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A SURPRISING FALL FROM GRACE?

REMARKS ABOUT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION OF 19 SEPTEMBER 2019 ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EUROPEAN REMEMBRANCE FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE



DERELICTION OF DUTY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM

During a European Parliament (EP) Culture Committee hearing in September 2015 about intercultural dialogue, Barry van Driel¹ spoke about the results of a study that revealed a sharp decline in young people's knowledge of the Holocaust.² This was followed, just a few weeks after the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, by the adoption of the *Report on the role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting EU fundamental values*³. However, this report makes no mention whatsoever of the fight against anti-Semitism⁴. Debates held in the wake of the Paris attacks focused mainly on hardening domestic policy and once again downplayed anti-Semitism as a non-European ideology imported from the Islamic world. As a corollary of this, it was decided that anti-Semitism was covered by the phrase "all forms of discrimination and racism" and therefore did not need to be mentioned specifically in the intercultural dialogue report.

The EP's 2016 dereliction of its basic political duty to combat anti-Semitism totally escaped the attention of the media. Even the worthier paragraphs of its recent resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe⁵ make no mention of the fight against anti-Semitism, despite the resolution being specifically intended to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. In Article 7, the European Parliament states that it "[c]ondemns historical revisionism and the glorification of Nazi collaborators in some EU Member States; is deeply concerned about the increasing acceptance of radical ideologies and the reversion to fascism, racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance in the European Union, and is troubled by reports in some Member States of collusion between political leaders, political parties and law enforcement bodies and the radical, racist and xenophobic movements of different political denominations; calls on the Member States to condemn such acts in the strongest way possible as they undermine the EU values, of peace, freedom and democracy."⁶

EIGHTY YEARS AFTER THE START OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, FASCISM IS HIDDEN BEHIND ANTI-COMMUNISM

The resolution of 19 September 2019 was based on drafts penned by the Group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR Group) and the European People's Party (EPP).⁷ Representative of the politicians who tabled this resolution are the Lithuanian MEP and former defence minister Rasa Juknevičiene (for the EPP), and Anna Fortyga, a member of the Polish Law and Justice party (PiS) (for the ECR Group), who served as Poland's foreign minister until 2007. Both are co-founders of an intergroup that is committed to implementing the resolution.

After negotiations with Social Democrats and Liberals, the *resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe* was adopted by a large majority⁸, ranging from the far right to the Greens. No fewer than 535 MEPs (82% of the total) voted for the resolution, while just 66 (10%) voted against, including all but two members of the left-wing GUE/NGL Group, who joined 52 others (8%) in abstaining.⁹

The resolution's *citations* draw on historical policy statements and resolutions passed by EU institutions and Member States. These introductory lines alone read like a history of a mutating totalitarian doctrine, equating Nazism with Stalinism. For whereas 23 August 2008, with intolerable relativisation, was proclaimed the "European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism"; three years later it had come to be known as the "European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes". By 2018, seven years after that, 23 August had become the opportunity to issue a joint statement of EU Member State government representatives "to commemorate the victims of communism". So it took just 10 years to turn relativisations about German fascism until 1945 into pure anti-communism.

The resolution's second *recital*¹⁰ lays down the following account of how World War II began: "*whereas 80 years ago on 23 August 1939, the communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a Treaty of Non-Aggression, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its secret protocols, dividing Europe and*

the territories of independent states between the two totalitarian regimes and grouping them into spheres of interest, which paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War;"¹¹

While this version of history given in a political document is coloured by a bitter clash between contemporary Polish and Russian history policy¹², it also has its roots in Western Europeans' stubborn ignorance of Eastern European debates about history and history policies being implemented there. Meanwhile, revanchists, right-wing extremists and dyed-in-the-wool (principally West German) anti-communists, look on with glee. These political strategies and the struggle for their corresponding narratives began immediately after the war, as a collective ploy to ward off guilt. Against this background noise, the slant of comments made on the current dispute between the Polish and Russian governments on how to commemorate the Holocaust is often only decidedly Western European.¹³

WILLY BRANDT'S 'GENUFLECTION' IN WARSAW FROM A POLISH PERSPECTIVE

A shocking 48% of citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany found that German Chancellor Willy Brandt went too far in falling to his knees in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970. By contrast, to begin with, it was totally unclear to Polish society whether the gesture of reconciliation was aimed at Jewish resistance in 1943 or the Warsaw Uprising in 1944.¹⁴ In 1970, socialist Poland switched to embracing the hegemonic Western European celebration of forgiveness of all Poles, among other things in light of the lengthy failure to recognise the Oder-Neisse line.¹⁵ Yet in 2011, Adam Krzemiński made waves throughout Western Europe when he wrote: "*Willy Brandt's historical gesture undoubtedly has a greater impact in Germany and other Western countries than it does in Poland. Shortly after the Berlin Wall came down, understandably more was said in Poland about Katyn and all the other places never spoken about where Poles were massacred than about the long-ritualised state commemoration of the genocide at Auschwitz. A few hundred metres away from the transshipment centre and the memorial commemorating the 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto who were transported from Danzig (now Gdańsk) railway station to the gas chambers in Treblinka, there is now*

a monument to the more than one million Poles who vanished into Stalin's labour camps in 1939. Although this monument was not put up to 'compete' with the transhipment centre, that is how its placement is sometimes viewed, especially since the 1987 quarrel about the crosses erected in the gravel pit next to Auschwitz concentration camp had finally made the Polish-Jewish 'contention for victim status' apparent even outside Poland. The problem is that many Poles are convinced that the global community regards them as 'second-class victims', because in cultural memory there is only room for one, 'absolute victim', those who died in the Shoah."¹⁶

BUILDING BLOCKS OF A STATE HISTORY POLICY IN EASTERN EUROPE

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, in Riga, which ignores the end of the Second World War, highlights 50 years of occupation from 1940 to 1991, starting with the Red Army's invasion of the Baltic on 15 and 16 June 1940. In this account of history, Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 fades into the background, although Riga then became the administrative seat of the Germans' Commissioner General for the General District of Latvia. Jews from Berlin, Vienna and Theresienstadt were sent to the Riga Ghetto and several concentration camps. Between 30 November and 9 December 1941 alone, 27,500 Jewish compatriots were murdered. However, Latvia denies responsibility for collaborating with German Nazis.

A similar history policy of deflecting guilt was based on the 2018 History Act in Poland, which states that *"The Polish nation has no responsibility or responsibility (...) for Nazi crimes."* This law has rightly caused horror among Polish and European historians and Jewish organisations because it also means that reappraisals that uncover collaborations and so on can be punished.¹⁷

WHY ARE HISTORICAL FACTS BEING CORRUPTED ACROSS EUROPE?

The 2019 resolution makes no mention whatsoever of the 24 million deaths that the Soviet Union and the other Allies suffered liberating Europe from Nazi terror after the German Army invaded. Mentioning Auschwitz in the 2019 resolution without noting the liberating role played by the Red Army is a falsification of history.¹⁸

But an incomplete historiography borne by anti-communist sentiment is not the only problem with the current resolution. Swept along by a preoccupation with relativising responsibility and guilt for the crimes of the Second World War, the adopted text legitimises bans on communist organisations and the repression of leftist organisations in the post-war years. Nobody should be under any illusion that the resolution's reassessment of history is merely a paper exercise. The people who tabled the resolution (see above) are planning a conference to clarify why in their view the Second World War did not end in May 1945.

INTERMEZZO: AN ARCHITECTURAL SIMILE OF TOTALITARIANISM – THE HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY IN BRUSSELS

"Yes, we also want to be provocative," chief curator Andrea Mork explained to members¹⁹ of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) just a few days after the adoption of the resolution, as she gave them a tour of the EU museum initiated by the EU institutions which opened in 2016. Arriving in the museum's section on the 20th century, guests are confronted with symmetrical, equally-sized presentations of the dictatorships in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union before the outbreak of the Second World War. Large numbers of young visitors pass through the museum every day, carrying tablets providing background information. However, rather than seeing this equivalent comparison of authoritarian policies in Germany and the Soviet Union as a provocation, they are presented with a presupposed relativisation of German fascism that is not even up for discussion.

Of course, it can be argued that the museum lacks the space to explain everything in detail. The beginning of the story, all about Europe's origins as a cultural area, is told well and closely adheres to research conducted by the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations. Europe is portrayed as a historical mixture of influences from the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa and the northern Mediterranean. Of course, relating a story of migration and integration spanning several thousand years is pretty straightforward. But the narrative starts hitting rockier ground well before the 20th century. The museum's failure to deal with Europe's colonial history is at least as unbearable as its architectural stage management of totalitarianism.

WHERE SHOULD WE BEGIN? – AND WHERE SHOULD WE GO FROM HERE?

The fall from grace represented by the European Parliament's 2019 resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe comes as no surprise. But it definitely needs to be brought home to people! Highlighting the truth should be our top priority. Leftists can take their lead from the traditions of a denationalised history workshop and transnational research that informed the regional and scientific assessment of Nazism in the 1970s and continued to shape it starting in the 1990s.

To counter the history policy of the EU institutions, which is dominated by totalitarianism and anti-communism, we can fall back on a wide range of regional approaches. For a long time now, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS) Brussels Office has been doing political education work on a critical approach to history, working alongside the parliamentary group. This also gave rise to the idea of developing alternative tours of the House of European History. We have to really want this, and develop and finance it, if we are to do justice to the important task faced by the Left, to intervene constructively in debates about history. Even if this never used to be a very important domain of political confrontation, it certainly is now! And 8./9. May 2020 is just around the corner.



NOTES DE FIN

- 1 Material from the hearing on *Intercultural dialogue and education for mutual understanding* from Barry van Driel of the International Association for Intercultural Education: see “The example of Holocaust Education” on slide 3, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/87329/VanDrielPresentation15092015.pdf>; see also Barry van Driel (2015), *Teaching about and teaching through the Holocaust: insights from (social) psychology*, in: Zehavit Gross and Doyle Stevick (eds), *As the Witnesses Fall Silent: 21st Century Holocaust Education in Curriculum, Policy and Practice*, Springer, pp. 95107.
- 2 Van Driel also criticised a complete lack of sensitivity in selecting and training teachers, as well as the fact that educators’ intercultural skills are not checked in a number of European countries. His extensive findings show that the multicultural continent of Europe offers neither intercultural competence nor multilingualism, either as study options or training criteria.
- 3 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0005_EN.html.
- 4 Unfortunately, the unequivocal topicalisation and mention of the fight against anti-Semitism was removed from an amendment tabled by Martina Michels, the GUE/NGL shadow rapporteur in this instance, even though it had originally been adopted in compromise 27. A non-differentiating concept of racism was included in its place. There was a more comparable process that same year at the beginning of the legislature in the European Parliament when an attempt was made to establish an intergroup working party to combat anti-Semitism. The argument made at the time was that its establishment was unnecessary because Parliament already has a working group that deals with racism in general.
- 5 Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe – European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP); https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.pdf).
- 6 *ibid.*, Article 7
- 7 The EPP’s original motion is available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0097_EN.html.
- 8 Here are the drafts submitted by the EPP, the ECR Group, the Social Democrats and the Liberals: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html.
- 9 According to p. 24 f. of the Minutes of proceedings, Dietmar Köster was the only German Social Democrat to vote against the resolution, along with the independent MEP Martin Sonneborn; https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PV-9-2019-09-19-RCV_EN.pdf.
- 10 Motions for resolutions by the European Parliament, or resolutions for short, serve as recommendations to the European Commission and assign work or set out legislative initiatives to be planned. The way they are structured, the citations list key international and European documents or events that predated the contents of the current resolution. This is followed by ‘recitals’ (A ... Z), which lay a socio-analytical basis but also present political assessments of history and current events, which supposedly underpin the need for the content of the resolution. The subsequent points, numbered 1 to x, set out the actual content of the resolution along with its conclusions for the work to be done by the EU institutions.
- 11 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.pdf, p. 2.
- 12 “The Fifth World Holocaust Forum at Yad Vashem is intended to take the gloss off solemnity in Auschwitz,” said Adam Krzemiński in conversation with Dirk-Oliver Heckmann on 23 January 2020.
- 13 This is just one example, but it is quite typical: Friedrich Schmidt (2019), *Putin und der zweite Weltkrieg* (Putin and the Second World War) (in German), 27 December 2019; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/putin-legt-sich-durch-historische-umdeutungen-mit-polen-an-16553506.html> (in German).
- 14 Adam Krzemiński, *Der Kniefall. Warschau als Erinnerungsort deutsch-polnischer Geschichte* (Brandt’s Genuflection. Warsaw as a memorial site for German-Polish history), in: *Merkur* 54 (November 2000), Vol. 11, pp. 10771088.
- 15 See Corinna Felsch and Magdalena Latkowska (2011), *Brief der (Polnischen) Bischöfe und Willy Brandts Kniefall. Verfrühte Helden? – Deutsch-Polnische Erinnerungsorte* (Letter from (Polish) bishops and Willy Brandt’s genuflection: premature heroes in German-Polish memorial sites?) (in German), pp. 396414.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 1088.
- 17 Stephan Fischer (2018), *Polnisches Geschichtsgesetz verabschiedet* (Polish History Act Adopted) (in German), in: *Neues Deutschland*, 1 February 2018; <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1078133.nazi-verbrechen-in-polen-polnisches-geschichtsgesetz-verabschiedet.html> (in German).

- 18 *“Such distortions and omissions can never form the basis for a ‘common memory’, much less a shared history curriculum for schools, as the motion recommends. Nor can they serve as the platform for a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes. Even less so may they be used to justify the removal of monuments and memorial sites like parks, squares, streets, etc. in the name of the fight against an undefined totalitarianism, which in reality provides an excuse to erase unequivocal lessons of history and wipe out the commemoration of those who sacrificed their lives for the victory over fascism.”* This was the sentiment expressed by politicians and scientists from the Transform Europe Network, echoing the criticism expressed by the International Federation of Resistance Fighters – Association of Anti-Fascists (FIR) on 23 September 2019. See: Walter Baier, Luciana Castellina and Guido Liguori (2019), *Die Vergangenheit korrekt erinnern* (How to Commemorate the Past Correctly) (in German), 5 October 2019; <https://europa.blog/die-vergangenheit-europas-korrekt-erinnern/> (in German).
- 19 The author took part in the museum tour.

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