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Twenty years after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism the battles about the right interpretation of the twentieth century past are still being fought. In some countries even the courts have their say on what is or is not the historical truth. But primarily politicians have claimed a dominant role in these debates, often mixing history and politics in an irresponsible way.

The European Parliament has become the arena where this culminates. Nevertheless, not every Member of Parliament wants to play historian. That is the background of Politics of the Past, in which historians take the floor to discuss the tense and ambivalent relationship between their profession and politics.

Pierre Hassner: "Judges are no better placed than governments to replace open dialogue between historians, between historians and public opinion, between citizens and within and between democratic societies. That is why this book is such an important initiative."

Politics of the Past: The Use and Abuse of History

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Edited by
Hannes Swoboda and
Jan Marinus Wiersma

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Socialist Group in the
European Parliament

 RennerInstitut



Politics of the Past: **The Use and** **Abuse of History**

Edited by
Hannes Swoboda and
Jan Marinus Wiersma

Dedicated to Bronisław Geremek

Bronisław Geremek, historian, former political dissident and our dear colleague, was one of the speakers at the event which we organized in Prague to commemorate the Spring of 1968. As always, his contribution to the debate was balanced and full of insights. His life was devoted to just causes whether writing his famous history of poverty or being one of the leaders of Solidarność. To him we dedicate this publication. He was a true citizen of Europe who always looked forward, as his article, which we were allowed to reprint, illustrates.

The contributions
in this publication do
not represent the Socialist
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History and Politics: Recommendations from a New Comparative Agenda

Wim van Meurs

As the saying goes, under communism only the future was certain, while the past was constantly being rewritten. Today the future of communism is indeed a certainty but the past two decades have demonstrated that the rewriting of history *per se* is not only a communist peculiarity. The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union have certainly given a new sense of urgency and direction to academic debates on fascism and communism as historical phenomena and to comparisons of the two. As historical issues they have also returned to haunt current European politicians.

Historians and political agendas

It is not only the views of historians that change over time; the understanding that academics have of their own role in national politics and society changes too. In the 19th century, historians had a role to play in nation-building: first inventing a synthesis of national history, next imbuing the populace with a sense of a shared national past and a common future, and finally – once the nation state had been created – identifying (ethnic) minorities in society to be excluded from that nation. In that era, historians rarely questioned their responsibility for representing the nation as a good cause in history. As the nation – their own – was considered the be all and end all of the historical process, taking sides was not considered problematic for academic objectivity.

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Communist historians would later use the term *partijnost* to describe this partisan form of objectivity. If the class struggle of the proletariat constituted the prime mover of history, historical truth could only be found in a class perspective. Arguably, the European Union's 50th anniversary celebrations show that it too has made the most of history as a medium of identification, highlighting a shared European past and cultural legacy rather than a history of conflicts and national introspection.

National history – or, for that matter, European history – is inherently selective and one-sided. As Ernest Renan noted, history is not so much about collective memory but first of all about forgetting. He defined the nation as: "... a group of people united by a common hatred of their neighbours and a shared misunderstanding of their past."

After the traumatic experience of the Second World War and in the context of the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War, the role of historians changed significantly. In Western Europe the task of historians shifted from generating popular identification with a national history, its myths, and its heroes to the past and present unity and continuity of the democratic *West* or the Atlanticist *Europe* – *partijnost* in favour of the Western system of market economy and pluralist democracy.

With the end of the Cold War and the ideological stand-off between West and East, a new momentous task befell historians. In the EU of the 1990s, candidate countries of Central Europe reinventing national history and redefining national identity after half a century of foreign occupation and domination became the priority of historiography. Meanwhile, West European historians began to reconsider the East-West division of the continent, thus contributing to the political project of reunifying Europe and preparing the ground for EU enlargement.

We may detest some political agendas and applaud others but, as a matter of principle, reducing history to politically adequate statements always flies in the face of history as an academic endeavour. After all, the art of politics is finding compromises; the essence of scholarship is contrasting diverging positions. As Karl Popper demonstrated, progress in academia is not found in compromise but in polarisation.

The tension between academic history and politics, therefore, is inevitable and essentially irresolvable. Thus any discussion of the role of historians, academic research and history textbooks in relation to politics should proceed with caution, especially when addressing the ideal of objectivity. History itself is objective in the sense that it exists, or existed, even if unknown to us. Yet no objective historical narrative exists – objective' in the sense that the narrative corresponds fully and verifiably to a historical reality.

The problem is not merely one of inadequate sources and the imperfect writing of history. Any historian is responsive to societal demands and may even be part of a political agenda. Some may intentionally champion a particular political cause in their work. Others may become aware only in retrospect of their indebtedness to a certain *Zeitgeist*. Historians are bound to be influenced by the politicisation of their topic, even when they set out to expose political interpretations or demystify conventional wisdom.

Highlighting the role of social democracy in resisting totalitarian ideologies is also part of a political agenda. So is disassembling national myths. There may be an apparent difference between, on the one hand, an ideological pamphlet championing a one-sided truth while condemning all alternative views and, on the other hand, a serious academic study proposing a new interpretation of history after critical evaluation of the historiographical state of the art. The line drawn between academic originality and outright misinterpretation can only be based on a robust degree of consensus within the community of professional historians. This line is bound to shift over time and does not represent objective history or truth. Debates on the use and abuse of history in politics and the separation of objectionable partisan views from historical interpretations that are expected to promote values of democracy, individual freedom, and national identification are inherently political. Accusations of abusing history or falsification are a curse for academic historians, not only because they suggest the existence of objective truth, but also because they may turn against them and against any iconoclastic or unwelcome re-interpretations. The history of the comparative history of fascism and communism bears out this conclusion. In the paradigm shifts of the past half-century in the academic study of totalitarian regimes, political agendas were never far away.

Comparing fascist and communist regimes

The role of history writing after the traumas and atrocities of the Third Reich, the Second World War and the Holocaust was no longer to create a collective memory of a national past, but to facilitate national amnesia. West European historians in the 1950s excluded Hitler, Mussolini and their fascist cliques from humanity; their accomplices in other countries were portrayed as unrepresentative of their respective nations. The evil genius of the Third Reich had overpowered the nations of Europe, including the German nation. Such a totalitarian view basically exonerated the broader populace, presenting them as victims. Not least because of the ideological confrontation with communism, national history in France or the Netherlands was redefined as an antedated quest for a *democratic* state rather than a *nation* state. Collaborators and fascists were depicted as a small minority that had betrayed the nation – both as an ethnic community and as a democratic community. Thus, in the 1950s, the term totalitarian exonerated one's own nation from complicity in fascism.

This poorly defined concept contributed little to the study of fascism as a historical phenomenon in Europe. Politically, however, it greatly contributed to the consolidation of the East-West divide by equating communism/Stalinism with fascism/national socialism and to the demonization of the Soviet regime and its followers in the Eastern Bloc. Totalitarianism was not an academic theory at all, since it did not allow for alternative explanations or empirical testing. Nor was it comparative as it presupposed the equation of fascism and communism in their dictatorial essence. The core assumption of totalitarianism – total control of the fascist or communist dictatorship over the population – made historical research all but redundant. One evil leader executed a pre-ordained master plan and managed to wreck the course of history almost single-handedly. Why then study a society that experienced total repression, except to testify to its suffering? Why study an allegedly monolithic regime with a premeditated strategy, except to demonstrate the ruthless implementation of this evil plan? Various aspects of totalitarianism as historical interpretation fitted in nicely with the war-time experiences and post-war requirements of West European societies. The perception that fascism had been too overpowering to resist implied

both a collective and individual exoneration from fascism and a clear-cut opposition to Soviet communism. Reconstruction got priority over remembering.

The 1960s were characterised by a reaction to the totalitarianism theory of the 1950s. Revisionists presented an alternative view of communist and fascist regimes on the basis of archival research both in the Soviet Union and in Germany. They rooted the emergence of both regimes in the characteristics, dilemmas and deficits of German and Russian society. Fascism and communism were no longer seen as just the grand strategies of dictatorial cliques, but, in the revisionists' understanding, involved larger parts of society. The revisionists championed academic objectivity, but by condemning the anti-communist and exonerating the instrumentalisation of history by totalitarianists, they too became highly political: opposition to a politicised view of history is by default a political statement. Typically, revisionists were preoccupied with the in-depth study of both regimes and a principled rejection of the totalitarian definition of Stalinism and Nazism: as much as the *Sonderweg* thesis of Germany's road to Nazism irritated totalitarianists, the latter aggravated revisionists. The *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s marked the apex of the confrontation between totalitarianists and revisionists, with the totalitarianists determined to salvage German history and the West from the odium of the Third Reich by emphasising its singularity.

Diverging experiences of the short twentieth century as an *age of extremes* explain the persistence of the East-West divide. In Western Europe, communism dropped off the political agenda with the end of the Cold War and the debate on fascism correspondingly lost much of its political edge. Those who witnessed the atrocities of fascism and lived to tell have been succeeded by new generations. These people were educated to remember the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust, but without the personal experience of those before them. Professional historians are taking over from eyewitnesses. Typically, young academic historians in Eastern Europe today are more interested in the fascist movements and regimes of their countries than in fifty years of communist rule. The dismantling of communist ideology and its elimination from national histories has topped the political agenda over the past

two decades. Ironically, while the political and academic establishments are preoccupied with settling a score with communism, fascism became a non-political field of study by default.

Currently academic historians enjoy a fascinating window of opportunity (even obligation) to revisit the fascism-communism comparison. The constraints of Cold War bipolarity have disappeared and both systems have become historical phenomena. The generation of eyewitnesses and victims has left behind an abundance of research material that is now readily available. Academic research, especially in the new member states of the EU, is exploring new directions and approaches. The functioning of fascist and communist regimes at the micro-level had not been studied before. Due to the politicisation of these issues and the taboos involved, the actual archival sources available had largely remained unexplored by historians in communist times. Research has produced new interesting insights. Firstly, it has seriously qualified the traditional pre-war contrast between democracies in Western Europe and an authoritarian relapse in most of Eastern Europe and, similarly, the presumed strict divide between the democratic majority in each West European polity and the marginal left and right wing extremists. It appears that many liberal and social democratic politicians were attracted to political ideas that we would now hesitate to label as democratic: corporatist parliaments, banning of political parties or arbitrary limitations on the freedom of the press. The struggle of East European politicians to internalise the idea of mass democracy and the consequences of universal suffrage seems more familiar. The democratic track record of most East European countries began with the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918 and ended with some form of royal or military dictatorship in the 1930s. The factors involved and the dynamics of these processes of democratisation and its reversal were too heterogeneous to warrant any simple conclusions contrasting East and West. Secondly, the totalitarian comparison of Stalin and Hitler is back. It is, however, analytical rather than holistic, and it addresses issues that would have been unthinkable in the totalitarianist paradigm, such as disunity within the regimes, popular resistance, those parts of society beyond the control of the regime, and the regime's choice between state violence and other means of managing society. Such analytical comparisons reinvigorate historical research, bypass moral issues and may defy current political agendas.

Europe's responsibilities

It is certainly no coincidence that academic historians were over-represented among the first generation of post-communist political leaders in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, writers of history are not qualified to provide definitive answers to what are essentially political questions. They may, however, be helpful in rephrasing and reframing some of the dilemmas. The key insight should be that any appeal for the de-politicisation of or removal of myths from history is in itself an essentially political statement. The history of the fascism-communism comparison has demonstrated that history as an academic discipline cannot escape political context and controversy.

The challenge that the new member states of the European Union face is the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* – processes that should have been sequential, happening simultaneously. European integration is supposed to remove the borders separating European nations and to reduce the importance of national identity. At the same time, the memory of what is perceived as fifty years of foreign occupation and communist ideology made the reconfirmation of national identity a top priority in Romania, Slovakia or Estonia. For the countries of Western Europe that faced only one actual aggressor in the Second World War, no moral dilemma between democracy and the nation arose; or at least the dilemma could be contained by downplaying the role of communist resistance during the Second World War. However, in societies that lived through both fascist and communist occupation and dictatorship, the moral dilemma is more strenuous. In the military and geopolitical realities of the late 1930s and the war years, a righteous third option rarely existed for those who fought for the nation and national statehood. That circumstance made them take sides – be it with the Russian communists or with the German fascists.

In retrospect, with the nation state as an historical norm, former opponents may equally claim to have fulfilled their patriotic duty. From that perspective we can understand how the question as to whether communists should be allowed to celebrate the October Revolution near the monument of the Red Riflemen in Riga leads to controversy. Obviously, the new directions in comparative research on fascism and communism will be hard to sell to a broader public.

Academics are not (and should not be) interested in passing moral and/or political judgements. Moral judgements are irrelevant for a better understanding of the how and why of inhuman, dictatorial regimes – as Eric Hobsbawm once noted: “Would Nazism have been half as evil, if it had killed three, not six million Jews?” The ongoing debate in Russia on whether Stalin’s regime caused two or twenty million deaths is irrelevant for our historical understanding and the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coping with the past in the broadest sense. Typically, the results of academic research and the new fascism-communism comparison take a decade or two to trickle down to school textbooks. The key question today, however, is how to handle these issues on the political level, both in the public debate in the relevant countries and in situations of international contestation.

Consequently, a number of recommendations can be made on how politics could deal with historical questions. In the first place, it is essential to distinguish between nations on the one hand and democracy on the other, both as objective and as norm. By implying that what is good for the nation must also be good for democracy or that the nation takes precedence over democratic values, moral contradictions arise, for instance the apparent need to justify Nazi collaboration for the sake of the nation. Secondly, it is necessary to promote understanding for the peculiarity of the double dictatorial legacy in the new member states in the public debate in Western Europe and to counter Western prejudices of alleged fascist sympathies and irrational anti-Russian sentiments in Eastern Europe. Thirdly, we need to avoid confusing the nostalgia of the last generation of war veterans and ideological outbursts of neo-fascism and national Bolshevism among the younger generations. Finally, middle ground has to be found between the implicit condemnation of an entire nation on the basis of the past strength of and support for totalitarian movements in a country on the one hand, and national amnesia claiming that fascist and communist leanings had always been alien to the democratic national character on the other.

Totalitarianist views are not helpful to this political agenda as they imply a moral either/or. The revisionism of the 1960s and the in-depth study of interaction between society at large and dictatorial

regimes provides a deeper understanding of the grey zones in historical reality and the extent to which totalitarian regimes pervaded everyday life. Last but not least, the more recent analytical comparative approach strongly suggests that, despite the fundamental differences between the regimes and ideologies of Hitler and Stalin, under both the dilemmas of collaboration, aloofness, and choice between nation and democracy had much in common for ordinary citizens.