

“Excess of Forgetting and Excess of Memory” in Polish, German and Austrian Narratives on World War II

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Abstract

In his extraordinary book titled *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur writes thus: “I am deeply troubled by the disturbing spectacle of the excess of memory in some places and the excess of forgetting elsewhere”. The events of World War II affected the Polish and the German nations in completely different ways. As perpetrators of the tragedy, the Germans were to some extent confronted with war crimes (the Nuremberg Trials, the Frankfurt Trial, the Düsseldorf Trial). But have the war crimes and the mechanisms of functioning of the Third Reich become common knowledge?

Was Ralph Giordano right to call forgetting the second German guilt? In their Communist-dominated country, Poles were faced with a uniform and preordained ritualization of war memories and the commemoration of its victims. For many years, a reckoning of German crimes and the post-war trauma was played out politically. The memory of the war owes its lasting vividness to the fact that almost every Polish family had lost loved ones at the time. After 1989, however, the narrative on war crimes has changed markedly. The Soviet occupation and its crimes finally became a subject of public discussion. For the first time, commemorations of World War II anniversaries were held jointly by Poles and Germans.

Relying on statistical data, the author analyzes the present-day memory of World War II and the state of knowledge about this period in history among various age groups. She also poses the question to what extent the memory of this tragedy has been ritualized both in Germany and Poland.

In the preface to his book titled *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the renowned French philosopher Paul Ricœur (2012) writes thus: "I am deeply troubled by the disturbing spectacle of the excess of memory in some places and the excess of forgetting elsewhere. The idea of just distribution of memory is one of the social issues that I address in the present volume" (p. 7). Let us use this quote as a starting point for a reflection on memory and forgetting about the history of World War II, but also on what Ricœur termed "distribution". Who, then, and why, would treat history and memory as "commodities for distribution"? The first part of the present article is devoted to the selectivity inherent in any description of the past and the possible effects of its application. The second part analyzes the Ricœurian "distribution of memory" – who, for what purpose and why regards memory as a "commodity" to be distributed? Our reflection on the excess of forgetting and the excess of memory will be set in the context of German crimes committed during the Second World War. Although forgetting about events that become more and more distant in time seems a natural enough process, the "excess of forgetting" – understood as some lack of memory – can be viewed as dangerous by many social players and various communities. There is no doubt that we may talk about an excess of forgetting as regards the crimes committed during World War II, especially when referring to the victims and perpetrators. From the Polish perspective – that is, from the perspective of a nation that suffered relatively the greatest human and material losses in the War – the present state of knowledge in Europe can indeed be described as an "excess of forgetting", particularly as regards Germany and Austria, since in the latter the level of knowledge about these events is lower still. Further – when analyzing the intriguing concept of "excess of memory", we will address the issue of excessive monopolization of collective memory by states, with particular attention being given to the ritualization of memory, especially as superficial, perfunctory commemorations often lead to a devaluation of the very events they are supposed to mark, thus hindering an honest and unbiased understanding thereof.

The Selectivity of the Historical Narrative

Historia in Greek means exploring, searching for knowledge – knowledge gained through examination and study. As Paul Ricœur (2012) writes, "A professional historian keeps asking himself the question: how can I know what I am about to say? History, then, means searching" (p. 226).

The task of history as a discipline is to reconstruct the past. A historian achieves this obvious aim by means of description; the processes of filtering and distorting events are not intentional, but rather stem from the very fact of using a given conceptual system and language, which itself is also variable in time (see Koselleck, 2001). A description is all that is left of the actual events. Documents – or more broadly speaking, written sources

– from past centuries undergo natural selection, human activity notwithstanding. Among factors that should be mentioned here are the physical frailty of documents, problems with deciphering their contents, and losses caused by various natural disasters.

The objective past reality becomes accessible to succeeding generations only through the narratives of witnesses, chroniclers and historians. These descriptions are inherently subjective and influenced by the experiences and beliefs of their authors, as well as the manner and style of the epoch in which they were written. Reinhart Koselleck (2009), a German historian who is an expert on and researcher of historical semantics, wrote: “there is always a profound difference between events as they unfold and their linguistic facilitation” (p. 12). And further: “everything that has happened beyond my own experience is available to me only through speech and writing” (p. 15). “Speech and writing” are exactly what shapes our (subsequent generations’) vision of history – or “generates memory”, as the ancient Greeks called it. Hannah Arendt (2000) wrote in one of her essays: “Every selection of material in a sense interferes with history, and all criteria for selection put the historical course of events under certain man-made conditions” (p. 285). Paul Ricœur (2012) put it even more simply: “If we cannot recall everything, we cannot recount everything. The idea of an exhaustive story is performatively unattainable” (p. 590).

It follows, then, that a historian is forced to make choices by the very nature of his profession. The historian’s choices as to what to write about and how to write about it have several aspects, however only three of them – crucial to the subject because of their impact on the narrative structure and selection of events – will be mentioned here.

The first issue concerns the distance in time to the events described. Up until the 18th century, witnessing an event or actually participating therein were viewed almost as a guarantee of the veracity and accuracy of one’s account. A substantial change in this aspect was introduced by historicism; Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), an eminent German historian who is widely regarded as the father of this theory, claimed that the basic task of a historian is to describe, “to tell how it actually happened” (*blos sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen*) – distance in time (hence also emotional distance) to the described events is therefore essential (Ranke, 1824, pp. v–vi). From the point of view of our subject – the memory of crimes committed during the Second World War – it is important to note one obvious fact: the last witnesses to these events, both the victims and the perpetrators, will not be around for much longer, and therefore it will soon be impossible to check any information against their testimony.

Secondly, perspective is determined by the social or political status of the historian in question. In this context, the category “the defeated – the victor” is of particular moment. Thucydides writing his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Tacitus writing his *Histories*, and Machiavelli writing *The Prince* – all of them were (at that very moment) on the defeated side.

The conquered views events from a different perspective, and in his description of them explores other, often new aspects, analyzes mistakes and reasons for his defeat. This exigency to explain the defeat prompts the authors to make a more thorough analysis of the events and encourages deeper reflection, but at the same time often leads large societies to deny the defeat or "turn it into victory". A good example here is what the Germans did after World War II: they celebrate the 8th of May, the day of signing the surrender, as the day democratic Germany was reborn. It is yet different in Austria, which in the official narrative calls itself – with the consent of the international community – "the first victim of Hitler". Such a phrase already appeared in the Allies' Moscow Declaration of 30 October 1943.

Thirdly, the historian's choices depend on whether he belongs to the entity whose activities he describes – be it political, religious, social or economic – and whether he identifies with this entity, either through direct involvement or affirmative identification, or else holds the position of an outside observer. This issue accounts for the vast differences existing between the narratives of Polish, German and Austrian historians.

It follows from the above, then, that despite the historian's best intentions and for objective reasons, his account can never attain Ranke's ideal. The difference in concepts and their meanings, as well as the awareness that words can alter our perception of the past, leave a very dangerous margin for the instrumentalization of history. Koselleck (2009) put it thus: "When concepts become irreplaceable and fixed, they become basic concepts, and no political or language community could do without them. At the same time they become contentious, as various language users try to monopolize and impose interpretation of these concepts" (p. 104).

The Distribution of Memory

Who, then, is this "language user" who wants to impose his own interpretation of history? We need to think about instances when "history is put at the service of politics" or when it is used for political purposes. This "subsistence" of history to politics readily evokes negative associations with manipulation and instrumentalization. However, if we examine this problem in greater detail, we may discover many rational arguments in favor of shaping the historical narrative, especially if we consider the issue from the perspective of a state understood as a permanent community of citizens. If, as already shown, historical narrative is inherently selective and vastly dependent on the narrator, then why should we disapprove of an interference made in the name of national interest in the best meaning of the term? Of course there remain questions as to who should carry out the selection, to what extent is it permissible and what is the aim of such an interference, with the underlying assumption being that we are talking about a democratic state, where both

freedom of speech and freedom of research are observed.

This obvious synergy of history and politics was noticed by 19th century German historians (Heinrich von Sybel, Heinrich von Stein, Wilhelm von Humboldt), who coined the term "historical policy" or "historical politics" (*Geschichtspolitik*). Today, historical policy is widely pursued, and the fact itself is not necessarily negative. What is important – as its German creators emphasized – is that historical policy should never be used for manipulation (*Geschichtsfälschung*) or mythologization (*Mythologisierung*). Germany (Prussia) was also the cradle of historical education, intended to forge a common national identity. An acknowledged expert on the history of Prussia, Stanisław Salmonowicz (1998), wrote thus: "The monarchy supported education for ideological reasons, as a method of exerting ideological pressure on its subjects, but more importantly as an element of economic development" (p. 221). Perhaps the Prussian model of internal historical politics does not inspire our enthusiasm, but it aptly illustrates the instrumentalization of history for the purposes of politics. To oversimplify, one might say that the effectiveness of this model of education was proven on the battlefields; as the then leading French politician, Leon Gambetta, pointedly remarked after the lost war of 1870: "The last war was won by the Prussian teacher" (Rothbard, 2014, p. 47).

"History", wrote Friedrich Nietzsche (1912), "belongs above all to the active and powerful man" (p. 111), so it is used instrumentally primarily by state authorities – regardless of the political system, though obviously to various degrees. Ricœur (2012) calls the Nietzschean powerful men "higher powers" that take over the plot structure of the historical narrative and "impose a canonical narrative by means of fear or flattery" (pp. 590–591). In the anarchic world of international relations, in which states vie for a better position – which in the end translates into political success and economic profit – the narrative of the history of the state and its position and status in world history is not without importance. Churchill once said: "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it". Nations and states fight to impose "a monopoly of interpretation", so in other words they fight for history to be kind to them. For this very reason, states distribute memory and historical narratives. This is of course strongly related to historical policy and the expectations of societies, who want their country to be held in high regard by the international community. Polish, German and Austrian experiences of the Second World War are so disparate that arriving at a common interpretation of certain events seems indeed impossible, and the clash between two distributions of memory can sometimes be painful.

The Excess of Forgetting

Despite the fact that the Second World War was an exceptionally harrowing experience for many nations, the memory of it – and, more importantly,

the knowledge of these events – naturally became increasingly limited over the course of time. The last eyewitnesses are now passing away, and subsequent important developments in 20th century history push the conflict of 1939–1945 into the background. In the history of Poland, however, the Second World War was not only a dramatic collective experience of the nation, but also an event that resulted in Poland losing its sovereignty for the next couple of decades. In spite of Communist censorship and the very selective memory of the Second World War allowed in the Communist era, a different image of the War, frequently more comprehensive than the official, was preserved by families (particularly as regards the crimes of the Soviet occupier). The Communist narrative of the Second World War created a dichotomous picture that was characterized by an often excessive martyrdom, with an ever-brave, oppressed Pole fighting the German invader. This cliché, although true in principle, did not allow for an open discussion about a wide range of behaviors and, more importantly, about the fact that the majority of Poles were focused not on military struggle, but on a daily fight for survival. Due to the sheer scale of destruction and the crimes committed by the occupiers against the Polish nation, the Second World War obviously still remains a constitutive element of the Polish historical narrative, and it seems nigh on impossible that it could fade from the collective memory any time soon. In Germany and Austria, however, the situation is completely different. First of all it should be emphasized that just like individuals, nations as a whole display a tendency – which is natural and to a certain extent rational – to deny their own guilt and crimes. In the case of Germany and Austria, the memory of German crimes became a hostage of the Cold War, and the distribution of German memory was handled by the Allies, who first subjected the Germans and Austrians to a reckoning, and thereafter let them forget about their crimes. Public opinion polls, which were conducted regularly at the time, showed that the majority of Germans were not convinced about their guilt, and hence they were not ready for any honest and unbiased assessment of the recent past (Lubecka, 2015). And even though German intellectuals protested against forgetting and demanded that the perpetrators of these crimes be brought to a reckoning, they managed to initiate a discussion only within their perforce numerically limited milieu. In the years 1945–1949, several important authors published works on the moral reckoning of the German nation (see Jaspers, 1946; Meinecke, 1946; Ritter, 1948; Weber, 1949). These works, however, did not give rise to a national debate on German guilt. The titles of publications printed at the time had strong moral undertones, e.g. *Did we, Germans, fail after 1945?*, *German disaster. Reflections and memories* etc., nevertheless Germans as a nation studiously avoided any reckoning of German crimes, for that would have necessitated bringing members of their own families to justice. The number of NSDAP personal identification cards issued reached 10,700,000, which means that every fifth German adult was a member of the Nazi party (Kellerhoff, 2010, December 15). From 1939 to

1945, as many as 17,300,000 soldiers served in the Wehrmacht (15,600,000 of them were Germans and Austrians) (Overmans, 2004, p. 226). The most cautious estimates of German historians pertaining to the participation of Wehrmacht soldiers in the committal of crimes – particularly on the Eastern front – put the figure at 5 percent, which means that over 700,000 soldiers might have committed atrocities.¹ If we add to this figure the members of the SS, the functionaries of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office, and also the personnel of the industrial complexes that supported Hitler, we can see the full picture of “involvement” and the scale of support which Hitler received from the German nation.² The reluctance to deal with the crimes was therefore a reluctance to admit guilt. The mechanisms of denial were the same as they usually are in such cases – first and foremost, the past was not talked about. Guilt was assigned to other persons, and accusations were levelled at the leaders who had taken fright and committed suicide, leaving the nation at the mercy of the victors. Crimes were explained away by the fact that they were the end-product of carrying out orders, of acting in accordance with German laws in force at the time. It was repeatedly stated that the German nation had no knowledge of the crimes being committed (see A. Mitscherlich & M. Mitscherlich, 1994; Moller, Tschuggnall & Welzer, 2002). At the same time, the fact that some war criminals lived a peaceful life in Germany, often under their own names and as “respectable citizens”, was glossed over (Frei, 2011). The government of the Federal Republic of Germany did not recognize the Nuremberg laws (which referred to crimes against humanity and against peace), so war criminals were tried as ordinary criminals, and for murder or complicity in murder they could be sentenced at most to life imprisonment. The German criminologist Dieter Schenk (2011) called the policy followed by the government, the administration and the judiciary in the 1950s and 1960s a “structural non-prosecution of murderers” (p. 305). The percentage of former NSDAP members employed post-war in decision-making bodies was fairly substantial, which largely accounts for the reluctance of the young state to address the subject of Nazi crimes. Schenk estimates that in 1950, 66–75 percent of judges and prosecutors had been members of the NSDAP (p. 311). As Reinhard Gehlen, head of the German BND (*Bundesnachrichtendienst* – West German Intelligence Service) wrote in his secret report for the CIA, in 1950, 129 Bundestag members – 26.5 percent – had belonged to the NSDAP during the Third Reich (*CIA Information*, n.d.). In 1952, 33.9 percent of employees of the *Auswärtiges Amt* (Ministry

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- 1 Estimates concerning the participation of Wehrmacht soldiers in the committal of crimes differ widely, ranging from 5 to 80 percent. Among those who put the figure at 80 percent is Hannes Herr, the main curator of the exhibition titled *The crimes of the Wehrmacht. The scale of the war of attrition in 1941–1944*, which was held in various German cities in the years 1995–1999 (see Hartmann, 2004, p. 2).
 - 2 In June 1944, the SS had approx. 794,940 members, of whom 264,379 were members of the Allgemeine SS (Grüttner, 2015, p. 115).

of Foreign Affairs) – 184 people – were former members of the NSDAP.³ Public opinion concurred with the general attitude of the political elites and the judiciary; additionally, both German churches (the Catholic and the Evangelical) were just as reluctant to bring up the crimes of the recent past (Schenk, 2011, p. 310).

The situation changed somewhat towards the end of the 1960s, after the youth revolt, when the Holocaust started to be talked about and taught in Germany, however crimes committed against other nations, and the Slavic in particular, are still consigned to a “black hole” – as Prof. Ortmeier (2012, February 27), who researches these issues, puts it. Furthermore, knowledge about the Holocaust, despite an objectively considerable educational effort and imposing financial outlay, is on the whole rudimentary and limited. In 2000, Alphons Silbermann and Manfred Stoffers published the results of their research on Germans’ knowledge of the concentration camps under a most telling title: *Auschwitz: I have never heard of it*. Even though the German state showed a deep concern for education about the Holocaust, as many as 23 percent of respondents aged between 14 and 17 answered the question “What was Auschwitz?” by stating “I don’t know”, whereas only 3.6 percent of respondents aged over 50 gave this reply (Silbermann & Stoffers, 2000). In 2012, the Forsa Institute conducted a survey whose findings were quite shocking: namely, it disclosed that for 21 percent of Germans aged between 18 and 30 the word Auschwitz carries no connotations whatsoever (*Jeder fünfte*, 2012). Other studies indicate that even if the Germans are aware of some general numbers pertaining to the Holocaust, they know absolutely nothing about the “technical” aspects of the Final Solution. The majority cannot explain what went on in the extermination camps, and hence they do not recognize the role of the state in the Shoah and do not understand its industrial character (Ortmeier, 2012, February 27). A poll conducted in 2017 on the whole confirmed the Germans’ deplorable lack of knowledge, while a survey carried out for the Körber Foundation revealed that only 59 percent of students aged above 14 know that Auschwitz was a concentration and extermination camp (“Deutsche wollen”, n.d.).

The situation is yet different in Austria, where the myth of Hitler’s first victim has virtually prevented research into Austrian Nazism and the participation of Austrians in the crimes of National Socialism (Uhl, 2001). Such a historical construct has led not only to a lack of awareness about crimes committed by Austrians, but also to the commemoration of Austrian soldiers and functionaries who served in the structures of the German

3 A response of the Federal Government to a parliamentary question concerning official policy on the National Socialist past (Deutscher Bundestag-17.Wahlperiode, Drucksache 17/8134, p. 9).

Reich.⁴ Research shows that the numerical participation of Austrians was relatively greater than the ratio of the Austrian population to the German would suggest:⁵ 8 out of 75 concentration camp commandants, 40 percent of male and female camp guards, 14 percent of all ss members and – finally – as many as 70–80 percent of Eichmann's staff personnel were Austrians (Steininger, 2008, pp. 14–15; Weiss, 1998, pp. 241–242).⁶

An Austrian writer and journalist, Martin Pollack, whose father was a member of the ss, Gestapo and *Einsatzgruppe*, and a war criminal, remarked thus on the memory of the Austrians:

The majority of Austrians welcomed the Anschluss with delight. A part of Austrian society chose the path of forgetting. They prefer to think that Austria had nothing to do with Nazism. A lot of people in Austria display such an approach to all matters connected with the Second World War: let's not talk about it out loud, or better still – let's not talk about it at all (Haidinger & Pollack, 2009).

To sum up, it has to be emphasized that the memory of crimes is shaped in accordance with the role played by a given country or nation in the Second World War. It is only natural that the memory of these events is subjected to denial by the Germans and Austrians, but perpetuated in Poland. The policy followed by the state is usually correlated with public feeling, and this is clearly evidenced by the situation in Germany and Austria in the 1950s and the 1960s, when the subject of the War was carefully avoided and even omitted from the school curriculum. In present-day Germany, knowledge of the Second World War and its crimes – particularly the Holocaust – is relatively greater than in Austria. Nevertheless, this knowledge is largely rudimentary and selective; for instance, Slavic victims remain completely unknown. The difference in preserving the collective memory of victims is also visible in the way that places of memory, including among others former concentration and extermination camps, are administered. In Germany, the majority have been converted into places of memory, museums, and youth centers; in Austria, many are consigned to oblivion and even physical neglect, with the most stark example being the grounds of the former concentration camp in Gusen. This was a subcamp

4 It is worth mentioning that the taboo about Wehrmacht soldiers has recently been broken also in Germany. The leader of the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* said in one of his interviews that the Germans have a right to be proud of Wehrmacht soldiers (*Gauland fordert*, 2017, September 14).

5 Austrians accounted for 8 percent of the total population of the German Reich.

6 Perz (2006) claims that the number of Austrians in camp garrisons is inflated; he himself puts the figure at 13–20 percent, which still, however, means that functionaries of Austrian origin were over-represented.

of KL Mauthausen. It is estimated that 71,000 people of 27 nationalities, mainly members of the intelligentsia, were incarcerated at KL Gusen; according to various estimates, 27,000–35,000 Poles were killed there. Presently, there is a housing estate at the site of the camp. Thanks to the efforts of former prisoners and a group of Austrian volunteers, three plots containing the former crematorium were purchased from private owners in the 1960s.

An Excess of Memory

In 1998, the writer Martin Walser was awarded the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. During the presentation ceremony, Walser (1998, October 12) gave a speech entitled *Sonntagsrede* (Sunday speech). His address sparked off an outcry and protests throughout Germany, and the author was accused of relativizing German crimes (Schirrmacher, 1999). As a matter of fact, Walser touched upon a very important element of the German memory. German education about the Holocaust, commenced in the 1970s, has undergone ritualization over time – the memory of crimes is superficial, and even though politicians remind the Germans of their guilt during successive commemorations of historical events, these very celebrations perpetuate a schematic and unreflective approach to the crimes committed during the Second World War. Walser views the German admission of guilt not as an authentic experience, but rather as a learned habit, an element of a correctness of sorts; the word “Auschwitz” should be met with the reply “my fault”. Whereas, according to Walser (1998, October 12), “Auschwitz does not work well as an accusatory routine, an ever-ready method of intimidation, a moral cudgel if you will, or as a perfunctory and yet obligatory exercise”. German research shows that when asked about the Holocaust, young Germans come up with no more than banal stereotypes, without any actual understanding of what it was about. The narrative of the crimes that has been built over the years relied heavily on the “discretion of unspecificity”, as German historian Norbert Frei puts it (Frei, 1992, p. 104). An eminent researcher on the Holocaust, Saul Friedländer (1998, November 26), called Auschwitz a universal “metaphor of evil”. It should be noted with concern that in many countries it is just a metaphor, with no real knowledge behind it – a general concept that is often repeated mechanically.

The Austrian historian and journalist Martin Haidinger warns against such a perpetuation of memory: “the attitude of young people towards the Third Reich cannot be shaped by pop culture, as this results in a rudimentary knowledge of symbols and gestures, not of actual facts” (Haidinger & Pollack, 2009).

Even though we often notice the danger that lies in forgetting about the crimes committed during the Second World War, we are frequently heedless of another perilous aspect of collective memory – the banalization

and ritualization of commemorative efforts. It is the sin of many governments and educational systems. Modern societies have sanctioned this ritualization and entrusted commemoration as such to state authorities; unfortunately, these have politicized memory to a high degree, turning it into a tool of political contest and consciously manipulating the selection of historical knowledge mentioned at the beginning of the present article. A key role in preventing such processes must be played by a reasoned, humanistic education. There is no better safeguard against forgetting than a sound and robust knowledge that is protected not only by the structures of the state, as nothing can replace grass-roots initiatives, often regional in character, and individuals who can revive the memory of victims, often in opposition to the "official memory". Locations such as Krzyżowa, Auschwitz or Sachsenhausen have to bustle with activity and function as the foci of the debate on the nature of totalitarianisms. Young people in particular must not only learn the bare facts, but also understand the processes that resulted in crime.

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