

Victimizing Europeans:

Narrating Shared History in the European Parliament's House of European History

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Abstract

The European Parliament's House of European History in Brussels, which opened in 2017, is the first museum in Europe devoted to telling the history of modern Europe. Based on a close reading of its permanent exhibition, non-participant observation, document analysis and interviews, this article explores and interprets the museum's master-narrative about the First World War, the totalitarian regimes and the Second World War and post-war European integration. It demonstrates how and why the museum blames nationalism as the root cause of conflict and war in Europe. With its strong focus on the similarities between National Socialism and Stalinism as regimes of oppression, moreover, it tells a story of Europeans as victims of abstract oppressive regimes. Paradoxically, the House of European History in this way employs the narrative tools of nationalism for overcoming nationalism.

Résumé

La Maison de l'histoire européenne du Parlement européen à Bruxelles, qui a ouvert ses portes en 2017, est le premier musée en Europe consacré à l'histoire de l'Europe moderne. Basé sur une analyse attentive de son exposition permanente, une observation non participante, une analyse documentaire et des entretiens, cet article explore et interprète le maître-récit du musée sur la Première Guerre mondiale, les régimes totalitaires et la Seconde Guerre mondiale, et l'Europe d'après-guerre, ainsi que l'intégration européenne. Il montre comment et pourquoi le musée blâme le nationalisme comme cause fondamentale de conflits et de guerres en Europe. Avec son fort accent sur les similitudes entre le national-socialisme et le stalinisme en tant que régimes d'oppression, il raconte, en outre, une histoire des Européens comme victimes de régimes oppressifs abstraits. Paradoxalement, la Maison de l'histoire européenne utilise ainsi les outils narratifs du nationalisme pour vaincre le nationalisme.

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The House of European History in Brussels could be the archetypical example of how European history should be, can be, or is told as shared transnational history. After all, this has been its explicit normative mission ever since Hans-Gert Pöttering, the then German Christian Democrat President of the European Parliament (EP) first proposed the project for a museum of European (integration) history in 2007 (Kaiser, 2017a). At the 2008 inaugural meeting of the Committee of Experts charged with drafting a concept for such a museum, Pöttering expressed his hope that the future museum would ‘give a fresh boost to a spiritual dimension of the EU, focusing heavily on the European integration process’ (European Parliament, 3 March 2008). After the museum’s opening in May 2017, Pöttering once more clearly articulated the normative concern behind his original museum plan (Interview Pöttering, 2018): ‘when we lose our historical consciousness, history can repeat itself.’

When Pöttering launched the project, the European Union’s (EU) 2004-7 Eastern enlargements had already highlighted persisting divergences in the ways in which Europeans remember history. Mnemonic entrepreneurs – actors who seek to shape collective memory (Jelin, 2003) – from the new EU member-states actively began to attack and undermine prevailing Western European tropes of memory (Mälksoo, 2014; Mälksoo, 2009). This especially concerned the notion of a singularity of the Holocaust which had only properly been imported into the EU following the International Forum on the Holocaust held in Stockholm in January 2000 (Kaiser and Storeide, 2018). Instead, these entrepreneurs sought to promote the suffering of Europeans from East-Central and South-Eastern Europe under Stalinism and communism as a major – if not the core – desirable component of a shared historical memory (Neumeyer, 2018; Perchoc, 2015a; Killingsworth, Klatt, and Auer, 2010).

These mnemonic conflicts have increasingly acquired transnational dimensions so that Sharon Macdonald (2013) has inspected ‘European memorylands’ and Claus Leggewie (2011) has even spoken of a memory ‘battlefield’. Alongside many other actors, EU

institutions also scrimmage on this battlefield. They have become more and more mindful of what they sense is a deep cultural void in European integration – a void that appears to have grown with every enlargement to incorporate member-states with diverging historical experiences and memory and less (potential) socialization into common ways of doing things within a set of common institutions compared to the EU founding member-states.

Originally, EU institutions fostered cultural policies and exchange programmes to fill this void (Calligaro, 2013; Sassatelli, 2009). From the 1980s they also sought to strengthen the EU's symbolic properties (Manners, 2011) in the form of the European anthem and flag, for example. As Cris Shore (2000) has claimed, their activism amounted to 'cultural engineering' from above in the attempted imposition of a common cultural and political identity.

Promoting narratives about the past as shared rather than divisive has recently played a prominent role in attempts at such cultural engineering from above, for example in the European Commission's 'New Narrative for Europe' initiative (Kaiser, 2017b). The EP has become increasingly involved in the politics of history through debates, resolutions, and Europe-wide projects (Perchoc, 2015b; Neumayer, 2015; Kaiser, 2015; Littoz-Monnet, 2012; Kaiser, 2012). The House of European History arguably marks a high point of the EP's growing narrative activism. It was designed to give Europeanization 'a museal form', as Leggewie put it when Pöttering made his proposal (cited in Assmann et al., 2008, 78).

Located close to the EP, well-connected in European museum organizations and networks, and with 400,000 visitors in the first two years after its opening, the museum potentially has strong narrative power. History museums like the House of European History have largely retained their prominent role in providing apparently authoritative accounts of the past (Levitt, 2015; Aronsson and Elgenius, 2014; Porciani, 2012). They can contribute to shaping what have been criticized (e.g. Foucault, 1969) or justified (e.g. Rüsen, 1998, 23) as master-narratives – cohesive stories with a starting point, a middle and a future-oriented end which

were already central to nation-building processes in the nineteenth century (e.g. Rigney, 2012; Anderson, 2000) and still appear essential for collective identity formation. Moreover, modern means of electronic communication including the use of social media allow museums to disseminate such narratives beyond the narrow confines of the museum building and limited number of physical visitors.

Due to the EP's political and financial backing and its prominent role as the only museum that claims to narrate Europe's history, the House of European History has come under close academic (as well as political) scrutiny. It has been analysed as part of a larger trend among national and regional museums to incorporate European and transnational comparative references into their new or updated permanent exhibitions (Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls, 2014). Much of the literature about the House of European History has focused on the museum's origins and trajectory before its opening, however. Thus, Camille Mazé (2014; 2012) and others (e.g. Simansons, 2018; Settele, 2015) have shown how various aborted plans for museums for European (integration) history as well as the debate about the House of European History have served as vehicles for the reflexive intellectual and (in the end) discursive material construction of a European museum master-narrative. Wolfram Kaiser (2017a) in turn has demonstrated how the project's initiation phase was dominated by a micro-network of Catholic German Christian Democrats who sought to use the new museum to bolster their broadly federal vision of the EU and gave it a name and form essentially derived from the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn.

Much of the literature that has analysed the permanent exhibition since 2017, which differs a great deal from the early planning, has done so from the perspective of new museology (e.g. Macdonald and Leahy, 2020; Macdonald, 1998) with a primary interest in museums' societal agency and their nature as sites of negotiation. Thus, Elizabeth Buettner (2018) has explored 'absences' from the permanent exhibition by focusing on the lack of more in-depth treatment

of European colonialism and its long-term impact on post-colonial Europe and the rest of the world. In fact, the lack of more critical engagement with the colonial legacy had already been an issue in the temporary exhibition ‘C’est notre histoire’ on show in Brussels in 2007-8 and Wroclaw in 2009. Some authors have also controversially discussed the extent to which the House of European History facilitates visitor engagement. While Buettner (2018) has lauded the option for visitors to use computers on the museum’s sixth floor to express their opinions on questions about Europe’s future, Astrid van Weyenberg (2019, 54) has rightly pointed out that the curatorial team has control over these questions and that they concern Europe’s future only, not its past.

In contrast, drawing on recent interdisciplinary scholarship on the importance of (historical) narratives in and for contested transnational spaces like the EU (Kaiser and McMahon, 2017; Bouza García, 2017), this article explores if and how the House of European History develops a strong master-narrative of Europe’s past as shared, not divisive, and what its focus and nature are. It does so first, by analysing three sections of the permanent exhibition: those on the First World War and on the interwar totalitarian regimes and the Second World War, which arguably have the greatest potential for divisive narration; and the one on post-war (Western) European integration which Pöttering and the EP had been keen to put centre-stage in a conciliatory narrative of shared history.

Methodologically, this section is based on a close reading of the exhibition narrative during five visits of the museum between its opening in May 2017 and November 2019. It considers the allocation of space, combination of objects and crucially, textual information on the compulsory tablet in all official EU languages which in this museum completely replaces text in glass cases. In a subsidiary manner it also draws on non-participant observation of guided tours and visitor behaviour during the five visits.

These first three sections argue that the permanent exhibition does indeed establish a coherent master-narrative of twentieth-century European history as shared in two crucial ways: first, by denouncing nationalism as the main root cause of violent conflicts in the section about the First World War; and secondly, by externalizing perpetrators in the section about totalitarianism and the Second World War, for example by referring to them as ‘Nazis’, or representatives of an abstract oppressive system. Arguably, the exhibition’s most striking feature is the extent to which it victimizes Europeans regardless of their national or other background. In this way it creates potential for feelings of shared suffering during the twentieth century as an emotional glue for living and working together in the twenty-first century. In contrast, the museum eschews drawing on European integration as shared history, which might be surprising in view of the stated intentions of the network that first promoted the project.

The subsequent sections four and five go on to analyse the reasons for this narrative outcome. They are based on the analysis of the museum’s internal planning documents, media reports and eleven interviews with members of the curatorial team, the Committee of Experts/Academic Committee, and officials in the EP administration as well as four interviews with MEPs from the EP’s Committee on Culture and Education and relevant national politicians conducted between 2009 and 2019. Empirically exploring what Till Hilmar (2016) has theoretically conceptualised as a process of narrative-making, these sections argue that the permanent exhibition’s narrative is not the result of a purposeful German design to extinguish German guilt from European memory; nor is it designed to downplay in times of Brexit the heroic deeds of British Spitfire pilots or to ignore the suffering of Poles as the single most valuable category of victims in Europe’s history, as some critics of the new museum have alleged (Hardman, 2017; Kazimierczuk, 2017). Rather, the narrative has resulted from a dynamic interplay between curatorial choices, constraints of

the production process and political negotiation and compromise over the project's original normative thrust.

First World War: from nationalism to collective suffering

Following an introductory section about revolutions, industrialization and colonialism, the visitor enters the twentieth century in the permanent exhibition by going through a heavy glass door, which has no obvious constructive necessity. Instead, it delineates spatially the beginning of what the tablet text calls the 'catastrophe [that] was the trigger for the most murderous century in European history', with 'traumatic effects [that] had a profound impact on European memory'. The visitor's gaze instantly falls on the pistol, which is the same model as the one used in the 1914 assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in Sarajevo, the spark that ignited the fire of the First World War. Behind it, photos from the war zoom in and out as they are projected against the wall. They show political leaders and monarchs, soldiers marching off to the front, planes, battleships, artillery, civilians, prisoners of war and other images, but generally are lacking in the brutality that was part and parcel of the war.

Crucially, the first glass case to the left shows objects that help illustrate nationalism as the root cause of the war: a caricature of the peoples of the Balkans hitting the bleeding dragon that symbolizes the declining Ottoman Empire, a naval warfare game for children, and a German caricature of alleged British demands on states like Russia to 'kill that Eagle' in the centre of Europe, alongside three rifles. While these objects only give a rough indication of the role of nationalist fears and ambitions in the outbreak of the war, the tablet texts for some of the objects clarify this narrative further. The introduction to the entire section already talks about 'many' who believed that 'war was inevitable', 'some' who saw it as positive and

'others' as 'survival of the fittest'. Crucially, 'many European leaders [were] driven by national pride and a belief in military might' and 'saw war as an acceptable means'. The introductory text mentions Germany's desire to 'fulfill its destiny on the world stage' and Russia's expansion into Asia as aggressive foreign policy aims. The tablet text about the Balkans then talks about 'growing Slavic nationalism and expansionism' and such nationalism creating 'competition between states [that] fostered racism, and inflamed tensions in Europe at a time of crisis', leading to the formation of 'two hostile alliance blocs'.

Within this quite generic description of varieties of nationalism as the root cause for the war, with some apparently randomly chosen examples, only the tablet text about Franz Ferdinand explicitly discusses the question of concrete responsibility for the outbreak of war – this despite the fact that this question played a huge role in war propaganda, in the punitive peace after the end of the war, as an argument for nationalist revanchists, and also in the historiography since the 1920s; in other words, an obvious opportunity for curators keen – in the words of chief curator Andrea Mork (European Parliament, 2018, 30) – to prioritize 'historical memory' and 'the relativity of perspectives' to juxtapose different usages of history for constructing sharply diverging or confrontational narratives. Instead, the tablet text remains highly factual in enumerating the official steps that led to the war, including diplomatic missions, mobilization decisions and declarations – until 'Europe was at war' as the tablet text declares laconically.

In other words, according to the permanent exhibition varieties of nationalism were guilty of making war break out in Europe in 1914, not Germany or Serbia, for example. Semantically, the tablet text merges those individual decision-makers and political and social groups, who were keen on war, or willing to accept it. It talks about 'European leaders', not leaders of specific parties or countries, to underline their commonality and shared responsibility. It also uses passive voice when mentioning that these leaders were 'driven by national pride and a

belief in military might’, as if they had not themselves deliberately inflated such pride, mobilized hatred of others or started the huge armaments programmes across Europe. At this stage in the exhibition, individual people and even their political leaders already appear as victims of a universal abstract force, nationalism.

This perspective is subsequently reinforced by the emphasis on suffering in the remaining part of the section about the First World War. In line with recent representational strategies that avoid the use of depictions of brutality through images like photographs or film footage (Muchitsch, 2013), the permanent exhibition uses everyday objectives to illustrate the suffering: postcards sent back home from the many fronts in Europe, positioned against a map of Europe; depictions of soldiers and prisoners of war in uniforms, and the artillery shells which are used to introduce through the tablet information, the ‘industrial scale, bringing innovations in the technology of war’. The tablet text also refers to ‘four million artillery shells [that] were fired during the first four days of the battle of Verdun in 1916’ without however illustrating the battle and suffering in the trenches with images.

‘Dehumanisation of the individual in this war’ is instead symbolized by film footage of shell-shocked psychiatric patients.

Combining the explanatory force of rather abstract notions of nationalism with the narrative of collective European suffering is broadly in line with – and was likely reinforced during the conception of the permanent exhibition by – parallel developments in the historiography of the First World War and memory practices in Western continental Europe in particular. In late 2012 Christopher Clark (2012) published his influential book *Sleepwalkers* that many have interpreted as the culmination point of historical research that has redistributed responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War more widely (again). Similarly, the new 2014 French war memorial *Ring of Memory* in Notre-Dame-de-Lorette near Lens with the names of 580.000 French, German and British soldiers, who died in this section of the

front, engraved in alphabetical order, which was opened by the French President François Hollande in the presence of the German Defence Minister (and now European Commission President) Ursula von der Leyen symbolized nationally coordinated attempts to foster the shared collective memory of futile suffering during the war (Prost, Ortiz and Le Maner, 2014).

The permanent exhibition's section in this sense is part and parcel of a much broader trend in Western Europe to connect a contemporary peace message to historicizing and Europeanizing the First World War (e.g. Wahnich, 2005). Crucially, this form of Europeanization is not threatened fundamentally by East-Central European memory entrepreneurs. While they often see nationalism as a positive force that enabled their countries to regain or gain statehood for the first time as a result of the war, for them the general lack of statehood and collective agency in the region before 1918 nevertheless makes the First World War relatively marginal for memory politics.

Totalitarian regimes: oppressive systems and suffering Europeans

Walking past a short section of the permanent exhibition devoted to communist revolutions and aspects of European interwar politics and culture, the visitor quickly reaches what is, in spatial and aesthetic terms, clearly intended as the dominant theme of this floor level: the comparison between what the exhibition calls the 'totalitarian systems' of Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union after no more than an abbreviated discussion of authoritarianism in East-Central Europe and fascism in Italy. During the permanent exhibition's conceptual planning stage, the prominence of this comparative focus was strongly pushed inter alia by Taja Vovk van Gaal, the leader of the team of curators, and the members of the Academic Committee from East-Central Europe. It was a deliberate choice to prioritize this perspective

on totalitarian regimes at the expense of a more in-depth treatment of the Holocaust, or Shoah. At a meeting of the Academic Committee in October 2011 it was noted that such an ‘exhibition with the Shoah ... at its centre’ was ‘not being made for the future’ (European Parliament, 2011).

The narrative about the two totalitarian systems is highly systematic both in terms of their textual description and their auratic representation in what appears like the exhibition’s central, almost ‘sacred space’ (Hilmar, 2016, 312). To begin with, to guard against claims that the exhibition equates both systems, the introductory tablet text emphasizes that they ‘emerged from very different socio-political backgrounds and were fueled by different political beliefs’ about class (in the case of the Soviet Union) and race (in the case of Nazi Germany) respectively. The text goes on to say, however, that they ‘had many similarities’ listing individual leadership by Stalin and Hitler as well as the use of ‘ideology, propaganda, terror and genocide to manipulate, subjugate and murder millions of people’. In line with Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of totalitarian regimes (Arendt, 1951), the exhibition stresses their structural similarities as systems of oppression.

The exhibition’s representational mode further emphasizes the similarities between the two regimes. From in front the visitor sees film sequences in parallel, about the Nazi regime on the left and the Stalinist regime on the right, which have the same length and use similar moving images with priority given to the regimes’ leaders, organization of the masses and military power. The objects in the two cases of equal size and relational position seem similarly interchangeable: Hitler’s bust and a vase with Stalin’s image as well as, on the rear, uniforms of the party organizations and clothes of inmates of prisons and so-called concentration camps and Gulags.

As in the section about the First World War, the tablet text addresses the regimes' brutality, but the representation through images and objects carefully avoids overwhelming the visitor with evidence of atrocities. Instead, it is largely limited to images that can create associations for the knowing, such as Jews leaving train wagons. In fact, the worst single image is of starving children in the Soviet section, during the persecution of the independent farmers from 1929 to 1932. The tablet's organization underscores the apparent interchangeability of the regimes and large parts of their descriptions. It works perfectly if the visitor steps behind the four large glass cases from where most objects come in view. However, if the tablet is used from in front of the screens with film footage, which initially comes more naturally, the spatial order is reversed and one looks at the section about Nazi Germany but listens to the comments about the Stalinist regime on the tablet.

In this section the exhibition uses the same semantic and representational strategies with the same results as in the section about the First World War. To begin with, it describes the political systems in abstract language using a lot of passive voice, which already creates a great distance between the visitors and any perpetrators. Thus, the tablet introduction to the Soviet Union repeatedly talks about 'the system' as an agent of persecution. Not people, but 'it' – the system – killed. Similarly, when 'the Nazis came to power in 1933' it was not they, the Nazis, who promoted the scapegoating of allegedly racially inferior Jews. Rather, 'Jews were blamed for Germany's problems'. In fact, with one or two exceptions in hidden away tablet text the exhibition generally talks about 'the Nazis' in a denationalized form, avoiding the use of 'German' as an adjective as in 'the German Nazis', for example, let alone 'the Germans', either in the context of Germany's military aggression and war crimes or of the annihilation of European Jewry. In fact, during a guided tour of this section for a group of French children, the educator heavily emphasized the notion of totalitarian regimes. He deliberately made a very strong distinction between 'the Nazis' on one side and 'the German

people' on the other, who were (or so it seemed) oppressed by them and could, for example, only listen to Nazi-controlled radio channels.

Similarly, this section also avoids disconcerting images or film footage, for example from show trials, executions or from the US liberation of extermination camps. Only Stalin and Hitler feature as perpetrators, although even here the focus is not on their deeds, but their leadership style – the bureaucratic Stalin and the charismatic Hitler. The visitor encounters none of the most awful ordinary perpetrators – whether Lavrentij Beria or Arthur Seyß-Inquart – a strategy that would have allowed the curators in passing to explore the multi-ethnic character of the regimes' annihilation machineries. The exhibition's textual and representational strategy instead writes the perpetrators and their agency out of Europe's history. The museum's narrative juxtaposes European victims and opaque oppressive regimes. The visitor is bound to feel with Germans and Russians even if they in many cases enthusiastically supported the regimes or even committed atrocities, as victims of structures that become externalized through a process of representational 'othering'.

Walking around the next corner a long glass case comes into view, which now includes themes like the mass murder of Jews as well as collaboration. This could have some potential to correct the impressions from the previous section. However, this section mixes information and objects about the flight and expulsion of Germans from the East with text and images about war crimes and collaboration, apparently putting it all on the same footing without paying attention to time or causal historical mechanisms while combining it with visual and sound recordings of the destruction of European cities by bombers – visual and sound recordings that once more emphasize the suffering of *all* civilians under *all* indiscriminate aerial bombing.

Again, as the section about the First World War, this section has also been developed in the context of broader narrative and semantic shifts, which have denationalized the totalitarian systems and the crimes of perpetrators. This has become apparent in cultural productions in Germany that focus on German suffering during and after the war as in the case of the film trilogy ‘Our Mothers, Our Fathers’ about the Second World War screened in 2013 (Cohen-Pfister, 2014) or in documentaries about flight and expulsion from eastern German territories – a trend that has led some to severely criticize these productions as attempts to downgrade German responsibility for the war and war crimes (e.g. Heer, 2005). More generally, the denationalization of the Nazi regime and its crimes is also reflected in now dominant colloquial references to ‘the Nazis’, which the House of European History has adopted for its narrative about the shared European experience of suffering. It is apparent in this section almost as much as in the one about the First World War that the notion of the suffering of Europeans constitutes the museum’s key narrative message.

European integration: externally imposed and ephemeral

One flight of stairs up, the visitor enters the time of the division of Europe at the start of the Cold War. In this section, the exhibition continues its oppositional representational approach by showing developments in the Western world with the creation of NATO on one side, and those in the East on the other where according to the tablet text, ‘liberation for many meant the replacement of Nazi tyranny by communist dictatorship under Soviet control’. In this narrative the Cold War dominates everything and shapes Western European integration. Hence, Western Europeans apparently chose what the introductory tablet text calls ‘cooperation at supranational level’ because they were ‘united by the fear of communism’. Their aims were to ‘tame nationalism and dismantle [sic!] the risk of war’ – a motivation that

is used to connect post-war integration back to lessons learned from the First World War. A subsequent tablet text concedes that the resulting ‘process has been beset with disagreements about how far unification should go’.

The motivations and conflicts are discussed in a completely generic way at this stage, however. The visitor does not learn, for example, that the electorally strong French communists and Italian communists and socialists were initially violently opposed (in line with Soviet policy) to any form of Western European integration as designed to prop up capitalist exploitation of the working class to serve the interests of an allegedly imperialist United States; or that nationalist parties like the French Gaullists intensely disliked the institutional set-up that seemed to threaten national identity, sovereignty, and power. These fears have been such recurrent themes of the debate about ‘Europe’ up to the present day that it is surprising that the exhibition expressly only addresses them for the first time in conjunction with the 2016 Brexit referendum on the top floor, and even then, they remain marginal to the narrative.

European integration in the exhibition is almost exclusively told as a sequence of 15 events, each one explained with a small vertical glass case with the European flag, an object, a quote, and short tablet text. The first three glass cases are squeezed in between the stories about the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, so that continental Western Europeans once more appear to lack agency. They are not making history; it is happening to them. The third glass case about the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954 utilizes a quote by Paul-Henri Spaak, the then Belgian foreign minister, from 1948, that the ‘basis of our policies’ is ‘fear’ – a claim obviously not intended to characterize European integration after the actual start of ‘core Europe’ formation with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951-2 and that was therefore methodologically inappropriate to cite at this point. Additionally, the object is a West German Communist Party poster denouncing the

European Defence Community in a form that even a native speaker of German, who can read it, cannot make sense of without additional contextual information.

The entire narrative strategy in this section is based on the assumption, initially promoted by Włodzimierz Borodziej, Professor of Modern History at the University of Warsaw, member of the original Committee of Experts and then chair of the Academic Committee, and which was taken up by the team of curators, that European integration is but ‘a history of events’ and should be told as such (European Parliament, 2008). The exhibition reflects that the curators had great difficulty retrieving suitable objects that symbolize such ‘events’. They have had to take recourse to showing the Rome and Maastricht treaties that lack auratic quality. The creation of the Common Agricultural Policy is represented by stylized grain. A toy tractor might have been a better choice. It is not surprising therefore, that visitors pay little attention to the vertical glass cases that seem to constitute barriers to walking through the exhibition rather than attractions that tell an interesting story vividly.

The only other strategy that the exhibition uses to represent European integration is one of personification (Bergmann, 1997, 298-300), somewhat hidden away in a dark corner devoted to what here are rightly described as the ‘so-called’ founding fathers, to delineate this notion as a foundation myth (whereas the tablet text with a gross lack of semantic sensitivity in the previous section uses Nazi terminology like ‘living space’ without distancing itself from this contaminated language). The busts, objects and tablet texts provide generic information about this group of male politicians (one per member-state, plus Jean Monnet). They say very little about their concrete motivations for European integration. Unlike the exhibition *C’est notre histoire* (Kaiser, 2011), the House of European History deliberately shuns the alternative or complementary strategy of personification: of showing how ordinary citizens have experienced integration or contributed to it, for example through the abolition of borders, the demise of uncompetitive industries, or the funding of mobility programmes.

On the whole, therefore, the permanent exhibition treats the theme of European integration, which Pöttering had wanted to be at the heart of the new museum, with disdain – as an institutionally obligatory side story with divisive potential, as it was limited to Western Europe and later Northern and Southern European countries for a long time, and has only included East-Central Europe since the end of the Cold War and the EU's Eastern enlargements during 2004-13. Instead, the post-war section clearly prioritizes spatially, and through the placing of prominent objects, the experience of everyday life in the classroom, the household or on holiday – something that allows the curators to develop a pan-European perspective that does not even distinguish between East and West except in the statistical information about social developments in individual countries on a desk in the middle of that particular part of this section. Clearly, or so it seems, prams and electrical kitchen utensils make up shared European history since 1945.

Obsession with objects: curatorial choices and pressures

The House of European History's narrative focus on the shared experience of victimhood of Europeans and the denunciations of nationalism as the original root cause of the First World War and indirectly, of the abstractly described totalitarian regimes that oppressed them are not the result of an entirely purposeful institutional or curatorial strategy. Rather, they have come about through the interplay of curatorial choices, constraints of the production process, and political negotiation and compromise.

To begin with, the curatorial team dominated by senior professionals with long museum experience, was obsessed with objects, not stories. Although this cultural institution was called a 'house', not 'museum', the curators were keen to construct and run a museum which required a collection of objects – hence their absolute priority during the conception and

implementation phase of the permanent exhibition was to identify and combine auratic objects that could support the exhibition's spatial and artistic structure and capture visitors' attention. As the House of European History had no collection and no time to build one either, and as it was bound by the EP's restrictive rules on public procurement, it had to get most objects on loan from other museums in Europe – an incredibly complex and frequently frustrating process that absorbed most of the curatorial team's time and management capacity (Interview Curator, 2018).

The obsession with collecting and displaying suitable objects turned discussions about narratives within the team or with the Academic Committee into a sideshow limited to central questions such as how to compare the totalitarian regimes while still rescuing a heavily cut-down version of claims to the singularity of the Holocaust as industrialized mass murder (Mork, 2014; Littoz-Monnet, 2013). This policy of prioritizing objects over stories has generated positive comments from some observers who have praised the exhibition's 'spatial art' and use of images and sound (e.g. Krankenhagen, 2017, 126-8).

Inasmuch as the curatorial team did consider narratives, its professional ethos and instinct shaped by postmodern theories and habits was to avoid a teleological story about European integration – especially as it is an institution of the EP whose president had charged it with telling such a teleological story. As a result of the EU's broader legitimacy crisis the EP was too divided and weak to impose such a narrative. For maintaining the project's legitimacy internally, the EP leadership in fact needed to respect the curatorial team's professional independence (Interview Pöttering, 2018; Kaiser, 2017a). As a senior EP official put it (Interview Director-General, 2019), the project's initiators realized early on that the curatorial team would never prioritize European integration in the exhibition, and so they gave up on this original objective and merely tried to secure the completion of the project.

Additionally, the curatorial team had limited academic expertise in European integration history and the Academic Committee had none, as its members had been appointed in line with the then prevailing grand coalition requirements in the EP for political and national proportionality. Moreover, they had no interest in European integration either. Most leading curators like Andrea Mork and Elke Pluijmen either had strong affinities with Western European traditions of prioritizing social and everyday history; or – like the Slovene team leader Vovk van Gaal – thought that it was not ‘their’ history anyhow. In any case, they agreed that it was impossible to represent European integration in an exciting manner in a museum and made no visible effort to make it more exciting. They left the work of planning the representation of the 15 ‘events’ to the only two largely isolated ‘integration’ curators on the team, who had any academic or personal experience of European integration respectively and who covered the periods up to 1973 and after 1973 (Interview Curator, 2018).

Please the East: political negotiation and compromise

Whereas prioritizing objects over stories and marginalizing European integration in the narrative were mainly due to curatorial choices and pressures, the heavy emphasis on the comparison of totalitarian systems largely resulted from a complex political negotiation process. Planning the permanent exhibition to begin with took place during a phase of intense pressure by memory entrepreneurs from East-Central Europe to implant the historical experience and memory of the new member states firmly in European and EU remembrance policy and narrative practices (Mälksoo, 2014; Mälksoo, 2009). This required stressing the evils of Stalinism and communism, firmly establishing their violence as ‘first order’ crimes (Hilmar, 2016, 311) and pushing the notion of totalitarian systems as a conceptual paradigm. It indirectly necessitated revising the notion of the singularity of the Holocaust propagated by

‘progressive’ academics, political parties and governments as the most desirable single focus of European remembrance policy and narrative practices, or even as a foundation myth of European unity, at around the turn of the century (Kaiser and Storeide, 2018) – this despite the fact that historically speaking, the Holocaust never was one of the motivations for Western European integration after 1945.

These memory entrepreneurs promoted the East Europeanization of remembrance policy and narratives practices in multiple political and cultural forums, not least in the EP where their efforts culminated in the 2009 resolution on totalitarianism (Perchoc, 2015b; European Parliament, 2009). As a political compromise, this resolution nevertheless strongly pushed the notion of totalitarian systems and heavily marginalized the notion of a singularity of the Holocaust. Prioritizing the comparison of the Nazi and Soviet systems of oppression also became essential for forging an East-West consensus among the members of the curatorial team and the Academic Committee, as well as in negotiations with the EP to secure funding and the actual completion of the project (Interview Trüpel, 2011).

The permanent exhibition goes one step further than the 2009 resolution, however, by relegating the historical representation of the Holocaust to a theme among many others in the glass cases about the Nazi system and about the Second World War, and separating it out in a room on the next floor which is firmly hidden away to the left of the space devoted to the everyday lives of Europeans. Moreover, this small room seems to strongly affirm as an example for the rest of Europe what Timothy Garton Ash once called the ‘German DIN-norm’ (technical standard) for the ‘reworking of history’ and for dealing with collective responsibility for the Holocaust (Garton Ash, 2007, 20): by referencing one European politician after another apparently following in the footsteps of Konrad Adenauer, the first West German chancellor, in accepting (some form of) responsibility for the Holocaust.

At the same time, the members of the curatorial team and of the Academic Committee for ideological and institutional reasons have not fallen in line behind the more far-reaching demands of East-Central European extreme nationalists. Here, the presence of Mária Schmidt, the director of the House of Terror in Budapest and confidant of Prime Minister Victor Orban, on the Academic Committee actually made it easier to draw a red line in the sand regarding the acceptable nature and extent of East Europeanization of the museum. From the perspective of the EP leadership, any outcome – even if it marginalized European integration – was better than Schmidt’s version of twentieth century European history. In this version Hitler would be but a ‘footnote’ and his Reichsbank president and economics minister Hjalmar Schacht would have been made central in the light of the then economic and financial crisis for his alleged ability to resuscitate the German economy in the 1930s (Interview Schmidt, 2012) – outlandish revisionist positions without any academic grounding which the EP had unintentionally imported into the Academic Committee through its peculiar grand coalition selection process; in this case, as the former Austrian Vice-Chancellor Erhard Busek has recalled, Schmidt had been chosen as the conservative counterpart to the Austrian social democrat contemporary history professor Oliver Rathkolb (Interview Busek, 2011) to represent the former ‘Austro-Hungarian’ geographical and political space.

Challenges like Schmidt’s, including Polish attacks on the museum after its opening in 2017 in fact strengthened the ‘progressive’ Western European dominated defence of core tenets of the established remembrance policy and narrative practices – most importantly, the unwavering identification throughout the permanent exhibition of nationalism as the root cause of all conflicts in the twentieth century. Paradoxically, while the permanent exhibition preaches the need to overcome nationalism, its narrative of Europeans as victims uses a well-established nationalist mode of storytelling. Inadvertently and paradoxically, the House of

European History employs the narrative tools of nationalism with the aim of overcoming nationalism.

Conclusion

The close reading of the House of European History's three key twentieth century sections with potential for divisive and conflicting narratives has yielded several insights. First, the exhibition's narrative puts nationalism centre-stage as the root cause of what it calls the 'catastrophe' of the First World War and the subsequent radicalization into two totalitarian regimes, Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union.

Secondly, the narrative strategy, while not equating both systems, nevertheless heavily emphasizes their similarities and externalizes them through a process of 'othering' as systems of oppression controlled by their two 'leaders'. To paraphrase Hannes Heer (2005), it was Hitler and Stalin. Ordinary and extraordinary European perpetrators do not feature in the museum. In fact, the most prominent named collaborator, who is shown on a photo sitting in a car, is Vidkun Quisling from Norway which rather conveniently is outside of the present-day EU. Overall, the permanent exhibition creates the notion of "Europeans suffering" as the core experience and desirable narrative of twentieth century history.

Thirdly, the exhibition narrates European integration in the most generic way as a response to nationalism and a result of the search for peace, but otherwise it appears as a side-effect of the Cold War. The choice of representing it as a series of 'events' shows little understanding of the historiography of European integration, which has increasingly focused on themes such as institutional competition, transnational social mobilization, and political contestation (e.g.

Patel, 2019; Kaiser and Varsori, 2010) which are largely absent from the museum's narrative, especially for the period of the Cold War.

As the analysis of the conceptual and planning phase has shown, this narrative outcome has resulted from a combination of curatorial choices, pressures of the production process and political negotiation following what Andreas Fickers (2018, 173) has called a 'European compromise logic'. Crucially, the curatorial team cared more about the objects than the stories. Whereas the House of European History has received praise for its aesthetic style within the confines of the building's space and belatedly imposed security measures, it largely fails to engage with diverging narratives in Europe in a productive way mobilizing visitors as active participants rather than treating them as consumers.

The political negotiation process, finally, resulted in the centrality of the comparative focus on the two totalitarian systems as a form of controlled East Europeanization of remembrance policy and narrative practices. Relenting to pressure by memory entrepreneurs from East-Central Europe to make their experiences under Stalinism and communism central in cultural projects like the House of European History arguably facilitates the continued control by actors and networks from the founding member-states over the EU's politics and other policy-making. Awarding the leadership of the original curatorial team and Academic Committee to reliable individuals from the new member-states with strong ties in and with Western Europe was the safest way to proceed (Interview Pöttering, 2018). This procedure has at least made sure that the narrative outcome has retained core elements of the Western European 'progressive' consensus, especially about the evil of nationalism and a rear guard defence of the uniqueness of the Holocaust as industrial mass murder.

Telling not just the history of the First World War, but also – despite the huge differences – that of the totalitarian regimes and the Second World War as one of 'universal victimhood' of

Europeans (Levy and Sznajder, 2005) ignores the victims of Europeans outside of Europe in the twentieth century – a glaring omission in the museum, as Buettner (2018) has observed. Instead, the House of European History has created what could be termed a healing narrative about an allegedly shared European past. The museum’s narrative mode of victimization, which draws on emotions connected to suffering and mourning or the joys of liberation (as in the section about 1989), may have potential to mobilize positive feelings of solidarity and allegiance (Koschorke, 2012) – a process that could even indirectly benefit the EU despite the ephemeral treatment of its history in the permanent exhibition; an approach that, to the evident frustration of the museum director present at the meeting, even elicited praise from Claire Fox, a British nationalist Brexit Party MEP during 2019-20 on the Committee on Culture and Education (European Parliament, 2019).

The museum in Brussels is only one institution among many to discuss and represent topics of the global twentieth century like the Second World War (Jaeger, 2020); it is also only one among many engaged in what Leggewie (2011) has called ‘the fight over European memory’. This larger ‘battlefield’ remains chaotic. Thus, whether the House of European History’s permanent exhibition can create a pathway for narrating Europe’s history as shared history around the experience of suffering and whether this can generate an impact on stories in national and regional history museums remain to be seen.

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