Memory and Power in Post-War Europe

How has memory – collective and individual – influenced European politics after the Second World War and after 1989 in particular? How has the past been used in domestic struggles for power, and how have ‘historical lessons’ been applied in foreign policy? While there is now a burgeoning field of social and cultural memory studies, mostly focused on commemorations and monuments, this volume is the first to examine the connection between memory and politics directly. It investigates how memory is officially recast, personally reworked and often violently re-instilled after wars, and above all, the ways in which memory shapes present power constellations.

The chapters combine theoretical innovation in their approach to the study of memory with deeply historical, empirically based case studies of major European countries. The point of stressing memory is not to deny that interests shape policy, but, with Max Weber, to analyse the historically and ideologically conditioned formation and legitimation of these interests. The volume concludes with reflections on the ethics of memory, and the politics of truth, justice and forgetting after 1945 and 1989.

This ground-breaking book should be of interest to historians of contemporary Europe, political scientists, sociologists and anyone interested in how the political uses of the past have shaped – and continue to shape – the Europe in which we live now.

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER is a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. He is the author of Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity (2000).
Memory and Power in Post-War Europe

Studies in the Presence of the Past

Edited by

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For as at a great distance of place, that which wee look at, appears dimme, and without distinction of the smaller parts; and as Voyces grow weak, and inarticulate: so also after great distance of time, our imagination of the Past is weak; and wee lose (for example) of Cities wee have seen, many particular Streets; and of Actions, many particular Circumstances. This decaying sense, when wee would express the thing itself, (I mean fancy itselfe,), wee call Imagination, as I said before: But when we would express the decay, and signifie that the Sense is fading, old, and past, it is called Memory. So that Imagination and Memory, are but one thing . . .

Hobbes, Leviathan
## Contents

**List of contributors**  ix  
**Acknowledgements**  xii  

- **Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory**  
  JAN-WERNER MÜLLER  

### Part 1 Myth, memory and analogy in foreign policy

1. **Memory of sovereignty and sovereignty over memory: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, 1939–1999**  
   TIMOTHY SNYDER  

2. **Myth, memory and policy in France since 1945**  
   ROBERT GILDEA  

3. **The power of memory and memories of power: the cultural parameters of German foreign policy-making since 1945**  
   THOMAS BERGER  

4. **The past in the present: British imperial memories and the European question**  
   ANNE DEIGHTON  

5. **Europe's post-Cold War remembrance of Russia: cui bono?**  
   IVER B. NEUMANN  

6. **Memory, the media and NATO: information intervention in Bosnia-Hercegovina**  
   MONROE E. PRICE  

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Part 2 Memory and power in domestic affairs

7 The past is another country: myth and memory in post-war Europe
   TONY JUDT

8 The emergence and legacies of divided memory: Germany and the Holocaust after 1945
   JEFFREY HERF

9 Unimagined communities: the power of memory and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia
   ILANA R. BET-EL

10 Translating memories of war and co-belligerency into politics: the Italian post-war experience
    ILARIA POGGIOLINI

11 Institutionalising the past: shifting memories of nationhood in German education and immigration legislation
    DANIEL LEVY AND JULIAN B. DIERKES

12 Trials, purges and history lessons: treating a difficult past in post-communist Europe
    TIMOTHY GARTON ASH

Index
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Acknowledgements

The editor wishes to thank the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford, for giving permission to hold a conference on ‘Memory and Power in Post-War Europe’ at All Souls on 26–7 June 1998. Especially warm thanks are due to Sir Julian Bullard and Robert O’Neill as co-directors of the All Souls Foreign Policy Studies Programme for intellectually and financially supporting this project throughout. The college staff and Julie Edwards in particular were unfailingly helpful with logistics. For stimulating comments at the conference, thanks to Erica Benner, Kathy Burk, Richard Crampton, Alex Danchev, Michael Ignatieff, Yuen Foong Khong, Ernest May, Jeffrey K. Olick, Alex Pravda, Peter Pulzer and Gesine Schwan. For useful remarks on the manuscript as a whole, thanks also to a number of anonymous readers. Finally, support from Tony Judt, Jair Kessler and the staff at the Remarque Institute of New York University during the conclusion of the project is very gratefully acknowledged.

Fifty years after the catastrophe, Europe understands itself more than ever as a common project, yet it is far from achieving a comprehensive analysis of the years immediately following the Second World War. The memory of the period is incomplete and provincial, if it is not entirely lost in repression or nostalgia. Hans-Magnus Enzensberger.