interest of the Baltic States that they will develop a good relationship with Russia – if one is living there, one surely has to focus on that awareness." Slamming Russia with the accusation that it has never looked into the mirror of history and provoking it with a juxtaposition of Nazism and Communism is probably the last thing Van der Veer, *Nord Stream* figurehead Gerhard Schröder and others will do.

However, there are more fundamental, psychological reasons why propagating the idea of Communism as the Equal Evil in Western Europe will be a most difficult enterprise. American historian Charles S. Maier wrote in an article that was published in the German and French magazines for Social Science *Transit* and *Le Débat* in 2002 that, although authors and dissidents like George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Yevgenia Ginsburg produced impressive masterpieces on the long and dark nightmare that Communism was, this ideology still does not arouse as many emotional sentiments in the western part of Europe as Nazism does. Maier offers several explanations for this lack of, what he calls, 'hot memory.' First of all, Western Europe never experienced any Communist

occupation and repression itself. Secondly, the persecution of the victims of Nazism occurred on a more structural and a better-organized scale, and was founded on well-defined, racial 'principles.' Communist terror was marked by arbitrariness; every Russian, Ukrainian, Estonian, etc. was at risk and nobody could predict who would fall prey to the Cheka/NKVD/KGB the following day. According to Maier, only the 'clear', 'purposeful' terror as practiced by the Nazi's leaves traces in public consciousness and contributes to the genesis of a 'hot memory.' Thirdly, and most importantly, the Nazi terror (that came to life again in hundreds of films) stimulates self-reflection – "How would I have responded if I had seen the *Gestapo*, or an outraged crowd hunting for Jews?" Far more than Communism, Nazism (still) confronts us with our own lack of courage and with our own passive attitude.

An additional problem is that juxtaposing Nazism and Communism is a great taboo in academic and political circles in *Germany*. Back in June 1986, conservative German historian and philosopher Ernst Nolte, in the early 1940s a student of Martin Heidegger, kicked off the notorious *Historikerstreit* ('Dispute of historians'), when he revealed his thesis on the correlation between Nazism and Communism and between Auschwitz and the Gulag. According to Nolte, the racial murders that took place in the Nazi camps were, above all, a *defensive* reaction to the class murders that were ordered by Lenin and Stalin. Hitler felt inspired by their terror, but at the same time felt threatened by it. Nolte worked out this *kausaler Nexus* ('the causal linkage') theory in his controversial book *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg* ('The European Civil War'). His opponents, sociologist Jürgen Habermas being the most prominent one, argued that in this manner, Nolte encroached upon the unique character of the Holocaust and played down the barbaric character of the Nazi regime and its atrocities.

After German reunification in 1990, the neo-conservative and nationalist *Neue Rechte* ('New Right') movement and its magazine *Junge Freiheit* ('young freedom') were not the only ones who tried to elaborate on Nolte's ideas. Writer Martin Walser shocked the country when he stated in October 1998, during a speech that he delivered in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt, that the numerous, endless references to Auschwitz were not as much aimed at guaranteeing a lasting memory of the Holocaust, but far more at the "exploitation of our shame for current goals." In Walser's view, Auschwitz had become a 'moral cudgel', with which the Germans should be beaten, in order to intimidate them forever. Ignaz Bubis, Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, was infuriated and accused Walser

of 'intellectual arson.' Six years later, angered Salomon Korn, Vice-Chairman of the Council, would walk away from a conference room in Leipzig, where Latvian politician Sandra Kalniete declared in a speech that the Nazi and Communist dictatorships were equally criminal and that no distinction between them should be made, only because one of them was at the winner's side. Other Baltic politicians – Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Indulis Emsis, Vytautas Landsbergis, Mart Laar, Tunne Kelam – had already preceded Kalniete, or would follow in her footsteps.

As Chancellor Schröder's crusade against the U.S.-led War on Iraq in 2003 indicated, Germany is indeed able to speak with an independent, critical voice in world politics. The greater part of German public opinion and of the opposition in Parliament even supported Schröder. Yet, a more self-conscious, revisionist assessment of modern history is still a bridge too far for most German politicians (including Schröder), academics, journalists and citizens. The sense of 'Eternal Guilt' i.e. self-masochism will not evaporate; *only* the suffering of the German people under the Nazi regime and during the Second World War (Allied bombardments) has gradually been stressed more. The memory of the Communist repression in East Germany has not been given an integral place in national German identity; the moral responsibility for and the (possibility of the) involvement of relatives in the Holocaust have brushed aside the memory of such phenomena as the *Stasi* (the secret service of the GDR) and its dirty practices and the forced removal of children from their 'anti-social' parents. One could summarize it in a metaphor of movies that Charles S. Maier would surely appreciate: the movie *The Pianist* will have a greater impact than *Das Leben der Anderen*. If since 1990 the greater part of the Germans have hardly displayed any real interest in the Communist past of the eastern half of their country – many *Ossies* even worship the 'social warmth' of the GDR – one can only draw the conclusion that it will be most difficult to reach any tangible results on higher, pan-European level.

It appears that Germany, the biggest EU member state, is the main obstacle for the creation of a common European culture of remembrance, with an equal standing of Nazism and Communism. Yet Germany's historically inspired restraints seamlessly coincide with the other factors that have been outlined in this article: commemoration traditions and peculiarities that are supposed to strengthen national identity (the Dutch ones served as an example here), the influential progressive 'anti-fascist' paradigm, the business, i.e., energy interests in Russia that have brought about a form of self-censorship, and Nazism and its sadistic practices as the ultimate 'tool' for self-reflection and self-chastisement.

This does not mean, of course, that politicians and scientists should give up their attempts to make the spoiled, post-modern Western Europeans more familiar with the crimes of Communism and to combat the endless propaganda stream of distorted facts from Moscow. They owe it to Stalin's victims – including the Russian ones. But a common perception of Europe's disastrous twentieth century history will not emerge in the years and decades to come.