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A (New) Spectre Is Haunting Europe: National Memory

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History is under attack, all over the world, for both the political and propagandistic uses of the past – which increasingly frame the actions of autocratic governments – and for the bans on writing, studying, teaching subjects that may be regarded as offensive to the memory of one country or even a threat to its national unity. These two perspectives are closely linked, because it is precisely in those countries where history, or rather an idealised or politically-oriented image of the past, is employed with greater ideological zeal that it is more difficult to write history without repressive state intervention. The examples are many: prison sentences for those who tackle certain topics, state censorship of school curricula, inaccessible archives, destroyed documents, marginalisation of disobedient officials, coercive rewriting of the past. It has become increasingly difficult to maintain the vital link between historical research, dissemination of results and teaching, to the detriment of an official history increasingly bent to the ideological pretensions of governments to create unitary histories in homage to a distorted idea of national prestige.

KEYWORDS: HISTORY; MEMORY; PROPAGANDA;

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History is under attack, all over the world, for both the political and propagandistic uses of the past – which increasingly frame the actions of autocratic governments – and for the bans on writing, studying, teaching subjects that may be regarded as offensive to the memory of one country, or even a threat to its national unity. These two perspectives are closely linked, because it is precisely in those countries where history, or rather an idealised or politically-oriented image of the past, is employed with greater ideological zeal that it is more difficult to write history without repressive state intervention. Indeed, the worm of control over historical research also corrodes the civic and cultural life of Western states, where freedom of research and teaching formally exists, but limitations and outright censorship of controversial facts and periods of national history have been introduced in recent

years. Examples are the controversy in France over torture during the Algerian war; the laws in Poland on the prohibition to write that the Poles contributed to the extermination of the Jewish population; or the legislative measures aimed at hindering the development of lines of research considered “divisive” in the USA.

But in general, the issue of the externally-imposed limits to academic research quickly emerged as a growingly-common feature of the historian’s profession in many countries which the recent war in Ukraine has greatly exacerbated, as the violence of war carries along a real violence in the use of history. This violence consists in the censorship imposed on language and in the ideological use of history in which an invented past is employed as an excuse for military aggression. I must confess that we did not think we were so “timely” when we planned the conference, although this was inserted from the very beginning within a general framework in which assaults on history have multiplied in various regions of the world. We do know if history necessarily is a political activity, but the pressure on the reconstruction of the past does not diminish – in fact it increases, as recent research by Anton de Baets shows (De Baets 2018). The conference *Storie pericolose – Dangerous Histories* was organized around these issues at the University of Turin in June 2022, and it provided the material for the interviews published here.

In order to understand whether there is a common thread linking these very different realities, we started from a basic question: what are the profound reasons for the attack on historians in the last two decades? Why is it still deemed necessary to control historical research? The question is not only the strategic nature of history in national propaganda, but its status as an academic discipline devoted to the study of the past *within* public institutions that have been using a different national memory paradigm for some time.

One reason may lie in the growing ethical issue of history as public National Memory.

At least since the early 2000s the process of personifying the nation-state has become an extraordinary complicated issue. Memory as the counterpart of History has taken on a more complex nature, imbued with ethics, moral superiority, and universal justice in a combination

of images that go far beyond the limits of traditional propaganda on “national glory.”

Today, many governments present themselves as collective moral persons representing the Nation, whose reputation becomes an autonomous political subject to be defended according to much higher ethical standards than those in use in the first half of the twentieth century. Distance from, or proximity to the “absolute evil” of the Holocaust has imposed a different hierarchy of values, especially in eastern European countries, which re-shaped their recent past around the criterion of victimization, resistance to the Germans and distance from war crimes (Koposov 2017). This way, a personified National Memory is born; its life is independent of individuals and it has legally-defined interests, among which *is the right to a good reputation*. And reputation is largely based on the things one has done and said – that is, on the reconstruction of the Past.

The Past, then, is not just a story, a quest, or a narrative, it is a memory increasingly objectified as the supreme “public good”, an avatar of the Nation that must be defined in its ideal and material boundaries. As a consequence, the reputation of the Nation can be identified as a legally defined object of law, as shown by a recent Polish law of 2018 that had as its title: *Protection of the reputation of the Republic of Poland and the Polish nation*. It is the (in)famous law that punishes those who dare writing that Poles contributed to the persecution of Jews:

Anyone who, in public and against the facts, attributes to the *Polish people* or the *Polish state* the responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich [...], or other crimes constituting crimes against peace and humanity or war crimes, or anyone who would otherwise *severely diminish the responsibilities of the actual perpetrators of these crimes*, will be subject to a fine or imprisonment of up to 3 years. The judgment will be rendered public.¹

¹ English translation by Massimo Vallerani, based on the Italian translation from Polish by Matteo Monti, *La controversia sui campi di sterminio “polacchi” e la legge del 1 febbraio 2018: fra costruzione della verità e protezione della reputazione della Repubblica di Polonia*, <https://www.diritticomparati.it/la-controversia-sui-campi-di-sterminio-polacchi-e-la-legge-del-primo-febbraio-2018-fra-costruzione-della-verita-e-protezione-della-reputazione-della-repubblica-di-polonia/>.

It stands out that the object of this liberticidal law is apparently the same of so many other memory laws spread throughout Europe, to which the Polish government explicitly claims to adhere. The enforcement of the law is entrusted to two new organizations: the *Institute of National Memory*, which houses investigative researchers who have to accuse non-aligned historians; and the *Polish League against Defamation*, a private party association. It is worth mentioning that the law and its violent enforcement served to target first Jan Thomas Gross, a Polish-American historian working in the U.S.²; and then the authors of a collective work edited by the Holocaust research center of the Polish Academy of Sciences: *Night without End. The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland* (Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking, eds, 2022), a book which received negative reviews by members of the “Institute of National Remembrance”³. In a different context but with similar outcomes, another epic clash between diverging reconstructions of the past took place with the violent reactions against the 1619 project – from the date of the first arrival of Africans in America – a major investigation promoted by *The New York Times* and coordinated by journalist Nicole Hanna-Jones⁴. Once again the controversy revolved around matters of image and reputation. A letter from four leading academic historians did not challenge the data, but rather the report’s *consequences* and conclusions – which are said to spread the idea that American history was founded on slavery, and that the progress achieved over time was more illusory than real, since the black population has not at all achieved the right to happiness sanctioned by the constitution.⁵ But it was especially the reactions from the U.S. government (under the Trump administration)

² See Jan Grabowski, *The Polish Police. Collaboration in Holocaust*, Ina Levi annual Lecture, November 17, 2016, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20170502-Grabowski_OP.pdf.

³ See Mosha Gessen, “The Historians Under Attack for Exploring Poland’s Role in the Holocaust”, *New Yorker*, March 26, 2021: pages. For the Grabowski and other authors’ response to criticism of the volume see <https://www.holocaustresearch.pl/index.php?show=555>.

⁴ About 1619 project see https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf.

⁵ The letter was published in *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>.

and some conservative states that was surprising: in more than twenty states, parliaments not only rejected the idea that slavery played a role in American history, but banned the use in (federal) schools of history textbooks that mention the Critical Race Theory. This way, national memory as the personified entity of the nation also enters the school curriculum. It is not just a matter of good reputation, but also of collective psychology. What is the “crime” of the 1619 project or the Critical race theory? Not only that of embodying an idea that can potentially hurt the nation’s image, but also the more topical one of dividing the minds of citizens, of creating false oppositions: Critical Race Theory causes unnecessary trauma to white kids (guilt) and black kids (slavery complex) against the normal mission of the school, which aims to promote integration. The ambivalence of the mentioned reasons needs to be stressed: the good school is geared towards integration, so it rejects divisive arguments; just as the Polish law punished equally those who accused Poles and those who denied Nazi crimes, like many “good” European memories laws⁶.

It is evident that a (new) *spectre is haunting Europe: National Memory*, which becomes a political and moral subject in that it is meant to represent the nation’s real character. The difficulty for the historian today, therefore, is increased by this mixture of ambivalent values, in a context of allegedly ethical defense of memory. The need for this defense pushes the governments to increase pressure and violence against historians, objects, museums, and books purported to threaten the national reputation or one group’s identity. This is believed to justify censorship, erasure, and replacement as the necessary work entailed by the duty to soothe a wounded memory. In this sense, even some manifestations of cancel cultures – despite the just criticism of the racism inherent in European colonial history – can contribute to the destruction of some elements of the past in the name of a “higher value” of inclusiveness and reparation for wrongs suffered. Ironically, such efforts can turn into an implicit revival of cancel culture practices implemented by colonial regimes themselves.

⁶ See Belavusau, Gliszczyska-Grabias, Mälksoo 2021 and Belavusau, Gliszczyska-Grabias 2017.

The mistake is double: to give Memory the function of representing the nation (which does not belong to it) and to give History the function of creating memory (which inevitably limits freedom of research). As a statement by the American Historical Association, along with other teacher associations, puts it: “cleaned-up history is of no use to anyone: students must also be educated through the narrative of mistakes and horrors”⁷.

In order to frame the growth of this attacks against professional history, we asked a number of historians engaged with the study of forms of pressure on historical research, to tell us about their experiences as researchers and witnesses of systems of censorship operating at different levels in their working environments. First, we considered history as an instrument of nationalistic claims, including in the demand for coercive rewriting of the past: Jordi Canal’s research into Catalan nationalism shows the ideological drive which leads to portray regional history as a “destiny of independence”.

The second perspective involves active censorship, precisely *the things one should not say*: the removal from research and school curricula of certain topics, or the imposition of a stigma against parts of the population or ethnic-religious groups; Aditya Muckerjee – a leading Indian historian – discusses the strong resistance against attempts to erase Muslim culture from India’s official history.

Subsequently, we followed closely the Russian case, after the experience of *Memorial foundation* that had opened a new documentary and historical front, soon closed by the authorities. A young researcher, Alexander Makhov, recounts his first-hand experience of studying the relationship between public authorities and academic historians in Russia, in particular the way in which state memory policy influences the academic discourse with respect to Soviet history. Over the past two decades, due to Putin’s increasingly censorious interventions, this type of research has become increasingly difficult, nay impossible, in Russia.

⁷ Joint Statement on Legislative Efforts to Restrict Education about Racism in American History (June 2021): <https://www.historians.org/divisive-concepts-statement>. See also the section “History Education Advocacy” in American Historical Association website: <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/news-and-advocacy-archives/history-education-advocacy>.

The fourth interview regards archives and access to documentation, a “classic” battleground of historical research in all countries of the world. We have chosen a European perspective, with a focus on France, where there is a fully-mature debate on the relationship between democracies and public documentation, and where state interventions in defense of national (secret) memory have also been extremely strong: Raphaëlle Branche⁸ – professor at Nanterre University and member of the *Conseil supérieur des Archives* – is a specialist of the administrative mechanisms that enable scholars to have access to documents, and she examines the state’s attempts to make parts of the extant sources de facto inaccessible. Last but not least, we face a sensitive issue: the relations between minorities and culture, amidst a celebration of the past in a profoundly changed world where a significant part of the population no longer recognizes itself in that past. This has happened before. It is an opportunity for us to study a transformation that affects us closely, but which we no longer directly dominate. Alice Borgna addresses the contentious issue of the relationship between classical culture and multicultural societies that demand other models of the past. This will be the task of future scholars – and to them these interviews are primarily addressed.

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⁸ <https://raphaellebranche.fr/>.