

European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes

On 2 April 2009, the European Parliament decided that 23 August each year should mark the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. With the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had divided Europe into spheres of interest. That agreement, with its secret protocols, preceded the German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 and the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland, as well as the Soviet occupation and later annexation of the Baltic States, in June 1940.

Background

Questions of historical memory of the Nazi German regime, of fascist collaboration, and of the crimes perpetrated became an increasingly transnational matter in western and southern Europe during the late Cold War period. West Germany experienced its *Historikerstreit* (or controversy among leading historians) in the 1980s, with debate about the comparability of totalitarian regimes and the singularity of the Holocaust, or Shoah. Trials against surviving perpetrators proliferated in Germany and elsewhere, as in the case of Maurice Papon, for example. Secretary General of the Gironde Prefecture in Bordeaux during the Vichy regime, who was found guilty to have ordered and organised that 1 600 Jews were arrested and transported to the extermination camps during World War II.

At the turn of the century, western European leaders increasingly propagated a common approach to remembering the Holocaust. Representatives from 46 countries met in Stockholm in January 2000 for the [International Forum on the Holocaust](#), to discuss questions of Holocaust education, remembrance and research. On that occasion, they declared 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp, [Holocaust Remembrance Day](#), emphasising that its 'unprecedented character ... will always hold universal meaning'.

Politicians drew different lessons from the past, however, as quickly became clear with the controversy in the EU over the formation of a new Austrian government bringing together the People's Party and Jörg Haider's far-right Freedom Party in February 2000. Moreover, historical memory in east-central and south-eastern Europe diverged very much from western Europeans' strong focus on the Holocaust. For many east-central Europeans, Stalinist crimes and what they had experienced as a result of the Soviet-communist occupation during and after World War II had the same, if not higher importance for their individual and collective memory than the Holocaust. As they regarded the cooperation between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939 as the starting point of their suffering, an estimated [2.2 million people](#) formed the human chain linking Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius on 23 August 1989, marking the 50th anniversary of the [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact](#) - an event that contributed to the collapse of communist rule and the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Leaders from the new and future European Union Member States in east-central and south-eastern Europe increasingly pushed, from the 2000s onwards, for greater recognition and inclusion in remembrance policies of the crimes of the Stalinist and communist regimes. In 2006, the Council of European Parliamentary Assembly passed a [resolution](#) on the need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes. On 3 June 2008, prominent politicians including former Czech President Vacláv Havel and future German President Joachim Gauck signed the [Prague Declaration](#) on European Conscience and Communism, calling for 'Europe-wide condemnation of, and education about, the crimes of communism', and advocating the institutionalisation of a European Remembrance Day.



European Parliament position

Having already signed the Prague Declaration, around 50 MEPs took the initiative in the European Parliament of launching a [written declaration](#), dated 23 September 2008 and signed by 409 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), which formally proposed the adoption of 23 August as the 'European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism'. The declaration claimed that 'the influence and significance of the Soviet order and occupation on and for citizens of the post-Soviet States are little known in Europe', and that better remembrance could contribute to 'rooting democracy more firmly and reinforcing peace and stability in our continent'.

The written declaration started a process that led the European Parliament to adopt its [resolution](#) on European Conscience and Totalitarianism on 2 April 2009, which formally marked 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance. The resolution in its final wording addressed a variety of concerns in debates among historians and in the Parliament. First, by referring to all 'totalitarian and authoritarian regimes' it broadened its scope beyond Stalinism and Nazism, explicitly referring, for example, to Franco's Spain. Second, it re-emphasised the 'uniqueness of the Holocaust', frequently understood as the systematic industrialised mass-murder of a delineated religious group. Third, it admitted the contested character of interpretations of history, and that 'parliament cannot legislate on the past'.

The main body of the text centres on the 'victims of totalitarian and undemocratic regimes ... and pays tribute to those who fought against tyranny and oppression'. It expresses the need for 'keeping the memories of the past alive because there can be no reconciliation without truth and remembrance'. And it connects the memory of the totalitarian regimes and their crimes to the notion of 'European integration as a model of peace and reconciliation'.

In this form, 553 MEPs [voted](#) for the resolution, 44 against and 33 abstained. All EPP MEPs except for 10 MEPs from the Greek New Democracy party, who abstained, as well as all liberal ALDE MEPs present voted for the resolution. 30 MEPs from the S&D group voted against, mostly for fear that the totalitarian paradigm could dilute the place of the Holocaust in European remembrance policies and memory. Most MEPs from the European United Left-Nordic Green Left Group voted against or abstained. Thus, Czech MEP [Vladimír Remek](#), a member of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, claimed that the EP majority was 'simply trying to lump me together with the Nazis'. And Greek communist MEP [Athanasios Pafilis](#) complained about 'the European Union's wretched anti-Communist strategy ... with the counterfeiting of history, slander and lies' by equating fascism and communism.

The debate preceding the vote on the resolution showed how important the topic was for east-central and south-eastern Member-States. In fact, all but five MEPs, who spoke in the debate, were from the new Member-States. The debate showed not only that memory of the past was and is perhaps still divided between western and east-central and south-eastern Europe, but also along ideological and other lines. A Day of European Remembrance cannot align such divided memory overnight. Marking the day can however contribute to a better mutual understanding of diverging memories and their greater long-term convergence.