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## UNDER A CLOAK OF TERROR

### Violence and armed conflict in Europe

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#### First words . . .

In *The Art of War* (2009), written by Sun Tzu more than 2000 years ago, the warrior-philosopher prophesied one of the most widely generalized maxims, accepted by those who see in the military exercise an authentic form of “artistic expression”. In fact, the great strategist states “the ability to obtain victory by changing and adapting according to the opponent” in a Darwinian logic applied to conflict. As Tim Newark writes, “adaptation to changing circumstances is indeed the key to military success. In war, victory depends more on ingenuity, creativity and innovation than on brute-force” (Newark, 2011: 6). In other words, the outcome of a war depends on how many weapons and soldiers are placed on the battlefield.

Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) can also be mentioned, when he stated that “war is a mere continuation of policy by other means”, anticipating “two centuries of increasingly pointless, financially disastrous, and above all, lethal conflicts . . . culminating in the discovery and proliferation of nuclear weapons, have rendered this venerable institution virtually incapable of performing any of the roles classically assigned to it” (Clausewitz, 1984: 6).

The paradigm of war shifts as it becomes more surgical, deadly, and “clean”. The professionalism of those who handle this machine take on grotesque contours in a time when, in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski: “war today is a luxury that only the weak and the poor can afford” (O’Connell, 1989: 4).

In fact, over the last 70 years, is safe to say that the war between powers holding a nuclear arsenal would only happen by “accident or madness”, mainly because, in such scenario, murders and suicides would happen. Therefore, the possession of nuclear and chemical weapons has turned out to be convincing enough to dissuade the most powerful countries from embarking on a path of no return.

However, deterrence is neither infallible nor capable of preventing conventional warfare between countries that do not possess nuclear arsenals. And there are numerous examples that show “the ingenuity, creativity and innovation” of those who create weapons with what they have “more at hand”. Rape or the sterilization of human beings may not be new, but the width and science invested in the profitability of this “weapon of war” has certainly gained expressive contours. In fact, this would only be surprising if we were unaware that “weapons are among man’s oldest and most significant artefacts; it makes sense that their development would be affected by their users’ attitudes toward them” (O’Connell, 1989: 4-5).

### **The war . . . always war . . .**

War was already an ancient practice when the first civilizations appeared, around 3000 BCE. However, with the advent of Civilization, war became essential to its development. The history of “civilised” warfare, perhaps not the most accurate term, began with the development of complex societies, made possible by the production of agricultural surpluses, in large part due to the irrigation of agriculture. From Ancient Egypt in its imperial phases and the warlike city-states of Mesopotamia, through the Greek-speaking world around the Aegean Sea and its “civic militarism”, and the grandeur of the mighty kingdom of Macedonia, with an unparalleled army, created by Philip II, bequeathed to his son Alexander the Great, power and military organization made a difference in the advances and retreats, rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. It was war, always war.

The Greek contribution to the art of war was more innovative, but it was with the Romans that the exercise of force came to be seen as a normal feature of society. The Greeks had a preference for offensive tactics over strategies. The Romans used both. Taking advantage of the Greek contribution, the Romans added a capacity for aggression that has never been seen before. “The Roman Republic’s ability to wage war was unparalleled before, and was not equaled until the emergence of the modern nation state” (Newark, 2011: 41).

Between the 5th and 1st centuries BCE, the Roman Republic conquered an empire around the Mediterranean, dominated exclusively by the use of military force. Constantly at war, the Romans gradually subdued the other peoples on the Italian Peninsula, fought mercilessly against Carthage, their great rival, finally imposing their rule over the Greek states of the eastern Mediterranean.

The legions’ thirst for conquest led the Romans to a conflict with Carthage, in the 3rd century BCE, for the conquest of the sea. The Punic Wars unfolded major naval and land battles, ending with the destruction of Carthage, at the end of the trilogy. After these epic battles, the Gaul and Dacia campaigns, the Roman civil wars, and the threats of revolt or invasion by the Roman Empire wrote some pages in the history of one of the most powerful and enduring empires that saw war as a way of life.

During the 3rd century, a series of invasions by Germanic peoples took place and nearly destroyed the empire. The instability in the governance of Rome, with

the succession of numerous emperors, greatly contributed to the poor resistance offered to the invading peoples. The Germans, who settled within the borders of the empire, were recruited by the Roman army, keeping in its ranks about half of Germanic soldiers, some of them reaching the highest leadership of the military command. At the end of the 5th century, the Germanic tribes that had settled in the territory of the empire no longer saw the need to recognize the authority of an emperor and, thus, the Western Empire fell.

With the taking over of Rome by Odoacer, in 476, instead of an empire in the West, there was a series of kingdoms founded by the different Germanic tribes. Unable to manage their fair share of land, the ancient Roman administration quickly became homesick.

The Middle Ages were marked by the difficulty of states and empires to integrate, or to dominate in a decisive way, the peoples that pressed their borders. This incapacity left them exposed to disastrous invasions and made them passively watch absolute conquests. Most western European states were unable to maintain active professional armies and were far from having a monopoly on armed force. This fragility made it difficult to distinguish between war and conflict, as local lords or mercenary chiefs fought to satisfy their own interests.

The rapid Muslim advance, which took place in the 7th and 8th centuries, is proof of this difficulty. Two decades after the formation of the first Muslim state, in 622, the Arabs had conquered the Sasanian Persian Empire, the eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt. Even though the Byzantine Empire resisted (in 717–718, the siege of Constantinople was lifted after the demoralized troops of Maslama ibn Abd al-Malik endured terrible ordeals and realized how impermeable the city walls were), North Africa and most of the Iberian Peninsula were swept away by the mantle of Islam. Asturias resisted, at the expense of Pelagius, in 718, in the Battle of Covadonga, and the rest of western Europe, with Charles Martel stopping the Muslim advance, at Poitiers, in 732. Both armies still hesitated to enter the field, but the Muslims eventually attacked. The Muslim army was repelled by Frankish soldiers who fought on foot, forming a compact frame, which they defended with their swords, their spears and their shields against the enemy cavalry.

The Vikings, who go down in history between the 8th and 9th centuries, terrorized Europe from Dublin to Constantinople. Skilled men in the art of the sea, they were merchants, robbers, explorers and settlers: the period of quick and surgical looting was followed by the settlement of these peoples from the North, culminating in the foundation of Normandy in 911, a concession by the Frankish king Charles III in exchange of good behaviour. Despite the appeal, the Normans continued their conquests from England (Battle of Hastings, in 1066) to Sicily (Battle of Civitate, in 1053).

In 1095, Pope Urban II's appeal to Christian knights to liberate the holy city of Jerusalem, after 400 years in Muslim hands, begins the first Crusade. More than 100,000 volunteers, who responded to Urban II's appeal, were moved by the expectation of material gains and the promise of a place in heaven for those killed in combat, fought in hostile territory and made possible the establishment

of Christian states in Palestine and in Syria. However, the precarious situation and the constant harassment of Muslim troops forced other Crusades to defend the gains already achieved. As a process rather than an episode, the Crusade was part of mediaeval Christian life.

In the western Mediterranean and, by this time, in the Iberian Peninsula, the Christian kingdoms of Castile, Leon, Aragon, and Portugal were carrying out their own Crusade against the Infidel. The Christian reconquest movement in the Iberian Peninsula unfolded over more than four centuries, with the conquest of Granada in 1492, with Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon ruling Christian Spain.

War did not stop from being felt in Europe between 1100 and 1500. For men of the nobility, making war was a natural activity, a result of the European political division of the time. The latent antagonisms of kingdoms, duchies, cities, popes, and emperors animated a continent in constant turmoil.

The beginning of modern warfare was determined by the growing importance of gunpowder weapons. If the war on land gained new contours, at sea, boats equipped with cannons revolutionized naval battles. The development of the fleets of Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands turned the naval battles into authentic cannon-fire duels. The defeat of the Invincible Armada by the powerful naval fleet of Elizabeth I of England (1588) or the Battle of Lepanto that resulted in the victory of the Holy League over the Ottomans (1571) challenged the cunning “naval engineering” and the military leaders.

On land, a series of conflicts swept across Europe such as the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the late 16th and early 17th centuries; the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which discussed the struggle for European supremacy between France, Sweden, and the Habsburgs of Spain and Austria; the English civil war; the dynastic wars that dotted the European continent (France, Ireland, Spain, Austria); and the Great Northern War (with the military campaigns carried out by Charles XII of Sweden against Denmark, Prussia, Saxony, Hannover, Poland, and Russia for dominating trade in the Baltic).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, different continents were the scene of numerous wars that contributed to the birth of modern nations. The military power of Europe and the countries resulting from European colonization (such as the United States) acquired an indisputable preponderance in terms of military technology and organization. This period was launched by the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), considered the first “truly world war”. In fact, the war was fought in Europe, in the Indian Ocean, and in North America. The birth of the United States of America owes much to war: the war for independence against the British crown (1775–1783), the war against Mexico and against indigenous populations, and the Civil War (1861–1865). French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) contributed to the spread of a new concept of the state – liberalism – and gave an autonomous meaning to the word “freedom”. In colonial empires, western powers imposed their power mainly by force of arms: over the populations of the Indian Ocean and West Africa, by the British, or by the French in Southeast Asia and West Africa.

Between 1815 and 1914, Europe experienced a period of peace between the great powers, a calm feeling that contrasted with the course of previous centuries. If we ignore insurrection phases related to the unification of Germany and Italy, between 1845 and 1871, we can consider that the armed conflicts had little expression because they remained in marginal lands of the interior or surroundings of the Ottoman Empire. However, this climate of rotten peace does not disarm countries during times of peace, which allow themselves to be invaded by a wave of nationalism aggravated by the growth of tensions.

Europe considered itself to be on a stage of war, either hot or cold, several times throughout the 20th century. The Great War, with its muddy trenches; the Spanish Civil War, with Guernica serving as a training center for German aviation; World War II, sweeping almost the entire old continent as if a cloak of terror had fallen over the whole land; and the relocation of conflicts to other stages after 1945 (there was not a single day without a conflict in any part of the world – Korea, Vietnam, colonial, and post-colonial wars, etc.) as a result of a new world order, are the great moments that mark the history of war and peace during the last two centuries.

## **Borders as “scars of history”: changes and permanence in Europe**

### ***Space: stability and tension on Europe’s borders***

The European Union has around 14,000 km of borders. The continent, from the Atlantic to the Urals, has more than 37,000 km and about 90 km of borders between states. The multiplicity of political borders, which often have the same amount of languages, has always been the hallmark of Europe.

Some are among the oldest in the world (Portugal-Spain; Spain-France; Andorra; Switzerland; Norway-Sweden), but half of them are very recent, dating from 1989 onwards. Representing a quarter of world borders and recognized states by the UN, it has only about 8% of the world’s population, which does not prevent it from playing a very particular and important role in the world context.

Structural fragmentation is still seen in our contemporary world, such as in the war in Ukraine, the return of the post-Brexit secession of Scotland or other regions in the United Kingdom, whether abroad or within the European Union, as proved by the case of Spain or Belgium.

The impact of the collapse of the Iron Curtain, even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the bloody dismemberment of the Yugoslav Federation, the autonomy of spaces in Czechoslovakia, and the constant tension between territories led the historian Krzysztof Pomian to state in 1990 that “l’Histoire de l’Europe est celle de ses frontières”.

This uncertainty and tension is reflected in the memories of its inhabitants. The feelings that this situation provokes are profoundly disturbing and traumatizing: exalted passions, memories recovered in the present, individual experiences that become collectivized, institutional records that claim ownership of certain

territories, pedagogical and didactic concerns so that future generations can live together democratically, and cultural memories that convey representations and imply individual and collective behaviour due to the borders.

*The long-time signs: the cultural frontier, the religious frontier, the political frontier, and the ambiguities of the present times*

In ancient times, borders were not clear lines, yet they were simple fluid markings that delimited boundary spaces. The development of modern borders emerges in the modern era. It was during the Peace of Westphalia, 1648, that the first borders were negotiated between empires. The Treaty of the Pyrenees, 1659, will be the first example of this modern delimitation, occurring simultaneously with the great evolution of cartography. At that time, borders served not only to control the entrances, often for health reasons, but also to guarantee a district where tax collection became fundamental to feed the new needs of the modern State, amongst which the professionalization and equipping of armies stood out, that, in return, would guarantee the maintenance of borders.

The undefined cultural boundary that had marked the difference between the Western and the Slavic Kingdoms in the year 700 (roughly corresponding to the division between the Western and Eastern Roman Empire) gave way to a religious boundary that will distinguish the western territory of Christianity from the Eastern Orthodoxy at the beginning of the 16th century. When looking at spatial demarcations in 1990, we find a political border where Western countries and the communist bloc almost coexisted in the territories previously “occupied” by the last two designations. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the current invasion of Ukraine (2022) are temporal limits of a time where ambiguities call Europe into question, not only what concerns spatial concept, but above all on a political, ideological, and institutional meaning. It seems that we have returned to a new fluidity, yet dangerous, because it is supported by imperialist, ideological, and military views that cast doubt on not only Europe as a signifier, but perhaps its own meaning.

**On the other side of the war: economic and social consequences for civilians in armed conflicts**

According to Arendt (2006: 124), “we know these processes of devastation throughout history”, as it is mainly in this curricular component that armed conflicts of greater or lesser scale and their consequences are studied.

In fact, wars, such as other subjects that oscillate between history and memory, more than being analysed in a logic of regret or guilt in the face of a painful or uncomfortable past/present (Traverso, 2012), need to be thought of historically, “sin simplificación ni falsificación de ningún tipo” (Morin, 2009: 92), stimulating skills such as empathy, argumentation, or multiperspective.

In this sense, with regard to history teaching and learning at the secondary level, the study of ‘the other side of the war’ can focus on, without “denying the shocking facts of the facts, [or] eliminating the unprecedented from them” (Arendt, 1989: 12), the geopolitical, social, and economic changes resulting from the armed conflicts that took place. The development of their historical awareness, preferably approaching the ontogenetic level (Rüsen, 2010), will involve a thoughtful analysis of aspects such as different ideological models, different economic conceptions and contrasted, even antagonistic, visions of social organization.

Going back in time, before the barbarians, the Western Roman Empire experienced the disastrous consequences of looting and war, in a struggle for survival. Already after the effective collapse, in the 5th century, the western economy and society, deeply marked by that vast political and territorial domain, suffered the inevitable impacts. The economic disruption resulted from abandoned fields, paralysed industries, and an unstable and fragile market. At a social level, the population suffered from famines and epidemics, and the climate of instability and fear pressured them to return to the countryside, a space of refuge and survival, to the detriment of former cities, or else seeking shelter from militarized classes and lords. The cultural setback took place through the reduction of the relevance of literature, the arts, and simple achievements in the daily life of individuals. Perhaps the only resistance came from the Catholic Church, especially in monastic spaces of religious orders, capable of reinforcing its role and position amongst individuals.

The European expansion brought another type of conflict, unequal in terms of armament and devastating in terms of economic and social consequences for the colonized peoples. If some European economic sectors and social groups benefited from this “attack on the American and African continents”, in demographic terms there is a ravage in African and American communities as a result of new diseases without adequate defences, while in Europe there is a return to the growth of cities, due to commercial, industrial, and financial development.

Afterwards, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the French Revolution and, later, Napoleon’s imperialism caused conflicts that, in some way, allowed the rise of liberalism and its founding principles. Consequently, the shock of those with the most conservative and anti-nationalist ideas, which had an echo in Europe, favoured the emergence of new revolutionary waves.

At the end of the 19th century, territorial disputes by European countries, especially in relation to Africa, but also to Asia, represented a climate of “armed peace”. Later came the military alliances that, to a certain extent, anticipated a full-scale armed conflict. In fact, at the time, nationalisms also contributed to the aggravation of this scenario of crisis and put world security in jeopardy.

Those 4 years of WWI shook the foundations of Europe, now marked by an unprecedented world conflict, contributing to the end of old empires and the emergence of new states. If in various parts of Europe parliamentary democracy gained ground, in the Soviet Union a dictatorship of communist nature emerged. Even so, the economic (inflation, public debt, constraints on investments and

exports, etc.) and social difficulties resulting from that conflict, as well as the problems associated with the expansion of socialism around the world, favoured the emergence, in power, of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, controllers of public life and repressors of individual liberties.

With regard to the Second World War, the “total war” not only involved the military, but also led millions of civilians to situations of mass execution, forced labour, or deportations in absentia. Therefore, it proved to be a fertile ground for massive violations of human rights, as stated by Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/>). In turn, the weakening of fundamental political institutions or the alteration of the current social fabric has become a fundamental element for the reformulation of norms, values, or ideologies previously defended (Colletta & Cullen, 2000).

From then on and until 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world became bipolar at political, economic, and social levels. If, on the one hand, with the West being influenced by the United States, liberalism was affirmed based on the principle of individual freedom, on the other hand, the East dominated by the Soviet Union, prevailed the Marxist conception that emphasized collectivity to the detriment of the individual.

It is important to stress, after World War II, the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC, or European Union nowadays), especially as a symbol of the union that aimed at economic prosperity and, again, greater political influence disappeared in the meantime as a result of world armed conflicts.

Even considering that “pensar la barbarie es contribuir a recrear al humanismo” (Morin, 2009: 94), the investigation of topics such as the outbreak of the first independence movements for the emancipation of colonized people from the first to the second half of the 20th century will be inevitable, as well as the persistence of religious, ethnic, or nationalist tensions at the end of the Cold War. Those movements, with an unequivocal impact on Sub-Saharan Africa, looked to the recovery of the national and cultural identity of the countries occupied by European colonists in a logic of self-determination and action against economic backwardness. In the Balkans, after the end of the division of the world into two distinct blocks, various crimes including genocide and war took place in the form of bombings against local populations, concentration camps, and violent massacres of civilians. Religious rivalries or ethnic cleansing actions have spread to countries such as Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia, as well as to the Kosovo region.

Despite efforts in this direction, the United Nations, created in 1945 with the aim of maintaining international peace and security and repressing acts of aggression, has not been able to counteract such harmful effects on the lives of many civilians. Regardless of the work being done in the opposite direction to the armed conflicts, “la barbarie de la guerra resulta por lo demás inseparable de los tiempos históricos” (Morin, 2009: 17).

In turn, the transformations related to the mentality of individuals, whether their visible reflections in behaviour, in the arts, in literature or in science, deserve didactic exploration, so that history is not interpreted as the subject that only



studies wars and battles, alienating from other parallel and distinct memories (Traverso, 2005).

Still, in the first half of the 20th century, following the world conflict, Europeans also began to interpret the world from other lenses: female emancipation took place, namely through the conquests of the right to political participation; positivism was questioned, with science being 'fallible' and knowledge subjective; visual arts and literary manifestations acquired subversive contours, sometimes showing more refined techniques and breaking the old canons. Since the mid-century, it is possible to recognize the emergence of a global society, marked by the role of information and communication technologies or by the generalized civic commitment against environmental degradation and social exclusion, as well as by recurrent scientific innovations or by the urban culture with reflections in several artistic domains.

Then there are the daily changes, banal and linked to each one's life, such as illnesses associated with the Hiroshima and Nagasaki radiation or the psychological effects resulting from daily experiences of war, such as anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorders. In addition to all the points mentioned, wars, whether from another century or the current conflicts that, for example, put Russia and Ukraine in confrontation, are responsible for situations of greater insecurity for civilians, poor mobility, or reduced job opportunities. Furthermore, the refugee status repeatedly becomes a reality, due to the destruction of housing, the absence of sanitary and food conditions, or the high levels of pollution.

To observe, discuss, and understand such scenarios, perhaps in the context of the classroom, is, in some way, to agree with Morin (2009: 94), "pensar la barbarie es contribuir a recrear el humanismo".

## How can we approach this topic in the classroom?

The approach of this topic in History classes, in secondary education, requires, in the first place, the definition of clear objectives that allow serious, consistent work aligned with a logical thread for teachers and students. The historical understanding of this problem goes beyond the location in time and space in order to perceive the complexity of the process marked by continuities and ruptures, advances and setbacks, and, mainly, by the implicit power games that make each conflict a particular context.

In this sense, it is essential that students understand weapons, soldiers, and war fields as key elements in understanding a war, know the different moments of the colonization process, describe the evolution of the European political map across the borders of its countries, assess economic and social consequences of armed conflicts, show the importance of propaganda in the development of an armed conflict, and be able to identify examples of moments of terror and disrespect for human rights in the 20th century European history.

The contents, when approached according to this objective logic, develop in students' skills that contribute to the construction of historical knowledge, insofar

as they are based on the use and interpretation of historical and historiographical sources and on the expectation that students will identify the historical evidence that supports the validation of knowledge. In other words, the learning experiences conceived by the teacher must privilege the diversity of rich and challenging didactic resources for the construction of historical knowledge, in the sense of promoting the performance of complex mental operations that allow the student to think historically.

There are numerous skills that students can develop when approaching this topic and that are not limited to the specific skills of History, but which seek to go further:

- To analyse sources of different nature, distinguishing information, implicit and explicit, as well as the respective limits for knowledge of the past.
- To analyse historiographical texts, identifying the author's opinion and taking it as an interpretation susceptible of revision in the light of historiographical advances.
- To use operational and methodological concepts of the discipline of History.
- To situate relevant events and processes chronologically and spatially, relating them to the contexts in which they occurred.
- Identify the multiplicity of factors and the relevance of the action of individuals or groups, in relation to historical phenomena circumscribed in time and space.
- Relate the history of Portugal to European and world history, distinguishing dynamic articulations and analogies/specificities, whether of a thematic nature or of a chronological, regional, or local scope.
- To problematize the relations between the past and the present and the critical and grounded interpretation of the current world.
- To express openness to the intercultural dimension of contemporary societies.
- To develop the capacity for reflection, sensitivity, and critical judgement.
- To develop awareness of citizenship and the need for critical intervention in different contexts and spaces.
- To promote respect for difference, recognizing and valuing diversity: ethnic, ideological, cultural, and sexual.
- To value human dignity and human rights, promoting diversity, interactions between different cultures, justice, equality, and equity in the enforcement of laws.

Addressing a topic that is both complex and sensitive like this one with secondary school students requires rigour and clarity in the conceptual domain. In this specific domain, concepts such as imperialism, colonialism, propaganda, total war, genocide, socially acute questions (SAQ), and resentment are unavoidable.

Throughout history, from ancient to contemporary times, imperialism and colonialism practices have given rise to serious war conflicts that have marked the memory of humanity. The practice of imperialism has a wide meaning. It was

practised by Greeks and Romans, having been perpetuated with the absolutist monarchies of the modern period and maintained by the main European powers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Imperialism can be understood as a policy of territorial expansion of a State with a view to enlarging its borders, in which that same State exercises military, political, economic, and cultural dominion over another(s), frequently resorting to propaganda to justify its dominance and discredit the dominated state. On the other hand, colonialism is a political and economic system whereby a state or a nation conquers and colonizes specific territorial areas across borders – the colonies – in order to exploit its economic resources and expand its markets. In this process, there is an extension of the way of life from the metropolis to the colony.

Total war means a war without restrictions regarding the type of weapons used, the territories invaded, or the soldiers and civilians involved; it accepts the disregard of the conventionally established rules of war, considering that the means justify the ends, with a view to a complete victory. In this conception of war, genocide is frequent.

The concept “genocide” was coined by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin (1944) following the Nazi “final solution to the Jewish question” during the Holocaust (or Shoah), but not forgetting the systematic murder of certain groups of people that took place before World War II, such as the massacre of the Armenian people by the Turks or the “Great Famine” (Holodomor) in 1931–32 to which Ukraine was destined by Stalin’s will.

In 1946, the General Assembly of the United Nations recognized “genocide” as a crime under international law, and on the 9 December 1948, it achieved its own status as an independent crime in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ratified by 152 States (data from July 2019).

As is easily understood, topics that address genocide and war crimes are sensitive and arouse pain and resentment.

“Resentment” is a painful memory related to an event or an experience that deeply marks the state of mind of an individual or a group that feels victimized or the target of injustice, giving rise to feelings such as pain, resentment, and rage. These feelings can generate hostile attitudes on the part of victims towards their aggressors or their supporters. On the other hand, we cannot forget that the traumas of war are often perpetuated by the following generations who feel the need not to forget the violence and injustices experienced by their ancestors. War memories are precisely an example of this desire to perpetuate the memory of victims, with the aim of not forgetting the traumatic experiences faced by a group in times of war, while waiting for their status as victims of war to be recognized and due reparations are made, not so much economic, but above all social and moral (Frotscher et al., 2014).

Thus it is indisputable that when working on a topic as painful and delicate as war, we are entering the specific field of socially acute questions.

Simonneaux (2019) proposed this term to describe the complex issues open to controversy and integrated in real context. These issues place social and scientific

controversy, complexity, consistency of knowledge, evaluation of evidence, uncertainty, and risk at the center of the teaching–learning process.

These aspects are considered “alive” when they are controversial in the following three areas:

- In society, as they generate debate. There is media coverage of these issues and therefore students may have superficial knowledge.
- In research and in the professional world.
- In the classroom, they are often perceived as “alive”. In this context, teachers often find it difficult to approach them in the classroom because they cannot rely solely on the use of consistent scientific facts and fear that they will not be able to manage students’ reactions.

### **In the end . . .**

Talking about narratives and uncomfortable heritage leads us to remember that “history is a narrative, a writing of the past according to the modalities and rules of a craft . . . that tries to answer questions raised by memory. History is born, therefore, from memory, freeing itself from it by putting the past at a distance” (Traverso, 2012).

Often, the narratives of the most uncomfortable legacies are crystallized because of the subjectivity of memory, seizing the strength of the lived experience, anchored in what we witness, either as protagonists or as extras.

Memory is qualitative, singular, little concerned with comparisons, with contextualization, or with generalizations. Whoever carries it does not need to provide evidence. Reports of the past given by witnesses – as long as they are not conscious liars – will always be their truth, which is the image of the past deposited in them.

*Traverso, 2012*

Therefore, the different narratives and representations of a phenomenon, a process, or an event often bring to a boil the feeling of reckoning with the past, as if there were debts to settle whenever discordant voices are heard.

Alongside individual narratives – and not forgetting collective memories – there are official memories, supported by States, which perpetuate or withhold the “ghosts of the past”, making them underground, hidden, and forbidden.

Recently, Johann Michel, in the article “Le devoir de mémoire” (“Sciences Humaines”, no. 315, June of 2019, pp. 20–25) took stock of the conceptual framework that the Social Sciences and Humanities and, in particular, History were incorporated in the approach of these themes. This article is particularly interesting because it brings us face to face with some dangers that are sometimes forgotten or underestimated, such as the fact that “le devoir de mémoire peut conduire à un culte du passé plus ressassé que réfléchi qui risque d’inhiber le présent” or that

“a saturée mémoire par la douleur empêche la construction de nouveaux horizons d’attente et charrie avec elle le repli des individus et des groupes sur eux-mêmes” (p. 25).

Even so, observing the pain of “others” – assuming that we are oblivious to our own pain – does not leave us indifferent. At least it should not.

Ignorance and contempt for the “ghosts of the past” can lead to ignorance, fanaticism, and the instrumentalization of History. But also to “resentment in History”, in line with what Marc Ferro (2007) wrote at the beginning of the new millennium, trying to find in the remote past the roots of actions observed in the present.

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