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The establishment of the European Union was the most significant development in twentieth-century political organisation. Despite the EU's achievements, events at the beginning of the twenty-first century pose an existential threat. *Memory and the future of Europe* treats integration as a response to the rupture created by the age of total war. As the generations with personal memories of the two world wars have passed away, economic gain has increasingly become the EU's sole *raison d'être*. If the Union is to survive, it will have to create a new historical imaginary that builds on the experiences of those who have grown up in a unified Europe and on the EU's ability to protect its citizens from the forces of globalisation.

PETER J. VEROVŠEK is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield

COVER IMAGE: Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, Germany ©Rob Pinney

MANCHESTER  
1824

Manchester University Press

ISBN-13: 978-1-5261-4310-5



9 781526 143105

www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

VEROVŠEK  
MEMORY AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE  
Manchester

# MEMORY *and the future of* EUROPE

*Rupture and integration  
in the wake of total war*

PETER J. VEROVŠEK

# The Paradigm of Collective Memory

- I examine the EU's past in order to understand its present & possible future
- Existing studies focus on economic, social & political factors
- This literature ignores culture, i.e. how participants perceive these other factors
- Part of a “memory boom” (Blight, 2009) that examines the role of collective memory in European integration (Guisan 2012, Sierp 2017)



# Memory and Historical Ruptures

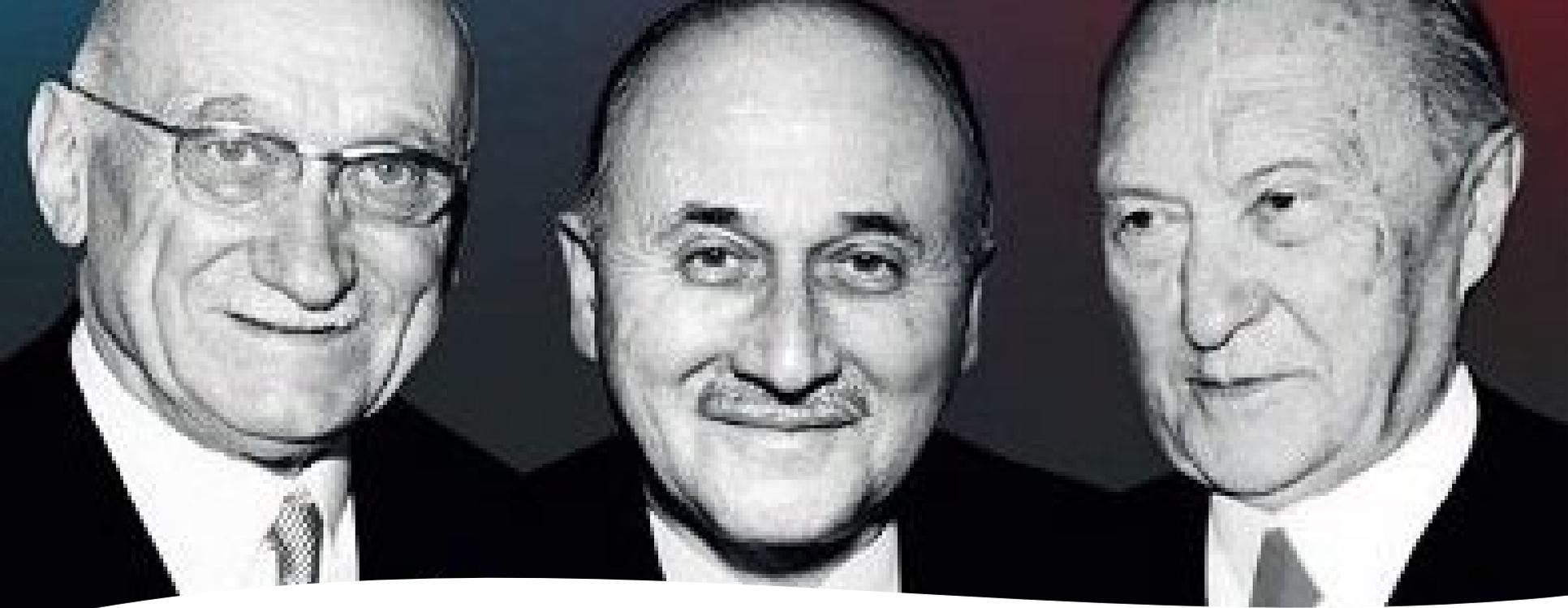
- Collective memory usually provides stability by legitimizing existing regimes
- Europe's "age of total war" (1914-45) is a rupture that "makes the continuum of history explode" (Benjamin 1940)
- Ruptures create "a 'gap' between past and future of such a magnitude that the past, while still present, is fragmented" (Benhabib 2003)
- New narratives become possible: ruptures reshape how "space of experience" feeds into "horizons of expectation" (Koselleck 1985)
- Generational dynamics play a key role in this process. I focus on 4 cohorts: Founders, Builders, Skeptics & Europeans



# Resistance and Rupture of 1945

- The generation that took power after WWII lived through the war as adults active in the resistance
- Hannah Arendt (1945): “Those who emerged to wage war fought against fascism and nothing else...All of these [resistance] movements at once found a positive political slogan which plainly indicated the non-national though very popular character of the new struggle. That slogan was simply EUROPE”
- This cohort built on the lessons of the past to construct new narratives. Used collective memories as a cognitive, motivational, and justificatory resources for integration





## Generation of the Founders

- Leaders are key: Schuman, Monnet & Adenauer
- The Founders interpreted 1945 as a delegitimation of nationalism and sought solutions in Europe's pre-national past
- Schuman (1958): "The Europe that we have founded [is]...a return to perennial tradition which a momentary aberration had succeeded in making us forget"
- Laid foundation for the EC, starting with the ECSC (1952), followed by the EEC & Euratom (1957)



## The Builders of Integration in the 1980s & 1990s

- The founders are followed by a cohort that experienced WWII as young adults (born in 1920s & 30s). This generation of leaders is defined by the constellation of "45ers" composed of Mitterrand, Delors & Kohl
- These builders transformed the European *Community* into the European *Union* by completing the Common Market, opening intra-European borders & creating the euro in the 1980s and 90s

# The Classic Narrative of Integration

- First two postwar cohorts created what I call the “classic narrative of integration” based on “spillover” (Haas 1958) & four freedoms (goods, services, capital, labor)
- The fight against fascism plays a key role in this narrative (Habermas & Derrida 2003). The Holocaust acts as the “European entry ticket” (Judt 2005)
- Integration is rooted in a scepticism towards nationalism and the nation
- The successful accession of the first post-communist member-states in 2004 signals the culmination of the classical narrative



# Challenging the Narrative I: A Skeptical Generation



- The paradigm of collective memory reveals 2 key issues: a new generation & a different rupture
- After 2000 the first generation of European leaders born after 1945 comes to power. Their defining experience is postwar "economic miracle" within the nation-state, not war and suffering
- For this cohort of skeptics being a "good European" is "a matter of choice, not obligation" (Schröder)
- Support for Brexit and other far-right nationalist movements across Europe is concentrated within this postwar "baby boom" generation

## Challenging the Narrative II: A Different Rupture

- In new member-states from CEE, the key historical rupture is not the defeat of fascism in 1945, but the fall of communism in 1989
- The rupture of 1989 brings different lessons for the present:
  - emphasizes popular sovereignty, not protection of rights
  - nation is seen as a source of freedom & liberation, not a fundamental danger
- Key result: liberal v. “illiberal” democracy (Verovšek 2020)
- Postcommunist states are also pro-European, but seek a Europe of nation-states, not a community or federal EU



## A European Cohort on the Horizon



- Loss of memory through generational turnover & challenge of the alternate rupture of 1989 has undermined the normative foundations of the EU
- Instead of further integration, the EU has “muddled through” recent crises
- This may be enough. There is a new, European generation, born in the 1970s and 80s, waiting in the wings
- Umberto Eco (2012): this is “the first generation of young Europeans. I call it a sexual revolution: a young Catalan man meets a Flemish girl – they fall in love, they get married and they become European, as do their children”
- The pro-Europeanness of this cohort is not based in collective memory, but on the experience of studying, living & working on continent of open borders

# Reasons for Hope

- This cohort's pro-European sentiments are foreshadowed by French President Emmanuel Macron, the first member of this generation to come to power in a major EU member-state
- Danger: recent crises have hit this cohort particularly hard (high unemployment, low wages, etc.). This threatens to undermine the Europeanness of this generation if they associate these developments with the EU
- But there is hope for future integration if the EU can survive long enough for this European cohort to take power
- Implication: Resolving EU's ambitions – its *finalité* – and pushing for further integration is better left for the future, when there is a greater chance that pro-European solutions will be available



Thank you for listening!

ANY  
QUESTIONS  
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