

Solveig Hennebert & Isabel Sawkins

Beyond the Normative Understanding of Holocaust Memory: Between Cosmopolitan Memory and Local Reality

In 2020, a pair of international ceremonies – one in Jerusalem and the other in Poland – were organised to commemorate 27 January, designated as International Holocaust Remembrance Day since the introduction of UN Resolution A/RES/60/7 in 2005.¹ The Israeli and Polish events marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Soviet army’s liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a site which has become symbolic of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The presence of delegates from countries representing both perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust at both commemorative events is in turn symbolic of what some consider to be a moral consensus on Holocaust memory (Mintz 2001).² Nowadays, most European countries pay tribute to the victims of the Nazi genocide.

Such remembrance practices can be seen as examples of “cosmopolitan memory”, a mode of remembering that spreads and highlights human rights values (Levy and Sznajder 2010). Grounding their work in an examination of Holocaust memory in Germany, Israel and the USA, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder (2002) argue that changes in Holocaust memory have transcended the borders of nation-states, leading to the tragedy’s deterritorialisation. The spread of the idea has been particularly noticeable on the European continent, where the Holocaust has been framed as “one of the foundational stories of the European Union” (Subotić 2019, 17). Indeed, the European Union has played an important role in the development of this memory (Kucia 2016, 98), and in recent years dedication to Holocaust memory has become a critical element of “the entry ticket into the EU” (Assmann 2014, 549).

¹ Isabel Sawkins would like to thank the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership who fund her PhD on this topic. She would also like to thank her supervisor, Professor James Mark, for detailed feedback on an earlier version of this co-written chapter. Solveig Hennebert would like to thank her supervisors Sarah Gensburger and Nancy Venel for their feedback.

² For a list of state representatives at the commemorative event at Yad Vashem (as of 20 January 2020), see “List of Leaders of Nations Attending the Fifth World Holocaust Forum taking place at Yad Vashem.” *Yad Vashem*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.yadvashem.org/press-release/21-january-2020-12-36.html> (27 November 2020).

For a list of state representatives at the commemorative event at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see “State delegates.” *Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, <http://auschwitz.org/en/state-delegations/> (27 November 2020).

In this chapter, we explore how the diversity of Holocaust memories in practice problematises the conception of a cosmopolitan Holocaust memory. We unearth French and Russian examples that do not subscribe to the key tenets of cosmopolitan memory. These examples reveal how the local realities of Holocaust memory are moulded by national, political, social and cultural context. Even though memory frameworks and figures common to cosmopolitan Holocaust memory are employed in both France and Russia, they are adapted to fit the national historical and political contexts and requirements in the present. Cosmopolitan memory practices are thus repurposed to fit national purposes.

1 Is cosmopolitan memory universal?

Levy and Sznajder contend that sharing Holocaust memories “provide[s] the foundations for a new cosmopolitan memory, a memory transcending ethnic and national boundaries” (2002, 88). They observe that the nation-state, which was long considered the vessel for collective memory, began to fracture in the post-Cold War period (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 96–97), and that “issues of *global concern*” were becoming “part and parcel of everyday local experiences and moral life worlds of an increasing number of people” (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 88; italics our own). In this reading, national particularities of Holocaust remembrance have been obfuscated. Nations across the globe have taken a more homogeneous approach to commemorating the apparently universalised values of the Holocaust. This cosmopolitan narrative of the Holocaust is explicitly based on the opposition between good and evil – and especially between good victims and evil persecutors (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 102). Those figures and organisations (such as the European Union) that develop such narratives generally contend that through the projection of a unified narrative everyone who partakes in such commemorative practices will both absorb a given set of moral and ethical lessons and discover ideals about human rights. Countries and institutions such as the EU then further developed this concept through the idea of “universalizing memory practices [. . .] in which interpretational patterns of the past lose contextual references and enhance their potential to be linked or even transferred to other memories” (Pestel et al. 2017, 498).

We argue that memory is neither performative nor consensual. Memory is a political and social process. Indeed, even if the mnemonic narrative of the Holocaust rests upon moral values, public memory policies are nonetheless political, and history is frequently instrumentalised in order to reach political goals (Andrieu 2006). This fact complicates both the theory and practice of cosmopolitan memory.

The admission of numerous countries from the post-Soviet bloc to the European Union in the early 2000s is an illustrative example of memory instrumentalisation. These countries had to engage with a global memory framework in order to become EU members (Neumayer 2019). However, once admitted to the EU, these nations attempted to refashion EU Holocaust memory so that it reflected their own experience of the twentieth century. Their shared post-communist identity is based on the “memory of Stalinism and Soviet occupation, as well as precommunist ethnic conflict with other states, rather than the memory of the Holocaust” (Subotić 2019, 11). The cosmopolitan Holocaust memory paradigm seeks to engage with the past to frame moral values in the present, but these nations have instrumentalised Holocaust memory for nationalist intentions. That instrumentalising approach to Holocaust memory bears similarity to Russia’s approach.

We suggest that localised readings of Holocaust memory add nuance to the notion of cosmopolitan memory. Some countries might be considered bearers of cosmopolitan memory narratives due to their memorial focus on good victims versus evil perpetrators. In the Polish context, Janek Gryta notes that “scholars such as Montserrat Guibernau, Michael Meng, Ewa Ochman and Sharon Macdonald” might consider memory activism in Kraków to be cosmopolitan because of its focus on “openness, tolerance and inclusivity” (2020, 36). However, Gryta argues – as do we – that local particularities challenge the prevailing cosmopolitan narrative. In 2018, for example, the Polish narrative of innocence during the war was given legal backing. A group of lawmakers took issue with terms that might be interpreted as suggesting Polish responsibility for the atrocities of the Holocaust (Hackmann 2018, 600–601). The group proposed an ultimately successful amendment to the *Act on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation*. The amendment sought to “protect the ‘good name’ of the Polish state” (Soroka and Krawatzek 2019, 157) by fighting against the use of phrases which could be understood as implying Polish responsibility for the Holocaust, such as “Polish concentration camps” (Hackmann 2018, 601). Through this recent legal intervention, a Polish national narrative based on Polish and Jewish victimhood has been solidified. On the other hand, in France a similar law was implemented to impose a narrative about the crimes against humanity committed during World War II. However, the rhetoric was rather different: indeed, the *Gayssot Law* (1990) made Holocaust denial illegal (Wieviorka 2010, 268). Even if there is an international convergence of memory public policy implementation, especially in the EU, the narrative is different, dependent on the national context.

Memory practices regarding the *Righteous Among the Nations*, an honorific title awarded by Israel to any non-Jewish person who helped to save Jewish

people during the Holocaust, are a further example of such local nuances. This globalised figure of the *Righteous Among the Nations* is seen as a vector for the defence of Human Rights. Yad Vashem argues that the programme is “essential to emphasize that Man was also capable of defending and maintaining human values”.³ However, Sarah Gensburger (2015) has shown that this notion draws on differing foundations in Belgium and France. In Belgium, the humanitarian figure is presented by the state as a symbol of religious cohabitation between Jews and Catholics. In France, the same figure is grounded in the universalist ideal of the Republic, which led to the erasure of the religious component. Indeed, the state deploys a universalist rhetoric centred on Human Rights without mentioning the religiosity of the Israeli title. Moreover, a service from the French National Assembly refused to include the word “Jew” in the law introducing the commemoration of the Righteous Among the Nations due to the state’s conception of secularism (Gensburger 2015, 552). Despite Belgian and French memory practices referring to the same figures, the implicit meaning behind the memory is different. To understand the diversity of the narrative’s appropriation, one needs to go beyond normative perceptions of Holocaust memory.

Even if that memory relies on humanitarian ideals based on the lessons everyone can supposedly learn from the Nazi genocide, it is still inexorably adapted to national contexts. The tenets of cosmopolitan memory are, Lorraine Ryan has argued, “nationalized and its discourse distorted, in some cases, to serve the national interest” (2014). One needs to consider national framework(s) in order to grasp this phenomenon in its entirety: hence our case studies of France and Russia in this chapter.

Understanding national memory necessitates considering the role of the individual’s social and family identities (Muxel 1991). Each individual belongs to a variety of demographic groups (gender, nation, religion, political ideology, age and so on) which, when combined, form an individual’s social identity (Pollak 2000 [1990], 13). The proclamation of the global narrative and humanitarian ideals of the Holocaust is thus not performative – it is adapted to each country’s own national context – and reception can vary depending on the social frameworks in place. The diversity of Holocaust commemorative practices on 27 January 2020 in France and Russia (and the general context of Holocaust memory in both countries) is a good illustration.

3 “About the Program.” *Yad Vashem*, <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-program.html> (27 November 2020).

2 The diversity of commemorations of 27 January in France, beyond the international narrative

76,000 Jewish people living in France – a quarter of the country’s Jewish population – were deported to Nazi concentration and extermination camps between 1942 and 1944. Most were killed in gas chambers or by other forms of violence. The Vichy government, French policemen and some citizens collaborated with the Nazi occupiers to deport and kill Jews (Wieviorka 2003). In the first decades after the war, this genocide was not remembered as a specific genocide at all. Deported Jewish people were lumped in with other groups and simply categorised as “political deportees”. Moreover, the fact of collaboration between the Germans and the French state and its citizens was denied in order to preserve unity and “restore the confidence of a divided nation” (Wieviorka 2010, 27) after the war. Instead, the state and the public disseminated a narrative of “la France résistante”. Indeed, Charles De Gaulle (French president from 1944 to 1946 and 1959 to 1969) and many others – including a mostly silent population – threw their weight behind the narrative of a victorious France (Wieviorka 2010). Official memory gave no room to discuss collaboration and complicity in the Holocaust.

That silence, however, began to dissipate in the 1980s as a result of work by historians, social scientists and Jewish grassroots activists (Wieviorka 2010). In 1995, Jacques Chirac finally recognised the crimes committed by the French state. At the same time, French secondary schools began to teach the history of the Holocaust (Schneider 2005). July 2000 saw the first iteration of the legally enshrined “National day for the Memory of the Victims of Racists and Antisemitic Crimes of the French State and Tribute to the ‘Righteous’ of France”. This memory has seemed to overlap seamlessly with the UN-led day. Every year the Ministry of Education organises events to mark 27 January, following the recommendation of the EU and the UN (Gensburger 2015). French educational institutions purport to view 27 January as an occasion to promote human values,⁴ so France may appear to have embraced global narratives and “cosmopolitan memory”.

⁴ “27 janvier: journée de la mémoire des génocides et de la prévention des crimes contre l’humanité.” *Ministère de l’Éducation*, <https://www.education.gouv.fr/27-janvier-journee-de-la-memoire-des-genocides-et-de-la-prevention-des-crimes-contre-l-humanite-11057> (30 November 2020).

However, 27 January in France is also appropriated by a variety of associations, foundations and museums, which each organise their own ceremonies.⁵ For instance, every year the Auschwitz Deportees Union organises a commemoration at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The ceremony's leaders partake in the rite of reviving the flame under the Arc. Since 1923, this flame has burned as a tribute to all soldiers who have died in battle. Every night a veterans' or war victims' association revives the flame so that these soldiers will not be forgotten. By doing so on 27 January, the Auschwitz Deportees Union links the history of the Auschwitz deportees not to the figure of the victim of genocide, but to the symbolic representation of all soldiers. International Holocaust Remembrance Day is also subject to more overt criticism by some groups representing the memory of political inmates, who argue that the day should commemorate *all* victims of Auschwitz, and not just Jewish victims.⁶ While the state interprets international memory narratives and commemorations, other individual reconstructions of memory seek to contest and reinterpret 27 January in ways that belie the idea of a "cosmopolitan memory".

3 Soviet liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau moulded by contemporary geopolitical concerns

Commemoration of the Holocaust has been a relatively recent development in the Russian Federation. For a long time, the tragedy was incorporated into the wider national narrative of the Great Patriotic War. The genocide inflicted upon Europe's Jewish population was rarely acknowledged as a distinct tragedy (Gershenson 2013, 2). Following the Soviet Union's disintegration, which resulted in the limited opening of archives and a more open examination of the Holocaust (Altman 2018, 227), both official and local discourses have found space to acknowledge the nature of the Nazi genocide to some extent. The memory of the

5 "Journée internationale à la mémoire des victimes de la Shoah – 2020." *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah*, <https://www.fondationshoah.org/memoire/journee-internationale-la-memoire-des-victimes-de-la-shoah-2020> (30 November 2020).

6 These observations were made during previous research conducted on an association (Hennebert 2014). Some members of this association, which commemorates two convoys of political inmates who were deported to Auschwitz, are opposed to the Holocaust Remembrance Day. The latter is understood as a means to silence the diversity of the people who were imprisoned and murdered in the camp.

Holocaust has, however, been employed in Russia to make a more general argument about the Soviet contribution to the war effort, as opposed to acknowledging the Holocaust and the suffering of European Jews in particular.

Much of the commemoration surrounding the Holocaust is grounded in the role played by the Soviet Red Army in the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January 1945. Indeed, 27 January has taken on an increasingly central role since the Russian state co-authored the UN Resolution to make 27 January Holocaust Remembrance Day.⁷ However, the Russian state does not at present commemorate the day officially (Altman 2014).

What is more, and despite its role in establishing Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Russian state continues to challenge the cosmopolitan narrative. The official narrative of the Holocaust has sometimes been framed by Russian political actors as a reminder to the world of the USSR's heroic role in the liberation of Europe. Following accusations from abroad that Russia (or the USSR) was partially responsible for the outbreak of war and for Soviet occupation in Central and Eastern Europe – Russo-Polish tensions flared particularly sharply in 2020 as the two countries engaged in a rhetorical and public battle about the implications of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the start of World War II – this heroic national narrative has been employed to bolster Russia's international legitimacy.⁸

For example, in June 2020 Vladimir Putin published an editorial in the conservative-leaning American magazine *The National Interest*. In the article, Putin examined what he considered to be the “real lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”.⁹ Released just days before the Russian state's rescheduled Victory Day parade, the president argued that he was “compelled” to publish the article to prevent repetition of the tragedies of the Holocaust from repeating themselves.¹⁰ Whilst the piece predominantly served as a weapon against the

7 “Privetstvennoe poslanie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S. V. Lavrova uchastnikam memorial'nogo vechera, posvyashchennogo Mezhdunarodnomu dnyu pamyati zhertv Kholokosta.” *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoy Federatsii*, 29 January 2007, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/382962 (27 November 2020).

8 For an example, see “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S. V. Lavrova pered grecheskoy obshchetsvennost'yu, Afiny, 2 dekabrya 2009 goda.” *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiiskoy Federatsii*, 3 December 2019, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/gr/-/asset_publisher/D4tBbKa1q61C/content/id/270818 (27 November 2020).

9 “Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II.” *The National Interest*, 18 June 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982> (19 June 2020).

10 “Putin Publishes Essay on ‘Real Lessons’ of WWII.” *The Moscow Times*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/18/putin-publishes-essay-on-real-lessons-of-wwii-a70623> (25 January 2021).

disputes about the start of the war, it also reinforced Putin's heroic approach to memory, albeit not necessarily in the context of the Holocaust in particular. He reminded the reader that it was the Soviet Union "that claimed an epic, crushing victory over Nazism and saved the entire world".¹¹

Vladimir Putin was also one of the speakers invited to the "Remembering the Holocaust: Fighting Antisemitism World Holocaust Forum" event held at Yad Vashem on 23 January 2020. Speaking at the event, Putin used his platform to remind the world of the prominent role played by the Soviet Army in the defeat against Nazism more generally, noting: "We paid a price so terrible that no nation had ever before dreamed of such a thing: 27 million dead."¹² In this instance, the Holocaust was framed by issues of national concern about supposedly Russophobic narratives propagated by states in the former Soviet bloc.¹³ The incident, however, was not unique. In a speech to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Putin argued that "the Russian people bore the main burden on their shoulders in the fight against Nazism. 70 percent of all the soldiers and officers of the Red Army were Russian people."¹⁴

These two examples are emblematic of the state's emphasis on the Soviet contribution to the war effort, rather than on Jewish or individual suffering, when it comes to Holocaust memory. The USSR's role in the war and in the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau had become a hot topic by 2020. The focus on the "Soviet" contribution to the war effort is a means to restore Soviet camaraderie to the Russian imagination of the former Soviet bloc and thereby highlight a shared contribution to this heroic feat. For this reason, Russian state memory of the Holocaust does not in these instances align closely with the idea of cosmopolitan memory. Rather, Holocaust memory, specifically that of the role of the Red Army in liberating Auschwitz-Birkenau, seems to be employed in circumstances in order to bolster Russia's international legitimacy.

11 "Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II." *The National Interest*, 18 June 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982> (14 November 2021).

12 "Forum 'Sokhranyaem pamyat' o Kholokoste, boremsya s antisemitizmom." *Sayt Prezidenta Rossii*, 23 January 2020, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62646/audios> (17 March 2021).

13 For an example, see "Brifing ofitsial'nogo predstavatelya MID Rossii M. V. Zakharovoi, Moskva, 23 yanvarya 2020 goda." *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 23 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4004544 (27 November 2020).

14 "International Holocaust Remembrance Day." *President of Russia*, 27 January 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47529> (17 November 2020).

4 Conclusion

Local examples of Holocaust commemoration in France and the Russian Federation challenge a supposedly dominant “cosmopolitan memory” of the Holocaust. The official narratives in both nations engage with elements of the cosmopolitan memory narrative by commemorating cornerstones of that memory, including 27 January in Russia and the Righteous Among the Nations in France. These are indications of some narratives surrounding the Holocaust that are, indeed, globalised. However, cosmopolitan memory has been variously instrumentalised in order to present a positive image abroad and challenged for national and local purposes by state and non-state actors. Cosmopolitan memory, far from being universal, is constantly reinterpreted and reappropriated. Topics that might complicate the local narratives of heroic and united opposition to fascism and fascist crimes – collaboration in France and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in Russia – are either open to challenge or deliberately suppressed or elided. Instead, countries are able to appropriate elements of certain globalised narratives that support their self-identification as heroic individuals and ignore those topics that contradict the broader sense of national and local pride. The following chapters examine local resistance to the cosmopolitan narrative in the format of Holocaust conferences for schoolchildren in Russia and the individual appropriations of memory frameworks among young Jewish people in France.

Bibliography

- Altman, Ilya. “Russia and the Holocaust – Whose Genocide was it Anyway?” *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-and-holocaust-whose-genocide-was-it-anyway/>. 27 January 2014 (22 May 2020).
- Altman, Ilya. “The Holocaust in the Occupied USSR and its Memorialization in Contemporary Russia.” *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*. Eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018. 219–234.
- Andrieu, Claire. “Le pouvoir central en France et ses usages du passé, de 1970 à nos jours.” *Politiques du passé: usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine*. Eds. Claire Andrieu, Marie-Claire Lavabre, and Danielle Tartakowsky. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2006.
- Assmann, Aleida. “Transnational Memories.” *European Review* 22.4 (2014): 546–556.
- Gensburger, Sarah. “La diffusion transnationale de la catégorie de «juste parmi les Nations». (Re)penser l’articulation entre diffusion des droits de l’homme et globalisation de la mémoire.” *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 22.4 (2015): 537–555.
- Gryta, Janek. “Creating a Cosmopolitan Past: Local and Transnational Influences on Memory Work in Schindler’s Factory, Kraków.” *History & Memory* 32.1 (Spring/Summer 2020): 34–68.

- Hackmann, Jörg. "Defending the 'Good Name' of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–2018." *Journal of Genocide Research* 20.4 (2018): 587–606.
- Hennebert, Solveig. *La figure mémorielle du résistant-déporté ou du déporté-résistant? La mémoire des convois des 45000 et des 31000 déportés à Auschwitz-Birkenau*. Université Lumière Lyon. Master's Thesis. Lyon: Université Lumière Lyon, 2014.
- Kucia, Marek. "The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 30.1 (2016): 97–119.
- Levy, David, and Natan Sznajder. *Human Rights and Memory*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.
- Levy, David, and Natan Sznajder. "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory." *European Journal of Social Theory* 5.1 (2002): 87–106.
- Mintz, Alan L. *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- Muxel, Anne. "La mémoire familiale." *La famille l'état des savoirs*. Ed. François Singly. Paris: La découverte, 1991.
- Neumayer, Laure. *The Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.
- Pestel, Friedemann, Rieke Trimçev, Gregor Feindt, and Félix Krawatzek. "Promise and Challenge of European Memory." *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 24.4 (2017): 495–506.
- Pollak, Michael. *L'expérience concentrationnaire: essai sur le maintien de l'identité sociale*. Paris: Métailié, 2000 [1990].
- Ryan, Lorraine. "Cosmopolitan Memory and National Memory Conflicts: On the Dynamics of their Interaction." *Journal of Sociology* 50.4 (2014): 501–514.
- Schneider, Florence. "À l'école de la Shoah. De l'enseignement de l'histoire à la pédagogie de la mémoire." *Les cahiers de la Shoah* 8.1 (2005): 57–85.
- Soroka, George, and Félix Krawatzek. "Nationalism, Democracy, and Memory Laws." *Journal of Democracy* 30.2 (2019): 157–171.
- Subotić, Jelena. *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2019.
- Wieviorka, Annette. *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli*. Paris: Hachette, 2003.
- Wieviorka, Olivier. *La mémoire désunie: le souvenir politique des années sombres, de la Libération à nos jours*. Paris: Seuil, 2010.