

Factors of Reconciliation: Is There a European Model?

Thomas Serrier

The violence that broke Europe in pieces and resulted in millions of deaths during the two world wars may have created the impression that “nothing tears us apart quite like family.”¹ What a contrast with today in any event!

A crowd of a million people in London’s Trafalgar Square, in the streets of Barcelona and Rome, 600,000 protesters in Madrid and Berlin, several hundred thousand in Paris, demonstrations in Warsaw, Prague and up to Minsk...: the largest trans-European gathering to this day was held on 15 February 2003 to say no to the war in Iraq. If the European states were divided between participation (United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Central Europe) and the refusal to participate (Germany, the Netherlands, France, Belgium...) in the coalition initiated by George W. Bush to overthrow Saddam Hussein, European opinion, for its part, seemed united. Doubts over the legitimacy of the operation coalesced with the powerful tradition of “Never again” that proliferated in Europe after 1945. Drawing on this mass demonstration, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, two of the most celebrated European intellectuals of the day, published a plea entitled “After the War. The Renaissance of Europe” in several European newspapers on 31 May 2003.

The meaning of this title did not refer to an imagined future for the period following the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, but rather interpreted the present as being the indicator of a secular shift. Guided by geopolitical urgency and European construction expectations, the analysis by Derrida and Habermas in fact took up the great irenic narrative which, with certain slight differences, makes post-war Europe the period of successful consolidation of democracy and an irreversible conversion to the culture of peace.

“Where have all the soldiers gone?” we might well wonder, with James J. Sheehan, in thinking about the peaceful way of life that prevailed at the turn of the twenty-first century, from Lisbon to Tallinn and from Belfast to Sofia. This was before the wave of terrorism that hit European countries and led to a renewed stress on security.

War and, sometimes, even the idea of military intervention, seemed to have been banned, maybe not in all European countries, but in an overwhelming majority of them. This shift had been taking place since 1945, even though it was slowed by the Cold War. It reached its peak with the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize that was awarded to the European Union for its contribution to “peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights.” It was supposed to have transformed Europe, a continent of incessant wars, into a permanent sanctum of peace. This great narrative became commonplace. For instance, the objectives of the “House of European History”, established in 2007, to recount “50 years of the European adventure” since 1945—Year Zero—are explicit: “In 1945, at the end of the war, Europe touched the bottom of the abyss.”² And the title of the last book by Ian Kersaw, Hitler’s biographer, picks up exactly the same thread: *Europe to hell and*

¹ Elie Barnavi, “Faire prendre conscience aux Européens de ce qui leur est commun (Raise awareness among Europeans about what is common to them),” *Le Monde*, 19 October 1999.

² Exhibition catalogue, *It’s our history! Fifty years of European adventure*, Brussels, Tempora, 2007, p. 29.

back.³

If tensions remain within the European Union or at its margins (Cyprus, Macedonia, Ukraine, Russia), the shift that took place since 1945 demonstrates the possibility of a rapprochement between former enemies. For many historians, this metamorphosis goes far beyond the simple fact of the European construction in an exclusively political and institutional sense.

To analyze the scope and limits of European reconciliation, four main points must be taken into consideration.

The first regards the historical, material, and moral context in which this movement towards reconciliation took place. The second focuses on those players who had a leading role in both the rapprochement itself and the effort to put the process of reconciliation itself at the centre of European collective memory. The third will evoke the role of the political management of memory issues in these developments; and finally, the fourth will examine the existence of a specific European model of conflict resolution.

The Period Following the Two Wars: Exhaustion, New Order, and Reorientation

Today it is common to hear both journalists and representatives of the EU declare that Europe was “built on the foundations of reconciliation.” Perhaps this is forgetting that the strategic choice of the “fathers of Europe,” including Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, had been to promote the interconnection of economic interests, that would prohibit any direct confrontation between European nations (particularly France and Germany). It was not based on reconciliation, and even less on friendship among the people, difficult to imagine so soon after the war’s end.

With respect to both the recent past and the centuries-old legacy of conflicts, all officials, from all sides, regardless of their political affiliation, initially chose to remain silent. In the speech he gave in Zurich in 1946, Winston Churchill summarized that position by stating that the objective should be to “turn our backs upon the horrors of the past.”

In retrospect, however, it is the in-depth transformation of relations between former adversaries that gains notice. Particularly because the “last catastrophe” (Henry Rousso), namely WWII, was not the only conflict to overcome between European nations. The wreckage of 1945 echoed the ruins of 1918. Before that, there were the traces left by the Napoleonic Wars, the Religion wars and the Hundred Years’ War... over the ages, quasi-standardized conflicts formatted the relations between “hereditary enemies”. The Franco-German and Polish-Russian examples are only two among countless others.

Even today, tensions among European countries remind us that the way of overcoming these rivalries is not self-evident: it is neither the product of any historical necessity nor the effect of a natural movement towards friendship between the countries in question. The resurgence, between Poland and Russia, or between Greece and Germany, of negative stereotypes anchored in age-old historical legacies, nurtured by a succession of institutional, social, and financial crises, reflects the importance of the challenges.

If there is a consensus on the necessity of reconciliation, it is far from being permanently secured. The context of reconciliation among European countries is well known: from the cost of human and material devastation left by the war in 1945, to the absolute urgency of reconstruction, by way of the incorporation of European countries into the two opposing Cold War blocs. The effect of which was the control of any policy that would destabilize the new order imposed and guaranteed by the American and Soviet superpowers. One could add, to the risk of being accused of cynicism, the disappearance of the most virulent sources of conflicts during the inter-war period, as a result of massive transplants of populations into areas of inter-ethnic mixing by the two totalitarian States in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

³ Ian Kersaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949*, Penguin, 2015.

“Europe is sick. Too sick even to hope for some cure. The therapeutic must yield to the surgical. An operation is necessary. None would be more efficient than exchanges, even imposed exchanges, of population,” wrote Nikolai Politis in 1940. “In the Europe of tomorrow, the interest of order and peace will require the coincidence of political borders with ethnic borders.” Politis was, however, not a pro-Nazi. On the contrary, he was a jurist and political leader who embodied a generation of cosmopolitan intellectuals committed to building European stability in the wake of the First World War. Winston Churchill was the first to call into question the ethnic balances of the pre-WWII period in Europe, speaking of a “clean sweep” as a necessary evil to ensure lasting peace. This sensitive and disturbing issue continues to trouble the collective conscience of Europeans. In 2003, the Polish writer Stefan Chwin, who was born in 1949 in Gdańsk, wrote in a provocative paper:

“The time has surely come to stop mentioning only the losses related to the deportation of whole ethnic groups, but also to raise soberly and coldly the “positive aspects” of these massive population displacements.”⁴

This argument questions the tacit agreement of the exclusively negative nature, in terms of consequences, of the displacements of populations that occurred before and immediately after the Second World War. However, would Europe that is being built today have been permitted to see the light without the “original sin” of these massive displacements of populations by the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes? Might it be possible that it is precisely these huge displacement of populations during the 40s and 50s that finally saved central Europe after 1989 from a massive crisis akin to that which ripped through the Balkans between 1991 and 2001?

Actors of the Reconciliation Process: Emblematic Figures and Social Foundations

In 1945, various actors pledged to (re)build Europe on the principle of confrontation of ideas rather than confrontation of weapons.

The first condition was to take a decisive step out of the spiral of revenge and violence that had been one of the characteristics of Europe until 1945. “Far from avenging us, whoever strikes or slaughters a German prisoner, insults us,”⁵ declared Robert Antelme in 1945, shortly after being himself freed from the Dachau concentration. For this man, a member of the French resistance, it was the memory of his friends, victims of the war, that imposed a new humanism, based on the respect for the former enemy: “Revenge will come only from the victory of the ideas (···) for which they died.”⁶

This ethic of reconstruction is the prerequisite for a new departure. Joseph Rovin, also a former deportee to Dachau, who was born in Munich and took refuge in France after Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, declared in a famous article that France will have “the Germany it deserves” according to its attitude, unforgiving or constructive.

This new ethic arose from the substitution of national antagonisms with a new moral vision based, on the one hand, on the rejection of the principle of collective condemnations and, on the other hand, on the idea that the greatness of a nation can only be measured by its degree of advancement and capability to respect a former enemy.

In 1989, the President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, during a meeting with his German counterpart Richard von Weizsäcker, did mention that his people had already accepted the principle of collective guilt leading to the systematic expulsion of the German minority in Czechoslovakia: “We expelled them, not on the basis of established individual guilt, but simply

⁴ Stefan Chwin, « Das « Glück » der Vertriebenen », (The « luck » of the displaced), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 20-10-2003.

⁵ Robert Antelme, *Vengeance*, Paris, Farrago, 2005, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

because they belonged to a particular nation. (...) In acting thus, we have injured ourselves.”⁷

The Franco-German situation, without necessarily being at the heart of this transformation, became emblematic of these evolutions which emerged in the civil society well before it became an official position.

Former protagonists of the Second World War, veterans, members of the resistance, and former prisoners of war, invested with a moral authority played an essential and exemplary role in this reconciliation process. Intellectuals like Władysław Bartoszewski in Poland, Joseph Rovin or Jean du Rivau in France, Jorge Semprun between Spain, France and Germany, but also the dissidents Lev Kopelev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn also played a major role. Their friendship with the German writer Heinrich Böll during the 60s and 70s, made a process of reconciliation possible, beyond the memories of Operation Barbarossa, Stalingrad, Soviet troops in Berlin in 1945, also beyond the ideological constraints of the Cold War.

The role of the Church is also well-documented, most notably in the German-Polish case. In October 1965, an important letter was sent by the Polish ecclesiastical authorities to their German counterparts. The use of the formula: “We forgive and ask for forgiveness” allowed both the sufferings endured by the Polish people throughout the war and by the Germans expelled after the defeat of the *Wehrmacht* to be acknowledged.

This healing work, that carefully took into account each country’s suffering, had begun, in the middle of the war, with Father Franz Stock, a German prison chaplain who helped hundreds of French detainees by ensuring the exchange of messages between those sentenced to death and their loved ones and who, after the war, stayed in France to support German prisoners of war.

After the war, many former members of the resistance, who escaped German camps, exhorted their comrades to avoid any nationalist excesses and to encourage mutual knowledge and exchanges involving the youth of both countries, politicians, trade unionists, journalists or even entrepreneurs.

It is this spirit that presided over the beginnings of the Bureau International de Liaison et de Documentation (BILD) and, in August 1945, the foundation of two journals, *Dokumente* and *Document* published in France and in Germany. The initiatives by these individual figures were, followed by various cultural, political or professional initiatives. The Franco-German Institute (DFI) was established in Ludwigsburg in 1948 to foster exchanges and language learning. Partnerships grew; meetings between historians came in quick succession and for instance Georg Eckert created a program for the systematized critical re-reading of textbooks. The Elysée Treaty of 1963 thus officially sealed a reconciliation that was well under way, and essentially further strengthened it. Over fifty years, more than 8 million French and German youth participated in the exchanges organized by the French-German Youth Office (FGYO).

The Role of Symbolic Gestures of Reconciliation in Europe

The echo that met the solemn gestures of reconciliation can be understood against this social and cultural backdrop. The aura of the protagonists, the symbolic nature of the chosen historical backdrop (Reims, Verdun, the location of a memorial to the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Krzyzowa...), the strength of these gestures, supported by the power of the speeches - or on the contrary, by the silence that is sometimes preferable for adding to the impact of some of these gestures, played an essential role.

But we know that the official Polish press, after Willy Brandt’s famous gesture of kneeling in 1970, held back images of the West German Chancellor repenting in Warsaw. We also know that the symbolic venue proposed for the “Reconciliation Mass” that was celebrated in the presence

⁷ Richard von Weizsäcker and Vaclav Havel, “Échange pragoïse sur la culpabilité (Reflections on guilt from the citizens of Prague),” *Esprit*, No. 162, June 1990, pp. 5-8.

of Chancellor Kohl and the Polish Prime Minister-President Mazowiecki on 12 November 1989 in Krzyzowa was suggested at the very last moment to avoid embarrassing historical blunders. Instead of this former Prussian territory, centre of the anti-Hitler resistance, located in Poland since 1945, Kohl had first considered the Annaberg hill, the site of clashes between German forces and pro-Polish paramilitary in 1921.

Another significant transnational symbol has been, without question, the handshake between French President François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl in Verdun in 1984. A similar pattern emerged when Queen Elizabeth II, whose cousin Lord Mountbatten had been assassinated by the IRA, and former IRA leader Martin McGuinness shook hands for the first time in June 2012, remembering “all who died in the Irish conflict,” while leaders of *Sinn Féin* had refused the idea of such a meeting a year before considering that it was “too early.”

The performative character of solemn rituals is, however, not certain. On the contrary, the repetition of such formal gestures can seem artificial, performed in order to “prove” the reality of reconciliation. In a biting commentary, German journalist Klaus Bachmann criticized in 1994 the “kitsch of reconciliation”, based on the mechanical repetition of the same ritualistic and hollow gestures.

Writing on this very topic, Valérie Rosoux stated that “the joint celebrations of WWI armistice day each November 11 by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy certainly illustrates the passage from duel to duo. Do they evoke however the same emotion as the first ones in 1984?”

When there is a lack of real support or popular consent or when the gestures of reconciliation are clearly related to political ends, they can easily become counterproductive. This was for instance the case of the “brotherly kiss” between Leonid Brezhnev and the Secretary General of the East German Communist Party Erich Honecker on the 30th anniversary of the GDR.

Conversely, a situation may still be too sensitive to make such a gesture possible. This was the case of Bosnia, where, after the wars between 2000 and 2010, several ceremonies, modelled after the figure of Brandt kneeling in Warsaw, never producing unanimity, in fact quite the opposite.

When Serbian President Boris Tadic travelled to Srebrenica in July 2005, the associations of mothers of the victims initially refused to allow the head of State to participate in the commemorations. In 2013, his successor, Tomislav Nikolic, declared that he was kneeling to ask forgiveness, but refused to use the words “massacre” or “genocide”. Two years later, the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic was forced to leave the memorial of Srebrenica.

The Work of Time and Memory: A European Paradigm?

One of the key difficulties of the process of reconciliation is to suggest that a turning point can occur in an instant, while for the populations, especially for the victims, the process can only be accepted in the long term. In the aftermath of violence, is it in generations that such an evolution is possible. The issue is to transform painful memories by giving them a constructive or re-constructive meaning. The central issue is the reason of all these European conflicts that have taken so many soldiers and civilians from us – A moral question to which politicians have often chosen not to respond and remain silent.

That attitude was the most common choice right after 1945 as it had always been. In fact, for centuries, silence and amnesty were regarded as prerequisites for any reconciliation. In 1946 in Zurich, Winston Churchill set out a clear and explicit objective that everyone could understand: “We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past.”

Major changes in attitude came later, during a long period that extended from the 60s to the 90s. It led to a complete reversal of the imperative to forget. Today, populations and European authorities alike insist on the importance of memory from all sides.

Despite the shortcomings, obstacles and silences that may persist today between neighbouring countries and former European enemies, it is true that this ability and willingness

to confront the memories of the wars that ravaged Europe give the European Union Member States a particular vocation in terms of conflict resolution. To cite Guy Verhofstadt, one example among many, the devastating experience of the two world wars and particularly of the Shoah is “the source of a particular European sensitivity and generosity.”⁸ Unlike the United States, often perceived as arrogant and unilateral, Europe has learnt “humility” from past tragedies.⁹

The Limits of the European Model

It would be easy however, to establish the list of ongoing conflicts or unresolved issues in Europe, from Ukraine to Cyprus, divided for over 40 years. The categorization between resolved and unresolved conflict is in itself highly subjective.

These limits do not prevent the EU from seeking to extend its model of reconciliation beyond its borders.¹⁰ First, beyond the limits of Europe, the question concerns the normalization of relations among the EU members or between some of its member states and states outside of the Union. In this specific instance, the main challenge is posed by the colonial past of European countries. The spokesperson of the European delegation at the Conference in Durban, Louis Michel, described a horizon of “historic reconciliation between North and South” based on a narrative that implicitly integrates, at its very core, the acknowledgement of responsibilities. “Over the centuries, European history has been contrasted. The best has coexisted with the worst. European countries have been in turns both conquerors and subjects, martyrs and aggressors, fraternal and fratricidal, bearers of generous ideas but also of abject designs.”¹¹ But recognition of an injustice does not systematically lead to an apology. Many things are at stake, from the legal and financial consequences that could result from possible reparations, to the consequences on internal policies, and electoral sanction.

The fact that France and Algeria have never managed to sign their “Elysée Treaty” nor enact their own type of “Verdun handshake” is revealing in this regard. More than half a century after the independence of Algeria, the Franco-German model has been definitively abandoned by the officials and the political advisers of the two countries. Without doubt because the Franco-German model is based on the recognition of a kind of symmetry between the two former enemies. Moreover, between France and Germany, there is a reciprocal cultural fascination. It is without doubt much less the case between Germany and Poland, but the Franco-Algerian case, as with other situations opposing former colonizers and former colonies, is entirely different.

Colonization automatically cancels any idea of symmetry as it imposes a hierarchy between the parties.

Beyond the difficulties of applying the European model of reconciliations to former colonies, there are other limits to this global aspiration. The European experience is without a doubt a remarkable precedent. However, at the global level, it does not constitute a unique model for all post-conflict situations. According to Valérie Rosoux: “The grammar of reconciliation gradually set out by the European countries does not result solely from a *sui generis* experience. It is also significantly influenced by the example of the establishment of “reconciliation commissions”, whether in Latin America or for the most emblematic of all, in South Africa in the 90s.

Far from dictating the way forward, the European States seem to have become fascinated, with a model of reconciliation based on forgiveness. The charisma of Nelson Mandela had a lot to do with these developments adapted for the European theatre, as in the case of the International Crime Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

⁸ Guy Verhofstadt, Brussels, 18 December 2001.

⁹ Guy Verhofstadt, Brussels, 08 December 2001.

¹⁰ Thierry De Montbrial, *Le Monde*, 7 April 2007.

¹¹ Durban, 30 August 2001.

The concept of “forgiveness”, according to V. Rosoux, also appears nowhere in the project of the founding fathers of the European Union. Actually, in the founding texts of the European community, there is much more question of the pooling of each nation’s interests than of reconciliation between the people, or even of the establishing conditions for lasting peace between European nations.

The idea that taking memory issues into account, if not as the sole instrument but at least as an essential ingredient in the process of reconciliation, is a fairly recent development, as we have said. Nevertheless, it remains a strong feature and an essential factor of reconciliations in Europe. It bears witness to the weight of the past and the pedagogical value given to the past, even the most difficult one to face, on Europe. The ravages of past centuries, especially the last one, have regularly brought devastation to the “old continent.” The fear of diving back probably explains the European obsession with the urgency of reconciliation.