

REVIEW ARTICLE

# The Politics of Memory: Between History, Identity and Conflict

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(Received 6 May 2025; accepted 29 May 2025)

## Abstract

This article surveys the recent literature on the politics of memory. It sets out the nature of research in this area over the last 25 years and distils its main trends and areas of focus. Investigating monographs and edited volumes published since the year 2000, it gives an overview of a rich and evolving area of study. It demonstrates the extent to which the increasing politicization and securitization of memory has started to underpin new strategies for political conflict with different groups on different levels using collective memory to assert identities. While the boundaries between the national and the transnational in studying the politics of memory are often blurred, the article broadly distinguishes between studying political conflict within and between states.

**Keywords:** memory studies; memory politics; political conflict identity

Memory politics as a subfield of Memory Studies has experienced an impressive growth spurt in the last 20 years. The proliferation of memory conflicts globally allows for the hypothesis that scholarly interest in the field will continue to grow. Having for a long time been considered an inconsequential variable in the study of politics, memory in recent years has become a major concern for political scientists and international relations scholars alike. The observation that collective memory is a deeply political phenomenon and an important political resource has pervaded most recent scholarship. The questions of who the agents of memory are, how their agency is constituted and what the consequences of politically utilizing memory can be, are the central concerns of studies dealing with memory politics. Its study is concerned with ‘how and by whom, as well as through which means, with which intention and which effect past experiences are brought up and become politically relevant’ (Meyer 2008: 176).

Most scholarship starts from the observation that memory is constructed and constructive, dynamic and multifarious, multi-sided and multi-sited. Memory is not just

about what events are chosen to be remembered but about how and by whom this memory is shaped. This characteristic makes it typically easy to contest and therefore vulnerable to the state or specific interest groups mobilizing, instrumentalizing, institutionalizing, securitizing, and occasionally outright weaponizing it. That the past is considered useful for the present makes its discourses and representations politically relevant. This dynamic also connects its memory closely to the acquisition, consolidation and expansion of power. Being a key resource for states, mnemonic agency is nevertheless not limited to governments, political parties and other elite actors but extends to a multitude of non-state actors stretching from NGOs to museums. The field of political mobilization and interpretation is also not a prerogative of national policy-making alone but is increasingly played out in the transnational and transcultural sphere as well.

Scholarship on memory politics reflects this plurality. The collective representation and interpretation of the past is not only studied by political scientists, but has become an important topic for sociologists, historians, cultural studies specialists, psychologists and literary scholars. It is a 'contested and affectively charged contact zone where politics, identity, history, emotions, power, law, and the human search for meaning, meet and intertwine' (Mälksoo 2023: 2). Studies of the politics of memory encompass a wide range of mechanisms and processes ranging from measures and policies implemented by the state to public speeches and commemorative practices all the way to history education and textbooks, monuments and museum exhibitions. It is an inter- and multidisciplinary field by nature and explored by scholars dealing with transitional justice, democratization, law-making, trauma, historiography, ethics, history education, security, memorialization and mythmaking. Both positivist and constructive epistemological traditions are present in the study of memory politics, as are regional, national and transnational approaches.

The increasing interest in memory since the 2000s has produced a burgeoning literature that escapes any attempt at a comprehensive summary. The following can be but an incomplete overview of the main trends and areas of focus in the field. Surveying the latest literature on memory politics, I tried to distil recurring trends and cluster them according to their main themes to give an overview of a rich and evolving area of study.<sup>1</sup> While memory politics is not exclusively about conflict, a survey of the recent literature clearly shows the extent to which the increasing politicization and securitization of memory underpins new strategies for political conflict with different groups on different levels using collective memory to assert identities. While the boundaries between the national and the transnational in studying the politics of memory are often blurred, this review article broadly distinguishes between political conflict within and between states. It starts off with a quick overview of the origins of this research field, proceeds to investigate memory politics on the domestic level, before moving to analysing conflict between states and in the transnational sphere. The main purpose of the article is not only to survey the most recent literature but also to demonstrate the extent to which it is useful for the study of politics generally and the study of political conflict within and between states more specifically.

## Origins and general overview

Literature on memory politics can be broadly divided into two groups: detailed case studies and more general theoretical reflections that often border other disciplines (i.e. transitional justice). From a theoretical point of view, one of the first scholars to talk specifically about political memory was Jan Assmann. In his earliest works on collective memory (Assmann 1988), he had dissected the controversial term invented in 1925 by Maurice Halbwachs – the father of Memory Studies – and introduced the subcategories of individual, social and cultural memory. While constructing cultural memory as an analytical and methodological category exceptionally closely related to politics, he specifically introduced the term ‘political memory’ as a separate notion in 2006. He focuses specifically on the mediated and transgenerational nature of political memory and its reliance on carriers of external symbols and material representations. This includes not only libraries, museums and monuments but also education and repeated occasions for collective participation. By employing events in an affectively charged and mobilizing narrative, by selecting and excluding, history turns into political memory.

Building on Assmann’s work, a number of theoretical books on collective memory and political memory have been published in recent years. While most of them are handbooks providing broad overviews, they all include a discussion of memory in politics, testifying to the growing importance of this area of research. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (2010) address the nexus between memory and politics by demonstrating the diverse ways in which memory functions both in the public sphere and in everyday life. They individuate three main clusters of problems: the histories of memory where political issues are most prominent, the theoretical context of dominant categories used in memory interpretation and the faultlines in current theorization. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy (2011) take a different approach. Their book presents key texts that underpin and express the enduring and increasingly intense interest in memory, particularly its social and collective dimensions. They aim to correct misconceptions about Memory Studies and highlight the importance of memory in understanding historical and cultural processes. Memory politics are addressed in contributions about the tension between memory’s permanence and its dynamism. This is especially the case in discussions about the identity-confirming and identity-challenging aspects of collective memories and the potential for commemorative reinvention in the political sphere. Two handbooks, the *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (Tota and Hagen 2016) and the *Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* (Kattago 2016) provide a similarly broad overview of the state of the art of Memory Studies. Both adopt a multidisciplinary approach and aim to address the isolation and fragmentation among different national and disciplinary perspectives. The volume edited by Shioban Kattago (2016) in addition includes a self-reflexive layer and collects thoughts from junior and senior scholars on the intellectual influences shaping their own research, blending theoretical insights with personal narratives.

Almost all scholars mention the enormous importance that the long-term impact of World War II and the Holocaust had for the developing interest in the political side of memory. One of the early comprehensive collections dealing specifically with

memory politics in Europe (Lebow et al. 2006) aims to understand the timing, nature and evolution of debates regarding the roles European states played in World War II. It uses a comparative analysis to offer broader insights into how political memories form, are challenged and become established on the political level. It also sheds light on the creation of postwar national identities which often rely on shared historical narratives. Four dimensions are highlighted as being crucial for analysing the politics of memory: (1) the varying interpretations of what event or time period is being represented or contested; (2) the influence of both domestic and international factors in shaping memory and identity; (3) the purpose and emergence of dominant discourses; and (4) national languages and cultures through which disputes about memory and identity are expressed. In the attempt to come up with a term that would describe the way in which political interests in Western Germany specifically shaped responses to the Nazi past, Norbert Frei (1996) used the term '*Vergangenheitspolitik*' (politics of the past). Since then, the very vitality of the narrative hegemonies that are being constructed in relation to history has alerted scholars to it as an object of study. The end of the communist period has then drawn further attention to memory as a social and political issue.

Erik Meyer (2008) makes a further distinction and talks about two different dimensions of memory in politics: '*Vergangenheitspolitik*', translated as 'policy for the past' and '*Geschichtspolitik*', translated as 'politics of history'. Policy for the past explores the practical and legal aspects. It focuses on public symbolic gestures and relies on the involvement of individuals. Amnesty, integration and demarcation are important elements, as is the temporal aspect. Policy for the past can be used to describe temporary policies that states use after regime change. Politics of history, on the other hand, involve political communication and symbolic politics, operating as 'politics without policy' that aims for cultural hegemony (Meyer 2008: 178). It relates to the cultural memory of a community, which is constantly subject to change. Its goal is to influence the political attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of citizens in order to shape political debate and legitimate contemporary decision-making. At the same time, it contributes to the negotiation and clarification of normative orientations within society. Meyer questions the conceptualization by Michael Kohlstruck (1997), who had described 'politics of history' chiefly as a communicative act. Instead, Meyer underlines the importance of considering political responsibilities and decisions, institutions and resources when studying institutionalized forms of remembrance.

Building on this, Thomas Berger (2012) develops a framework for analysing the influence of history on politics and policies. He distinguishes between historical determinism, which views history from an empirical standpoint; instrumentalism, which highlights how politicians manipulate historical narratives to advance their own agenda, and finally cultural explanations that emphasize the role of societal culture in shaping a nation's response to its past. Taking this wider perspective and the dialectical interaction into account allows also for the investigation of the question of when and why states change official narratives of the past. Jennifer Dixon (2018) in this context comes to the conclusion that international pressures increase the likelihood of changes in official narratives, while domestic factors shape the content of these changes. Calls for state apologies, demands to change representations of events and remembrances highlighting alternative narratives can prompt state officials to reconsider and

potentially change the public narrative. How officials respond to international pressures depends on four factors: material concerns, legitimacy and identity concerns, electoral-political concerns and domestic contestation. While much of the existing work has concentrated exclusively on the impact of structural factors on collective and official memories, this newer work underscores the interactions between structures and agents who contest, challenge and shape states' narratives.

### Nation-building and identity

Memory politics has traditionally been seen as a prerogative of the nation state. It is thus not surprising that much of the existing literature harks back to the nation and the role of memory and identity. It underscores the importance memory has acquired for different groups to assert their role in society. Most of this recent literature revisits terms used in the context of nation-building (i.e. myth, tradition, heritage, identity, culture) and investigates them through the lens of recent developments in Memory Studies. Ann Rigney (2018) propagates a clearer distinction between the terms 'myth' and 'memory'. While earlier work (e.g. Anthony Smith's collection *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999)) had used both terms interchangeably and considered them as an inseparable pair, Rigney sees them as opposing forces. While myths have the status of representing the unquestioned truth about the collective past that has been acquired over much longer periods of time, memory is the 'reiterated impulse to remember the past from changing perspectives in the present' (Rigney 2018: 242). That makes it a dynamic resource often working against the authority and power of myths. Olick (2016) on the other hand posits that memory is a way to link phenomena like tradition, heritage, identity and culture together in a single analytical framework.

National identity in this context is an important concept explored by a number of scholars (Bell 2006; Coakley 2012; Finney 2011) highlighting how much of the literature on memory and politics focuses on identity construction, reproduction and contestation. The process of using historical arguments in creating national attitudes and self-identity is, for example, showcased in Hungary (Rainer 2020). Similarly, Russia is seen as an instructive case on how to construct a positive historical basis for national identity (Malinova 2018). At the same time, the post-Soviet context is described as particularly problematic due to the subversive nature of mourning practices and the 'multihistoricity' of contemporary Russia where multiple interpretations coexist (Etkind 2013). The state is not always the main actor in this. Patrick Finney (2011), for example, explores how historians used historiography about the origins of World War II to shape and foster national identity. He demonstrates that in the Axis powers historians had managed to craft explanations of pre-war aggression that supported conservative national identities. Whereas in Britain historians and policy-makers reassessed Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy to align with a new sense of British identity. Alison Landsberg (2004) equally contends that the technologies of mass culture enable the sharing of collective memories among people that belong to different races, ethnicities and genders. Cinema and television but also museums allow individuals to assimilate historical events as personal experiences and hold the potential for fostering empathy for the memories of others. Landsberg argues that this new form of public cultural memory, which she calls 'prosthetic memory', awakens

the potential for increased social responsibility and political alliances in American society. In her opinion, these alliances could transcend the essentialism and ethnic particularism so characteristic of contemporary identity politics.

The reference points for identity politics are usually national memories of events that are being manipulated for contemporary political purposes. Nicole Maurantonio (2019), for instance, analyses the memory politics surrounding the American Civil War. By investigating the way neo-Confederates managed to normalize the Confederacy and present themselves as guardians of historical truth and victims of political correctness, she demonstrates the extent to which the 'Lost Cause ideology' and Confederate exceptionalism continue to affect American society. In Central and Eastern Europe, it is Holocaust memory specifically which is often employed by post-communist states to construct contemporary political identities (Subotić 2019). Holocaust memories are co-opted deliberately to highlight other forms of suffering with the aim of rejecting communism and emphasizing a pre-communist, ethnically pure national identity. In doing so, political actors face the challenge of reconciling the Western European norm of Holocaust memory with narratives focused on the suffering under communism. Jelena Subotić (2009) demonstrates how memory actors, such as museums, educational institutions and cultural ministries, have implemented projects that invert and appropriate Holocaust memory to serve nationalistic purposes. She challenges the prevailing academic view that Eastern European countries must completely repudiate their communist past and warns against the simplistic criminalization of communism and the risks of equating it with fascism. Her work, however, also underscores the dangers of memory appropriation and the political manipulation of historical narratives by the state. Ljiljana Radonić (2021) makes a similar argument in her book examining the 'memory wars' following 1989, which saw a period of post-communist rewriting of history. She shows how the Holocaust template and with it the concept of genocide provided by the Western European states can be manipulated to rationalize radical policies and deflect blame for deteriorating domestic conditions. Memory in this context becomes a powerful resource of the state which often finds its official form in the promulgation of memory laws and specific memory policies.

### Memory laws and memory practices

A number of recent books and edited volumes deal with this type of memory politics through lawmaking (Belavusau and Gliszczyńska-Grabias 2017; Belavusau and Gliszczyńska-Grabias 2020; Koposov 2017). Most start from the premise that the concept of memory has been shaped by political influences and that memory legislation can be both beneficial and detrimental depending on how it is being employed. This literature identifies four factors that have contributed to the rise of memory laws: the example set by early Holocaust denial laws, the spread of democracy after World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the introduction of new narratives comparing Nazi and Stalinist crimes, and the international community's recognition of genocide as a legal category (Belavusau and Gliszczyńska-Grabias 2017: 12–14). Building on this, Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias (2020) introduce the term 'mnemonic constitutionalism', describing the legal governance of history and historical policies implemented by states. They contend that memory laws,

which initially appeared within criminal law in Western Europe nearly three decades ago, have become constitutionally significant in many Central and Eastern European countries. They suggest that the manipulation of historical narratives through legal means is integral to maintaining political power and legitimacy. While Belavusau and Gliszczyńska-Grabias (2017) define memory laws in their strictest form, Nikolay Koposov (2017) chooses a wider definition that includes all laws that regulate collective representations of the past – that is, the definition of state symbols, the establishment of museums, the provision of amnesties and benefits. While such legislation can promote a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of history, it can also lead to biased interpretations and ensuing resistance if viewed as political attacks on the independence of historical discourse.

Another very visible form of memory politics within a state is the different memory practices carried out by a variety of actors. Public commemorations and the set-up of memorials play an important role in this regard. They (re)inscribe the understanding of history and chart the space between official and social accounts of the past. While traditional scholarly work has concentrated on the authority of the state in creating commemorative instances, newer research takes a more pluralistic, grassroots approach investigating how popular commemorations can create historical narratives representing a form of creative citizenship and civic identity. It captures commemorations that bring together mass participation of citizens and iconographic resources in the service of public remembrance. The aim of this type of research is to analyse the instances of mediation that take place between ‘private remembrance and stories of nationhood’ (Haskins 2015: 118). The extent to which actors and agency interact when it comes to public remembering is picked up, for instance, by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (2014), who produced one of the most comprehensive overviews of the politics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. They use the analysis of memory politics in the post-communist states that were triggered by the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall to develop a novel theoretical framework to understand the importance of memory on a general level and the classification of mnemonic actors and mnemonic regimes on a more specific one.

### Memory and (far-right) political parties

Among the most visible mnemonic actors within a state are political parties. The way different political groups have sought to encourage views of the past which serve their own ends has been subject to investigation for a while. It is thus surprising that to date only a few scholars have started to engage with the use of memory by far-right actors. With growing anti-immigration sentiments and xenophobia, scholars of populism have begun to zoom in on the negative mobilization possibilities that memory politics can offer. According to those newer studies (Couperus et al. 2022; Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2020; Manucci 2022; Ortiz Cabrero and Sierp 2024), the question of why populism flourishes in some countries while it remains taboo in others can only be understood if the historical context and collective memory is taken into account. Those scholars divert attention from short-term socioeconomic and political factors that contribute to the success of populism and argue that the long-term legacies of authoritarian pasts play a crucial role in determining the social acceptability of



populist discourses. Crises are seen as particularly fertile grounds for the flourishing of right-wing memory discourses. They can serve as narrative devices that intertwine with memory politics, heightening xenophobic and nationalist anxieties, especially in the rhetoric of right-wing Eurosceptic parties.

Helga Hallgrímsdóttir, Ari Finnsson and Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2020) argue that crises lead to a narrowing of the concept of citizenship, pushing nationalist and xenophobic framings to the forefront of political discourse. Luca Manucci (2020) claims in this context that it is essential to consider the long-term impact of authoritarian legacies on national political culture, individual attitudes and electoral behaviour. David Art (2012) posits that it is especially elite-held ideas about the wartime past that play a pivotal role in shaping the complex interplay between memory and the rise of far-right parties determining the varying trajectories across different countries. He suggests that contrition and ongoing critical examination of historical complicity are evolving into pan-European values and are shaping the political landscape across the continent. Both authors underscore the centrality of memory politics in the development and legitimization of far-right parties in Western Europe. Stefan Couperus, Piers Tortola and Lars Rensmann (2022) focus on how the far-right manipulates non-authorized, colloquial and marginalized counter-hegemonic versions of the past, as well as how it challenges and counters mainstream institutionalized historical references and tropes. While these authors primarily focus on political parties, elites and leaders – representing the supply side of politics – they also explore the roles of grassroots activism, popular culture and social media in mobilizing historical memory.

### Non-state memory actors

Political parties and state actors are not the only ones actively engaged in memory politics. Indeed, in the last 10 years more attention has been paid to non-state actors and activists (i.e. civil rights advocates, museum workers) who possess the necessary social capital and communicative resources to influence memory politics. Typically, they have the power to influence discourses by creating and propagating commemorative events and strategies at the small-group level (Conway 2010). These then are often uploaded to the official level and can overturn the conservative nature of embodied memory. This creates a dialectical relationship between the elite's efforts to forge collective memories and the configuration of myths and beliefs shared by society (Malinova 2021). Ekaterina Haskins (2015), for example, investigates how popular commemorations create historical narratives and how public involvement in these commemorations represents a form of creative citizenship. Her pluralistic, grassroots approach contrasts with the traditional emphasis on artefacts and events typically controlled or regulated by the government. It also challenges binary distinctions like 'popularization versus democratization, vernacular versus official and authentic experience versus spectacle' (Haskins 2015: 8). The Conflict and Memory special issue of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* edited by Wagoner and Brescó (2016) falls into the same category and emphasizes the significance of memory in understanding intergroup conflicts. It employs social representations theory to analyse how groups represent their past and define themselves against the backdrop of intractable conflicts. It demonstrates



that memory can be a powerful tool for either igniting past conflicts or fostering reconciliation and peace.

Other scholars do not analyse the ability of actors (state or non-state) to assert identities but, on the contrary, focus on elements that limit the omnipotence of the state in creating those stories of shared memory and nationhood. They examine, for example, physical remnants of genocide that resist incorporation into state-sponsored memorial narratives. The tangible evidence of victims' bones, bodies and personal items undermines statecraft by highlighting the state's failure to protect its citizens (Auchter 2014). By examining material remains and memorials from different parts of the world that avoid acknowledging loss (e.g. Ground Zero in New York, the US–Mexico border or Rwanda), this type of research shows how memorial sites can challenge the state's efforts to define existence and manage memory. It highlights the resistance posed by ghostly remnants that defy state control and establishes the connection between security, mortality and memory that is seen as defining for modernity and postmodernity (Heath-Kelly 2016).

This type of scholarship focuses on the injustices, inconsistencies and ignorance present in local and national memory politics, while also highlighting small acts of repair that promote inclusive public narratives of acknowledgement, regret and reconciliation. It typically uses qualitative interviews, participant observation, oral history, ethnographic and archival research. Many of the books focus on detailed case studies, combining chronological perspectives with a detailed analysis of present-day policies. By zooming in on a specific case, exploring various layers of memory work and their interaction, it argues that it can break down the tendency to oversimplify global or European viewpoints (Dureinović 2019). At the same time, it shows vividly that 'politics of memory is not limited to state agency and actors in power positions, it is a multi-sited struggle for hegemony that does not imply a dichotomy of imposed narratives from above and opposition from below' (Dureinović 2019: 12). This dynamic is particularly evident in countries dealing with rather recent experiences of autocratic regimes. It may not come as a surprise that most case studies are situated in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. Their recent transition to democracy has given way to a whole new field of inquiry, which – among other things – explicitly deals with memory politics.

### Transitional justice and reconciliation

Politics of history and '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*' (coming to terms with the past) after human rights violations are closely related (Barahona de Brito et al. 2001; Buckley-Zistel et al. 2013; David 2020; Elster 2004; Lind 2009, 2008; Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006). Scholars have long recognized that after each transformation from undemocratic autocratic, or dictatorial regimes, there is the need to come to terms with the past and the sanctioning of past behaviour. This is the case both in the aftermath of old regime collapse and after transitions negotiated between new democratic elites and old regimes. Transitional justice is usually defined as a 'set of practices, mechanisms and concerns that arise following a period of conflict, civil strife or repression and that are aimed directly at confronting and dealing with past violations of human rights and humanitarian law' (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006:

2). By analysing truth commissions, trials, amnesties, purges, policies for compensation, restitution and reparation, the impact of memory policies on democratization and accountability measures can be evaluated (Barahona de Brito et al. 2001).

This approach also allows for the investigation of potentially negative side effects. To what extent different transitional justice measures can lead to memory standardization and a sort of 'moral remembrance' is discussed by Lea David (2020). She questions the usefulness of a human rights memorialization agenda by describing it as potentially oppressive and ideology driven. Her analysis shows that human rights as an ideology tends to standardize memorialization practices through established norms. By scrutinizing the concept of moral remembrance, she challenges the idea that societies must address the legacies of mass human rights abuses in a prescribed manner. She criticizes the oversimplification of memorialization into a set of actions to be universally applied without critical reflection. In this context, she identifies three principles central to the memorialization agenda: facing the past, the duty to remember and justice for victims. Other authors (e.g. Nagy 2008) challenge the purported global dimension of transitional justice norms and debate whether a norm that has been conceived in the Western world is applicable beyond its contexts of origin. They draw attention to the fact that those norms purport a particular interpretation of the concepts of justice, truth and reconciliation without taking into account that they might mean different things to different people in different parts of the world.

Given its recent experiences of military dictatorship, most research on transitional justice looks at developments in Latin America. The three edited volumes *Memory, Truth, and Justice in Contemporary Latin America* (Villalón 2017), *The Struggle for Memory in Latin America: Recent History and Political Violence* (Allier-Montañón and Crenzel 2015) and *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay* (Lessa and Druliolle 2011) explore the complexities and contradictions in processes of collective memory and justice-seeking in Latin America. They try to present a nuanced understanding of past violence and collective memory, moving beyond simplistic binaries like victim vs. perpetrator, socialism vs. capitalism or fact vs. falsehood. Tavares Furtado's (2022) book zooms in on Brazil and explores the deep-rooted culture of impunity which, according to him, partly explains the rise of the far right. He argues that while the National Truth Commission made significant progress in addressing and documenting visible acts of violence committed during the military regime, it failed to dismantle the deeper-lying power structures that enable entrenched structural violence and which are rooted in patriarchal, racialized and class-based exclusions. In *Death, Dismemberment, and Memory: Body Politics in Latin America*, Lyman Johnson (2004) delves into the often-overlooked topic of the political symbolism associated with the bodies of martyred heroes in Latin America. The book explores the processes through which these bodies are transformed into political vessels, the rituals of veneration and memorialization, and the ways in which they are imbued with cultural and political meaning. By linking those processes to broader Latin American cultural practices and historical experiences, he illustrates how disputes over dead bodies represent struggles for power and memory – both over the past and in the present.

The interest in studying how societies emerging from periods of civil war or dictatorship deal with the legacies of the past through transitional justice measures took

off in the 1990s. It was influenced by the increasing utilization of international and transnational trials on the one hand and the growing use of investigative truth and reconciliation commissions at the start of the new millennium on the other. The evolving multilayered reality showcases increasingly intricate relationships between local, national and international spheres. Maria Mälksoo's (2019) research demonstrates the extent to which states' politics of truth-and-justice-seeking in turn influences their foreign policy discourses and practice. According to her, the concept of ontological security – meaning the condition underpinning an actor's ability to act in the world with basic confidence about how the world works and his or her own place within it – allows us to understand the causal relationship between transitional justice as a set of international normative expectations on how to deal with the past on the one hand and foreign policy as state behaviour on the other. This lens enables her to develop an analytical framework that investigates the threefold dimension of transitional justice: (1) major transitions and disjunctures as starting points for memory politics; (2) the state's response ensuing from an interpretation of this transition and its grappling with various pressures; and (3) the international resonance.

### Memory and conflict between states

The extent to which memory politics influences bilateral state relations is being explored by scholars like Jennifer Lind (2008). She focuses on one of the most diffused forms of political action between former adversaries in order to achieve international reconciliation, namely public apologies and other acts of contrition. Lind (2009) suggests that the most effective form of remembrance for international reconciliation lies between whitewashing past atrocities and extensive contrition. She concludes that denying past violence hampers reconciliation, fosters distrust and heightens threat perceptions while public acceptance of responsibility for past crimes enables it. Contrition at the same time is not a precondition, on the contrary it can create a domestic backlash. The fact that reconciliation efforts are often undertaken on the local level in addition or parallel to the international one, has changed their significance. Having been viewed in the past as either a cover for impunity (e.g. in the Latin American context) or as an automatic outcome of other processes like truth-telling (as in South Africa), local initiatives have imbued the concept of reconciliation with a richer significance (Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006: 10–12).

While much of this kind of research is still concentrated in Europe, an increasing number of books dealing with developments in other continents is being published in or translated into English, widening the overall research perspective. Asia and specifically East Asia occupies a prominent place in research on memory politics between states. Rather than examining single countries, most books address the intricate relationship between memory issues and reconciliation prospects across the region, offering insights into the domestic and international challenges that shape historical narratives and prospects for peace (Kim 2015; Saito 2017; Shin and Sneider 2016). Due to the growing interconnectivity between countries, authors trace the evolution of increasingly nationalist commemorations leading to mutual antagonism rather than affinity or understanding. The combination of field theory with social movement studies allows for the conceptualization of a political field where political actors, leveraging

various mobilizing structures, advance their political positions and exploit political opportunities in order to influence public remembrance. Gi-Wook Shin and Daniel Sneider (2016), for example, concentrate exclusively on the perspective of opinion leaders, understood as politicians, historians, writers, filmmakers and activists. They cover memories formed around the Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s and the Pacific War, covering events from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to the Allied victory. Zheng Wang (2012) on the other hand zooms in on China, emphasizing the importance of historical memory in understanding China's political transition, its national identity and international behaviour.

### Memory and trauma in international relations

Literature addressing international behaviour and politics bridges over to international relations and security studies. By integrating Memory Studies, authors try to provide a nuanced framework that goes beyond traditional geopolitical and economic considerations. The moment 'trauma' is added to the analysis of war, terrorism and genocide, studies of memory politics also link to other disciplines. Indeed, a large body of literature deals with the intricate connections between trauma, violence and political community (Amilivia 2016; Bell 2006; Edkins 2003; Lerner 2022; Resende and Budryte 2014). It examines how the aftermath of mass violence becomes politically embedded over time and in what way traumatic events are woven into everyday narratives through practices of remembrance, memorialization and witnessing. This literature aims to enhance understandings of how power, social order, personhood and political community are constituted. By investigating the diverse ways in which representations and echoes of traumatic past events impact contemporary political attitudes and identities, this literature lays bare memory's potential for shaping key aspects of world politics.

In this context, Jenny Edkins (2003) argues that some forms of remembering actually serve as a way of forgetting and thus allowing societies to recover from trauma by sidelining lessons from the past and restoring a sense of normalcy. A prominent example of this is Spain (Boyd 2008; Encarnación 2008; Ramon Resina 2000; Solís 2003), exemplifying for a long time a politics of forgetting with its broad amnesty law enacted in 1977 before the so-called 'Law of Historical Memory' was passed in 2007. The tension between public remembrance and forgetting leads to contestation over whether public memorials should bear witness to the horrors of war or rather inscribe a narrative of sacrifice and heroism (as for example in the case of the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, or the US Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC). Trauma in those cases is analysed as part and parcel of the production of sovereign political power of either states or of supranational bodies (e.g. NATO in the case of Kosovo). They are depicted as arenas of intense contestation within (international) politics, serving as crucial 'sensitizing concepts' (Resende and Budryte 2014: 8) that enhance comprehension of political transformation. By being forcefully interpreted and promoted by political actors, collective trauma can evolve into a potent national or state identity capable of restructuring the dynamics and direction of international affairs. In this sense, trauma is viewed as an 'ontological condition of international life' (Lerner 2022: 12) that can shape the enduring understanding of the self and the other. Katrin Bachleitner's (2021) *Collective Memory in International Relations* very

specifically explores the profound impact that collective memory has on the conduct of international relations. It delves into the question of how shared historical experiences and collective remembrance of them shape the policies, identities and interactions of states on the global level. She argues that collective memory influences everything from diplomatic negotiations to conflict resolution and alliance formation. It creates enduring legacies that guide national strategies and foreign policies.

A very specific type of memory relationship that has wide-reaching consequences for contemporary foreign policymaking is the one between former colonial powers and their colonies. Research into this field is still rather scarce. One of the big exceptions is the book *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa* by Cassandra Mark-Thiesen et al. (2022). It contributes to the growing literature on the legacy of colonialism, taking the viewpoint of the colonized in examining how monuments, tributes and cultural objects evoke colonial history in Africa. It investigates the mediation between past and present and discusses the impact of collective memory on historical writing and social and political realities.

The memory of colonization and its consequences is also the focus of Michael Rothberg's influential book *Multidirectional Memory* (2009). It addresses the question of what happens when different histories and memories confront each other in the public sphere. Rothberg suggests considering memory as 'multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (2009: 3). He explores the dynamics of individual and collective memory, examining both the agents and locations of memory and their interactions within historical and political struggles. He concludes that the memory of the Nazi genocide and decolonization struggles have served as a catalyst for memory competition that consistently transcended the boundaries of the nation state. Aline Sierp (2020) similarly adopts a transnational focus when analysing the lack of memory initiatives on the European Union level. She demonstrates that the EU efforts for transnational historical remembrance, which have focused almost exclusively on the Holocaust and National Socialism as well as Stalinism, have at the same time obscured memories of imperialism and colonialism. The memory of colonial legacies is a rather new field in this context. Not many authors look at memory in a decolonial context. Kalypso Nicolaïdis and Berny Sèbe (2014) are an exception in examining Europe's colonial past and its ongoing impact on contemporary politics, social realities and identities. They explore whether the legacy of colonialism is resurfacing in modern times, influencing current bilateral and multilateral relations.

The extent to which profound transformations due to violence, lost cultural diversity and ethnic cleansing can shape national outlooks and transnational processes in turn can also be seen in Central and Eastern Europe. The region is often seen as a unique case due to its specific historical experiences shaped by expulsions, mass murder and the Holocaust that had a lasting impact on its international behaviour (see e.g. Pakier and Wawrzyniak 2016). Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (2016) argues that memory politics especially in Poland and the Baltic states are often embedded in key strategies to challenge their historically marginal status and sense of 'liminal Europeanness' (Mäklsoo 2009). Subotić (2009) similarly proposes the idea that post-communist states used Holocaust memory strategically to address their contemporary insecurities about identity, status

and relationships with Western Europe. While seeking validation as fully European member states, they continue to struggle with the legacy of communism.

That local and national memory conflicts can sometimes unwillingly acquire a European dimension is demonstrated by Ana Milosevic and Tamara Trošt (2020), who explore how European integration has influenced collective memory in the countries of the Western Balkans. Their volume demonstrates that memory conflicts during accession negotiations can become tools to either support or oppose Europeanization. The extent to which this dynamic turned into an important element during and after enlargement negotiations and markedly influenced EU memory politics until today is shown by Sierp (2017). Her work reveals the extent to which the sought-after equation of Stalinist and Nazi crimes shook up the established Western memory narrative based exclusively on the Holocaust and required a reconfiguration of the overall European memory framework.

### European and transnational memory

If studies of the Europeanization and the transnationalization of memory are considered to belong to the so-called 'third wave' of Memory Studies, the closer scrutiny of the dynamics between the local and the transnational is also reflected in scholarship on memory politics. Sierp (2014), for example, investigates the European integration process from the standpoint of memory. By analysing national memory constructs on the one hand and different memory initiatives by the European Union on the other, she demonstrates how national and European memory politics are intertwined and she challenges the widespread idea that memory politics is a prerogative of the nation state. She concludes that the reorganization of nationally bounded memories on a higher level allows for the emergence of a transnational, European framework.

Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (2012) uses a similar starting point when investigating the emergence of new memory frames at the European level. Her central thesis is that the changes in the EU's remembrance discourse are dependent on fluctuations of political actors and the resonance of their arguments with existing memory cultures at both the national and the supranational level. Her study utilizes insights from agenda-setting and framing literature to examine how new memory frames develop and gain traction within the EU. Her research highlights the influence of the accession of the Central and Eastern European states, which is also the focus of Laure Neumayer's (2019) book on the *Criminalisation of Communism in the European Political Space after the Cold War*. Neumayer provides a comprehensive analysis of the contested historical legacies that framed political competition and public policies on the transnational level. She investigates the motivations and strategies of anti-communist memory entrepreneurs in the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and examines the extension of anti-communist activism beyond those assemblies. Peter Verovšek (2020) goes one step further and investigates the consequences of the ensuing European memory conflicts. He argues that as World War II memories fade – and as the experience with Stalinism in newer member states challenges the narrative of the Holocaust as its foundational rock – the European Union must reconstruct a shared historical imaginary if it wants to survive into the future.



A number of books, articles and special issues deal with the empirical processes that underscore the transnationalization of remembrance in Europe and globally (Bond and Rapson 2014; De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Levy and Sznajder 2006; Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015). One of the most influential books on the globalization of memory politics is Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder's *The Holocaust in the Global Age* (2006). By studying how the representation of the Holocaust has become central to political and cultural symbolism, the authors are trying to address the question of whether the integration of global concerns into everyday local experiences creates new 'memoryscapes' and fosters solidarities and mutual responsibilities that transcend national boundaries. Indeed, the Holocaust in particular is discussed in several publications as an example of how the concept of genocide can be manipulated globally for political ends. Dirk Moses (2021) is in this context one of the prominent voices in genocide research. His 2021 book *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* addresses issues surrounding the concept of genocide and its implications for modern understandings of mass civilian destruction. Moses' core thesis is that labelling genocide as the 'crime of crimes' creates a problematic hierarchy that distorts the understanding of civilian deaths and blinds us to the impact of other forms of state aggression and mass violence.

Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (2014) also advocate a shift in research away from methodological nationalism towards more polyphonic and multilayered constellations of memory. They question the historical connection between nation and memory, demonstrating that factors such as globalized communication, time-space compression, post-colonialism, transnational capitalism, large-scale migration and regional integration have created transcultural entanglements that challenge the dominance of national frameworks. The formation of memory cultures that transcend national borders is also dealt with by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson in their (2014) book *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders*. Like De Cesari and Rigney, they investigate the circulation and articulation of intersecting and conflicting representations of the past. They argue that memories are inherently dialogic, travelling within and between groups, operating across various media and contexts. The forces behind the transnationalization of memory are also the focus of Aline Sierp and Jenny Wüstenberg's (2020) book on *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*. It zooms in on the agents and their agency that, under the influence of globalization and technological change, shape transnational memory politics, both reproducing and transforming the structures that enable and confine them.

### Gaps in the literature and conclusions

When surveying the field, it is striking that there is no extensive literature on methodological questions. While this is true for Memory Studies generally speaking, the lack of articles tackling methodology is noteworthy. One exception is Olick's *The Politics of Regret* (2007), which includes a chapter developing explicitly broader methodological ambitions. It seeks to concretize the methodological implications of different perspectives (i.e. the Bakhtinian, Eliasian and Bourdieuan) for political culture analysis (Olick 2007: 85–118). Missing so far is also a dedicated textbook on memory politics that is explicitly written for a student audience. While there is no doubt that the field will



continue to grow, these are two important gaps that merit further attention in the future.

The survey of the literature on the politics of memory demonstrates clearly how the increasing politicization and securitization of memory underpins new strategies for political conflict with different groups using collective memory to assert identities. This process can be observed on all levels, from the local to the domestic to the transnational, involving a huge variety of different actors – state and non-state – across the globe. With its specific focus on the agents, their means and the effect of their actions, literature on the politics of memory proves to be important for the study of political conflict within and between states. It adds an additional dimension to existing investigations dealing with the acquisition, consolidation and expansion of power. The issues dealt with vary slightly between the national and the supranational level even if the underlying dynamics of identity-confirming and identity-challenging actions remain the same. On the local and national level, elements of amnesty, integration and demarcation play an important role. They influence the negotiation and clarification of normative orientations within society but also create cultural hegemony based on historical narratives. Since the reference points for identity politics are usually national memories of events that are being manipulated for contemporary political purposes, memory politics actively contributes to nation-building.

The literature shows how manifold the tools are that states have at their disposal to foster a specific vision of the past. They range from lawmaking to the establishment of museums, the provision of amnesties and the promulgation of memory policies dealing with remembrance. All these mechanisms are integral to maintaining political power and legitimacy and chart the space between official and social accounts of the past. This is the reason why the investigation of the mobilization possibilities that memory politics offers allows a better understanding of contemporary phenomena like the rise of the far right. In addition to short-term socioeconomic and political factors, it is the long-term legacies of authoritarian pasts that can play a crucial role in determining the social acceptability of specific political discourses and associated political behaviour.

The literature also demonstrates that the politics of memory is not limited to state agency and actors in power positions. It is a multi-sited struggle for hegemony. While domestic factors and the interaction between structures and agents shape the content of those narratives, international pressures determine how, when and by whom they are manipulated. That in turn influences states' foreign policy choices. This mechanism becomes particularly evident in states that have recently transitioned from undemocratic, autocratic or dictatorial regimes to democracy. Investigating a nation's attempt to come to terms with its – often traumatic – past can thus not only give indications about its national outlooks and state of democracy but also allows us to understand the causal relationship between transitional justice as a set of international norm expectations on the one hand and foreign policy as state behaviour on the other.

With memory being inherently dialogic, travelling within and between groups and operating across various media and contexts, the present literature reveals the extent to which it has become a formidable political tool in the hands of state and non-state

actors. Under the influence of globalization and technological change, the rise of populism, autocracy and human rights issues, memory will continue to influence local, national and transnational politics in the decades to come.

## Note

I concentrated on monographs and edited volumes published since the year 2000 and only occasionally included influential journal articles. The selection is inherently biased because I only reviewed English-language publications or work that had been translated into English to make it accessible to a broad readership. As a result, we might miss critical perspectives, case studies and examples coming from other geographical areas by scholars whose work has not been published in English (yet).

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