



# The Pedagogy of Collective Memory in Europe

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## ABSTRACT

The pedagogy of collective memory generally involves two types of activities with students: the intervention of historical witnesses and visits to memorial sites. These specific tools, which appeared in the aftermath of the First World War and developed on a European scale at the turn of the twenty-first century, were used by teachers for their pedagogical value (personification and materialization of the past) and educational impact (pacifism, democratic values, human rights, prevention of genocide and mass violence). In addition, since the 1990s and the European Union's enlargement to the East, this pedagogy has served as an instrument for Europeanizing the collective memory of the two world wars. It has also been used to resolve competing memories, or on the contrary to bolster them in the context of national educational policies.

The pedagogy of collective memory based on sites and historical witnesses appeared in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War, in response to the cultural challenge of a war that was seen as a collapse of civilization. Its scope extended in the late twentieth century with the duty of remembrance, which saw an increase in and internationalization of instruments of memorialization, which is to say public narratives of the past for the present and future of a community.

## The Pedagogy of Memory Inside and Outside of Classrooms

This pedagogy consists of two primary practices: intervention by witnesses and visits to memorial sites. Testimony by war veterans for students appeared in the 1920s in France, in connection with commemorations of the Armistice of November 11, 1918 held at local war memorials. This initial pedagogy of memory was in keeping with a pacifist and pan-European movement oriented toward youth, in which the conflict that ravaged Europe was seen as an "educational war" that had to bring the continent's peoples together. The intense mobilization of students in Italy by Mussolini's government in 1922 conveyed a highly different message. Already highly present at ceremonies commemorating the war alongside veterans, students—for the most part boys—symbolized the regeneration of the Italian nation, and were asked to plant a tree for each hero who died in combat in "parks of remembrance" (*parchi della remembranza*), which spread across the country.

The intervention of historical witnesses, whose status increased through the development of oral history, was revived in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It primarily involved members of the French Resistance and

Jews deported during the Second World War, in connection with the Holocaust and the fight against negationism in both France and Germany during the 1980s. Other memories were discussed with students using this approach, such as the Spanish civil war as part of the “recuperation of historical memory” movement in the early 2000s. This pedagogical practice continues to be used in France today to teach the Algerian War, with interventions by former Harkis, contingent conscripts, *pieds-noirs*, and Algerian independentists.

Visits by schoolchildren to memorial sites—historical sites with a cognitive and educational component—involved both of the world wars fought in Europe. After the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe during the 1990s, the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, which became a symbolic site for the Second World War, was the most visited site by schoolchildren, who came by the hundreds of thousands: 571,300 (57% of total) in 2006 and 1.029 million (72% of the total) in 2012. Geographic expansion has continued over the last thirty years, with 2018 seeing visits by students from Poland (162,061), Germany (29,603), Britain (24,222), the Czech Republic (23,840), Italy (17,610), France (17,547), Slovakia (17,034) and Norway (16,958), among others.

In Germany, this practice was based on a “pedagogy of emotional upheaval” (*Betroffenheitspädagogik*), a historical teaching method developed during the 1970s to transmit the Nazi past through pedagogy (films, visits to camps). The objective is to spark powerful emotions among students that would promote identification with the victims, thereby affectively rejecting Nazism, and avoiding any risk of its resurgence among youth. Similarly, the rise in the number of British students visiting Auschwitz was in keeping with the Emotive and Controversial History teaching method.

The practice of school visits to memorial sites has also become a key requirement in policies of democratic transition and decommunization in Eastern European countries. For example in Romania, the educational policies developed by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes (IICCR) created in 2005, made site visits part of new teaching activities. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the 2007 manual for students at Sarajevo high school—prompted by European directives for a post-conflict transitional policy—included a section entitled “Excursion: Learning on Site,” with suggested excursions.

## **An Instrument of National and European Memorial Policies**

These methods for teaching memory enjoyed support from international authorities, for instance with the creation in 1990 of the World Center of Peace, Freedom and Human Rights in Verdun, which received support from the UN, or the Stockholm International Conference on Preventing Genocide held in 2001. As part of its enlargement to the East, the European Union promoted these practices—seen as instruments of prevention, pacification, and unification—in connection with the First World War and the Holocaust (European Parliament resolution from July 1995 demanding the establishment of national Holocaust memorial days in the Member States). A policy for the Europeanization of memory was conducted beginning in the 1990s, in an effort to include young Europeans within a community of historical experiences and prospects. On March 16, 2005, 1,500 high school students from 25 EU countries each placed a rose on a tomb at Douaumont Ossuary, and then proceeded to the esplanade to plant 25 trees, before swearing the oath of Verdun taken by former European combatants (1936) in 20 different languages.

The pedagogy of memory was one of the most prominent instruments in the memorialization of the two world wars and the Europeanization of memories. This engagement sparked a phenomenon of “competing memories.” This competition took various forms on the European scale, with a “memorial Iron Curtain” between the West focusing on the crime of the Holocaust, and the East focusing on communist crimes. This pedagogy is also in keeping with memorial competition in two ways. First, it sometimes drives this competition by transmitting a victimized-heroical national past that reinforces narrative conflict with the country’s minorities or EU memorial standards. Russia is an interesting case in point. School museums, which appeared during the 1950s to pay tribute to the young Soviet soldiers killed during the war, were actively developed during the post-Soviet period. Among the 5,204 museums

listed in Russia, most are devoted to the “great patriotic war” of 1939-1945. A tiny minority is for communist repression (0.6%) and the Holocaust. Second, this pedagogy is also used to remedy memorial competition, for instance in France with the “*réconciliation des mémoires*” (reconciliation of memories) project led by the ONACVG (National Office of Veterans and Victims of War), which organizes class visits by historical witnesses from the Algerian War who convey messages of peace.

Since the 1990s, the pedagogy of memory has nevertheless been criticized by academics who underline the moral, emotional, and normative aspects of these practices, which are likely to weaken the historical knowledge they seek to convey, without ensuring their educational effects.

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