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Changing Memories: The First World War in German Remembrance Culture

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Abstract:

The paper pursues the changing role and representation of WW I in German historical culture during the 20th century. It describes the political exploitation of the war memory already during the war and in the postwar period which ranged from pacifist condemnation to belligerent mythicization. After having touched upon the national socialist cult of remembrance the contribution refers to the abstract and marginalised war memory after WW II and the stunning change of public interest towards the Great War because of its 100th anniversary which led to its return into the framework of contemporary history. in today’s Germany.

A PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE BEYOND GRASP

There is hardly a historical anniversary that is loaded with reference to the present like this year’s 100th anniversary of the Great War. The analogy between the 1914 July Crisis and the 2014 Crimean Crisis is overly palpable and so are the similarities between the sleepwalkers of those days and today’s daydreamers: Neither of whom wanted to sacrifice civilisation in favour of a world war, yet both – then and today – were prisoners of the logic of their national *modi operandi* and virtually blundered into war. Also today’s political journalism when referring to the present conflict in the Ukraine substantiates its respective opinion „in view of the fact that the beginning of the First World War is currently remembered as the West more or less stumbling into it“. And day by day, historians object to this notion in public and argue: “Historical

comparisons that are supposed to explain the incidents in Kiev and Crimea must be considered foolish and dangerous.” Yet exactly in the denial of the idea of historical recurrence we can see the influence of war remembrance on the attitude of the European public and diplomacy. In particular, the German position of caution and avoidance of escalation is overly oriented to the conclusions from the crisis diplomacy of a hundred years ago.

At the same time, the First World War seems to be a place of remembrance which cannot be grasped or defined precisely. The devastating outcome of the First World War that shook Europe to its foundations is still before our very eyes, one hundred years later, and in particular in the year of its anniversary when we attach monumental terms to this war, like the break of civilisation or the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century. In retrospective, what keeps us riveted is a grotesque gulf between two images of this war – a monstrous gulf between the tremendous material and mental devastations caused by the “Human slaughterhouse”, prompting the secular “European Civil War” from 1914 until 1989, and, on the other hand, its banal and contingent cause of an automobile lacking a reverse gear, the automobile of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne that is, stopping on the 28th of June 1914 in front of the cocked revolver held by Gavrilo Princip.

However, the Great War brought about consequences which still affect the present – but which have not found a place in remembrance, so for example the date of the last indirect reparation payment – October 3rd, 2010, to give you an example from politics, or - from the field of economy - the prohibition to apply the label “champagne” to German sparkling wine. There are also some examples from everyday life: A coat worn by officers in the trenches became an established fashion item after Humphrey Bogart’s peak, the so-called trench coat, and millions of men all over the world who wear a watch on their left wrist are supposedly even less aware of the fact that they are actually following a direct tradition from the war: Previously considered an awkward female accessory compared to the male pocket watch, the wrist watch with a seconds hand became an excellent instrument in infantry attacks and when estimating explosion times.

THE MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Remembering the Great War did not begin after it ended but already when it was still going on. Combat operations such as the attrition warfare in the west and the manoeuvre warfare in the east after the retreat of the Russian troops from East Prussia took place outside the frontier of the German Reich so that the war-related events reached home only by the media, at first the *Wochenschau* (newsreel) with its stereotypical images of troop movements and front sectors and later also documentaries which – not least because of the technology – conveyed impressions that were rather out of touch with reality.

The debate about the First World War became divergent and controversial even more so after the war ended. The mourning of losses suffered in war, the grieving at the extent of the devastation, and the understanding of being victims of an aggression initiated by Germany and Austria were dominating concepts of memory in France and England. In both these countries thus emerged a community of remembrance that has been preserved until today and that observes the *Onze Novembre* or Remembrance Day respectively every year without triumphalism and militarism as a day of joint grieving under the symbols of the blue corn flower or the red poppy, understanding the day with the *fêtes des poilus* as the “rebuilding of social togetherness”.

In Eastern and East Central Europe, however, the coming to terms with the war was completely different and non-uniform in itself. It is apparent that the overall picture of the Great War in European memory was not formed by the Eastern Front but, predominantly, by the Western Front. One reason is that the course of the war was decided here in the fall of 1918. Furthermore, the war remembrance in Eastern Europe was superimposed by the events in the aftermath of the war: the Russian Revolution, civil wars, and the formation of nation states. Emerging nation states like Poland and the autonomous movements of the Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Latvians, Lithuanians, or Estonians did not see the war as a catastrophe but as the beginning of an epoch in which the concept of the imperial state was replaced by the concept of the nation state, thus breaking the ground for the peoples’ right of self-determination. In these countries, achieving or maintaining their national independence became a major criterion of remembrance. In pre-revolutionary Russia and later in the Soviet Union, the bloody showdown of the imperialist world (war) powers did not at all occupy a role in its social memory. Russia’s contribution to the war did not belong to the Soviet Union’s line of tradition and was at first entirely

superimposed by the worship of the revolutionary heroes with Lenin at the top, and later by the remembrance of the Great Patriotic War against Hitler's Germany.

The German post-war society, on the other hand, had the task to come to terms with the knowledge that its entire efforts had been futile and that goods and lives had been wasted beyond all measure – in other words: the task of trying “to make sense of the senseless”. This coming to terms in post-war Germany was determined by a threefold experience of loss: millions of lost lives in the war, the loss of middle-class status and social security through inflation and the loss of income and the means to earn a living because of massive unemployment since the Great Depression in 1929. Under these circumstances in post-war Germany, a commemorating and grieving community that included all parties did not emerge but instead a torn scene of grappling with memory, ranging from complete suppression of the experiences of war and suffering to aggressive historico-political mobilisation, from pacifist condemnation to belligerent mythicization of the war experience. In the first post-war years, however, a peculiar disinterest in authentic depictions of war events dominated. War remembrance was revived only at the war's tenth anniversary in 1924 which represents a break in the appraisal of the Great War. On that day, both the Reich's President and the Chancellor issued a call for creating a common memorial for the war dead.

But the project did not turn out as intended. On August 31, 1924 there was, in fact, a ceremonial groundbreaking for a national memorial at the site of the Battle of Tannenberg in East Prussia. But this was only the beginning of years of further competitive planning for memorials, such as an “Isle of the Dead” at Lorch in the River Rhine in the western part of the country or a “Holy Grove” at Bad Berka in Thuringia. The Tannenberg Memorial was dedicated by Hindenburg in 1927 and in 1935 rededicated as a memorial of the Reich by Adolf Hitler after the Prussian government of the late Weimar Republic had, on its own, declared the Neue Wache (New Guardhouse) in Berlin a memorial for the troops fallen in the World War. Thus, single events became sites of commemoration. Yet, neither Verdun nor the Battle of the Somme were chosen but sites of heroism and historical pride, such as the just mentioned Battle of Tannenberg which in 1919 was established as a memorial site of annual commemorating against Weimar and Versailles, under Hindenburg changed to a site of victory and eventually became a Memorial of the Reich.

Other striking examples of the fiercely disputed memory are the scandal created by Emil Julius Gumbel's idea to crown a proposed war memorial in the city of Heidelberg with a turnip instead of the goddess of victory, but even more so the reception of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* which first had been published as a serial in the *Vossische Paper* and whose key message of the futility of war, the misery of war routine and the inevitability of defeat made it a bestseller (with 900,000 copies sold in 1929 and translated into all major languages) but also evoked fierce opposition.

How the scales tipped in the German public can be seen in the fate of the film version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* which the invigorated Nazi movement was able to stop temporarily from being shown already in December 1930 until in 1933 all books by Remarque were burned in public. Remarque himself went into exile and in 1938 lost his German citizenship which he was not able to regain after 1945, despite all efforts.

If we look at the single ingredients of this reflection on the past in more detail, we can easily recognize the profound differences to our present understanding of memory culture. The national thinking in the time of the Weimar Republic understood the concept of remembrance as the specific creation of myths. Well-known examples for these myths are the *Dolchstoß* myth (stab-in-the-back myth) and the *Langemarck* myth. Both myths express the blatant defiance of the diktat from the victorious and were encouraged by the belief that the war had not been lost at the Front but at home. The legend that the fighting troops were stabbed in the back – i. e. undermined by war fatigue and rebellion caused by the denigratory efforts of revolutionary parties at home – is older than Hindenburg's famous as fatal testimony before the commission / committee of the Weimar parliament in November 1918 when the subpoenaed [suppi:ned] /cited military leader referred to the supposed statement of a British general that "the German army had been stabbed in the back". Already on the 26th of October 1918 the newspapers had lamented the "collapse of the home front", and on the 10th of December 1918 even Friedrich Ebert celebrated the returning war veterans as "undefeated on the battle field". Yet, only in the course of the year 1918 and in connection with the disappointment over the failed "Wilson peace" (Fourteen Points) this claim unfolded its destructive power when it found its way into a public opinion that had been dramatically changed by a right-wing surge. The *Dolchstoß* legend (stab-in-the-back-legend) became a myth which provided a

complete model for the interpretation of the undigested defeat and which laid the blame for the German impotence on the “November Criminals” and the “Revolutionary Parties” of the political centre and left.

So, in the Weimar society the term remembrance was not filled with the sense of a painful memory but instead prompted an overall feeling of heroic experience. For that feeling, a term was coined that focused specifically on mythical romanticisation: the wartime experience. And – just like we today – the survivors and contemporaries at the time were wondering if there was an irrevocable lesson that could be learned. The acknowledged philosopher of education Erich Weniger was right when he said that, actually, there was not a real memory but only very opposing lessons from the experience with the world war. There was, however, a didactic memory of the war that manifested itself in a rather practical field - the military. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch's and Reinhart Koselleck's theory that historic defeats strengthen and invigorate future innovative power far more than victories, the German military modernized its strategic concepts faster than the Entente powers. The French military doctrine, for example, persisted in their viewpoint of historical analogy, conceptualising a future war as the repetition of the mobilisation in 1914 and thus - in terms of fortifying the country's defence with the Maginot Line - relying on a linear concept of defence. In German military strategy, on the other hand, the linear concept of space for attacks in attrition warfare had already been abandoned in 1918 under General Ludendorff who ordered a flexible, more progressive charge instead. Ludendorff's directive was based on a revolutionary concept of space which replaced the previously used image of linear conquest of a wide space in a military operation by picturing a virtual net that could be conquered at its important junctions: traffic hubs, airports, support bases, and rear command posts. Whereas the victorious French military relied on the linear defence strategy approved in the war, the German military doctrine turned to vast offensive operations with motorized combat troops, focussing on the development of correlating weapon systems like tanks and dive bombers, and – most of all – on a faster communication by equipping tanks with ultra-short-wave voice radio.

This war-related cult of remembrance was used by the NS-movement and probably became their most powerful basis of legitimacy. Hitler, an unusually highly decorated private of the world war, Hitler himself represented – in the plain uniform of the soldier or in a propagandistic display of marshal and private at the so-called Day of

Potsdam - an exponent of a movement which wanted to reconstitute the “honour of the front-line soldier”. On the 21st of March 1933, war cripples in wheelchairs, effectively arranged, embellished Hindenburg’s and Hitler’s entry into the Garrison Church in Potsdam; and at sports competitions, in particular at the Olympic Games in 1936 in Berlin, they were assigned seats of honour. Symbolically, National Socialism esteemed the (disabled) war veterans in public, but to the same extent secretly deprived them of previous privileges, such as free train rides.

The National Socialism’s political coordination was also linked with a unification of war remembrance, which decidedly transferred the Weimar period’s previous fragmented remembrance with its party squabble into a common cultural remembrance and celebrated this transfer as a triumph over poor individualism. National Socialist war remembrance was characterized by a paradigm of continuity which understood its own rule as re-establishment, re-building, and resurgence of a former status, not releasing the war into the past time but seeing itself as its continuation. In this sense, the time span from 1914 to 1939 appeared to be a / one single / distinct epoch of belligerence.

REMEMBERING WWI DURING THE POST-WAR ERA

During the post-war era, “Versailles” was the central argument in blaming the allies for Hitler’s rise to power and the Second World War. When marking the 50th anniversary in 1964, not the actual war experience, but rather the diplomatic development leading to the outbreak of war was in the centre of debate - a debate that at the time was under the spell of the German War Guilt controversy sparked by Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer and fiercely opposed both by established historians and national remembrance politics. Irrespective of an answer to the debate, when remembering WWI the heroic narrative was commonly avoided and not yet replaced by a victimistic one. What remained was a void in remembrance culture.

War remembrance remained part of national politics, and due to this time of abstract remembrance, the institution of the contemporary witness was not prevalent, even if this contemporary witness were no less a person than the Chancellor. War remembrance had to remain abstract because tangible remembrance could have led to the distinction between friend and enemy, victim and perpetrator – at the time the

contemporary witness would not have been considered an all-European concept but would have remained a nationalistic continuation of the bellicose unforgiveness. Thus, the Great War remains an abstract model of learning and opposing, a – so to speak – false lieu de memoire without contemporary witnesses, for the sake of not endangering the gospel of European conciliation. The remembrance culture of those years in the spirit of the post-war era and its Kahlschlagpoesie [a style of German literature which accompanied the immediate post-war years and tried to radically get rid of the pomp and ideological concepts invoked by the Nazi's use of German. They wanted to cut down to what they saw as the bare skeleton, the bare "sober" essentials of the German language.], therefore, hailed the idealism of the activists of conciliation, which they "shamefully (hid) under a shell of non-illusioned critique and strict soberness". From the place of memory that are the battlefields of the Great War return humans who do not live up to their memories but have gained a civilized mode of behaviour, who do not look back but have gained moral standards in the first place.

Among experts and especially during the Berlin Historikertag [Historian's Convention], likewise in 1964, Fritz Fischer's thesis that Germany had a considerable responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War was already established. Fischer himself later expanded and sharpened / intensified his thesis, leading to the assumption of the exclusive German guilt, which ascended to a historical master-narrative in the course of the 1970s and 80s. But the Great War still remained an abstract date, and furthermore one that favoured a nationally constricted way of thinking History – especially when it comes to the question of guilt.

FROM EXCLUSIVE GUILT TO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The Great War has been a forgotten place of remembrance even in the Berlin Republic of the 2000s. Nothing reflects this circumstance to date like the Neue Wache in Berlin, which was created as a Reich-wide cenotaph for the First World War, then recreated by GDR-officials as a monument dedicated to the "victims of imperialistic warfare" and today is serving as a collective memorial place for "the victims of war and despotism". With this dedication, it is strongly linked to the remembrance of the suffering during the Nazi-Ruling in public memory. Likewise, the

airing of the made-for-TV Series “Holocaust” in 1979 was a far-reaching media event that still is remembered today, whereas the elaborate German-French TV Co-production “La Grande Guerre/1914-1918/Der Erste Weltkrieg” has completely disappeared from collective remembrance.

In almost no time this situation seems to have changed with a rather eerie radicalness and pace. If we look at present day journalism as well as the academic output revolving around the 100th anniversary of the First World War, we have to notice that this Great War has been transformed from a forgotten to a very lively lieu de mémoire in a sudden and rather triumphant way. This change from forgetting / oblivion to remembrance has, with breath-taking ease, swept aside the very thesis / assumption of the German War Guilt which had provoked the fiercest academic and public quarrels [trench fights?] for decades.

However, if one sees through the scientific and journalistic publications concerning the 90th anniversary, we will find that even then this narrative didn't own any publicly acknowledged, exclusive validity anymore but got increasingly softened. By the 100th anniversary, the now ruling narrative – as supported by the works of Christopher Clark, Oliver Janz, Herfried Münkler and Jörn Leonhard – goes something like this: The First World War was a disaster in global history, not wanted by anyone. But no one proved capable of undertaking resolute prevention measures either. Everyone turns out to be a victim of a war, the dimensions of which no one could possibly suspect – victims in different ways and to different extents, but victimized are all of them. That is why the Great War should not be forgotten, it holds a historical learning opportunity which is apprehended by the EU in a remarkable way, but culpably neglected by countries like Turkey or Russia.

How could this happen? How can this twofold change from forgetting / oblivion to remembrance and from exclusive German to collective European guilt be explained? Especially the disempowered master historians from the war guilt party like to make use of a traditional figure of thought which explains and at the same time discredits Christopher Clark's counter-concept of the European sleepwalkers as a long desired self-exculpation of Germans, awoken to a new national self-consciousness. But this new master narrative of contemporary history is not so much about nationally biased exculpation of perpetrators, but rather a widening of the victim narrative to a European scale. With this widening fostered by a significant internationalization of the narrator's point of view (as presented for example in Clark's focus on the inner-

Serbian situation) we witness how the Great War becomes incorporated into a victim-oriented historiography. A historiography which up to now has concentrated on coming to terms with the two main systems of dictatorship of the 20th century but today also embraces the Great War as their very initializing, seminal catastrophe. Rapprochement [frz. Aussprache!] in remembrance and at the same time dissociation as a sign of willingness to learn from the pincer movement / represent the predicament of the era of reappraisal we live in today. Eventually, the recent boom of historiography with its ongoing medialization and event-hungry Jubilee-focusing has caught up with the First World War.

In these various states of the remembrance of the Great War, a gradual shift from heroization to victimization is reflected, which for a long time has begun to take place also in the remembrance cultures of the former adversaries of Germany. At the same time a new historiographical narrative can be recognized in the event of this contemporary “change of the past”. It is propagandized especially in Germany and there has found its palatable counterpart in the term of the “European Year of History 2014” (“europäisches Geschichtsjahr 2014”). This narrative does not operate with the identification of single perpetrators, political parties or social groups anymore, nor does it use ideas, interests and mentalities as an argument. It just states this war was sheer madness. No one had wanted it and in the end everyone was victimized by it – anyone from the monarchic leader down to the most common soldier. These are the grounds on which this new narrative of remembrance is linking the “seminal catastrophe” of the First World War with the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War and even the peaceful revolution in Germany and East-Central Europe 25 years ago. And now, all of a sudden, from the former emptiness of remembrance a construal of history emerges which is capable of lending meaning in a post-national and European perspective. It holds the offer of relating the ruling norms of historical shame-culture – such as the experience of watershed moments, the focusing on victims and the coping with dictatorship – in a way that leaves a historical success story to narrate the “century of extremes” as a well-used opportunity of learning a lesson. The outcome is a golden bridge being built from the outbreak of war in 1914, spanning over the Gates of Hell of 1939 all the way to the regaining of European freedom in 1989 and the eastward enlargement of the EU in 2004.

If this interpretation proves sustainable and capable as a basis of a future “European memory” or, on the contrary, will be renounced as an “ideological exploitation of war” it has to remain an open question for now. The scepticism that the Federal Foreign Office has encountered for its proposal to remember the First World War as a transnational community of victims and to embed it into the goal of European integration might speak against the former. But in any case, this scepticism shows how incredibly unsteady the past of the Great War has remained, how resounding the respective validity of its different narrative patterns was and still is, even if hidden behind the seemingly harmless term of “Remembrance”.