

Postmodernism and European Memory

Ewa Thompson

“Events do not happen; events are produced. An occurrence becomes an event only when certain groups in society pay attention to it, consider it important, speak and write about it, react to it, and remember it. Thus events are socially constructed. This does not mean, however, that they are pure constructs. At their starting point, they have acts and occurrences that are very real indeed.”¹

This postmodern statement was made by the German Historical Institute’s Research Fellow, Carola Dietze, in November 2006 at a conference/workshop partly dedicated to European memory and sponsored by the Institute in Washington, DC. It was not incongruent with the views of other participants on historical subjects and memory. The key participants included Aleida Assmann, Professor of English at the University of Konstanz and acclaimed author of numerous books on memory, and Peter Novick, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Chicago and author of *The Holocaust in American Life*.² I submit that this statement represents a widely accepted postmodern view of the study of history in Germany and the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It promotes the view that might makes right and suggests that certain communities and groups of people produce only “occurrences” not worth remembering, occurrences that may

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be mentioned wholesale but then quickly dismissed. Not only did this conference fail to move the European discussion on memory forward, it made accord among the EU nations more difficult by adopting and proclaiming the faulty postmodern ways of approaching history.

At first glance, Dietze’s thesis may seem defensible. History consists of events and not of occurrences; it consists of things deemed important and selected for their importance. However, a foundational assumption of this kind is a different matter. First, on the ontological level, it is predicated on an a priori certainty that select human beings are the sole creators of history—that facts do not matter unless given importance by the intellectually powerful individuals who decide which facts are important and which are not. This view is not uncommon among Western historians today. In contrast, most earlier historians, even when they wrote from a secular point-of-view and declared themselves historicists, carried in their methodology

traces of the belief that there exists some kind of ordering grid, whether epistemological or value-oriented, that transcends individual historians and their time. They might have done so unconsciously, as they were influenced by the customs and habits of Western tradition, or they might have done so consciously. The entire corpus of Holocaust studies is predicated on the quasi-transcendent idea that certain things are unacceptable, regardless of whether they have undergone “social construction.” Without an appeal to moral indignation, Holocaust studies would lose their resonance. Similarly, without the grounding in traditional moral valuation and/or in customary ways of assessing historical facts, historical books would become obsolete as soon as new contingencies appeared.

Second, Dietze’s statement cancels out the assumption, long taken for granted, that historical narratives are always incomplete and tentative. “Incompleteness” ceases to be a meaningful term, as there are no yardsticks measuring “correctness” or “incorrectness” of a “socially constructed event.” Indeed, the word “correctness” appears absurd in this context. Select human beings are accepted as legitimate creators of the narrative of history because they succeeded in constructing an event by speaking of it often and authoritatively. Their efforts and abilities ultimately determine what the rest of us remember—and we are supposed to find nothing wrong with such a state of affairs.

The difference between the postmodern view and the “traditional” view may appear slight, but it is critical. Dietze’s postulate, while ostensibly acceptable, is destructive of Western culture, which is predicated on the possibility of disputation about the relative importance of events regardless of how much attention or publicity they have so far received from historians or the public. Dietze’s statement does not leave room

for correction, except when correction is based on force, and implies that greater power is inherently the ground for historical, and therefore moral, authority.

The keynote speaker of the GHI conference, Aleida Assmann, tried to define the parameters of European memory. This was not the first European attempt to do so. After the bloodletting of the Second World War, European intellectuals repeatedly tried to create a discourse that would process and preserve national memories in such a way as to invalidate their ability to inflame the masses. European countries have overwhelmingly declared that the places of former conflicts are the sacred *lieux de mémoire* worthy of respect by all. The idea was to preserve memories without inciting resentment and the desire to get even, so that cultural memory would become a common property of nations participating in a memory community—and Western Europe was ripe to form such a memory community. To a large degree, this readiness to develop a common memory was helped by the perception of a common danger from the East (and the concomitant erroneous implication that non-Germanic Central Europe was part of the East and a friend of the East). Western European countries succeeded in the enterprise of reconciling their memories or at least papering over their differences. French theorist Pierre Nora has noted that the *lieux de mémoire* became a common element of social and political life in Europe; they have become places that unite rather than divide the Western European nations.³ Jay Winters, the author of one of the best English-language books on European memory, gave a sympathetic account of these *lieux de mémoire* in a way that inspired communal melancholy and strengthened, rather than weakened, European unity.⁴

Thus the recent studies in memory have differed from nineteenth-century attempts

to promote national chauvinism through memory, both by means of books and by other symbolic representations of the past. It has been shown that throughout that century commemorative rituals were embraced and promoted by the European empires eager to confirm and consolidate their imperial status, while nineteenth-century historians created the visions of Europe advantageous to their particular nations. Many of the memory rituals, often treated as if they were a legacy of centuries, were produced by the imperial imagination rather than being a work of many generations: parades, monuments, and museums were founded and paid for by the European monarchs in order to strengthen their legitimacy and the citizens' loyalty to the imperial state.⁵ In contrast, the *lieux de mémoire* as described by Pierre Nora or the battlefields of the First World War as described by Jay Winters are attempts to set aside European pugnaciousness and replace it with the spirit of cooperation. The GHI conference was ostensibly conceived in that spirit. But unlike Nora or Winters, who merely ignored the eastern half of Europe, the keynote speaker's tone was bent on instructing the unfamiliar "Eastern European Other" (I have in mind nations of the European Union located east of Germany) on how to construct a common memory in countries whose national memories were a source of conflict in the past. She proposed an acceptance of certain rules that in her view would facilitate the desired outcome. Her approach differed radically from the piecemeal approach of Jay Winters or Pierre Nora or from the traditional historians' approach to history that strives for objectivity, confrontation with available evidence, checking and rechecking of sources and facts, and the arrangement of facts according to their significance.

The key part of Assmann's proposal had to do with the methodology of cre-

ating the proposed common memory. She quoted approvingly the standard for a "European identity for Germany" formulated, she said, by a German-Syrian student of Max Horkheimer, Bassam Tibi. His first postulate, and presumably hers as well, was to reject whatever transcendent truths some European historians might consider foundational to their researches and instead to embrace "reason" as the central concept. What kind of reason? From Assmann's presentation it was clear that she and Tibi (and Novick as well) had in mind the Enlightenment understanding of "reason," rather than the Aristotelian or Christian one. Assmann thus excluded from the company that should determine what Europeans should remember all those who do not subscribe to the kind of subjectivism the Enlightenment generated. She then stated that church and politics must be separate, while pluralism and tolerance should reign. The possibility that the first part of this statement is a tautology and that both parts taken together are a contradiction apparently did not occur to her. Assmann further proposed to give priority to memories rather than arguments about memories, stop the "competition of martyrologies," respect each group's memory, and introduce contextual frames for the memory of individuals and groups. She submitted these guidelines while demonstrating, over and over again, ignorance of the martyrologies of Germany's eastern neighbors; this, however, did not prevent her from summarizing them in one word—"Jedwabne." Finally, she proclaimed her agreement with Tibi concerning the primacy of the rights of the individual over communal rights.

While Tibi apparently formulated these postulates for Germany only, perhaps owing to the peculiarities of twentieth-century German politics, Assmann implicitly proposed that they be given validity for the

entire European Union. She did so without any input of scholars from other EU countries, especially those that so far have had little opportunity to engage in dialogue with their German colleagues or present their possible objections to Assmann's and Tibi's way of defining European identity. In other words, when Assmann moved onto the territory of the Others' history and how one should look at it, her elegant and apparently seamless theory rode roughshod over areas of which she demonstrated little knowledge but about which she was ready to theorize.

After exporting Bassan Tibi's German product into countries unfamiliar to her, Assmann quoted a British expatriate in America, Tony Judt, as an authority on Eastern and Western Europe. In her opinion, one of Judt's essays "showed" that after the Second World War, Eastern European memories froze "in such a way as to support the political status quo." Judt's (and Assmann's) disregard for the realities of Soviet occupation of Central and Eastern Europe allowed both of them to speak nonsense. The risings in some countries against the Soviet power, the well-camouflaged but now known Soviet efforts to suppress the culprits by minimizing the development of infrastructure and educational system in their countries should have alerted both scholars to the incorrectness of such "Orientalist" bagging of apples and oranges together—they did not. Assmann went on to say that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe illegitimately assumed the role of blameless victims and/or resisters to German onslaught, while in fact they are not entitled to such a unitary pose. The illegitimate assumption of the victim's pose involved "screening memories" and "forgetting" about collaboration with the Germans, generally directed against the universal Jewish victims. Assmann then opined that while these "defensive strate-

gies" began to crumble in Western Europe in the 1980s, no such crumbling occurred in Eastern Europe. The incommensurability of her comparison (Eastern Europe was occupied by the Soviet Communists between 1944–89 and between 1939–41, that is, during the first two years of the Second World War—with momentous consequences) apparently did not cross her mind. But even with regard to Western Europe, Assmann displayed an amazing lack of discernment. From the Vichy government collaboration to Switzerland's protection of its "banks and borders," she concluded that Western European countries, if not as guilty as Germany, were at least heir to many "conflicting and shameful memories." With a facility unworthy of a great scholar, Assmann looked for parallels where there are none, and then opined that the story of Jedwabne in Poland caused a reaction of denial because the Polish attitude of victimhood was so deeply and wrongly entrenched. "Psychoanalysts," Assmann averred, "speak of 'screen memories' that suppress other memories and serve to protect a positive self-image. To put it another way, one remembers something in order to be better able to forget something else. When applied to the realm of national memory, this means that one recalls one's own suffering in order to avoid being reminded of one's own guilt. Myths arise when partial memories supported by experience are claimed as the homogeneous and exclusive memory for the national collective, while memories deemed inappropriate are excluded from the national discourse and expunged from the collective self-image."⁶ She further advised that Poland's self-perception as victim could lead to self-immunization against guilt and responsibility.⁷

The epistemological principles espoused by Assmann do not allow her to make elementary distinctions concerning the scale

of responsibility or the indecency of advising a nation ravaged by Nazis and Soviets on how it should handle its indescribable losses. Furthermore, she appears unable to see the qualitative difference between France's creation of a contemptible Vichy government in conditions of foreign occupation, and the implications of the unprovoked attack on France by Nazi Germany. She is further unable to understand the incomparably more brutal treatment of Poles than the French under Nazi occupation, the differences in scale between the resistance in both countries, and numerous other circumstances (virtually ignored by Western and Soviet historians) that the two long years of Nazi-Soviet friendship (1939–41) created. In her recent novel Anne Rice captured well the wave of consequences that evil deeds entail, depending on their weight and circumstances:

I saw the deeds...the smallest, most trivial things...I saw them growing, intertwining with other deeds, and those deeds come to form a thicket and a woodland and a great roving wilderness that dwarfed the world as we hold it on a map, the world as we hold it in our minds...and James' face when I said it, *I am weary of you, my brother*, and from that instant outwards a million echoes of those words in all present who heard or thought they heard, who would remember, repeat, confess, defend... and so it goes for the lifting of a finger, the launching of the ship, the fall of an army in a northern forest, the burning of a city as flames rage through house after house!⁸

Rice's poetic text could find its parallel in a scholarly text, if the scholar did not adhere to the mechanistic logic of the Enlightenment. For a scholar who knows

the facts, even if they have not congealed into "events," the consequences of German deeds throughout Europe were incomparably more malignant than the consequences of French or Swiss inaction, itself being caused by German misdeeds to begin with. Any theorizing of the relative weight of consequences has to be done by scholars well-acquainted with each damaged (France) or mortally wounded (Poland) country. But Assmann is unable to make the distinctions necessary to assess the consequences of German deeds.

The Enlightenment reason Assmann invokes at the beginning of her presentation offers little in the way of methodological tools to deal justly with the problems described above. Therefore, her attempts to forge a common approach to memory among countries whose burdens are incommensurate is doomed to failure. To find one's way around deeds, the consequences of deeds, and the relative weight of deeds, one has to bring to bear concepts grounded in a morality based on something other than Enlightenment logic. Surely comparing a country like Switzerland, with its admittedly clannish policy of assuring its own citizens' comfort before opening its borders in a rescue mission, with the German onslaught not only on Jews but also on Catholics, who were the primary target of the Nazi murder campaign in 1939–41 (Auschwitz was originally built to exterminate the Polish educated classes), demonstrates an inability to assess the comparative moral significance of historical events while at the same time calling for an adoption of universal criteria that would ensure the primacy of ethical principles in inter-European relations. Assmann wishes to prevent "competition" among victims and "comparisons" between stages of victimhood without having studied these stages and without having acquired the knowledge necessary finally

to put an end to such comparisons and such competition. She appears unaware of the fact that, while Germany has fully shouldered the consequences of its behavior toward Jews (and part of this shouldering has been to educate every German about what happened in German-Jewish relations during the war), no such awareness exists in Germany of what Germans did to Catholics in the east—or what the Soviets did, for that matter. It is clear from Assmann's essay and her endnotes that she has read no books detailing Nazi and Soviet pronouncements and their implementation regarding the Catholic East. She knows of Jedwabne but does not know of Koniuchy or Naliboki; nor has she heard of Bykownia, Zamo , Rajsk, Michniów, Skłoby, Kulno, Cyców, Olszanka, Borów, Łazek, Józefów, Sumin, Jamy, Milejów, Kaszyce, Sochy, Lipnia, Mrozy, Krusze—each of them with a story no less poignant and in which Catholics were the victims. Her references do not even contain such elementary books as Richard Lucas's *The Forgotten Holocaust*. She seems totally unaware of the issue of "pollution of the soil" that Germans accomplished on Polish, Czech, and Ukrainian territory by placing Auschwitz, Theresienstadt, Babiy Yar, and other death camps and killing fields there. While death camps were built on German soil as well, to mention only Buchenwald and Dachau, the majority were built on occupied territory so that "Others" would have to deal with the humiliation of having such memories imposed on them. It is not a question of "competition of victims"; it is the question of German ignorance of what Nazis did to Eastern European Catholics and the lack of willingness to remedy that ignorance. Such issues should be discussed by German scholars before they offer Eastern and Central European colleagues instruction about how to move "from trauma to understanding," how to "separate memory

from argument," how to stop "competition among victims," and how to "share memories" rather than exclusively embrace the memories of one's own community.

The consequences of fifty years of Soviet totalitarianism (a direct result of the Nazi onslaught) for Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, western Ukraine, and Belarus, the loss of several generations of people in this way, do not affect Assmann's facile call to abandon comparisons and freeze memories at their present stage. By invoking the tainted memories of the French and the Swiss in the context of German crimes, Assmann tries to suggest that today those Western European countries that behaved shamefully in the Second World War should stand alongside Germany as examples not to be emulated, and she invites the countries east of Germany to confess and acknowledge their co-participation in Nazi crimes. Historically, psychologically, and morally, this is an absurd demand.

Assmann's paper, and indeed the entire conference, were free of the input of scholars elaborating on the memories and ways of dealing with them in Eastern and Central Europe. Assmann opined on the status of "commemorative consciousness" in countries whose histories she had not studied. Furthermore, she took it for granted that in constructing the European memory all metaphysical considerations should be put aside; the audacity of making such proclamations regarding countries like Poland or Lithuania, where a crushing majority are religious believers, is mind-boggling. This, I submit, is a frequent occurrence in German intellectual life. The boldness of German theorizing about the world and reality is well known, and it has often been accepted and followed by scholarly communities in First World countries. However, when this audacity is applied to peoples on whose soil the Germans built the death camps and who remained prac-

ticing Christian believers, it becomes unacceptable.

It amazes me that a scholar like Assmann, highly sensitive to the details of the suffering of Jews and knowledgeable about the ways Jewish memories are contextualized, felt free to theorize about nations unfamiliar to her. The only possible explanation is that the fifty years of silence imposed by Soviet terror on non-Germanic Central and Eastern Europe has made German scholars feel that nations east of Germany have nothing to say about the Second World War, that everything has been said already by Holocaust scholars and German scholars.

Assmann quotes with approval Peter Esterhazy's opinion on the "untruth of the exclusive perpetrator...[and] the untruth of the exclusive victim of World War II." Not once does she mention the crucial yet forgotten two years of the Second World War from September 1939 to the German attack on Soviet Russia on June 24, 1941. She apparently does not know who fought against whom at that time, and why, and what were the consequences. She does quote Christian Meier's comment about "atrocities" Germany perpetrated against "Poland and Russia." But can one really dismiss the consequences of German actions in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania with just this curt word, "atrocities," and then lecture those countries on how they should deal with their knowledge and their memories? At the GHI conference there were no scholars representing Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Belorussian, Ukrainian or Russian territories—no Andrzej Paczkowski, Janusz Kurtyka, Jan Kieniewicz, Andrzej Nowak, Henryk Wisner, Antoni Dudek, Jan Żaryn, Mariusz Muszynski, Piotr Gontarczyk, Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, or Sebastian Bojowski. Indeed, the entire conference seems to have been structured in such a way as to deny the

Eastern European Catholics a voice. The German cultural habits place Germany at the "center" of civilization and intellectual articulation, thus seeing German scholars as those destined to articulate single-handedly the "periphery" (Central/Eastern Europe). This "other Europe" is deemed to be a place of colonization, instruction, experimentation, and German-initiated development—but never a place that has its own narrative to offer, a place where Western civilization developed in a unique way, somewhat different from Western Europe while remaining indubitably Western and Latin-based. In a recent article historian Jan Kieniewicz argued that the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic developed their own civilizational model based on the same principles as those adopted in Western Europe but utilized them differently because of the different geographical and political circumstances.⁹ I have yet to find a German scholar who would take such propositions seriously. In German historiography, countries east of Germany do not exist as separate and distinctive cultural entities. They are all subsumed under a vague image of a territory that needs tutelage and articulation from the outside, a waystation on the road to Russia with which Germans display a continuing fascination.

Assmann's presentation perpetuated these colonialist habits of mind. She offered a model of memory that she claimed was universal but was based solely on the experiences of Western Europe and Germany. I submit that, without taking the voices and the point-of-view of "new Europe" into account, the project of developing a common European memory cannot be launched.

The speakers at the conference were selected by the German Historical Institute. In this context, the gesture made toward the "inarticulate masses" in the East is sig-

nificant. Instead of inviting the Polish, Latvian, Estonian, Ukrainian, or Lithuanian scholars specializing in the history of the Second World War and the issues of memory, the GHI invited the Polish ambassador to the United States, Janusz Reiter. It is not difficult to conclude that the presence of Ambassador Reiter was meant to create an impression that all sides had been given their due and that theorizing could now proceed in an aura of full agreement.

Contingency was assumed to be total and all-encompassing, the only possible guideposts being the functions of power (“whether an occurrence has been much spoken about”). Peter Novick spoke contemptuously of the vision of “organic development” of society that was the core of John Henry Newman’s and T. S. Eliot’s thinking (not to mention the millions of less-articulate people who continue to see society as “organically developing”). But according to Novick, this way of thinking has been discredited and should not be invoked by a scholar aspiring to world-class status.¹⁰ In other words, Novick proclaimed that those whose worldview is founded on such essentialist concepts lack scholarly respectability. Thus, for instance, Catholic scholars, including the last two popes, must be denied scholarly status simply because they recognize the realities that give rise to the metaphor of “organic development.” Denying them the status of world-class scholars is dogmatism *à rebours*, inconsistent with open enquiry and a welcoming attitude toward a range of epistemological approaches that scholarship in an open society supposedly entails.

It is also worth noting that the postulate of the rights of the individual trumping the rights of the community came from a member of the strongest of all European communities—namely, the German nation. It seems rather unlikely that its rights as a community would be trampled under

any foreseeable circumstances. Their communal rights have recently been asserted through the government-sponsored building in Berlin of a “Center against Expulsions” that commemorates the expulsion of Germans from territories awarded by the four Great Powers to Czechoslovakia and Poland after the Second World War. The Center was built in spite of a strong opposition of Czechs and Poles. The Center ignores or barely mentions the other expulsions—those initiated by Soviet Russia and resulting in a relocation to formerly German territories of over one million non-Russians previously living in Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Those who protested against the Center saw an element of the grotesque in honoring German suffering associated with Hitler’s war, before the suffering of the non-German Catholic victims—whose numbers ran in the millions—is properly acknowledged in German history books.¹¹ While Assmann declared her disagreement with some of the aggressive doings of the German expellees’ organizations, she could not have been unaware that protests such as hers, expressed at a learned conference on American territory, played no role whatsoever in the policies of the German state.

Can a common memory develop in Europe? I believe it can. In the twenty-first century Europe is united politically and, to some extent, also economically and ideologically. However, there exists an imbalance between mutual knowledge and recognition between the countries of “old Europe” and those of “new Europe.” A rectification of that situation can be accomplished if German scholars in particular acquaint themselves with the history and memories of their Eastern neighbors. So far, they have refused to do so.

There is a relation between a nation’s perceived political security and its ability to convert its memories into the kind of

memory Jay Winters describes in his book or the kind of memory the participants in the GHI conference assumed could instantly become a part of everyone's self-perception. When a nation reaches the state of stability and is respectfully recognized by the neighboring nations as a creator and carrier of its own history (and a contributor to the ways its neighbors see history), it can reminisce about the past with its erstwhile adversaries without bitterness about past grievances and losses. Reaching that stage requires that its history and self-perception be in some measure internalized by the neighboring nations, and especially by the nations that once brutalized it. If a nation has not reached this stage of security and stability, attempts to lecture it about the culturally superior ways of its neighbors amount to intellectual violence and cultural imperialism.

To give the German Historical Institute its due, another German scholar appearing at the conference, Gesine Schwan, came forward with similar postulates:

Surveys show that Poles have not only more respect, but more sympathy for Germans than the other way around. German attitudes are very slowly improving. But it remains remarkable that Poles—who were victims of German policy not only under the National Socialists but also earlier—are more at ease and more sympathetic toward Germans than the other way around. In a way, this is psychologically understandable because those who have done something bad often have an unconscious tendency to think that the victims must also have had their part in it. This psychological mechanism is at the basis of the “anti-Semitism of resentment.” Because we don't want to acknowledge our

role as perpetrators, we say in order to ease our feelings: “There must have been something about the victims themselves.” And this is the case to a certain degree with Poland too, I would say, especially in the last few years. Public discussions of the Nazi past and World War II in Germany were first about Jews and then expellees, but not that much about what was done to Poland. I think this is a deficit that has to be overcome in order to teach contemporary Germany what really happened in Poland.¹²

Schwan's remarks, however, fell on deaf ears.

In his Nobel Lecture, Czeslaw Miłosz spoke about “the other Europe.”¹³ He did not have in mind Russia, which has famously assigned to herself a measure of separateness from Europe, but rather the countries west of Russia whose culture is rooted in Western Christianity and Greco-Roman models, but which lost their political independence at various points in history and regained it only as a result of the First World War.¹⁴ Battles, monuments, museums, and *lieux de mémoire* associated with the Great War are scattered across those countries, but the names of these places, cities, localities, and individuals connected with them do not exist in the memory of Western Europeans, or in the common memory discussed at the GHI conference, except for the sites associated with the Holocaust. Countries situated east of Germany, the largest and most significant of them being Poland, remained partitioned among empires throughout the nineteenth century, and as a result, their earlier history was erased from European consciousness. Yet these countries played a significant role in ages past, and even now, after all the disasters, have strong and dis-

tinct identities. Poland has nearly 40 million citizens of whom 97 percent consider themselves Polish (in Germany, 91.5 percent of citizens consider themselves German¹⁵). Who outside Poland remembers today that Pawel Włodkovic (1370–1435) presented at the 1412 Council of Konstanz a treatise, *De potestate papae et imperatoris*, in which he formulated the foundations of international law and proclaimed that “the pagans also have the right to live in peace?” Or that Prague and Kraków had functioning universities before Vienna and Heidelberg did? Owing to this kind of amnesia, in the twenty-first century, after joining the European Union, the countries east of Germany have been called “new Europe”—as if their Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque periods never existed, as if Europe began with the Enlightenment.

Why are these issues relevant to American intellectual life and American conservatism in particular? Because, to begin with, there are more conservatives today in new Europe than in old Europe, and it is with them that American conservatives should start a dialogue. There are more Christian believers in “the other Europe” than in Western Europe. In spite of the inroads postmodernism has made into the Central and Eastern European universities and education, humanistic scholarship in those countries is logocentric to a considerable degree and therefore much more in tune with conservative thought in the United States than with humanistic scholarship in “old Europe.” This is particularly true of Poland, where Aristotelian thinking (that is, the kind of thinking that starts with acknowledging reality outside the human mind, rather than starting with the human mind as Descartes and the Enlightenment wanted) is accepted much more widely than in Germany or at American universities.

It is therefore important to understand the implications of the approach to mem-

ory advanced at the GHI conference. That approach calls on “the other Europe” to abandon its logocentric orientation and restructure its value system according to postmodern principles. Assmann’s “constructivist” approach is “the very opposite of essentialism,” to use her own words. She claims that we always select from the past what is most advantageous for us. In other words, we always treat the past instrumentally, keeping in mind our own interests rather than the principle of objectivity. Yet there is a huge difference between admitting that we may never be perfectly objective and reducing our memory to self-interest only. Assmann asserts, after Halbwachs, that collective memory is a construction of memory “according to the needs of the present. As the present is in no way stable, reconstructing the past is a varying and open-ended project.”¹⁶ I daresay this makes a mockery of the concept of memory held by American conservatives. Yes, our imagining of the past is always in the process of construction. However, Assmann’s constructivism lacks the warning mechanisms telling us that some essential part of the past has not been taken into account; indeed, it voids the distinction between “essential” and “minor,” reducing our remembering processes to what seems to serve the present. Assmann’s statement is a sophisticated and nuanced version of the Marxist assumption that our material status determines our consciousness.

Assmann can only offer us a short-lived substitute for European memory, one based on Carola Dietze’s “events” construed by prominent people, prestigious universities, and well-known publishing houses. Nations that have managed to tell their story to the world will remain satisfied with such an arrangement, but those that have not cannot be expected to consent to what to them is a distortion of history. This is how conflicts between nations are born.

The historians who gathered in the German Historical Institute in November 2006 to give their learned papers discussed history in a way that implied that their discourse was the only one that has reached world class and therefore cannot be challenged. While this tendency to dictate interpretation appeared in the refined atmosphere of academia and therefore may seem insignificant, attention should be drawn to the dangers of this way of proceeding. The postmodern approach to history is unacceptable to Germany's Eastern neighbors and also to those who refuse to drop logocentrism in the memory hole. An analysis of conferences such as this one makes one realize that, to a large degree, Western European scholarship is no ally in the struggle to pass on the Western tradition. If intellectual allies are to be sought, one must focus on the "new Europe" and its intellectuals, from Václav Havel and Viktor Orbán to Ryszard Legutko and Zdzisław Krasnodnbski.¹⁷

1 Carola Dietze, "Terror in the Nineteenth Century: Political Assassinations and Public Discourse in Europe and the United States, 1878–1901," *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, no. 40 (Spring 2007), p. 91. The entire issue is available at www.ghidc.org/publications/ghipubs/bu/040/bulletin40.html. **2** Other participants included Volker Berghahn, Professor of History at Columbia; Janusz Reiter, Polish Ambassador to the United States and former Polish Ambassador to Germany; and Gesine Schwan, President of the German-Polish Viadrina University. **3** *Les Lieux de Mémoire: La République*, Vol. 1, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). In the twentieth century such *lieux de mémoire* have been officially established in France, Holland, Austria, Ger-

many, and Spain. **4** Jay Winters, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998). **5** Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 263–307. **6** *GHIB*, p. 15. **7** *Ibid.*, p. 17. **8** Anne Rice, *The Road to Cana* (New York: Knopf, 2008), pp. 181–2. **9** Jan Kieniewicz, "Civilizational Aspects of the Eastern Boundaries of Europe," in *The State and Development in Africa and Other Regions: Past and Present. Studies and Essays in Honor of Professor Jan J. Milewski*, ed. Krzysztof Trzeciński (Warsaw: ASPRA-JR, 2007). **10** Peter Novick, "Comments on Aleida Assmann's lecture," *GHIB*, pp. 28–9. **11** In "Widoczny znak: rz d polski nie zgłasza sprzeciwu," Marek Cichocki argues that the Center was built in spite of the objections from the Polish side. In effect, says Cichocki, "the building of the Center showed that the Polish-German dialogue is fiction," *Rzeczpospolita*, 25 March 2008. **12** Gesine Schwan, "Bridging the Oder: Reflections on Poland, Germany, and the Transformation of Europe: Part I," *GHIB*, 45. **13** Czesław Miłosz, "Nobel Lecture," available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1980/milosz-lecture-en.html. **14** An adjustment to Western thinking that has to be made here has to do with the fact that the First World War is not regarded as a disaster in non-Germanic Central Europe because it brought liberty to previously suppressed nations and allowed them to begin rebuilding their statehoods and identities. **15** *CIA World Factbook 2008*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>. **16** Assmann, "Response to Peter Novick," *GHIB*, p. 34. **17** Viktor Orbán leads the Hungarian Fidesz Party; Ryszard Legutko, minister of education in the Kaczynski government in Poland, is a professor of philosophy at Jagiellonian University; Zdzisław Krasnodnbski is a professor of sociology at the University of Bremen, Germany and at Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. See also Judy Dempsey, "Letter from Europe: a new conservatism rises in Eastern Europe," *International Herald Tribune*, 4 October 2007.