

# Remembering to forget?

## Memory and democracy in Italy and Germany

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### Abstract

Since the end of the Second World War, controversies surrounding the question of the right format of remembrance and public commemoration of the experience of Nazism/Fascism have troubled politics and society everywhere in Europe. Discussions have been particularly dramatic in the two successor states of the Nazi/Fascist regime where the difficulty of doing justice to different categories of victims and the conscious selection of what has to be publicly remembered and celebrated, has always been a thorny issue, reflecting the general social and political divisions present in both societies.

This paper deals with the question of how the experience of Nazism/Fascism has been remembered publicly in Italy and Germany since 1945. By tracing back discussions on how the Nazi/Fascist past should be remembered and by investigating disputes centring on the question of what should be evoked by establishing a specific calendar of official remembrance days, it scrutinizes the way Italy and Germany have come to terms with their past and consolidated their democracy. The examination of results obtained from qualitative discourse analysis conducted on public speeches by Italian and German political leaders held during commemorative events between 1945 and 2009 then serves as an additional observatory lens through which wider social, political and cultural developments can be analysed and put into context.

**Keywords:** Italy, Germany, Fascism, Nazism, WWII, public commemoration, collective memory

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## Introduction

The way a nation selects what should be publicly remembered or forgotten, the way the past is critically reflected upon and the way interpretations of those past experiences are transmitted from one generation to the next, can tell a lot about the social and political framework that structures contemporary society. It gives indications about the values guiding a nation's post-totalitarian identity formation and the democratic foundations of its political culture. Among all the different *eredità* (inheritances) a previous regime might leave, it is probably the way its memory is being treated by successive generations that can give one of the clearest indications about the state of its democracy. By tracing the development of the creation of a nation specific memory framework it is usually also possible to draw conclusions about the different stages a state goes through during its democratisation process.

The link between democracy and memory has only recently become a field of investigation for political scientists. Most literature on memory has developed outside the mainstream of political science, falling within the realm of cultural studies or sociology. The most noticeable political science exceptions come from studies conducted in democratizing countries.<sup>1</sup> Looking at developments in two countries that have emerged from an undemocratic regime more than 60 years ago and who therefore cannot be called 'democratizing' any more, might however offer valuable insights into the long term processes behind the transformation of history into memory and of the connection between memory and democracy. The direct comparison of two different national realities with a similar history furthermore allows drawing conclusions about factors that might have influenced the different public dealing with the most visible inheritance of the previous regime: its memory.

## Memory and democracy

The idea that there might be a connection between memory and democracy is not new. Karl Jaspers, in his *Vorlesungen über die geistige Situation in Deutschland* (lecture on the intellectual situation in Germany) at the University of Heidelberg in 1945, was one of the first ones to reflect on the connection between the construction of a democratic culture and public reflection on German guilt. His idea that the confrontation with all aspects of the past was the precondition for the acquisition of political freedom and that only the direct confrontation with the past that had caused the material and moral destruction of Europe, could pave the way for a democratic future, was shared by many intellectuals in the post-war years but by no means everybody. Discussions were particularly vivid in the country that had precipitated the rest of Europe into a spiral of violence and devastation. Not only intellectuals but also the German political elite dealt with the problem of memory and democracy. When analysing speeches held in the German Bundestag, it becomes obvious that the question if the confrontation with the political responsibility for the past was undermining or strengthening democracy has been a much debated topic in political circles until today. Those discussions constituted a central thread running right through all parliamentary debates, which became particularly heated whenever new signs of the weakness of the West German post-war

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<sup>1</sup> (see Barahona de Brito et al. (Eds). (2001). *The Politics of Memory—Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Cruz, C. (2000). Identity and persuasion: How nations remember their pasts and make their futures. *World Politics*, 52 (3), pp. 275-312; Bermeo, N. (1992). Democracy and the lessons of dictatorship. *Comparative Politics*, 24 (3), pp. 273-91.

democratic culture emerged.<sup>2</sup> Discussions dominated the public sphere until the 1980s when a shared understanding of the importance to face the past in order to build a democratic future started to emerge.

When it comes to investigating the close relationship between history, memory and democracy, Germany constitutes a prime case study in. The investigation of the physical and political division of the country that had led to the development of two divergent memory cultures allows for a direct confrontation of two different ways of dealing with the same past. The example of the GDR in particular demonstrates clearly how post-totalitarian societies that deny, repress, or narrowly define a past characterised by state-organized violence will continue to bear the signs of the regimes from which they emerge. Similar insights come from the analysis of other countries that have experienced totalitarian dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that it might have been - among other factors – precisely the confrontation with those ‘negative examples’ that have caused a general change from a traditional way of state legitimisation based on positive memories of glory and victory towards a democratic culture of public reflection on a nation’s misdeeds. The wave of public apologies heads of state all over the world are increasingly voicing seem to indicate such an ethical change.<sup>4</sup>

How have Italy and Germany dealt with the memory of the previous regime? Which elements of this initially prevalently individual memory did policy actors decide to institutionalise? Which factors have influenced the construction of the Italian/German nation specific memory framework? Where are similarities and differences in the way history has been transformed into public memory? Can we discover during the course of democratisation of the two countries the above described transformation away from a nation-centred positive memory towards a more complex framework capable of containing positive and negative, joyful and traumatic memories?

### **The construction of Italian and German post-war memory**

WWII has been experienced in a very different way by the various sectors of the Italian population<sup>5</sup> accounting for the variety of antagonistic personal memories that emerged after the end of the war. Despite those different individual memories, two antagonistic but fairly uniform public memories, both centred on a general refusal of responsibility, developed as early as 1943, soon after the armistice on 08 September. One was elaborated by members of the resistance movement, who depicted the fascist regime as the incarnation of evil, presented Italy as the victim of a war perpetrated by Mussolini and Hitler and glorified the role played by the Italian resistance. The other narrative developed in opposition to the antifascist rhetoric and found its political expression in the *L’Uomo Qualunque* movement<sup>6</sup> that was marked by

<sup>2</sup> As for example after the attacks on the Cologne Synagogue in 1959. There was a general consensus among politicians that the new wave of anti-Semitism sweeping through Germany was a sign of the weakness of German democracy due to the missing confrontation with the past (Dubiel, 1999, pp. 81-84).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Rotberg; R. & Thompson, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Truth v. Justice: The morality of Truth Commissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Jelin, E. (2003). *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>4</sup> America apologised for its history of Slavery, Australia for the assassination of Aborigines, the Netherlands for the exploitation of Indonesia, Norway and France for collaboration in the Holocaust.

<sup>5</sup> Soldiers, partisan fighters, apolitical citizens, supporters of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, POWs, members of the Fascist party, victims of deportation, expellees from Istria ... - to name just a few.

<sup>6</sup> On the *L’Uomo Qualunque* movement see Setta, S. (1975). *L’Uomo Qualunque 1944-1948*. Roma: Laterza.

widespread anti-Communist attitudes, lamented the failing of the ‘fascist revolution’,<sup>7</sup> praised the heroism displayed by the Italian soldiers and accused the antifascist forces for having betrayed the nation (Lupo, 2004, p. 370; Focardi, 2003, pp. 52, 53). Due to the political need after the war to demonstrate a clear break with Fascism in order to allow Italy to reintegrate itself into the Western nations and since it furthermore allowed a certain political class to legitimise its claim for the political guidance of the country after 1945, it was the antifascist narrative that got the upper hand, became part of the official rhetoric of most politicians and quickly turned into the dominant public and social memory of the new Italian state (Focardi & Klinkhammer, 2005, p. 115).

Dates marking Italy’s turn away from Fascism (as the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 1943) and the victory of the Resistance (as the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1943) started to get publicly celebrated or were directly turned into national holidays (as the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the day of Italy’s liberation) as early as 1946, anchoring the main pillars of the narrative firmly to public commemoration practices. During those occasions special tribute was paid to the ‘martyrs of the resistance’, who were commemorated as victims of Mussolini’s Fascism alongside soldiers and civilians who had died in the struggle against Nazism (Schwarz, 2003). In public speeches the victims’ loyalty, their sense of duty and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland was underlined. The same values were praised in both groups and no distinction was made between soldiers that had been killed combating alongside the Germans (e.g. in the battle against Montgomery’s army at El Alamein) or against the Germans (e.g. in Cephalonia) (Focardi, 2005, p. 31). During those eulogies usually no reference was made to the Italian active participation in the occupation of foreign territory, their collaboration to the persecution of Jews or to crimes committed by Italian soldiers. On the contrary, the commemorations of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre (on 25 March 1944) or of the bloodbath in Cephalonia (on 8 September 1943) tended to exalt the heroism of the Italian resistance without making any reference to the events that had preceded the mass murder of Italian soldiers and civilians and that might have triggered actions of reprisal by the occupying force in consequence.<sup>8</sup> By calling WWII ‘*la guerra dello straniero*’ (the war of the foreigner)<sup>9</sup>, describing the German occupation as ‘*l’invasione dello straniero*’ (the invasion of strangers) and referring to the civil war during the resistance as ‘*la guerra fratricida imposta dello straniero*’ (the fratricidal war imposed by the foreigners) (De Gasperi, 1951) responsibility was attributed unilaterally to the Germans while Italy’s passive victim status was underlined at the same time.

In Germany, the construction of post-war collective memory followed a very similar pattern, which is maybe not too surprising if one takes into account that post-war society in both countries was still dominated by a world view that had been moulded by either twelve (in the German case) or twenty-one (as in Italy) years of dictatorship. In scholarly debate there is the widespread idea that German politicians said next to nothing about the Nazi past until the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> The analysis of public discourses, however, shows that German political leaders shaped public memory from the earliest post-war days and months. Looking at parliamentary debates in particular, it becomes evident how present the past was. The idea of silence is

<sup>7</sup> A similar idea of ‘a good idea badly carried out’ was widely diffused in Germany in the 1950s (Art, 2006, p. 50).

<sup>8</sup> See Taviani, P. (1954, March 25). Nel decennale del glorioso sacrificio dei 335 caduti alle Ardeatine l'Italia ha esaltato i valori della libertà e della rinascita nazionale. *Il Popolo*. And Avanti! (1953, September 8). Cephalonia. *Avanti!*

<sup>9</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Greifenhagen, M., & Greifenhagen, S. (1993). *Ein schwieriges Vaterland: Zur politischen Kultur im vereinigten Deutschland*. München: List. Or Mitscherlich, A., & Mitscherlich, M. (1967). *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*. München: Piper

particularly misleading if one considers how vocal most Western Germans were when it came to portraying themselves as victims. Most of the population perceived themselves as a community of defeated soldiers, prisoners of war, expellees and war widows who had first been victimised by the Nazi regime and then by the vengeful Allies (Marcuse, 2001, p. 64). This general attitude got clearly reflected in public speeches. Most MPs separated neatly between the general population and the 'criminal regime', turning perpetrators and accomplices into victims. The question of individual or collective responsibility was only touched upon and if then vested in very abstract terms. Paul Löbe's inauguration speech at the first seating of the German Bundestag for example vaguely mentioned a '*Riesenmaß an Schuld*' (a tremendous amount of guilt) but qualified it immediately by employing the passive voice: 'a tremendous amount of guilt that a criminal system as burdened us with' (Löbe, 1949). When talking about victims, he first mentioned German prisoners of war, widows, orphans and expellees, dedicating only one sentence to the war-dead from other countries and not mentioning Jewish victims at all.<sup>11</sup> The concentration on the German victim status and the rejection of collective guilt coupled with frequent references to the misdeeds of other totalitarian regimes (in this case Stalinism), were typical for most speeches in the 1940s and 50s. Konrad Adenauer's<sup>12</sup> (1949) and Theodor Heuss'<sup>13</sup> (1949) inaugural speeches for example follow a very similar line.

Another characteristic of those early speeches is the exclusive concentration on the future. The past was seen as something to be left behind, something that impeded the construction of a democratic society more than fostering it. It was thought that too much memory and justice would infringe the still fragile democracy.<sup>14</sup> The tension between past, present and future and in particular the question of what kind of image Germany wanted to project by remembering officially certain elements of its history, becomes evident when looking at the discussions preceding the choice of the young republic's national remembrance day. Initially the 8<sup>th</sup> of May was favoured, the day of the German capitulation marking the end of the war in 1945. The fact that May 8<sup>th</sup> had been experienced by the majority of the population as a day of defeat (and not as a day of liberation – a discussion that would dominate the 8<sup>th</sup> of May celebrations until the 1990s) and its clear reference to Germany's responsibility for WWII, however outweighed the date's second meaning of being an important milestone in the construction of German democracy (on 08 May 1949 the German Basic Law was passed by the Parliamentary Council).<sup>15</sup> The policy makers' choice to favour the 7<sup>th</sup> of September marking the first session of the *German Bundestag*, clearly reflects the popular wish to leave behind the past and look towards the future

The attempt to avoid any political move that would call the spectres of the past and the tendency to identify with the victims of the war or to count the own nation among the victorious forces (as was the case in Italy) was to a certain extent in both countries the consequence of the inability to take on full responsibility for the crimes of Fascism/Nazism. The avoidance of the question of guilt and the exclusive concentration on national suffering

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<sup>11</sup> The missing reference to Jewish victims in public debates has been illustrated by Olick (1993).

<sup>12</sup> First chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany

<sup>13</sup> First president of the Federal Republic of Germany

<sup>14</sup> This has been the main argument of Herman Lübbe, who in 1983 sustained that keeping silent about the past had been essential for permitting West Germans to construct a functioning civil society after 1945. The idea that silence supports democratisation has been questioned since then.

<sup>15</sup> The 7th of September was replaced in 1954 by the 17<sup>th</sup> of June remembering the 1953 uprising in East Germany before becoming the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, marking the signature of the Treaty of reunion between the two Germans.

can be partly explained with psychological mechanisms. Individual psychology teaches us that suppression and evasion are normal reactions to traumatic experiences and that it takes many years before a guilty memory can surface again. Concentrating on one's own losses is part of this process. Individuals have to be allowed to first work through their own trauma before it is possible to empathize with the one of others. 'Mourning over the offenses and losses oneself has suffered is even a precondition for mourning over the suffering that was inflicted on others' (Wirth, 1997, p. 15). What is true for the individual level seems to be true for the collective level as well.<sup>16</sup>

The avoidance strategy, however, had also a very clear political purpose in both states. German politicians had learned quickly that an open attempt to come to terms with the past antagonized a significant bloc of voters that could make the difference in elections (Herf, 1997, p. 203). As Olick and Levy note: 'Indeed, at this early point, there was a radical disjuncture in many respects between the abilities of the government and of the general population to "come to terms" with the Nazi period' (1997, p. 928).<sup>17</sup> In Italy, the confounding of victims and perpetrators, civilians and soldiers, guilty and innocent, served two political purposes: (1) to portray externally the Italian nation as the innocent victim of either Mussolini or Hitler-Germany in order to facilitate the reintegration of the Italian state into the Western nations and (2) to reconcile internally the different forces within Italy. In the immediate post-war years especially the second aspect - the movement towards *pacificazione* (reconciliation) between Fascists and Antifascists, winners and losers - was very strong. It is therefore not surprising that the first celebration of the Liberation in 1946 was celebrated in unitary form involving civil society, religious and partisan organisations from different political currents. This changed very quickly in both countries in the following years, when the different political forces recomposed themselves and the memory of WWII became increasingly subject to partisan struggles and political instrumentalisation.

### **The student movement, the *anni di piombo* and the *deutsche Herbst***

In Germany the 1960s were marked by a number of social and political changes that caused a gradual transformation of the way the past was confronted. First, a number of legislative and societal debates, most importantly those on extending the statute of limitations on the crime of murder (and therefore on many acts committed under the Nazi regime), a wave of anti-Semitic vandalism in 1958-59, as well as the Adolf Eichmann trial and the Auschwitz trials between 1963-66, carried the moral, judicial, and political issues concerning the Nazi past into the public sphere. Second, a generational shift was under way with the new generation challenging the structures, policies and attitudes of the Federal Republic and demanding a re-evaluation of the state's political identity.<sup>18</sup> And third, a political change took place when the previous Christian-Democrat government was replaced first by a Grand Coalition between Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU) in 1963 before the Social Democrats took over in 1969.

<sup>16</sup> This description however does not reflect the whole picture: studies by Martin Niemöller, Eugen Kogon, Wolfgang Staudte and Theodor Adorno show that intellectuals had started to call for a critical confrontation with the past already in the 1940s and 50s (see Fröhlich, C. & Kohlstruck, M. (Eds.). (1999). *Engagierte Demokraten: Vergangenheitspolitik in kritischer Absicht*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.

<sup>17</sup> See Mitscherlich, A., & Mitscherlich, M. (1967). *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*. München: Piper. on an account of the inability of the general population to confront the past.

<sup>18</sup> See Schumann, H. & Scott, J. (1989). Generation and Collective Memories. *American Sociological Review*, 54, pp. 359-81 or Shils, E. (1981). *Tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. on the connection between generational change and collective memory.

With the SPD in power and with an electoral majority for the first time in favour of confronting the past and assuming responsibility before history, the political consensus that had dominated the post-war years unravelled. Partisan divisions that had not been clear cut when it came to the question of the right dealing with the past in the 50s, suddenly opened up. Ideological disputes about the lessons to be learned from the experience of repression and dictatorship started to dominate politics. They were fuelled by the confrontation with the antifascist student movement, whose members denounced the apparent continuity of fascist structures in society, and the increasing threat of Left-wing terrorism. Even if the interpretation of the right way of dealing with terrorism was different, both political currents agreed that the reasons behind this radicalisation of the younger generation, constituting a menace for democracy and demonstrating its instability, were to be found in the insufficient dealing with the past.<sup>19</sup>

Policy responses by the government were almost immediate. When Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees in front of the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1970, he powerfully expressed the government's new approach to the Nazi past. Brand's government was also the first one to officially commemorate the 8<sup>th</sup> of May in a special session of the German *Bundestag*. The speeches held in this occasion were very balanced, underlining the importance of facing the past in order to be in control of the present and the future and giving equal importance to all dead without favouring German casualties: 'The war initiated by Hitler has caused the death of millions of people, of children, women and men, of prisoners and of soldiers coming from many nations. We remember all of them with respect' (Brandt, 1970, p. 591). Brandt is also the first political representative who addresses the ambivalent meaning of May 8<sup>th</sup> for Germany. As Dubiel (1999) notes, the fact that this date had never before been remembered officially by the *Bundestag*, might indicate that most MPs preferred to commemorate the 'day of defeat' in silence.<sup>20</sup> Brandt instead clearly mentions the double significance of the capitulation as day of defeat and as day of liberation. It can be argued that this change of tone had not only been influenced by the domestic problems mentioned above but also by the Cold War and the nascent *Ostpolitik* promoted by the SPD. Most politicians believed that the beginning dialogue with the Eastern European States would only be successful if Germany managed to face the challenges of its own history. Concentrating on German defeat and suffering in a time when negotiations with the Soviet Union had just started, would certainly have been counterproductive (Dubiel, 1999, pp. 137-38).

The ideological antagonism of the Cold War influenced public commemoration in Italy as much as in Germany but the development of its strength and direction was very different from the one in Germany. In Italy it was not so much the question of how to adequately remember the past and incorporate lessons learned into present-day policy responses that initially opened up divisions between different political currents, as the increased competition for the heritage of what can be considered to have been the Italian version of the *Persilschein* (whitewash certificate), namely the heritage of the Resistance.<sup>21</sup> Especially the celebrations of the

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<sup>19</sup> The Left attributed the students' violent reaction to their parents' missing confrontation with the past; the Right located the roots of terrorism in the overrepresentation of an overwhelmingly negative past.

<sup>20</sup> Another reason is to be found in the Nazis' heavy reliance on public display that had discouraged post-war ceremony and symbolic politics. For decades commemoration of the past were avoided and celebrations of any sort were reserved to heralding the future (like for example the celebration of the first opening of the German *Bundestag* on 07 September being declared a national holiday in 1949 before getting replaced by the 17 June in 1954)

<sup>21</sup> There was the until today dominant idea that Italians had liberated the country with their own hands from an external enemy. The concentration on the Italian resistance movement (which had only involved a small

Liberation anniversary (on 25 April) were used for political accusations and were characterised by heavy disputes. As in Germany it was the electoral change in 1963, when a centre-left coalition<sup>22</sup> came to power that caused the return to what had been the official memory since the end of WWII. With almost all<sup>23</sup> of the major political forces going back to the antifascist narrative, political confrontation diminished and commemorations concentrated on celebrations exalting the Resistance movement and the struggle for liberation.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to the situation in Germany, where an important impetus for re-discussing the memory of the young Republic had come from the student movement, in Italy the mobilisation of the extreme-left and the threat of terrorism did not challenge the antifascist consensus. On the contrary, it has arguably been precisely the mobilisation of the extreme-left and the threat of terrorism that - despite occasional polemical remarks by the main party leaders of the Left forces<sup>25</sup> - fostered the general solidarity among the main parties during commemorative celebrations and further entrenched a national narrative that had been constructed in the immediate post-war years around the binary topic of resistance and victimisation. It is therefore not surprising that instead of calling for a more critical reflection on the past, commemorative speeches in the 70s are characterised by an interesting confounding of different historical moments: Italy's struggle against terrorism in the 70s got commonly compared to the fight against Fascism and Nazism in the 40s; Policemen, who had died in terrorist attacks were remembered as martyrs of freedom and democracy alongside those that had been killed fighting for Italy's liberation (L'Unità, 1978); and those who had killed Aldo Moro were associated to 'those Germans in the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Auschwitz, who tortured and killed millions of innocent men, women and children' (Lama, 1978).

One could argue that by comparing the two episodes in Italian history and by reaffirming the importance of the memory and the values of the Resistance, what was really affirmed was democracy. Both terms were often used interchangeably, anchoring the resistance memory firmly to the democratic foundations of the Republic. The slogan '*Contro il terrorismo, contro la violenza, ora e sempre Resistenza*' (against terrorism, against violence, always Resistance) (Il Popolo, 1978) speaks for itself in this context. This exclusive concentration on the resistance movement however did not necessarily advance the democratisation process. On the contrary, it obscured all the other elements that had made up the history of Fascism

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proportion of the Italian population) allowed for the elision of the previous twenty years of fascist experience, exonerating the Italian population from the responsibility for crimes committed in its name. Neither evidence that there had been a popular consensus for Fascism, the fact that most Italians had been in favour of the war at its outbreak hoping for a quick victory or the civil war character the resistance fight had taken on after 1943 were recorded.

<sup>22</sup> Including Democrazia Cristiana, Partito Repubblicano Italiano, Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano and Partito Socialista Italiano.

<sup>23</sup> Opposition came only from the far-right, who condemned the celebrations of the '*decennale del massacro*' (decennial of the massacre) and the '*stragi fratricide*' (fratricidal slaughter) (Almirante, 1955) and from the radical left, who used the celebrations of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April for political mobilisation against the '*fascismo dello Stato*' (Fascism of the state) (Continua, 1972)

<sup>24</sup> In addition to the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the popular insurrection in Naples on 27-30 September 1943, the general strikes of March 1943, the Fosse Ardeatine massacre on 25 March 1944 or the liberation of Rome on 4 June 1944 were officially commemorated.

<sup>25</sup> See the speeches by the PCI secretary Enrico Berlinguer on 25 April 1975 'La linea della divisione e dell'anticomunismo è dannosa per il paese' published in *L'Unità* on 26 April 1975; the leader of the PS Francesco De Martino 'Tutta la forza dell'antifascismo' published in *Avanti!* on 26 April 1975 and by the DC secretary Amintore Fanfani 'Fanfani: La vera libertà presuppone la distinzione tra forze politiche' published in *Il Popolo* on 26 April 1975.

confirming the apologetic tone that had characterised the Italian memory framework from the beginning.

### The 1980s: preparing changes

The 1980s marked an important transitional phase preparing the changes in public memory that were to fully express themselves only after the end of the Cold War. Again, changes were almost antagonistic in both countries. While discussions in the 80s prepared the slow convergence of all political forces in Germany around a common frame of public memory, in Italy the antifascist consensus on which Italy's politics of memory had been built, started to unravel. This was mainly due to the changed political framework after the birth of the so-called '*pentapartito*'<sup>26</sup> and the new political isolation of the Communist Party. The same accusations that had dominated public discourses in the 1950s were voiced again by exponents of the Right and the Left. Those ideas had actually never really disappeared from the pages of the conservative and neofascist press but only acquired wide public recognition when recognized authorities like Renzo Di Felice<sup>27</sup> entered the debate. This development was accompanied by the renewed depiction of Fascism as '*autoritarismo all'italiana*' (authoritarianism the Italian way), describing it as a paternalistic good-natured regime that had fostered the modernisation of the country and that was not at all comparable to the cruel totalitarianism Nazi-Germany had experienced.<sup>28</sup> Speeches held during the celebrations of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Liberation in 1985 clearly reflected the division caused by the confrontation between the official memory and this reawakened kind of revisionism. While some political exponents - like the President of the Republic Sandro Pertini and the Prime Minister Bettino Craxi - reaffirmed the traditional themes of the antifascist memory, other political representatives and the media (even the socialist newspapers '*Avanti!*' and '*Mondoperaio*'<sup>29</sup>) openly questioned the antifascist paradigm.

In Germany debates that had already started in the 70s became even more pronounced in the 1980s. The tensions resulting from the confrontation of the Right, who preferred to silence the past, underlining the complete rupture with Nazism, and the Left, who forcefully revoked the past at every occasion, erupted in open parliamentary debate. This was partly due to the entry into the Bundestag of the *Bündnis 90 Die Grünen*, a party born out of the antifascist student movement, to the newly aggressive history politics of the Kohl (CDU) administration<sup>30</sup> and

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<sup>26</sup> The agreement between DC, PSI, PSDI, PRI and PLI that dominated Italian politics between 1981 and 1992.

<sup>27</sup> The historian Renzo de Felice sustained that Antifascism as an ideology based on the experience of the resistance movement was insufficient and even dangerous for the creation of a genuine democracy (quoted in Jacobelli, J. (1988). *Il fascismo e gli storici oggi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza).

<sup>28</sup> In particular, Indro Montanelli influenced the image of Mussolini and Fascism as being good-natured and paternalistic. Until the 1990s he denied in his column in the *Corriere della Sera* that Italy had contributed to the persecution of Jews or had committed other acts of violence and presented Mussolini as a good-natured dictator without any bad intentions. See Montanelli, I. (1997, September 06). La cultura fascista? Un tubo vuoto. *Corriere della Sera*; Montanelli, I. (1997, April 02). Il razzismo è roba da biondi mi disse Mussolini. *Corriere della Sera*; Montanelli, I. (1997, April 02). Una Auschwitz italiana. *Corriere della Sera*; Montanelli, I. (1998, November 10). Mussolini? Demagogo e ciarlatano ma non sanguinario. *Corriere della Sera*.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Scarrone, G. (1985, April 26). Un ricordo senza miti. *Avanti!*; Guarini, R. (1985, May 05). Per un antifascismo conseguente. *Mondoperaio*.

<sup>30</sup> The chancellor sought - through a series of foreign policy and domestic moves and by revoking constantly Germany's pre-fascist history - to redefine German history as positive and the Nazi period as only one chapter in the larger story of Germany (an argument that was often employed also in Italy: see Croce, B. (1963). *Scritti e Discorsi Politici (1943-1947)*. Roma/Bari: Laterza. Kohl's message was that a healthy national identity

the advent of a new kind of revisionism that expressed itself in the so-called *Historikerstreit*<sup>31</sup> (Dubiel, 1999, p. 187). In addition to that a series of political scandals (Jenninger affair<sup>32</sup>, Bitburg controversy<sup>33</sup> and Heitmann dispute<sup>34</sup>) and the concentration of a number of anniversaries (50 years since Hitler's assumption of power in 1933; 40 years since the end of the war in 1945; 40 years of Federal Republic of Germany in 1949) provided incentives for a renewed confrontation with the past and the increased questioning of what has been termed the 'normalisation frame' by David Art (2006)<sup>35</sup>. In particular the Bitburg affair that had caused vivid protest in Germany and abroad and the increased criticism of Kohl's forceful relativisation politics requesting a change in international and diplomatic attitudes towards Germany, pushed the Conservatives to gradually abandon the normalisation frame in favour of the contrition frame that had been advocated by the Left-wing parties. Public discourse started to centre around three main elements: (1) the Holocaust was a unique event; (2) the critical examination of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime is a permanent responsibility of all Germans; (3) there can be no forgetting and no drawing a line under the Nazi past (Art, 2006, pp. 80-84). President Richard von Weizsäcker was the first political representative to combine all three elements in his famous speech commemorating the 08 May in 1985. He was the first German politician to speak in the first person plural and to accept 'responsibility before history' without equivocation (Weizsäcker, 1985). His synthesis asserting liberation without denying defeat and accepting responsibility without dishonour included everybody and allowed both political forces to move closer together (Olick, 1999, p. 399). 'Responsibility before history' was a principle that everybody could adhere to and which quickly became the new code for future commemorations.

### **The 1990s: the beginning of a new era**

The 1990s indeed saw the ceremonial ritualisation of memory and the codification of commemoration practices in Germany. Speeches of those years are characterised by a mix of public admission of guilt, collective mourning and the celebration of a united Europe. Even if some conservative politicians in the years after reunification tried to use references to the Communist dictatorship in order to relativise the Nazi regime (as had been common practice during the first years of the Cold War), most politicians seemed to espouse the idea that 'neither the rejection of guilt, nor its repression, but its total acceptance functioned as redemption' (Jeismann, 2001, p. 9).

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and a stable historical self-confidence could only develop if the 12 years of Nazi regime got neutralised and that Germany deserved to move back onto the international stage unhindered by its past.

<sup>31</sup> An intellectual and political controversy in West Germany about the way the Holocaust and the Nazi past should be interpreted in history.

<sup>32</sup> Jenninger, the then president of the German Bundestag had to step down from office after a misinterpreted speech delivered during a special memorial session of the Bundestag on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Kristallnacht*.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald Reagan's and Helmut Kohl's visit to both the Bergen Belsen concentration camp and the German military cemetery at Bitburg (where members of the SS are buried) in May 1985.

<sup>34</sup> Heitmann (Helmut Kohl's federal president candidate) was dropped quickly after he made comments about the Nazi past that were deemed inappropriate.

<sup>35</sup> The normalisation frame was initially embraced by almost all political parties but particularly by the Conservatives. It attributed the crimes of Nazism to a small clique of fanatics, interpreted the years of the regime as an aberration in German history, saw Germans as victims first of the Nazis and then of the Allied forces and supported a politics of forgiving and forgetting rather than remembering. In the 1980s calls for 'normalisation' included also the affirmation that West Germany faced the same 'normal' problems of other modern welfare states and should therefore be treated like a 'normal' state.

An important impetus for this development came from the end of the Cold War division of the country, which was seen as a remarkable chance for collective reflection on the relationship of Germany's future to the variety of its earlier pasts (Eley, 2004, p. 179). Despite the widespread fear that the concern with the memory of Communism would displace the memory of Nazism, the question of how to deal with the 'second German dictatorship' did revive discussions on how to confront the German past in its whole. This was probably also one of the reasons why some aspects of German history, namely the question of German victimhood, were pushed into public discourse again. While books, films and news magazines rediscovered a topic that had seemed off limit for decades, political leaders struggled with finding the right balance between the preoccupation with German defeat and victimhood that had dominated the 1950s and its complete denial that had characterised the 1960s and 70s (Olick, 1999, p. 399). This was particularly difficult for the Left, who had always seen German suffering as the bill to be paid for the pain Germany had inflicted on others. After initial warnings of a resurgence of revisionism and of renewed attempts to relativise German guilt, most left-wing politicians, however, joined Conservatives in advocating a coming to terms with this side of WWII history as well. In other words: 'The Left came to terms with the memory of German suffering in the 1990s, just as conservatives had come to terms with the memory of German crimes in the 1980s' (Langenbacher, 2003, p. 62).

It was nevertheless not only the attempt to work through the German past in its entirety, but also the fear of leaving this repressed memory of suffering to the extreme-right, that influenced the abandonment of the German-centred memory by the centre-right forces on the one hand and the acceptance of the memory of victimhood by the Left on the other. How real such a fear was, became evident in 2005 when the extreme right party NPD stormed out of the parliamentary chamber of Saxony during the commemoration ceremony of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January and subsequently organised a huge demonstration in occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dresden's destruction by allied bombing a few weeks later (Economist, 2005). As the exclusively German-centred memory framework<sup>36</sup> got increasingly taken up by extreme right-wing forces, its advancement became ever more politically unacceptable, supporting at the same time the convergence of the political centre around the difficult-found balance of accepting full responsibility for the crimes committed during WWII on the one hand, while acknowledging German suffering on the other. The best example for this bifurcation of memory is the commitment to officially commemorate the 27 January<sup>37</sup> dedicated to the victims of National Socialism on the one hand, without neglecting the *Volkstrauertag* (People's day of mourning)<sup>38</sup> devoted to all 'victims of war and tyranny' but in particular to German military casualties on the other.

While the fear of revisionism from the Right had provided a further incentive to critically examine the past in Germany, in Italy the inclusion of the post-fascist party Alleanza Nazionale (AN)<sup>39</sup> in the Berlusconi government in 1994 inhibited a similar development,

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<sup>36</sup> A term borrowed from Eric Langenbacher.

<sup>37</sup> Day of the liberation of Auschwitz. It was proclaimed 'Day of Remembrance for the victims of National Socialism' by the Federal President Roman Herzog on 03 January 1996 and has since then become an international day of remembrance (see United Nations (2005, January 11). *General Assembly decides to designate 27 January as annual international day of commemoration to honour Holocaust victims*. Retrieved August 10, 2009, from United Nations Website: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/ga10413.doc.htm>

<sup>38</sup> For an interesting confrontation of the two remembrance days see Kaiser, A. (2008, Winter). Performing the New German Past. The People's Day of Mourning and 27 January as Postunification Commemorations. *German Politics and Society*, 89 (26), pp. 28-49.

<sup>39</sup> The former Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) had always been excluded from the government due to its evident fascist roots but reached 13,5% on the elections of 27-28 March and entered as Alleanza Nazionale

giving way to a new form of revisionism. It is not a coincidence that since 1994, when the need for political legitimisation of the successor party of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) became particularly urgent, the fascist narrative (see page 3-4) gained ground again. Calls for national '*pacificazione*' (reconciliation) and '*parificazione*' (parification) of all dead (in particular of the so-called *ragazzi di Salò*) reappeared with force, placing resistance fighters and Fascists on the same moral level. The electoral success of the centre-right coalition in 2001 marked another step in the legitimisation of the revisionist memory promoted by AN. The years of the second Berlusconi government were in fact characterised even more than the first one by the reappearance of anticommunist themes and the re-proposal of the neo-fascist version of history.<sup>40</sup>

The extent to which the Italian memory framework is still divided becomes particularly evident when looking at the way the 27 January<sup>41</sup> is being commemorated. Speeches by political representatives in occasion of the Holocaust Memorial Day clearly reflect the different interpretation attached to this particular memorial day and provide a perfect example of the way history is being remembered or portrayed selectively. Whereas left-wing political leaders usually stress the need to remember the Italian racial laws and the Italian persecution of the Jewish citizens, right-wing politicians tend to emphasize more the courage of those Italians, who had risked their own life when trying to protect the persecuted. It seems as if the end of the Cold War has done very little to break up the internal ideological divisions present in Italian society. On the contrary, the last years have seen a further entrenchment of the two competing narratives, impeding an objective investigation into the fascist past and rendering the integration of the two versions of history into one single remembrance culture increasingly impossible.

## Conclusions

Scholars of comparative politics and history have often stressed the remarkable similarity of the different forms in which collective memory is constructed and expressed in countries that have experienced undemocratic regimes all over the world (ranging from Central and Eastern Europe to Latin America and South Africa). One would expect an even more striking comparability of developments in different European states that have experienced the same historical event. On a first glance, the direct confrontation of the two successor states of the Fascist/Nazi regime, however, seems to contradict this assumption. While the construction of a public memory framework in the immediate post-war years was very similar in both countries, developments in the 1960s took a completely different turn, becoming almost antagonistic despite very similar external circumstances.<sup>42</sup> While the different political currents in Germany managed to come to an agreement concerning the question of how to adequately remember officially the events of WWII, in Italy the ongoing process and struggle

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(AN) the governmental coalition. See Ignazi, P. (1994). *Postfascisti? Dal Movimento sociale italiano ad Alleanza nazionale*, Bologna: Il Mulino.

<sup>40</sup> The main elements of the neo-fascist version were: (1) The Italian Social Republic had tried to protect Italy from the attempts of the *Wehrmacht* to transform Italy into a second Poland. (2) Mussolini had been a good Italian who was convinced that the only way to protect the country was by assuring Hitler his friendship. (3) The communist resistance had imposed a civil war on the country and had provoked the reprisal actions by the Germans. (4) The victory and the rebirth of democracy were attributable exclusively to the Allies.

<sup>41</sup> Institutionalised on 20 July 2000 by Law No. 211 as 'Giorno della Memoria' following a European-wide initiative. See <http://taskforce.ushmm.org/about/index.php?content=stockholm/>

<sup>42</sup> Both countries emerged from a dictatorship, both countries had to confront the threat of politically motivated terrorism, both countries saw political change in roughly the same years, both countries were heavily influenced by the ideological confrontation of the Cold War etc.

of interpretation preceding the institutionalisation of memory has impeded a similar development so far. The analysis of public speeches in particular demonstrates visibly how value and power questions have outweighed the attempt of delineating a reflexive, self-critical *storia condivisa* (a shared history) in Italy.

Reasons for the divergent development despite the similar starting point are manifold and can be found in the different political constellation, the major ideological and socio-political division within the country<sup>43</sup> and the greater international control Germany's politics of the past was subject to. Taking into account the premise stated in the first part of the paper on the importance of facing the past in order to build a functioning democracy, the presented evidence raises serious questions concerning Italy's state of democracy. It is particularly the deliberate deformation of public memory that risks to seriously harm the health of Italy's democratic political culture. One has to keep in mind though that Italy is not the only country that has not yet come fully to terms with its past. Research done on France, Great Britain and Russia comes to similar conclusions. Most researchers agree that only the German nation has gone an appreciable distance towards accepting a critical history for itself, demonstrating how important it is to confront the ghosts of the past in order to establish a stable democracy and to reach a healthy level of exemption. Remains to be seen if the increasing europeanization of politics, society and culture and the increased mutual control of self-centred national memory constructions resulting from this, will lead to a greater willingness of all European nations to confront all aspects of the continent's dark history, strengthening that way not only Europe's external political legitimacy and authority<sup>44</sup> but also each member state's domestic democratic culture.

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<sup>43</sup> A similar division like in Italy did not exist in Germany and might be only comparable to the East-West division of the country until 1989. One has to keep in mind though that the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany had been two separate states. Political instrumentalisation of the past was therefore usually directed against the different political system in the other state and not against a fraction in the same society (as was the case in Italy). This was probably also one of the reasons why it was much easier for the various political forces in Germany to adopt a very similar attitude towards the critical examination of Nazism and WWII.

<sup>44</sup> When lecturing other states about human rights issues or intervening in cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

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