

Now we should all acknowledge our holocaust guilt



European policymaking isn't just about the future, it also concerns the past, writes **Alfred Pijpers** who welcomes moves in the European Parliament and the Commission to make the re-assessment of national responsibilities during World War II a building block for the idea of European citizenship

Berlin's moving holocaust monument is an acknowledgement that the annihilation of European Jewry during World War II was Nazi driven and the primary responsibility of Germany. The country's post-war politicians and governments conscientiously accepted this responsibility – in West Germany at least. The Federal Republic's constitution, electoral system, foreign policy and European treaties all are guarantees that history will never repeat itself.

Germans know that the Federal Republic has had to be the public embodiment of this huge historic guilt, but the question arises: guilt for how long? The overwhelming majority of Germans were born after the war, and are no more guilty of the Nazi crimes than, say, their Dutch, Polish, French or Spanish contemporaries. It is unfair to keep them and future German generations forever accountable for the holocaust. As far back as the 1960s, Bavarian leader Franz Joseph Strauss argued that a state as successful as the Federal Republic should not forever be reminded of Auschwitz.

These feelings received fresh impetus with German reunification and the Berlin Republic. In 1998, German writer Martin Walser proposed putting a stop to the country's collective penance, arguing that those who want to commemorate the holocaust should do so at home. Walser became the target of fierce criticism from Jewish circles, yet there were many Germans who sided with him, the then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder being among them.

The official – penitent – attitude of Germany will not change for the time being. But suppose that the younger German generations, with some justification, no longer want to be the principal bearers of historic "guilt". Who should then take up the burden? The destruction of European Jewry is still too recent and too immense to be neglected. It also very much needs an official, governmental platform of remembrance. In my view, the best way forward is to create a truly European framework, and two arguments support this idea: European complicity with Nazi crimes, and the developing concept of European citizenship.

Although Hitler's Germany was the driving force behind the extermination of the Jews, other European countries had a considerable hand in the catastrophe, and most of them are now member states of the European Union. Austria, for instance, became after the Anschluss an integral part of the Third Reich, and offered a rich pool of highly-placed Nazis. A disproportionately large number of them served in the extermination camps, predominantly as volunteers. Mussolini's Italy was an ally of Hitler's Germany, although Italian fascists adopted a more moderate attitude towards their Jewish countrymen. Vichy France was a German satellite with an openly anti-semitic regime. When at the end of 1942 the Germans occupied that part of France too, and began large-scale deportations, the ground had already been well prepared. To his credit, President Jacques Chirac has publicly admitted France's guilt for these crimes. The war record of the Netherlands is hardly better; Dutch police officers, civil servants, railway personnel and other collaborators made a substantial contribution to the destruction of the Jewish community in a country that has long enjoyed such a strong – albeit false – image of staunch resistance.

In eastern Europe, the Baltic states and in the regions under Soviet rule, notably Ukraine, the local populations played a significant part in the Final Solution. Anti-semitism in those regions was as, if not more, endemic as in Germany. Many saw the Nazis as allies against Soviet communism, and after their invasion by Germany, thousands of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians volunteered for the notorious police battalions and auxiliary forces that then launched pogroms on a massive scale.

COMMENTARY

By **William Schabas**

But still we should be careful about how we define "guilt"

Alfred Pijpers is right to remind us of the anti-semitic elements in countries occupied by the Nazis, and their involvement in the persecution of the Jews alongside whom they had lived for centuries. He will surely upset some who are embarrassed about the forgotten history, or who are still in denial. The Germans certainly had no monopoly on anti-semitism. There are even some omissions in his list of offenders. For example, he doesn't mention Greece, where there was a vibrant Sephardic community in Salonika that now no longer exists.

And let us give credit where credit is due. Of all the "European" states, perhaps Turkey performed the best. It provided sanctuary for Jews from around the continent (including my own relatives, who fled Berlin in the late 1930s). It is worth reminding those who argue that Turkey is not European enough to join the European Union of this noble time in its past. Turkey's problem is with another Holocaust that it would like to forget.

But the Dutch and the Poles and the French and the Ukrainians and the Austrians and all the others in Europe, who stood by while Jews were rounded up for the extermination camps, did not collectively plan or implement the "final solution". They joined in the persecution, but they did not carry out the extermination. Pijpers says we need to ascribe guilt, and I agree with that. But it is important to recognise degrees of guilt.

In other eastern European countries the picture is equally terrifying. In Hungary hundreds of thousands of Jews were deported by the SS during the closing phase of the war, with the full support of the Hungarian government and the notorious Arrow Cross militias. The latter proceeded to massacre their Jewish countrymen in great numbers. In Romania, a similar role was played by the Iron Guard under the command of the pro-German dictator Ion Antonescu. Even before the Germans stepped in, Antonescu had already slaughtered a quarter of a million Romanian Jews. The Romanian fascists also often operated outside their own borders, as did their Austrian, Baltic and Ukrainian comrades. In February 1941, for instance, some 30,000 Jewish citizens were killed in Odessa by Romanian troops.

Bulgaria and Slovakia were also pro-German satellites during World War II, although surprisingly the Bulgarians managed to limit the scale of the persecutions. This cannot be said of the notorious Ustashe fascists in Croatia, which like Bulgaria, is now a candidate for EU membership. The Ustashe slaughtered with their own hands nearly 40,000 Jewish fellow citizens as well as Roma gypsies. Even the Nazis were at times dumbfounded by the cruelty and the fanaticism of their Croat, Lithuanian or Romanian sympathisers.

Until 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, communist rule in those countries had to a large extent obscured these national contributions to the holocaust. Hitler's fascism was generally deemed responsible, and the post-war communist takeovers had cleared things up in that respect – that at least was the reasoning in the peoples'

republics. After the collapse of the Soviet empire, most of the new Eastern European regimes more or less accounted for earlier war crimes, but compared to the West German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* they only did so scantily.

The second argument for a different approach to commemoration of the holocaust relates to the whole process of European integration. Germany has, over the years, become one of the most "European" of the EU member states, in terms of economic interdependence, political affiliation and support for the EU institutions. According to the EU treaties, German citizens are also European citizens, and as such completely equal to their French, Polish, Danish, or Belgian brethren. Germany not only shares sovereignty with Europe but also citizenship. So why not also share its memory of the past too, without violating the historical facts?

The notion of European citizenship has so far been mainly associated with the free movement of people across national borders, and with the fundamental rights listed in the European constitution. But these rights are in any case available under the various national constitutions, and have not added much value, so European citizenship still lacks the feeling of belonging to a true political community, with common roots in the past. A collective awareness of the holocaust and the shared responsibility of most EU member states, would surely contribute to developing a more substantial European identity, as well perhaps to relieving the conscience of younger generations of Germans.

It is very welcome therefore that the European Parliament and the European

Commission are both beginning to see the collective European memory of the World War II, and of the holocaust, as the building blocks of European citizenship. Slovakia's Commissioner Jan Figel suggested at the time of the 2005 launch of the Consultation Forum on the Future Programme for Active European Citizenship (2007-2013) that "public acts of remembrance [of Auschwitz] may indeed help to determine an always fragile yet evolving collective memory, capable of contributing to the expression and sentiment of a European identity". In January last year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on "remembrance of the holocaust, anti-semitism and racism", in which Council, Commission and member states were urged to reinforce holocaust education, and to make January 27, which marks the liberation of Auschwitz, "European Holocaust Memorial Day".

These are laudable initiatives, even if a truly European citizenship is still miles away. But one thing is certain: it can only become real if Dutchmen, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians or Greek no longer consider Auschwitz as a predominantly German problem but rather as a common European mortgage. □

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ADDITIONAL READING

"Holocaust And Memory In The Global Age", Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, October 2005, Temple University Press (www.temple.edu/tempress), ISBN: 1592132766

"How the Holocaust Looks Now: International Perspectives", Claus-Christian W. Szejnman and Martin L. Davies, January 2007, Palgrave Macmillan (www.palgrave.com), ISBN: 0230001475

"Between globalization and particularization of memories: screen images of the holocaust in Germany and Poland", Joanna K. Stimmel, September 2005, Article from *German Politics and Society*, Thomson Gale (www.gale.com)

"Holocaust Agendas, Conspiracies And Industries?: Issues And Debates in Holocaust Memorialization", Judith Berman, April 2006, Vallentine Mitchell Publishers (www.vmbooks.com), ISBN: 0853037116

"Holocaust Restitution: Perspectives on the Litigation and Its Legacy", Michael J. Bazylzer and Roger P. Alford, March 2006, New York University Press (www.nyupress.org), ISBN: 0814799434

There are two important distinctions. First, accomplices in crime do not generally deserve the same reprobation as the perpetrators. As recently as 2004, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia reduced the sentence of one of the Serb commanders at Srebrenica, General Radislav Krstic. The trial judges had convicted him of genocide, but the appeal judges said he was only an accomplice. For the court, this was an important qualification, and so it should be for the countries the Nazis occupied.

Second, the historic and persistent persecution of European Jews cannot be equated with their annihilation. When the full horror of the extermination camps became known in 1944, a new word had to be added to the language to describe what Winston Churchill had called "the crime without a name": genocide. Adolf Eichmann's judges in Jerusalem recognised the important nuance, acquitting him of genocide for acts prior to 1941, when the extermination plan had not yet crystallised and when Jews could still emigrate. They convicted him of crimes against humanity for the earlier atrocities, but not genocide.

We might recognise this today as the distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide. Care must be taken not to blur the lines of demarcation. The forced transfers of Germans after the war were acts that, by today's standards, all Europeans would condemn. They cannot, though, be equated with Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and Belzec. □

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