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HOW ARCHIVES CONTRIBUTE TO THE FORMATION OF A COMMON EUROPEAN MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Abstract

Archives preserve primary sources handed down from the past to give insight into the visions, strategies, negotiations, decision-making, and actions of organisations and individuals. By preserving and making accessible these documents, they serve in (re)constructing memory and shaping the identities of people.

While the concepts of national memory and identity have received scholarly attention, particularly in relation to World War II and the Holocaust, the application of the two terms to the political sphere of the European Union and the definition of a common memory and identity are more complex. The Historical Archives of the European Union plays a key role in the definition of both, a European memory and identity. It provides relevant and authentic primary sources that are the basis for understanding and building a common European memory and identity.

Key words: Archives, vision, strategies, memory, reconstruction, identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Archives preserve primary sources handed down from the past and produced by individuals or by organisations as direct records of their actions. They contribute, thus, to the formation of a collective memory. The concept of national memory has received broad scholarly attention and has been reflected in scholarly studies and debates about World War II and the Holocaust (Sierp, 2014). Looking at the European level, the concept of common memory is rather complex, similar to the debate about a common European identity. A specific European self-perception of collective characteristics, such as language, culture, religion, or ethnicity, thus a common identity, is challenging to define and only has a short history reaching back to the post-war period of Western European reconstruction (Wintle, 2011).

Archives play a role in the construction, or better recovery and reconstruction of collective memory. The Historical Archives of the European Union play a key role in providing relevant and authentic primary sources for building a common European memory and, thus, in contributing to the formation of a European identity.

EUROPEAN MEMORY AND IDENTITY

The discussion on the concepts of memory and identity related to European integration is complex. The historical foundation of European integration was described in the 1950 Schuman Declaration as the will of the European peoples to overcome war and destruction on a continent shaken by atrocities and destructive wars caused by extreme nationalism. This became the main historical reference for European integration in the aftermath of World War II and throughout the Cold War period (Sierp, 2014). The limitations and shortcomings of this single reference became evident after the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent enlargement period towards Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s (De Angelis, 2014).

Further to the historical reference, European integration has faced other issues in response to the concepts of identity and memory. The European Union lacks a common language, a shared tradition, and a common history. Its citizens joined the Union with a backpack of national, regional, and local identities, which they could not ignore for the sake of a new European one (Radeljic, 2014). While scholars consider the European Union as geographically well-delineated and economically and to a certain extent politically integrated, its citizens have rather low emotional ties to the new transnational entity (Hroch, 2012). The persistent relevance of national, regional, and local identities created a dilemma for the European Union. The levels of solidarity and tolerance in a multicultural European setting remained weak due to the lack of a single voice and the mix of intergovernmental and supranational decision-making processes. The national element may, at any moment, gain over the European, whenever the economic or political climate necessitates positioning (Hroch, 2012; Radeljic, 2014).

“The fact that we are not talking about Europe in terms of the United States of Europe, but rather in terms of the role and goodwill of individual EU member states, has made the existing attempts to promote European identity in every possible form – not matter whether by various European representatives and respective official documents or the public – open to speculation and, depending on occasion, abuse.” (Radeljic, 2014, 17)

Other scholars tend to have a more positive view, seeing “quite strong sources of common European identity” (Pedersen, 2008) on a large cultural scale and shared ideas in

Europe of societal ways of living. The terms of identity and memory would then refer rather to a common culture of democracy, solidarity, and to the unique European cultural heritage (Pedersen, 2008). At the same time, we have to bear in mind that the value of democracy was not the first-hour driver for European integration in the original designs of the Paris and Rome Treaties. There, the executive level of the new supranational entity was particularly strong compared to the new parliamentary body, which only in the 1970s started to become a powerful democratic voice (Strath, 2013). The value of peace was a strong driver at the beginning of the European integration process, but then faded in the 1960s as new fields became more relevant, such as the geographical expansion through enlargements, defence, and security, and more importantly the transformation from economic to political entity (Sierp, 2014). Only in the 1980s the peace element came back during the Delors presidencies. This was manifested in the introduction of the 9 May Europe Day celebrations and the discussion of European values of democracy, liberty, equality, solidarity, justice, and rule of law in the 1990s (Sierp, 2014).

The idea of a European memory and identity was politically useful and necessary to complement European integration. During the Copenhagen European Summit of 14–15 December 1973, the Heads of EC member states signed for the first time a common declaration referring to the concept of European identity. The declaration was prepared in view of the first enlargement towards the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark, and set a policy framework for the EC's foreign relations. It defined key elements of a common European identity, such as peace and cultural diversity, and reiterated the common values of democracy, rule of law, social justice, and human rights (European Communities, 1973). Since 1979, the directly elected European Parliament took over the main role as driver in defining and building a conceptual framework of European identity (De Angelis, 2014; Pedersen, 2008).

Clearly European integration has a fundamental impact on the lives of citizens in Europe. The common market and the opening of borders provided numerous new economic, political, social, and cultural opportunities. It also triggered not only a large public support for European integration, but also a sound basis for defining a common European identity (Kuhn, 2015).

THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVES

Archives are the product of administrations of public or private organisations and the individuals that work therein. EU administration comprise officials that come from different European countries and enter the institutions with distinct educational and cultural background. Once working for the EU, they shape transnational policies for the European Union under the 'acquis Communautaire' and have over time become part of the specific and unique European administrative culture (Brachem, 2015). While their individual identity may remain grounded in national ethos, norms and routines, they nonetheless assume a new hybrid, a transnational identity (Connaughton, 2015).

The archives produced by EU institutions are the carriers of the collective and individual memory of these administrations. The written legacy of the institutions and the individuals that work therein provides the relevant authentic and reliable primary sources for the discovery, recovery, and reconstruction of memory (Hedstrom, 2010; Brown, 2013). The Historical Archives that preserve these documents are, therefore, a place of European memory. The tripartite concept of archives as place, entity and set of documents crystalizes a common memory and a common heritage for European citizens (Den Boer et al., 2012).

The documents preserved and made accessible at the Historical Archives of the European Union comprise the workings of the first supranational European Coal and Steel Community established with the Paris Treaty of 1951 with seat in Luxemburg and Strasburg. The institutions created under the Paris Treaty of 1951 were the European Parliament, the Council, the Court of Justice, and the High Authority under President Jean Monnet. The Rome Treaties of 1957 established two additional organisations: the Economic and Social Committee and the European Investment Bank. In the 1970s, the European Court of Auditors was added, and finally, in 1998, the European Central Bank in Frankfurt started its operations.

For the first 30 years, the archival documents were kept on premise for filing, internal consultation, and use. With the Council Regulation 354/83 of 1983, the Community institutions decided to open these archives to the public after a period of 30 years. In 1984, the European Commission signed an agreement with the European University Institute, thus establishing the Historical Archives of the European Communities in Florence as single and central preservation and access point for the historical documents of EU Institutions. The 10 kilometers of paper files deposited in Florence today comprise the documentary heritage of the EU institutions, bodies, and agencies.

The mission of the Archives defined in Council Regulation 354/83 is to preserve and make publicly accessible the historical archives of EU institutions. The ownership on the material remains with the producing institution. By opening their archives and moving them to a single location, the EU institutions raise the public knowledge of the institutional decision-making processes and operations in the European Union and create a place of memory and identity for the united Europe.²

The specific role of the historical archives of EU institutions in providing sources to recover and reconstruct the memory of European integration was already present in the decision of Commission President Jenkins to open the EU archives to the public. History professors at the European University Institute were not only in favour but lobbied actively for the archival deposit in Florence. They also defined the larger strategic objective for the Archives in the collection, preservation, and public access not only of institutional but also of private archives of all those organisations and individuals that have made an important contribution to European integration.³

Furthermore, the international research community grouped by the European Commission in 1982 under the name of the "Groupe de liaison des professeurs d'histoire contemporaine" actively promoted the opening of the archives as the central memory of European integration. More than 300 archival holdings have been deposited in Florence, comprising more than 600.000 archival files, 70.000 photographs and audio-visual recordings, as well as 1.000 interviews produced in a variety of European oral history programmes. Its operations are ruled by Council Regulation 354/83 in its last amendment of 17 March 2015 (EU Regulation 496/2015), which made the deposit of historical archives mandatory for EU institutions, bodies and agencies. A few years earlier, in 2012, the Italian State reinforced its key support for the Archives as place of memory of European integration by making available the prestigious renaissance Villa Salviati.

2 Historical Archives Study. PA Management Consultants, November 1977, Commission of the European Communities. Study commissioned by the DG IX Personnel and Administration, Historical archives working party chaired by Nicola Bellieni IX/2130/77, HAEU, EUI-736, Christopher Audland. Right Place – Right Time. Stanhope 2004, and Jean-Marie Palayret, « Privacy et raison d'Etat versus Transparency et légitimité démocratique. Evolution et révolution en matière d'accès aux documents des institutions européennes », *Revue des Archives fédérales suisses*, cahier 14, printemps 2003 p. 73-79.

3 Notes of Prof. Peter Ludlow, 8 October 1979 and 12 February 1980, HAEU, EUI 812.

CONCLUSION

The archival heritage on European integration comprises rich and diverse collections from EU institutions and numerous organisations and individuals in Europe. These archives provide the unique memory of a complex puzzle of different initiatives launched in European integration in the political, social, economic, cultural, and educational spheres. The supranational Community model has been the most ambitious and successful project of European integration. With the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, in the aftermath of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Communities became the European Union, which integrated in the coming years various Central and Eastern European countries. As single and central preservation and access point to these documents, the Historical Archives of the European Union provides unique resource for the recovery and reconstruction of a common European memory and identity.

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