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Competing Historical Narratives: Memory Politics, Identity, and Democracy in Germany and Poland

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Abstract: This article considers the growing rift between Western and Eastern Europe regarding the commemoration of Europe's recent past and related historical narratives of nationhood that shape contemporary political preferences. More specifically, it investigates the connections between collective memory, national identities, and democratic cultures as they manifest themselves in Germany and Poland. With the help of an interpretative analysis focused on the discourse of political elites in both countries, the article identifies competing ways of interpreting 20th-century history and providing it with meaning for contemporary audiences. The national case studies of Germany and Poland present a contrasting logic in this respect: the promise of freedom and democracy in Poland is primarily narrated as the liberation from foreign rule and the desire for national independence. This narration is significantly built around a notion of popular sovereignty in which dissenting views of the heroic national past tend to be discredited and largely banned from public debate. In contrast, in Germany, the memory of fascism and the Holocaust has established a stronger rights-based approach to democracy in the liberal tradition and an openness to contesting historical narratives in the public domain.

Keywords: collective memory; democracy; identity; nationalism; Germany; Poland; Europe

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1. Introduction: Narrations of the Past and Memory Politics

Currently, Europe is confronted with a momentous political chasm: after an initial phase of great enthusiasm for the common European cause following the collapse of Communism, Eastern and Western Europe now seem to be drifting apart. Traditionally, there has been a notable lack of familiarity with, or even public awareness of, the diverse collective experiences and shared history informing the formation of national identities in these countries. Yet, in the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine, this phenomenon has become more pronounced, and the political implications for current political realities on the European continent have gained greater public attention. There has been an increasingly apparent alienation of Western European countries from those in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) that endured Soviet rule during the Cold War era (Coman and Leconte 2021). After a wholehearted drive to unite the continent along with the eastward enlargement of the European Union, a drive which continued into the early 2000s, this new division exhibits distinct forms of collective memory that manifest themselves in both the domestic and international arenas.

First, countries in CEE show an affinity for a form of populist nationalism that contrasts markedly with the liberal–cosmopolitan approach that has shaped Western European attempts to redefine national identity after the Second World War. The resurgence of a particular brand of populist nationalism specifically in CEE reflects this divergent legacy. This division has also become manifest in opposing understandings of liberal and "illiberal" democracy, which, for instance, play out in the tension between countries like Hungary and Poland and the European Union (Minkenberg 2017). The irritation of many EU member

states has been expressed over multiple causes: the ascent of right-wing, nationalist–populist forces to power, the persistent democratic backsliding observable in many former Communist countries (Cianetti and Hanley 2021; Cianetti et al. 2018; Gora and de Wilde 2022; Holesch and Kyriazi 2022; Rohac 2021), and the rise of illiberalism (Jenne and Mudde 2012; Margulies 2019) are only the most obvious.

Second, the deepening East–West divide also concerns international relations and the geopolitical reality of the continent (Jenne 2021). With Russia's war in Ukraine, the memory of Soviet occupation has regained its significance for articulating identities, interests, and policies in the European Union and with respect to the EU Neighbourhood Policy. Arguably, the momentum in setting the tone in the EU's foreign policy and response to Russia's aggression has shifted to the eastern member states. Countries like Poland or the Baltic states feel emboldened in the quest for leadership. This aspiration is rooted in the deeply ingrained idea that the Western states have not taken the Russian threat seriously. In terms of their domestic and foreign policy priorities, the European continent is faced with an intensifying sense of mutual distrust and alienation.

This article argues that the deepening divide between Central-Eastern and Western Europe has its roots in distinct legacies of political culture. I suggest that different forms of collective memory have established historical narratives of nationhood and national identity that shape contemporary political preferences (see also: Verovšek 2016). The selective commemoration of the past and the meanings assigned to it steer the political imagination of a polity. These narratives provide a foundational collective identity and stipulate key principles on which the national community rests (Bell 2003). More specifically, I will investigate the connection between collective memory and democratic cultures as it manifests itself in Central Eastern and Western Europe (Misztal 2005). The main argument will seek to establish a link between how key events of the 20th century are commemorated—most notably the World Wars, Fascism, the Holocaust, and Communism (Clarke 2014)—and the trajectory that national identities and democracy have taken based on distinct historical narratives.

This article starts with a brief conceptual discussion exploring the link between collective memory and democracy. This theoretically driven probe is then substantiated by illustrating the selective way in which Central and Western European member states of the European Union (EU) rely on distinct memories of the 20th century. Following the logic of the most sharply divergent case study design, I will focus on Germany in the West and Poland in the East of the continent. This article is based on a larger study (Barna et al. 2024) whose findings will soon be published in a book. The comparative study on the politics of memory, populism, and democracy builds on the systematic analysis of the historical narratives used by political elites to discursively interpret this memory in order to provide meaning (Helbling et al. 2016; Kaiser 2017). This material allows me to shed light on divergent trajectories in memory politics and their implications for the state of (liberal) democracy across Europe.

2. Collective Memory, Historical Narratives and National Identity

Arguments about the effects of political culture are notoriously difficult to substantiate. Yet, the focus that I have chosen for this article allows for an empirically grounded investigation into the link between collective memory, national identity, and democracy. The power of historical narratives to steer current politics, and in particular, to shape loyalties and allegiances, has become manifest in the shifting geopolitical landscape of Europe (Klymenko 2022; Krawatzek and Soroka 2022). However, rather than investigating how, for instance, these accounts of the past mould competing senses of belonging to the European Union or the Russian world, my focus is on the effects that the memory of the 20th century has on national identities and the democratic culture of EU member states in the East and the West.

National identity describes a sense of belonging to an imagined political community rooted in an idea of a common descent, a deeply shared culture and history as well as a

belief in a communal fate tying the past to the future (Fleischmann et al. 2019; Hobsbawm 1992). In this regard, a collective or national identity is based on a foundational historical narrative that transcends generations and provides continuity for the political community (Gillis 2018). Halbwachs (1992) has provided an analytical lens into how social groups construct their identity through a socially constructed and reproduced collective memory. Elaborating on the political role that collective identities play, Fukuyama (2018, p. 9) described that "national identities can be built around liberal and democratic political values, and around the shared experiences that provide the connective tissue allowing diverse communities to thrive".

It is against this background that I explore the link between historical narratives and democracy in two dimensions: I will first examine lessons from the past and transitional justice before moving on to civil society contestation.

2.1. Lessons from the Past and Transitional Justice

Arguably, the institutional design of Western European democracies reflects and has been driven by the lessons drawn from the vulnerability of liberal democracies having been confronted with fascist or communist dictatorships. The memory of the authoritarian turn in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s has had a major impact on the constitutional design of post-war democracies on the continent (Manucci 2019). The collective memory of these periods in a country's history has the potential to instil a widely shared recognition of how fallible and fragile democratic regimes actually are. In this respect, the experience of authoritarianism or genocide can be transformative in terms of its long-term effects on a political community.

The end of authoritarian regimes regularly ushers in a time of reflection on the factors that have allowed for the failure of democratic rule. In this regard, in many post-authoritarian countries, this process of learning from the past has found its expression in political practices and institutional arrangements designed to protect democracy. The memory of failed democratic regimes is likely to trigger constitutional reforms meant to protect and strengthen independent and democratic institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, media, or civil society. For example, as a reaction to the failed Weimar Republic, the post-war constitution (Grundgesetz) of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was set up in a way that protects against the misuse of democratically legitimated means by an authoritarian leader (no direct election of a president, the protected role of the parliament and the chancellor, strict federalism, etc.). Similarly, the emphasis of liberal democracies on unalienable individual rights has become a dominant feature in the constitutional setup of Western European democracies.

It is worth underlining that there is a direct, formative link between how German society commemorated its past and how the country's democratic institutions were formed after the Second World War. As Jarausch analysed accurately, the slow public acknowledgement and commemoration of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime provided key components to the Federal Republic's "inner democratization" (Jarausch 1997). After 1945, the political leadership of the young West German state had grave concerns as to whether the nascent post-war democracy could survive facing the inescapable task to commemorate the Holocaust and to acknowledge the complicity of the overwhelming part of German society with the Nazi dictatorship. As Herf (1997, p. 7) stated, the "inherent tensions between memory and justice on the one hand and democracy on the other would appear to have been one of the central themes of postwar West German history". The resulting moral, legal, and political challenges proved to test the limits of what the young West German Republic was willing or able to tackle publicly. Only with a new generation, finding their political voice in the 1960s (most notably during the student revolt), did Germany's guilt and accountability become more visible in a newly emerging memory culture.

A second cornerstone of learning from the past is the difficult task of addressing past injustices and wrongdoing after a transition to democracy. Regularly, these processes of confronting the painful history of authoritarian rule and its victims take decades to

unfold and are met with stiff resistance from those implicated in crimes under the old regime. Still, acknowledging historical injustices and providing multifaceted entry points for redress is a critical component of the democratization process. Reflecting on the critical task of 'democratizing truth', Henry describes the connection between addressing past injustices and democracy as follows: "the broader conceptualization of transitional justice is instrumental not only for examining the past wrongdoings of established democracies, but also for giving coherence to diverse and competing discourses on colonial injustices" (Henry 2015, p. 1999). Maystorovich Chulio (2022) speaks of "democratising collective memory through forensic exhumations".[1]

In Spain, this reasoning resulted in the so-called *Democratic Memory Law* that came into effect in October 2022 (see: Nayler 2022). After a long period of deliberating, forgetting, and neglecting the Franco regime (on the political right and the left), the current Socialist government took the initiative to address this legacy more fully and openly, almost fifty years after the death of dictator Francisco Franco. The Secretary-General of the Office of the Prime Minister, Félix Bolaños, stated: "No democratic force should have any problems paying tribute to the victims of a dictatorship".[2] This push to acknowledge past injustices led to the *Democratic Memory Law* that, among other initiatives, mandates the government to exhume the bodies of those killed by the fascist regime and buried in unidentified graves. This legal initiative has allowed many local initiatives working towards finding and documenting the over 100,000 estimated civilian victims of Franco's dictatorship to flourish. The *Democratic Memory Law* has not only committed the state to facilitating such acts of truth-finding and victim-recognition under Franco's fascist regime. It has also given voice to marginalized communities and brought recognition to victims of past injustices who have thus far been largely denied recognition in the collective memory of the nation. Normatively, the recognition of past wrongs and victims of authoritarian rule speaks directly to the foundational principles of a democratic political community and its commitment to justice and transparency.

2.2. Civil Society Contestation

The example of recent initiatives in Spain illustrates the second dimension of how collective memory and democracy are conceptually linked. National narratives about the past are critically shaped by political authorities and state institutions. They are regularly established and reproduced from above in order to strengthen national identity and shape the image of the nation. These narratives tend to be heroic in nature and, in their quest for national grandeur, lack an openness to contestation.

It is against this background that Nijhawan et al. (2018) shed light on the way in which collective memory and the contestation of historical narratives can be considered constitutive components of a democratic citizenship regime (see also: McGrattan 2013). Their claim is based on the idea that open, 'multi-directional' (Rothberg 2009) debates about the past and their meaning for contemporary society are indispensable elements of a vibrant democracy. Civil society actors play a decisive role in this process. They can act as 'knowledge generators' when it comes to local history, and they are indispensable in pushing for a plurality of interpretations about what happened in the past. From this perspective, clashes between the official, state-sponsored collective memory of a country and civil-society-based 'memory activism' can be interpreted as vital to a democratic culture.

The FRG is a telling illustration of this argument: grassroots initiatives and local 'memory activism' have been central in transforming the country's memory culture. Without such civil-society-based groups, it would be difficult to understand the transformation that Germany's memory culture regarding the country's Nazi past has undergone over previous decades. Arguably, the plethora of non-state actors engaged in addressing and debating Germany's 20th century has been key in keeping this memory alive and considering its ethnical–political implications for contemporary society. In her comprehensive study of mnemonic actors in post-war Germany, Wüstenberg (2017) shows how civil society actors and their multifaceted challenges to the FRG's official memory culture have had a transfor-

mative effect on the country's democratic culture and its willingness to confront the legacy of the Nazi dictatorship. She analyses the so-called *Geschichtsbewegung* (History Movement) that began setting up local chapters in the early 1980s. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* estimated that in 1992 there existed 192 such organized local groups of 'history activists' (see: Wüstenberg 2010). They were committed to 'Dig Where You Stand' using the local setting as a way to remember the Nazi regime and its crimes. These local chapters formed a network of memory activists that had a considerable effect on institutionalizing a vibrant memory culture at the national scale and steering state mnemonic practices over the years. It is worth noting that a similar dynamic of relying on memory activism has come to shape the collective memory of the East German Communist rule after 1989 (see Albrecht 2017).

3. Divergent Memories in Constructing National Identity: Germany and Poland

In the first step of this empirical analysis, I consider the frequency with which critical components of the 20th century's past have been explicitly referenced in official statements by Germany's and Poland's governing political elites. Here, the focus is on the public discourse interventions by representatives of governing politicians and parties.[3] Over a period of seven years (2015–2022), these discursive statements about the past were coded with a view to their main thematic focus regarding the portrayal of the past and its meaning for the present. Figure 1 provides a general overview of how prominent key reference points are in commemorating the history of the 20th century within the elite discourse of Germany and Poland.

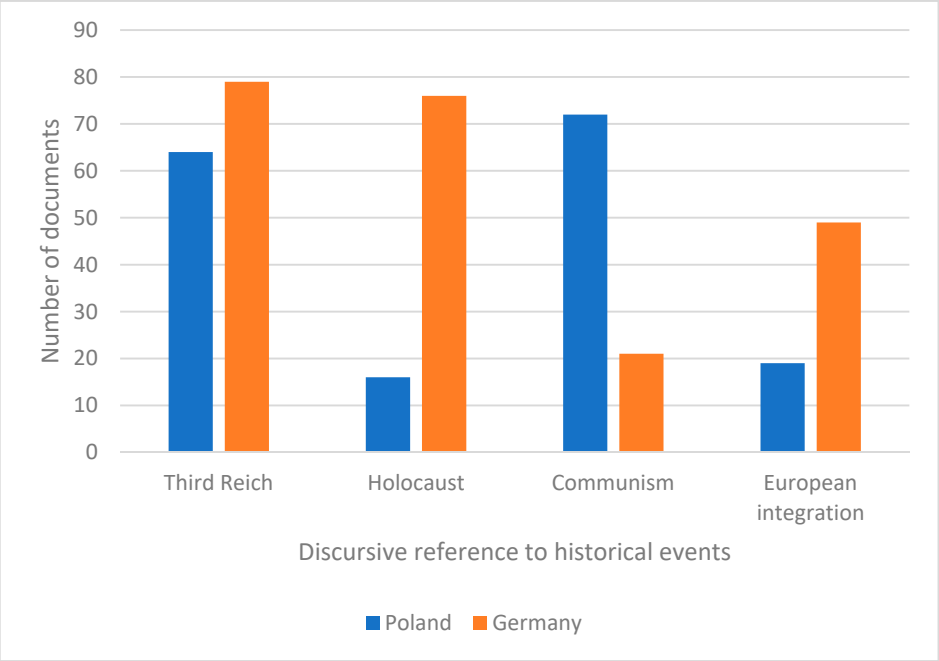

Figure 1. Historical references commemorating the 20th century in Germany's and Poland's elite discourse (2015–2022).

It is not surprising to see that the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust take centre stage in the official, elite-driven depiction of the past in Germany. While the Nazi regime ended almost 80 years ago and is rapidly disappearing as a lived memory, the reference to the crimes of the Nazi regime and what this dictatorship represented still dominates public commemoration. Yet, it is worth underlining that the history of European integration and the European Union now also plays a significant role in the official narration of the country's past. In contrast, the relatively young history of being an EU member state does not feature as significantly in public discourse in Poland. In its historical narrative, the governing elite in Poland focuses squarely on the two dictatorial regimes that dramatically

shaped the fate of Poland in the 20th century. However, in marked contrast to Germany, the reference to the Holocaust is much less prominent (in 2021 and 2022, the Holocaust became more noticeable in elite discourse, but primarily as a form of charging others of misrepresenting the country's past).

This snapshot of what moments or events in the history of the 20th century are referenced in the elite discourse largely confirms what we know about memory politics in both countries: over the past decades, the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust has become an integral part of (West) Germany's post-war political identity (Olick and Levy 1997). In the initial period after 1945, the notion 'zero hour', the myth of an entirely new beginning, provided a politically shrewd justification for the collective amnesia that post-war German society demonstrated with a view to its Nazi past. Yet, gradually, the task of commemorating the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust became a defining mark of the political identity nurtured by new generations in the FRG. In particular during the student unrest in the 1960s, the critical examination of what Germans did during the Third Reich and what could be learned from the catastrophic failure of Germany's interwar democratic experience took on a formative role in the country's political culture. In a painful and politically highly controversial process, the collective memory of National Socialism has steadily become a defining feature of Germany's democratic principles and institutional practices (Kansteiner 2006).

The core elements of Poland's national identity and its foundation in 20th-century memory are inextricably linked to the traumatic experience of the country being occupied, partitioned, or simply deprived of its very existence (Zarycki and Warczok 2020). In this context, Nazi and Soviet occupation represents the climax of 200 years of suppressing and persecuting the Polish nation. I will focus on the implications of this historical narrative at the core of Poland's national identity in the subsequent section of the article. Here, it suffices to point to the relatively minor attention directed at the Holocaust and the fate of Jews in Poland under German occupation. Kapralski (2018, p. e48) observes that "in post-communist Poland the Holocaust has been commemorated on the level of official institutions, rituals of memory, and elitist discourses, but not necessarily remembered on the level of social memory".

It is worth underlining that the relative insignificance of the Holocaust in the country's memory culture also reflects a legacy of Communism that could also be observed in post-war Germany: commemorating Nazism and the Shoah was framed very differently in both German states after 1949. Herf (1997) speaks of a 'divided memory' in both German states. While this commemoration of the Holocaust gradually gained central importance for the Western Federal Republic of Germany (FGR), the Communist German Democratic Republic (GDR)—with its claim to be the 'anti-fascist state'—framed its political identity primarily via narratives of class struggles and the achievements of the working class.

Collective memory is fundamentally shaped by national narratives and the shared national identity that these narratives construct and reproduce. Even in a country that was divided only for 55 years, the memory of the Holocaust took on a decisively different meaning in how this story was told in the Communist East and the Western part of the country. An ideology that claimed to have led the perennial class struggle to its historic conclusion through a final, dramatic fight with fascism did not leave much room for the suffering of Jews during the Shoah. In this narrative, the heroic tale of working class struggles and the fight against Nazi Germany during the 'Great Patriotic War' provides the master narrative of the past (for the Polish context see: Huener 2003). The collective memory of Poland reflects a similar trajectory. The suffering under Soviet and German occupation in Poland as well as the experience of having lived under Soviet rule since 1945 are the decisive reference points in shaping collective memory and the way it is employed in contemporary politics.

3.1. Dominant Historical Narratives in Elite Discourse

In the second step of this analysis, I focus more closely on the key narrative themes based on which the national past is commemorated and provided with meaning in public discourse. Here, the focus moves from what periods or events are addressed to commemorate the past, to the way they are interpreted in discursive practices. Analysing the elite discourse in both countries, the analytical objective is to identify how the account of the past was told with a view to a historical narrative that is meant to resonate with contemporary audiences. The four themes identified in Figure 2[4] represent the dominant ways in which the collective memory of the country is depicted and related to core features of national identity. I will discuss the four themes in turn with a view of how collective memory is mobilized and how core features of both countries' national identity and their meaning in the context of current political realities are addressed.

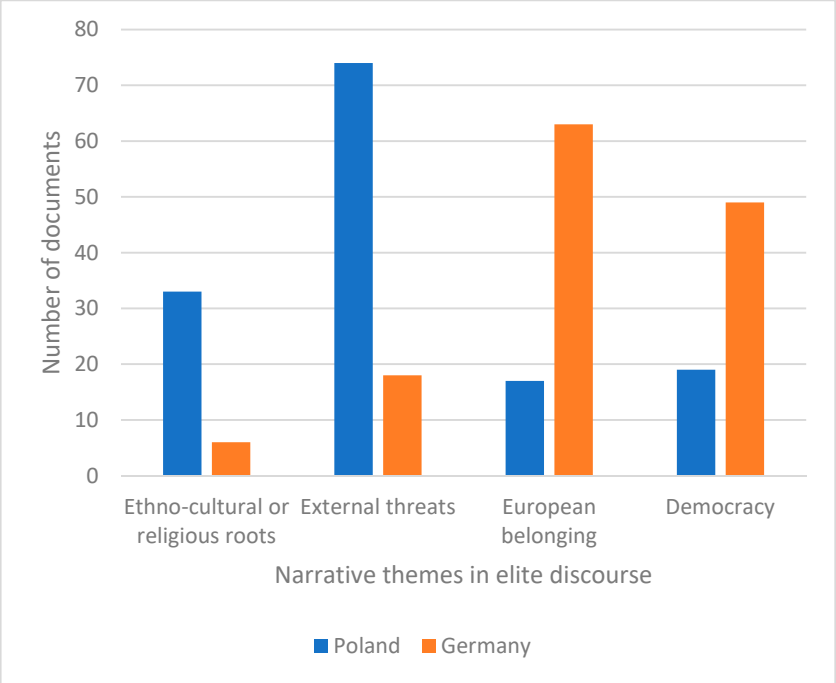

Figure 2. Narrative themes of collective memory in Germany's and Poland's elite discourse (2015–2022).

3.2. Ethno-Cultural and Religious Identity Markers: The Emotionally Charged Nation

It is worth underlining that, while not insignificant, the classical narratives of national identity based on historically rooted ethno-cultural or religious markers do not feature prominently in the Polish context. As I will explain in the next section, if the political elite mobilizes the notion of ethnic, cultural, or religious belonging, it is in close association with other issues such as national perseverance. In the Polish setting, the ethno-cultural or religious identity of the nation is primarily evoked when the resolute defence of the country's independence and sovereignty is called upon. One of the key themes in elite discourse is the resistance to Soviet rule due to the resilience of Catholicism (Byrnes 1996); in this context, religion becomes an integral part of the perennial struggle for national survival. In Germany, however, this reference to the nation's ethnic or cultural roots is widely ignored by the governing elites. Except on the far right, this tradition is perceived to be irrevocably compromised through association with the racist or militaristic legacy of the Third Reich (Diner 2003).

As already alluded to above, the mobilization of a Polish national identity and nationalist feelings first and foremost revolve around the historical experience of victimization and the heroic struggle for national survival in the country's dramatic modern history.

Faced with Austrian, Prussian, and Russian aggression in the 19th century, the country's national poet Adam Mickiewcz coined the image of Poland as the "Christ of Nations" whose suffering would eventually lead to salvation and redemption.[5] This narrative still provides the dominant narrative framework for interpreting and mobilizing Poland's modern history and current political realities.

The present-day challenges that the country has to face are recurrently framed in terms of a paramount loyalty to the beleaguered national community. Jaskułowski et al. (2018) show how this 'obligation towards the nation' is also deeply embedded in Poland's school curricula. The priority assigned to the collective task of defending the independence and integrity of the nation can be seamlessly used to denounce those who are accused of weakening or discrediting the national community caught in a constant struggle for its survival. This logic can be plainly detected in how, over the past years, Poland's political elite has mobilized a nationalist account of the country's history and identity against those who are deemed enemies within. If the culture and religion of a country are depicted as foundational and the national community is simultaneously represented as permanently at risk, disagreement with the officially sanctioned historical narrative can easily be rebuked as disloyal.

In this regard, the issue of properly interpreting the country's 20th-century past has become a controversial issue in domestic politics (Kuisz and Wigura 2020; for commemorating the Communist rule, see: Mark 2010). During the period under investigation in this study, the Polish government under the leadership of the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość PIS) has reacted to 'heretical' historical statements—most notably studies that have highlighted the deeds of Poles collaborating with Germans in the prosecution of Jews—with draconian measures. In 2018, it released an Act on the Institute of National Remembrance, which penalizes public speech attributing responsibility for the Holocaust to Poland or the Polish nation. The so-called 'Memory Laws' and the controversial Article 55a state:

"Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich . . . shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to 3 years." (Law and the Institute of National Remembrance. Article 55a, Clause 1, 2018).

In an amendment to this Act also known as the 'Holocaust Law', any public statement attributing responsibility for the Holocaust to Poland was also outlawed. PIS justified this legal initiative by pointing to its responsibility to protect 'the good name of the nation' (Hackmann 2018). Its mnemonic policy seeks to sanction a particular vision of the country's history and to silence critical voices questioning this narrative. Dissent on historical issues sensitive to national identity is considered illegitimate or even treasonous. In his study of Hungary and Poland, Vermeersch (2019, p. 113) observes: "Recent developments in national commemoration and remembrance practices in the region have enabled not only the glorification of the national past but also the suppression of 'heretical' interpretations of specific traumatic historical episodes".

It is important to underline that such a law has had a chilling effect on some civil society groups or individual scholars and intellectuals who have challenged the dominant, state-sanctioned historical narrative (such as university professors; see: Gessen 2021; Grabowski 2016). After considerable domestic and international protest, the PIS government downgraded the crime of the Law from a criminal to a civil offense. Yet, the aspiration of the current political elite to regulate and prescribe how the past is supposed to be interpreted remains in place.

3.3. External Threats: Heroism and Victimhood

The dominant narrative deeply entrenched within Polish commemorations of the past and regularly mobilized by the political elite is one of victimhood and heroism in confronting the devastating effects of outside aggression. Poland's national memory is critically shaped by a deep sense of suffering—and the resilience to have survived as a

nation against all odds. In its modern history, Poland was repeatedly divided up by major European powers and even disappeared from the map of Europe for over a century. Most dramatically, Poland was violently occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 20th century. Poland was the space where the majority of the crimes associated with the Holocaust took place. The Nazi regime murdered three million Polish Jews as well as three million non-Jewish Poles. Genocidal acts were also committed by the occupying Soviets: the massacre of Katyn (Paul 1991) in which close to 22,000 Polish military officers and prisoners from the intelligentsia and socio-political elite of the country were murdered, has a central place in commemorating the suffering inflicted on Poland by its outside tormenters. It is a constitutive component of a national identity rooted in the narrative of constant suffering throughout its history and of the strength to persevere in spite of what the country had to endure.

Yet, in recent years, the use of history for the purpose of shaping the contemporary political realities in Poland has taken a more overt and aggressive tone since PIS under Jarosław Kaczyński took power in 2015. History is strictly interpreted and publicly celebrated in nationalistic terms, founded upon a narrative in which critical questions are regularly portrayed as an illegitimate attempt to depict the nation in a negative light. Supporting the party's nationalist agenda, the commemoration of the past through state-sponsored channels and sympathetic media has strongly focused on the heroic efforts of Poles fighting against its German and Soviet invaders. The sacrifices made in these endeavours are primarily depicted in glorified accounts of the resistance.[6]

This reference to the Third Reich takes on a different meaning in the discursive practice of Germany's political elite. Noticeably, any echo of heroism is missing from the historical narratives reproduced by Germany's traditional political elites. In a fundamental sense, the commemorated past is the opposite to heroic, born of a recognition of utter failure and humiliation resulting from the crimes of the Nazi regime. After the horror of the Third Reich, the celebratory tone in recounting the nation's history is widely gone. It has been replaced with a widespread scepticism towards heroic tales and a commitment to critical inspection of what facilitated the rise of a dictatorial, fascist regime in Germany.

Still, a word of caution is in place here: in recent years, the right-wing, anti-immigrant party "Alternative für Deutschland" (Alternative for Germany; AfD) has put much political effort into questioning and delegitimizing the collective memory associated with the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. When the AfD entered the federal parliament as the first far-right nationalist party in the FRG's history in 2017, it immediately focussed on challenging the centrality of this memory for contemporary Germany. As the co-leader of the AfD, Alexander Gauland declared in 2018: "Hitler and the Nazis are just bird shit in more than 1000 years of successful German history." In the same spirit, *Björn Höcke*, a leading figure and prominent representative of the '*völkische*' (ethno-nationalist) group in the party, insinuated, "that Germans were the 'only people in the world who planted a memorial of shame in the heart of their capital'"[7]. This comment was made in reference to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which is located in Berlin.

The overall impact on Germany's memory politics is ambivalent: for the first time in the FRG's post-war history, we have a party in the federal Parliament that calls for an end to the 'cult of shame' associated with the commemoration of the Nazi regime. The ascent of this right-wing party coincides with a period in which a growing fraction of German society questions the centrality of this history. According to a 2020 survey by the weekly Die Zeit[8], more than half of the respondents (53%) agreed fully or partly with the statement that it is time to bring the focus on the memory of national socialism to an end (in German: "einen Schlusstrich ziehen").

At the same time, the electoral support for the AfD and its nationalist ideology, in particular, in the country's eastern, formerly Communist *Länder* (states), has sparked a more robust public commitment to using the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in the current fight for the protection of democracy. In recent prominent speeches by Germany's highest representatives (former Chancellor Merkel and President Steinmeier),[9] references to

the resurgence of anti-Semitism and racism have taken centre stage in commemorating the Holocaust and the crimes of the Third Reich. As the memory of this history is transformed from a lived and social memory to a 'cultural memory' (Assmann 2011), its political meaning for the present is being renegotiated and given new meaning as a response to a rise in intolerance, racism, and political extremism on the right.

3.4. European Belonging and Popular Sovereignty

In this narrative of a fierce struggle for independence and suffering, the social construction of outside and inside enemies plays a critical role (Csehi and Zgut 2021; Verovšek 2021). While Poland as a member state of the EU and NATO might not currently be involved in a fight for national survival, the theme of a continuous existential threat to the nation looms prominently in elite discourse. The strength and pride of the Polish national community are primarily depicted with reference to the enemies portrayed as threatening the country. In this respect, current political elites employ historical narratives of independence and sovereignty that are closely associated with an emotionally charged plea for loyalty to the country (see: Betz and Oswald 2022). Nationalist sentiments are mobilized as an integral part of this friend–foe dichotomy.

More recently, the Russian war in Ukraine has given new relevance to this narrative. Yet, during the time period subject to this investigation, it is manifest that the leadership of PIS does not only represent Russia as the only enemy that the Polish nation is called upon to resist. Under the current government, the country's post-Communist ideal to 'return to Europe' after Soviet rule has largely been replaced by a position highly critical of the process of European integration and the EU itself (Karolewski and Benedikter 2017). Based on well-entrenched historical narratives, the political elite in Poland has turned to an aggressive form of Euroscepticism, accusing Brussels of illegitimate outside interference and of constituting a fundamental threat to the country's sovereignty (Styczyńska 2017).[10] Indeed, in discursively linking tropes in the national historical narrative, the EU is regularly compared to the Soviet Union. In the same vein, the liberalism that is associated with Brussels is accused of representing the Communist ideology (Petrović et al. 2022). The official narration of the past is designed to foreground the defence of national sovereignty as the primary reason for the state. The EU is put under general suspicion of thwarting this overarching goal.

In his article on current memory politics in Hungary and Poland, Vermeersch (2019) notes a sharp turn away from an endorsement of a common European heritage (dominant in the immediate post-Communist phase) to a commemoration of the past that focuses on national sovereignty and glory. One can speak of a push towards 're-nationalizing' the country's mnemonic policy with critical implications for how the government in Warsaw recalibrates its international relations. In Europe, this shift under nationalist auspices entails a more aggressive attitude towards Russia and a persistently articulated scepticism regarding European integration. Despite high popular support for the EU, the Polish government has begun to depict the EU as the 'other' opposed to the genuine Polish national community (O'Neal 2017). Again, the anti-EU rhetoric is deeply steeped in historical narratives: in 2021, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PIS, suggested in an interview that Germany intends to build a 'Fourth Reich' on the basis of the EU with the intention to exert control over the continent.[11] This historical narrative of victimhood is also strategically used to push German authorities to take responsibility for the damage inflicted upon Poland by Nazi Germany during WWII in the form of massive reparation payments (USD 1.4 trillion).

Beyond inflammatory rhetoric, the conflict with the EU revolves around competing visions of how a democratic polity should be organized and what the proper balance between the supranational authority of the EU and the sovereign rights of the member states should be. In its struggle with the EU over judicial reforms that Brussels characterizes as an illegitimate constraint on the independence of the judiciary,[12] Poland's governing party

argues for a supreme authority vested in a united and sovereign nation. The implications of this position for democracy will be explored in the subsequent section.

The dominant narrative of Germany's political elite cannot be further removed from this perspective promoted by leading figures of the Polish government. The Federal Republic of Germany is an elucidating case when it comes to addressing the connection between collective memory, national identity, and democracy: Germany's post-war national identity is inextricably linked to the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust. The FRG's commitment to integrate the country into the community of Western democracies and reimagine the national community as European in nature has been framed in terms of a lesson learned from the country's 20th-century history (Wüstenberg and Art 2008). In this respect, Germany's gradual democratization after 1945 cannot be disassociated from the historical narratives promoting political responsibility regarding the legacy of the Nazi past. Commemorating the pre-1945 period has been both a form of assuming responsibility for past injustices and a practice of guiding the fragile post-war democracy in terms of its fundamental ethical–political principles. In Verovšek's (2020) analysis, the memory of the war has led to a rupture in parts of Europe introducing a radically new understanding of the relationship between state, community, and democracy.

3.5. Popular Sovereignty versus Rights-Based Democracy

However, it is not only the deepening commitment of the FRG's political elite to commemorating the country's Nazi past that has proven instrumental in democratizing society. Civil society commemorative practices have similarly contributed to making modern German society more alert and resistant to forms of exclusivist nationalism or racism. The memory of totalitarian rule and the collapse of democracy in particular during the interwar period instilled a shared commitment towards defending the fundamental values of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Of central importance is the protection of inalienable rights for individuals and groups as well as a commitment to the division of power as a foundation of liberal democracy. One component in this growing willingness to learn from the difficult past that has proven to be particularly pronounced in West Germany is the critical re-evaluation of nationalism and its relationship to democracy.

The drive towards unifying the continent has been based on the sobering recognition of the continent's failure to have prevented the horror and destruction that shaped the first part of the 20th century. What initially united political and civil society leaders after the Second World War was the realisation that dramatic changes in the political landscape of Europe needed to happen in order to secure peace and collaboration across national boundaries. Given the experience of the First World War and the Third Reich, nationalism in its exclusionary iteration has become closely associated with genuine threats to a democratic society. The FRG's unwavering commitment to European integration and to building a meaningful political community at the European level is intimately connected to both the responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime and the recognition of the destructive forces unleashed by extreme forms of nationalism. The project of post-war European unification was born out of an existential crisis into which nationalism, war, and genocide had thrust the continent (Assmann 2011). This commemoration of nationalism and authoritarianism is constitutive of the grand European narrative of building peace on the continent, a political identity widely shared in the FRD.

Democracy is also a key theme in the discourse of Poland's political elite, yet it takes on a markedly different meaning as compared to the German context. The discourse of the country's political elite is full of references to 'freedom' and 'democracy', in particular, with reference to the historical experience of authoritarian Communism. However, in line with the historically justified emphasis on protecting the country's sovereign rights, the mode of democratic rule evoked is regularly framed in terms of 'popular sovereignty'. Under populist–nationalist auspices, the rhetorical appeal to basic democratic principles does not necessarily translate into constitutional processes facilitating greater degrees of democratic participation and accountability in the liberal tradition (Orgad and Koopmans

2022). Rather, the populist–nationalist promise is to advance a democratic practice that is substantially different from the one guiding liberal, parliamentary democracy. In an unmediated way, the populist defence of popular sovereignty is to give voice to a united, homogenous entity called the 'people' (Schmidtke 2021). Corrias (2016) describes this form of representation as a 'politics of immediacy' that seeks to affirm the power of the 'people' demonstrating their sovereign rights (for instance, at rallies, demonstrations, referenda, etc.). In this sovereigntist discourse, it is the 'will of the people' that seeks to defend the independence and self-determination of the nation.

Again, the country's political elites frame historical narratives in a way to make more urgent the goal of fostering a unified nation depicted as being in a state of permanent existential threat and in need of unity, a unity that a mere rights-based regime cannot ensure. Against the background of a constant public display of the country's alleged enemies, the established decision-making procedures in liberal democracies are persistently represented as a weakness and a genuine threat to the historically mandated need for an undivided nation (Urbinati 2019). These ideas have found their way into concrete constitutional reforms. From a comparative perspective, Larsen (2021) speaks of the EU as an assemblage of constitutionalist regimes, a 'fundamental constitutional asymmetry' that reflects the historical circumstances under which democracies in Europe came into being. He distinguishes 'post-fascist constitutionalism' from 'post-communist constitutionalism', depicting their specificity with a view to their respective political associations with the project of European integration and as it relates to the political history of the country (see also: Bugarič 2015; Puchalska 2011).

At this point, a brief conceptual reflection might be helpful: the populist–nationalist propensity of presenting politicians or governments as the sole defenders of the 'rights of the people' demonstrates an important sympathy for forms of authoritarian governance. In their quest to defend the interests of the people against what they portray as corrupt or ineffective modes of decision making in liberal democracy, nationalist populists tend to reference a superior legitimacy that rests directly with the 'people' and is detached from the procedural logic of liberal democracy (Schmidtke 2023). This partial endorsement of 'illiberal democracy' reflects Carl Schmitt's (2005) inter-war criticism of parliamentary democracy in which politics is considered as a permanent 'state of exception', an existential crisis of the political community. In this logic, protecting the integrity and interests of the national community requires political decisions that liberal rule-based democracies are portrayed as being unable or unwilling to provide.

Here, the difference from the Western European tradition becomes manifest: in the discourse of the current political elite in Poland, freedom and democracy are primarily defined by the independence and empowerment of the national community and not as a set of constitutionally enshrined individual rights. In contrast to the West's liberal conception of internationally constrained democracy rooted in the protection of individual and minority rights, large parts of society and the political elite in Central Europe have endorsed an illiberal version centred on the popular sovereignty of the nation.

4. Conclusions

We are currently at a crossroads with a view to the forces shaping the collective meaning of the dramatic 20th century and its meaning for current generations. When it comes to the Second World War and the Holocaust, the last eyewitnesses are disappearing and the memory of these events will shortly have to rely exclusively on a memory reproduced by institutions and, significantly, state authorities. Next to the political appropriation by political actors, the resurgence of this memory in public discourse is closely associated with this watershed moment when the social memory becomes enshrined into 'cultural memory' (Assmann 2011).

We also face a different kind of critical turning point with respect to collective memory and the project of European integration on the continent. The post-war permissive consensus granting European integration with solid political legitimacy and authority has

eroded in recent decades. The memory of the War and the Shoah as the cornerstones of the EU's political identity has either substantially weakened or it no longer commands the same authority as a fundamental reference point in guiding political norms and principles. New ways of narrating Europe's recent past in a nationalist key have emerged primarily, albeit not exclusively in CEE filling the void left behind by the fading narrative plausibility of the 'European story'. The resurgence of populist–nationalist parties across the continent is deeply couched in a new appropriation of historical narratives based on national mythologies and traumas.

Beyond simply diagnosing distinct modes of memory politics across Europe, this article has developed a more specific argument about the link between collective memory and democracy. The focus on the victim status of CEE countries and the related heroization of the national resurgence after the collapse of Communism has shaped a distinct legacy of interpreting core elements of democratic rule. The promise of freedom and democracy in Poland is primarily narrated as the liberation from foreign rule and domination. It is built around an antagonistic commitment to defending national sovereignty in which a unified, homogenous nation is of pivotal significance. In contrast, in Germany, the memory of fascism and the Holocaust has established a more rights-based approach to democracy and an emphasis on the institutional arrangements guarding fundamental protections and entitlements of the individual in the liberal tradition.

The key hypothesis suggests a deep, culturally framed division of Europe rooted in a popular and state-sponsored way of promoting a historically rooted sense of identity and normative principles in CEE that is not easily compatible with the Western model of liberal democracy. If the protection and empowerment of the nation, tormented in modern history, is the primary goal for the political community, a procedural, rules-based democratic order is seen with suspicion or outright contempt. In countries like Hungary and Poland, the governing parties have recurrently mobilized a nationalist historical narrative that has a propensity to favour forms of popular sovereignty. In a populist vein, charismatic leaders claim to represent the 'people'—depicted as existentially threatened by outside forces—directly. Elite-driven historical narratives offer the discursive environment in which the friend–foe confrontation is mobilized to justify a more aggressive and authoritarian defence of the country's national sovereignty.

Furthermore, the competing narratives on the respective country's history and identity have a related effect on democratic culture. If closely prescribed and controlled by state authorities (and enforced by legal regulations), mnemonic practices can become detrimental to civil society engagement and an open, democratic public debate. Misztal (2005) has shown how memory can become a veritable threat to a democratic community. What we have recently witnessed in Poland—and other countries in Europe—is an overt attempt to weaponize history under nationalistic auspices for domestic and international purposes. In this respect, Europe's evolving East–West divide might have deeper cultural roots and more emotional, identity-driven disputes than the disagreement over international affairs or the proper role of the judiciary in the democratic system. Yet, it is important to underline that one cannot simply explain the current threats to democracy with reference to an oversimplified rupture between Eastern and Western Europe. Clearly, there are also significant challenges to democracy in Germany or other parts of Western Europe that are primarily associated with the resurgence of the nationalist–populist right across the continent. Irrespective of national context, historical narratives can be both a unifying force on the European continent and a divisive one deepening friction along national(ist) lines. Currently, a significant number of Central Eastern European political elites have begun to use the dramatic and often traumatic history of the 20th century to promote their nationalist–populist agenda and challenge the Europeanist vision of the post-war decades.

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Notes

1 This is a dynamic that is manifest, for instance, in the discovery of Indigenous children in unmarked graves near former residential schools in various locations throughout Canada (see MacDonald 2019).

2 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Memory_Law#:~:text=PSOE%20politician%20and%20Secretary%2DGeneral,however%2C%20has%20pledged%20to%20repeal (accessed on 14 March 2023).

3 This empirical analysis drew on a total of 342 documents (173 for Germany and 169 for Poland) representing parliamentary debates, public speeches, programmatic announcements (such as in party publications), and media statements addressing issues of the respective country's past. These documents were coded according to the main subject of the historical reference made (Figure 1) and, in a second more interpretative step, to the dominant narrative interpreting this past (Figure 2). Some documents were coded for several categories as they represent multiple historical narratives. Methodologically, this article relies on the tradition of interpretative, critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1993).

4 Here, the overall number of articles included in Figure 2 is smaller than in Figure 1 as central themes interpreting the past could not always be detected.

5 In this respect, the 19th century is the primary historical reference point for contemporary Polish national identity; see Eile (2000).

6 A good example is the Warsaw Rising Museum (opened in 2004), which describes the unequal fight between the citizens of the Polish Capital and the occupying German troops in 1944.

7 BBC: German fury at AfD Hoecke's Holovcaust memorial remark; https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38661621 accessed on 12 April 2023.

8 Die Zeit, Erinnerungskultur: Das Ende der Selbstgewissheit ('Memory Culture: The End of Self-Certitude; April 2020) https://www.zeit.de/zustimmung?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.zeit.de%2F2020%2F19%2Ferinnerungskultur-nationalsozialismus-aufarbeitung-deutschland-rechtsextremismus-umfrage (accessed on 4 April 2023).

9 For instance, President Steinmeier's speech delivered on 23 January 2020; for the full text of the speech, see: https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2020/01/200123-World-Holocaust-Forum-Yad-Vashem.html (accessed on 1 April 2023).

10 This latently anti-European attitude of the current Polish government can also be interpreted as a reaction to a long tradition in Western European memory politics of treating Eastern Europeans as subaltern; see: Mälksoo (2009).

11 See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/poland-jarosaw-kaczynski-germany-eu-fourth-reich (accessed on 28 March 2023).

12 In the interpretation of the Polish opposition and the EU, the entire judicial system including the Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court are threatened in their integrity by direct political interference (see the statement of the European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5367; accessed on 2 April 2023).

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