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Memory Structures and the Choices in War and Peace: South African and European Stances in the Ukrainian War

1 Introduction

Modern historiography has turned, though not exclusively, to the structure of memory. What is it that transforms *memoria* into *historia*, and how does this process consider memory not as a fact but rather as an intervention making it possible to understand the past and to discover its different layers (Frijhoff 2010)? The answer is not an easy one, given the fact that memories are not data we can easily deal with as if they had some objective truth. Moreover, memories are not only the material of which history is made, they are also part of collective or individual identity (Hiscock 2018). Both aspects, however, can lead to fierce disputes. If memory is considered the pedestal of identity, it probably has a solid nature, pretending it might be a fact. If, on the other hand, memory is closely linked to imagination (Hansen 2015; Frijhoff 2008) aiming to create the possibility of writing history, then the idea of a pedestal is far from an ideal choice. Memory then becomes the sign of conflict and is essentially contested memory (Rawski 2023). This may lead to a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between those who represent the past and give it its voice and those who can only be seen as those who are represented by others. This division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the legitimization of any representation of the past, is of course one of the major issues in the modern debate about decolonization. Statues that represented a glorious past are suddenly toppled and provoke the ire of those who once were subjected to the rule of these rulers. It goes without saying that in the current situation – a war raging in Europe and the international community being strongly divided – the topic of history and memory becomes an important one. Moreover, in this particular case it is clear that the cultural aspects are also intimately intertwined with religious ones (Assmann 2006).

Now, if we move from these general remarks to the concrete and current situation of the stance different countries take when it comes to the war in Europe, it matters perhaps most to mention first of all the South African position. This is for the following reasons. On the one hand, South Africa is an important voice in the North-South dialogue and it is a prominent member of the BRICS. It is, however, right in the case of this North-South dialogue that we encounter the tensions between the European point of view and the one often held by countries of the

Global South. These divergences are related to contested memories, and that is what we will deal with in this article.

To start with, I would like to picture some aspects of the current political situation as it is described by some specialists. First of all, there are some very useful observations made by Akinboade, Heske and Molobi (2023), who, in a recent article, summed up the main principles of South African foreign policy. What they see as the most important dimensions of this policy are the following ones. First of all, what matters is the notion of independence and non-alignment. Of course, this principle may imply a certain distance towards the Western stance in the Ukrainian war, but it certainly is not necessarily the case. A second element then is the preference for a peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes. This may be considered something obvious, but it can lead to downsizing the economic relationship with a belligerent country. Thirdly, there is the aspect of solidarity with those countries or nations that supported the South African battle against apartheid. This third principle may be at odds, at a certain moment, with the first one (non-alignment). Russia strongly supported the fight against apartheid (Geldenhuys 2015) and has now started a war at its borders. That raises the question of knowing to what extent non-alignment and support for parties that have shown their solidarity in the recent past are compatible. This is, in fact, the most difficult aspect of the South African policy, and its paradoxical nature is confirmed in many publications (Brosig 2022; Agyemfra 2023). Finally, the fourth element is then the protection of human rights. As you will understand, these principles may be foundational, but they are not necessarily principles that needlessly fit into one another. Priorities depend on geopolitical, interior politics, and perhaps also morals.

The authors therefore also mention some other principles, meant to allow decisions in complicated situations where the main principles may be at odds with one another. First, they speak about African solidarity, meaning solidarity with the African continent. Non-alignment is then taken in the sense of not belonging to either the West or any other geopolitical structure. The notion was developed in the times of the Cold War and indicated that countries were not willing to take sides with either of the two opponents, the West or the USSR. However, now that the Cold War has ended, the name and the organization remain relevant. It certainly has to do with defining first of all the interests of the national community and it therefore represents the emphasis on political independence (Keethaponcanlan 2016). Next, it also represents the larger similar stakes of certain countries in a certain region such as Africa. It then represents a certain African solidarity. Moreover, it also implies the idea that relationships with the Northern Hemisphere are essentially based on economic principles, they are not value-driven. In addition to these aspects, one could also mention the role of the BRICS alliance,

which tries to respond to the rapidly changing geopolitical order (Brosig 2019), attempting to escape from the traditional, Cold War, bipolarity between East and West, and wanting to reinforce the position of the Global South in a multipolar world. This is confirmed by authors such as Chigova, Hofisi and Tshidzumba (2023) who argue that South Africa should do its utmost to get rid of this Western predominance. The West is accused of disregarding international law, of disregarding new Global developments, a new Global order. Therefore, they suggest, South Africa should leverage its regional influence, thus becoming a more influential partner in the BRICS alliance. In addition to that point of view, one might also put forward that the relationship with the Northern Hemisphere is not solely based on economic principles, as was observed some lines above. One might also argue that the Global South rejects the Western point of view and the Western narrative of the Ukrainian war because it considers it to be a highly hypocritical stance, in which certain Western interests are protected without taking into account Russian interests and justified complaints (Nwaezeigwe 2023).

But there is also another point of view when it comes to Russian policy. Regarding Russian policy then – Russia being a member of the BRICS – a special volume of the *African Journal of International Affairs* highlighted several aspects of Russian politics in Africa. Shiskina and Liukomovich (2022) emphasized that the Russian narrative – which claims to side with the goals of African countries as was argued at the Russia-Africa summit of 2023 – is a distorted narrative, and they conclude that Russia, under the guise of an anti-colonial attitude, behaves as a neo-colonial power. A similar view is upheld by Allard Duursma and Niklas Masuhr (2022). This seems not to be a view shared by South African politics. The conclusion can be that South African foreign policy considers the possibility of increasing its influence in a changing world in particular in distancing itself from the West, silently supporting an old friend such as Russia, regardless of some moral aspects (Seekings and Saunders 2022). Even though the moral argument is used in many ways, both to keep a stance of neutrality as well as to support tacitly the Russian stance, the final argument will probably be based on the question of whether a certain position can serve any of the South African interests. Put differently, in a world where geopolitical changes succeed one another rapidly and unpredictably, there is a tendency towards *realpolitik* that mainly serves the national interests and that values moral arguments only in the second instance. They normally have only a rhetorical role, serving ideological goals. However, when there is a conflict of interests, morality may have a certain role and that might be the case in South Africa.

2 Morality

I would therefore like to have a closer look at the moral arguments to take this discussion further. I will not discuss certain political aspects that concern South Africa's interior political interests (which are certainly present), but focus on these moral aspects that can be involved in an international debate. In a recent article, dating from January 17, Sylvie Kaufman (2024), editorialist of *Le Monde*, argued that Western moral judgments were largely based on the memory of the Shoa and the principles of the Enlightenment (Kapasov 2017; Goldberg and Hazan 2015; Gilbert 2019), whereas for the Global South such a starting point is rather the history of colonization and slavery and hence the need for decolonization. One might say that the reproach to the West is that it claims a moral superiority, a high moral ground, of which the focus on the Holocaust and the 'never again' adage are the focal points. But this moral superiority hides geopolitical interests threatening the interests of others who reject this point of view as a moral cover-up. The West, she argues, quoting the black author Aimé Césaire, who was a great advocate of the idea of African identity, never worked on the memory of colonization and slavery. This may be a very plausible thesis and I would like to elaborate on it.

What matters in the first instance, is the fact that moral criteria are based on certain epistemological and historical structures, and these are the structures we must analyze. First of all, then, the epistemological structure. The Shoa has been considered, up to now, as a unique historical event involving techniques and a scale of destruction, systemic hate, and discrimination never seen before. The 'unique' character has been much debated, in particular in Germany during the *Historikerstreit* of the eighties of the last century, but in general, there is a widely accepted awareness of its singular character, though the recent *Historikerstreit* 2.0 has tried to nuance this singular character (Rothberg 2022).¹ I will not dwell on this debate, but the general acceptance, though contested, of the singular character has led to the decades-old formula 'never again', which is repeated on many occasions (Baer and Sznajder 2017). It is the moral imperative derived from this

1 Regarding the *Historikerstreit* 2.0, Rothberg writes: "The advances of postcolonial and decolonial activism and knowledge production, both in Germany and globally, entail that there is less and less legitimate space left for denial of colonialism's legacies" (1318). And also: "There is a paradox here: even as the absolutist conception of the Holocaust's uniqueness has become increasingly central to German *Staatsraison* and Germany's public memory culture in the twenty-first century, Holocaust memory has become increasingly entangled with issues only partially or even tangentially related to it" (1322). This clearly shows the impossibility of creating a memory culture *ab ovo*, as it were a '*Reinkultur*'.

hideous and horrific history. The singular character and its exclusive nature however have also cast a shadow on other horrific stories. They have perhaps even hidden these other stories. For instance, Are we sufficiently aware of what happened in Eastern Europe with its remembrance of the many crimes of Stalinism, the Holodomor in Ukraine (Kasianov 2021), and so on? But perhaps even more important, are we aware of the fact that the ‘never again’ adage should certainly be applied to the history of colonialism and slavery? As such, this widening scope represents the globalization of new, non-national, mnemonic structures and cultures, as is argued by Danielle Lucksted (2022) in her *Memory Laws, Mnemonic Weapons: The Diffusion of a Norm across Europe and Beyond*. Indeed, it reveals that our mnemonic cultures have long suffered from an exclusively Western scope that enabled us to remember and forget arbitrarily, without knowing exactly how the mnemonic structures are woven. Nelly Bekus (2022) suggests, in her *Memory Wars in Post-imperial Settings*, that this is because mnemonic structures are driven by interests and not by values, and her point is a relevant one: I will come back to it.

3 The Structure of Memory

Mnemonic structures, that is what the historian sees as the core of our discussions. Let us simply start with the observation that one can remember one thing and forget at the same time something else that is no less important. Why then do we forget things? What is the mechanism of remembrance and oblivion? Or to rephrase the issue, What do we know about the exact structure of oblivion? Indeed, if we do not know the structure of our oblivion, the gaps in the tissue of memory, then our concept of memory and remembrance is also flawed and defective. We ignore the exact nature of our memory because we do not understand the nature of oblivion. Normally speaking, what is forgotten is roughly constructed through what is remembered, as is the case with classical *damnatio memoriae* (Flower 2006). If our memory can be pictured as a rectangle, then the elements that have been forgotten will be elements fitting into the rectangle. They will, so to speak, be small rectangles. We do not know what we have forgotten, but we suggest that we know at least the contours of this particular case of oblivion. That is what we normally think because, in our view, oblivion must be derived from memory. But let’s imagine that the parts that have been forgotten do not look like small rectangles but that they represent small circles. In that case, we will not be able to put them into the rectangle of our memory. We should have to admit that if we have forgotten something, we cannot suggest that, though

it is forgotten, we still know the contours of what is forgotten. No, if what has been forgotten looks indeed like a small circle, we will not be able to put it in a rectangular structure and oblivion will remain something that, definitely, is forgotten. Put differently, we cannot be sure that oblivion can be derived from memory, it is perhaps the other way around: oblivion creates the structure of our memory. That, at least, was the Freudian perspective. Oblivion frames and phrases our memory, and our understanding of the past. The forgotten trauma, the repressed past, creates our present and our memory. We remember without being aware of the fact that oblivion cannot be derived from present memory but that the present has been created by these repressed remembrances. Therefore, we have to admit that we know what we remember, but the underlying epistemological structure remains hidden.

Saint Augustine (2009) was the first to focus on these dynamics, showcasing it by a striking example (which I have somewhat simplified). You enter a grocery or supermarket, knowing you must run some errands, let's say four things. You manage to do so rather quickly, you pay and leave the shop. Once you are back in your car, you realize, you brought only three items with you instead of four. There is one thing you have forgotten. Now the problem is that, on seeing the three items, you remember to have forgotten the fourth one. That is the paradox, even an oxymoron, how can we remember what we have forgotten? Isn't that impossible? Something is either forgotten or remembered, but how do we remember what we have forgotten?² Epistemologically the conclusion must be that we do not know what we know about our memory. We know we remember things, but we don't know the underlying structure.³

Now, if we do not know what we know about our memory, what then is the moral worth of the adage 'never again'? If the underlying epistemological structure of a moral imperative is unclear, how can we claim it should be seen as a universally moral imperative? 'Never again' implies that we will always remember. But at the same time, we have to admit that this remembrance does not reveal whether something has been forgotten. Putting it even more pointedly, the 'never again' adage presupposes oblivion (Pasture 2018). It warns against obliv-

2 Augustine, *Confessions* X,16,24: "But when I remember forgetfulness, both memory and forgetfulness are present-memory by means of which I could remember, forgetfulness which I did remember. But what is forgetfulness except loss of memory? How then is it present for me to remember when, if it is present, I have no power of remembering? What we remember, we retain by memory. But unless we could recall forgetfulness, we could never hear the word and recognize the thing which the word signifies."

3 A good example of an endeavour to trace these developments, certainly within the literature, is to be found in Burch (2015).

ion, but it can only do so if it presupposes that things have been forgotten. No one who remembers and sits in front of his memories would say ‘never again’. Yes, of course, he would say ‘never again’ when confronted with unheard suffering and torture. But only as long as he can stand it. There will be a moment when memory becomes too painful, too confrontational, and that will be the moment oblivion will help secure a certain distance between a subject and his memories.⁴ Now, if that is the case, if the ‘never again’ cannot reach every memory of one’s inner life, and therefore has no ‘universal’ range in one’s mind, how then can it have a universal meaning in the outside world? Mnemonic studies mention therefore the hierarchical structure of mnemonic cultures, the national aspects, as well as the transnational use of mnemonic structures as an attempt to clarify some of the gaps mentioned.

4 Cultural Memory and Identity

Yet, given the fact that these gaps have a cultural origin, they will never be comparable. They are similar when it comes to their function (securing a distance between the subject and his memories), but they cannot be compared. The gap that represents the atrocities of colonial history is strangely different from the gap that represents the horrors of the Holocaust. Indeed, the gaps are similar, but they cannot be compared. Given these gaps and the variety of these gaps, it seemingly is not possible to decontextualize memory and to consider it something that exceeds national or cultural boundaries. On the contrary, it is the cultural context that helps to create oblivion and remembrance when needed. Looking at another culture from inside one’s own culture implies that one’s cultural structures determine what can be seen from the other culture. Certain angles will be overlooked, and others will be emphasized. Now, these national and cultural aspects and the impossibility to decontextualize memory create the battle of memory, which can become a first step toward cultural wars. Next, if memory belongs indeed to cultural structures, then it will also represent an *identity* structure. It is, in fact, the moment that a so-called universal principle ‘never again’ becomes a structure of one’s identity and therefore loses its strength. The ‘never again’ fits only in the structure of a certain culture and it functions at the same time as a cipher of this culture. It does not only have a moral component but also one revealing one’s identity, allowing people to recognize their culture. Forgetting then that memory

⁴ This is impressively described by Apel (2020). She pictures how the remains of Jewish settlements in Poland, where her family used to live, have been destroyed.

has a cultural and identity structure, oblivion can play its hidden role. Is it then still possible to remember what has been forgotten, as Augustine tried to show? It certainly is, once one is confronted with the pluralistic nature of our society. However, that is a process that cannot easily be achieved. It demands that, first of all, we become aware of the fact that the cultural aspect of remembrances gives birth to a certain morality. Meaning, such a morality will also bear the stamp of a cultural background. Yet, morality, though created within a certain cultural context, should have a broader reach than just being appropriate in a particular cultural context. There should be a possibility to partly decontextualize it. Indeed, the identity aspect of memory undermines the moral aspect that arises from such a memory. On the one hand, the moral aspect should have a universal value, but it cannot have it because it also functions as a cultural cypher. On the other hand, it is precisely this cultural aspect that gives birth to moral commands. You need a culture that defines the equality between men and women to create a morality that counters gender discrimination. At the same time, a debate is needed about the notion of 'equality' that reveals the cultural aspects of such a notion. We may defend equality between men and women, but can equality also be applied to economic structures?

Understandably, these questions about the connection between memory, identity, and morality have led to conflicts, disputes, and quarrels. However, systematic reflection on the epistemological structures of mnemonic patterns is strikingly absent. How do we remember what we remember? There is of course the identity structure we have to keep in mind, but, next to this, there is also a logical aspect that is often overlooked. Memory must always have a preliminary memory. You have to recall that you want to stick to 'never again'. You must not forget to pick up this book. You must think not to forget, you must think to think about, and you must remember to remember. This preliminary memory is not determined by the same cultural structures as the remembrance it tries to waken. It just reaffirms the role of the primary remembrance. Yet, it also shows that memory is capable of duplicating itself and in that sense, it strengthens the cultural aspect. It brings one back to one's cultural 'home' so to speak. For instance, you must stick to the 'never again' formula. Sure, but this appeal therefore sharpens the context in which the formula was created, and it reaffirms the boundaries we live with. Moreover, the duplicating aspect even is an endless process, as Augustine observed when he made clear that memory is always present to itself: *so when I remember memory, memory is available to itself through itself*. This inside presence is nothing less than the effect of two mirrors placed in front of each other: they will endlessly reflect each other. The same goes for memory, it is the most 'visible' form of the I looking at the I, looking at the I – the subject not being able to entirely reduce itself to an object. That is the logical structure of

memory, representing also a kind of inner battle: What do I forget, what do I remember? The answer to the Augustinian question, ‘How can I remember what I have forgotten?’, then lies in the cultural context of our memories. They create a framework that models our memories and that hides certain of our unwelcome remembrances.

5 The Battle of Memories

However, this selective memory allows us also to use its national and cultural character in a more public way. On the one hand, it can serve to reinforce the national identity, e.g., by modifying certain educational programs. In that sense, the creation of a national narrative, taught at school and propagated on TV and social media, is extremely effective when it comes to the use of mnemonic structures. Once this narrative has been created, it can even serve on the battlefield itself (Noordenbos 2022): memories as weapons, weapons meant to justify, even in a moral sense, the battle itself. That is the use of mnemonic structures Russia currently adopts in its war in Ukraine. It constantly refers to the need for the so-called denazification of Ukraine, and it invokes the Great Patriotic War as a justification for this war, in particular because of Ukraine’s rapprochement with the European Union, viz NATO (Pakhomenko et al. 2018), developments that are seen as a historical threat to Russia’s independence. Moreover, according to the Russian argument, there is a striking lack of remembrance, in the West, of Christian values, leading to a decadent culture (Soroka 2022). Ukraine on the other hand defends itself by pointing at the Holodomor and the many crimes of Russian imperialism. Russia puts forward, in this mnemonic war, that Ukraine has always been part of its territory, Ukraine refers to the Orange Revolution and the Maidan Revolution as decisive moments in its decolonization attempts.

Their current use on the battlefield proves how strong these mnemonic structures are, and it therefore remains extremely important to analyze their structure and power. We know how to discover what has been forgotten, we know how to approach moral questions and those about identity, and we know the ambivalent character of moral commands resulting from a cultural context yet not identical to them. How then can we look at the South African stance in the Ukrainian war?

6 The Christian Stance on Memory

One might argue that what matters in this particular case is to deconstruct prevailing structures and to develop new ones. It is only then, once we have deconstructed and understood the structure of memories and oblivion, that we can think of morality and eventually of peace. I am not sure this will suffice, but it is a task we cannot run away from as theologians rooted in a Christian tradition. Indeed, Christian theologians work in a tradition that is in itself a huge mnemonic structure: *do this in remembrance of me* (Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:24). The same goes for Judaism: *remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there* (Deut 5:15 ISV). If that is the case, we are bound, even morally, to understand the theological aspects of the mnemonic traditions. Indeed, what then is, from a theological point of view, the underlying structure of remembrance and oblivion? Is the theological aspect identical to the cultural one? Or do they have to be distinguished? Where can we find clues to a possible answer?

I would like to start with Hannah Arendt. Arendt suggests in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in *Responsibility and Judgment* that thinking in itself is a kind of protection against a lack of morals. Put differently, you have to remember that you must remember. Because, if you do not remember to remember, if you do not remember to think, morality will be lost. This is something that often can be witnessed in courtrooms when the perpetrator claims: I do not remember. Meaning, I refuse to remember and I do not want to think that I must remember. That was, as she explains in *Responsibility and Judgment*, the core of her analysis of Eichmann, his refusal to think about his deed and role. Yet, recently the reception of Arendt's works has shown a more nuanced image, though more pessimistic. Jissov (2020) argues that, in the line of Agamben's *State of Exception*, thinking can definitely be absent, and thus morality can completely collapse. Are we not constantly living in a state of exception? Thinking is therefore not the protection Arendt suggested it was, says Jissov. Yet, I would like to emphasize that, though thinking may be absent and morals may be absent, as long as one refuses to remember, this refusal to think is also an act of thinking. There is no absolute absence and even when it comes to the absence of morals and thinking, thoughts can be developed. In the particular case of the 'never again' adage, if we do apply this adage, but at the same time apply it in a limited way and thus create oblivion, a gap in our memory, how can we approach this absence of thinking?

Let me make a calculated guess, putting forward some Christian element in the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. This guess will be based on the fact that Christianity is indeed a mnemonic structure and that this mnemonic structure is traditionally strongly connected with the notion of sacrifice. As is well

known, this connection was studied in detail by René Girard, who insisted on the importance of a mimetic aspect in our desires and acts. Girard was the one to show-case the importance of the notion of sacrifice as something we continuously repeat but at the same time forget by introducing a scapegoat. There are then two sorts of sacrifices, and we would like to forget both of them. On the one hand, there are the ones we have sacrificed, on the other hand, there are the sacrifices for the benefit of others we refused to make. Those we have sacrificed, we forgot about them. We forgot about them, e.g., in the case of slavery and colonialism, because it was a mimetic affair. We did so because it had always been done this way. We are simply acting in a mimetic way, repeating what did our forebearers. We only did something because others did it. We sacrificed people because it was always done and even though we desired to do so, it wasn't our desire, it was just the example that was shown to us, it was the mimetic desire, it was a mimetic act. In fact, we did not do it. That might be the reason we forget: we were not the ones who sacrificed, we only repeated what was done before us. If women were sacrificed, if children were, if black people were, we do not remember, because we did not do it. The 'never again' didn't apply to those victims, because it was not an exceptional moment in our history, it was ordinary history. Even if it was remembered, then it was not our deed, it was an incident, something a few weird others perpetrated. If you talk, e.g., about slavery: yes, we had slaves, but at least we treated them very well. If you talk about #metoo, yes, women were mistreated and violated, but that only happened in the world of artists, movies, and journals. If we talk about abuse in the church, yes, it happened, but the perpetrators were only some isolated members of the clergy, a very small percentage. We constantly dealt with unfortunate incidents. Even if we remember, we remember it as something belonging to others, to the past, not as something that still is present in our society in many ways. Would it still be there, we probably would have forgotten it. Sacrifice is the shameful remembrance we do not remember.

7 Sacrifice

Now if we focus on the notion of sacrifice as the key to oblivion, we can compare the mnemonic structures of the West and the South. The West emphasizes the singular character of the Holocaust and tries to remember it. This is not easy because there are still aspects we would rather not remember, in particular the way antisemitism was not a German particularity, but a phenomenon widespread in the whole of Europe and even considered a mark of high culture. Elite organizations often refused Jews to become members of their organization. We continued

to argue that, yes, there was the Holocaust, but that was the fault of the Germans, they are to blame. On the one hand, we used the Jews as scapegoats, on the other hand, we did the same with the Germans and we escaped from any moral responsibility ourselves. Of course, there was antisemitism in Europe, but it was Germany that made the step towards sacrifice. They sacrificed, we did not and therefore we can forget about our past. Yet, especially in Germany there is this sincere endeavor to remember and it is in particular Germany that has created an exemplary mnemonic culture when it comes to the memories of WW II. Now the values on which this endeavor to remember is based (which comes down to creating a new mnemonic structure) can be seen as those present in the French Revolution as well as in Christianity, the most important being the equality of all men, which is already present in Christianity; think of the famous phrase, *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal. 3:28 NIV). It is this value (equality) that creates the other values such as freedom of consciousness and freedom of religion. The other important one is of course solidarity. Equality and solidarity can both be recognized in the Kantian categorical imperative: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time want it to become a universal law” (*Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten* 4, 421; my translation).⁵ At the same time, these values, to create a new mnemonic structure, are also defined by a cultural context. Equality was therefore often only equality for those who were like Westerners, meaning that equality became something like identity.⁶ Recently Yasha Mounk (2023) wrote an impressive book, called *The Identity Trap*, in which he warned against the divisive nature of thinking along the identity lines. Communities are divided into ‘us and them’, creating hatred and anxiety. Solidarity suffered from a similar fate. It was solidarity with those who are as we are. Solidarity with Ukraine can then be seen as just another example of a restricted use: they are like we are, so we must show solidarity and defend freedom as sovereignty. Right, but these notions were not adopted universally, though the West claimed they were universal. And as they were not applied universally, they sacrificed others and we forgot about these victims. Consequently, unless these values are reevaluated, they will continue to be used in a limited way, leading to, once again, sacrifice and from there, to oblivion.

⁵ “Handle nur nach derjenigen Maxime, durch die du zugleich wollen kannst, daß sie ein allgemeines Gesetz werde.”

⁶ Think of the history of suffrage. Voting rights were first only granted to men with a certain income, then to men only, and finally universal suffrage was granted to men and women.

8 Conclusion

Where do we take it from here? How can peace ethics be realistic and idealistic at the same time? It is – in my view as a historian and looking at the topic of peace ethics from a different angle – only possible if we reevaluate our mnemonic structures. What matters is often not what we remember, but what we have forgotten, in the West as well as in the South. The South cannot only claim to be a victim, but it also had its proper responsibility in creating mnemonic structures. Now, if we can discover the structure of this oblivion, we can also understand why we remember what we remember. What I suggested is that behind this oblivion, through the gaps in the tissue of our memory, we can discover the shadows of the victims of our sacrifices. I think that a Christian theologian can never escape the notion of ‘do this in remembrance of me’ as well as the notion of sacrifice which is so strongly related to this memory and which has created a whole theology, running from Augustine to Anselm to Luther, to Bonhoeffer. The notion of sacrifice has often been associated with the ghosts of guilt, sin, and depraved nature. We have to ward off this spectre of doom. What matters is to stop the dynamics of sacrificing, in order to create new mnemonic structures. Otherwise, we will continue to reproach others for forgetting what has to be remembered. The battle of memory is not about what is the most singular atrocity we have known in our history. In that case, we will end in victimization and identity politics. The battle of memory is about the efforts humans make to avoid sacrifices. But that can only happen if we reconsider our mnemonic structures and do so in an honest debate. Such a debate is indispensable, but it is also incompatible with the use of memories as weapons on the battlefield. Weapons and debate are not compatible. However, weapons cannot be fully excluded. The theologian who is confronted with a debate that started peacefully but that afterward ends up in an armed fight, may feel obliged to answer with weapons.

Let me be clear and give you an example. The stance currently taken by the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the Ukrainian war is, in my view, not a tenable one. Its executive committee declared recently that war is contrary to the will of God, a declaration that is nothing less than an open door. However, the declaration continues and states:

We commend and encourage the WCC general secretary’s continuous efforts to seek ways of addressing this crisis through dialogue within the ecumenical fellowship of churches as well with other partners, and deeply regret that those efforts are yet to bear visible fruits

[. . .] We ask member churches of the WCC to urge their governments to seek peace in Ukraine by taking and supporting initiatives for dialogue.⁷

First of all, one might wonder what kind of dialogue the WCC has in mind in the case of Ukraine, a country that has been shamelessly attacked and invaded. Secondly, speaking about a “fellowship of churches” implies that the WCC still counts the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) among its members, not willing to suspend the membership of the ROC. Finally, peace must be sought by urging governments to engage in a dialogue. Now, that is surprisingly naïve as the dialogue would already put belligerents at the same level. It is a refusal to attach consequences to the fact that Russia in this case is the perpetrator, the country that invaded Ukraine. Such a point of view only favors, in the end, the WCC itself because it can preserve its relationship with the ROC. But it is also a refusal to deal with a certain reality. The reality is that peace can sometimes only be achieved through arms, but that churches are not capable of admitting such an ‘ordinary’ fact, withdrawing themselves to a high-pitched, idealistic position where prayers and diplomacy can be situated outside the geopolitical reality. Floating above reality, this allows the WCC to forget things and escape from an analysis of oblivion and remembrance. Now, as we had this conference in Berlin, we may be permitted, perhaps, to recall Bonhoeffer, whose name is honored at this faculty, and his decision to take part in an armed assault against Hitler. Consequently, what the WCC forgets, is its own ideological framework in which some interests are more important than others.⁸ What is lacking, therefore, is a clear analysis of the way we avoid naming those who sacrifice and those who are sacrificed and the difference between them.

⁷ *Minute on the Escalation of the War in Ukraine*, Executive Committee WCC, June 11, 2024: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/minute-on-the-escalation-of-the-war-in-ukraine>.

⁸ Cp. also Clements (2023). The author insists on the need to make choices based on the confession. He bases his argument on Bonhoeffer and Rowan Williams, as well as on the attitude of the WCC towards certain white South African churches at the time of the apartheid. Quoting Visser ‘t Hooft, he writes: “We had placed such an emphasis on the duty for the church to remain the truly ecumenical church that there was a danger that the church would be looked upon as a haven of refuge above the world and not give guidance to their decisions in this world. I came therefore to the following conclusion: ‘The ecumenical movement dare not be silent at a time when various forms of nihilism tend to submerge large parts of Europe, and when the validity of such basic norms of human relationships as justice and freedom for the life of our whole civilization is at stake.’” (258–59) Cp. also Peränen (2023) who writes: “The World Council of Churches’ discussion was, in my opinion, very unproductive. In fact, it seemed to be mainly an opportunity for people to express their opinions, which the President, Metropolitan Nikon of Targoviste, did not seem to appreciate.” (115)

Finally, if this is the outcome of our analysis, we will need touchstones that can show us how we deal with memory and forgetting, with sacrifices and sacrificers, victims and perpetrators. The recent case of the death of Alexei Navalny is a striking example. How he will be remembered – that will be a fierce debate in which the West and the South will have a particular responsibility. Was he a kind of Mandela? Was he a martyr or a stubborn nationalist, rejecting the independence and sovereignty of neighboring countries? How will his memory be framed and can we discuss the basics of this new mnemonic structure? What will be the role of theology in these secular debates? I do hope that our discipline can at least add some notions to the debate about memory and then make clear not only how we create memories but also how we tend to forget what is contrary to our interest.

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