When first seeing this essay title, I immediately thought of the memory of Bletchley Park. A kept secret until the 1970s, the collective memory of the 10,000 people who worked there was suppressed for a clear political purpose; the millions grieving after the war would not have accepted the deliberate sacrifice of British convoys after the breaking of the Enigma code. The achievements of the code breakers are now widely recognised across generations and, although this is a too newly formed memory to know whether it will persist and serve a political purpose, Bletchley Park is a good example of a collective memory: the remembrance of an event, time period, or place by a group of people, which is passed down over generations. It is difficult, at first glance, to think of a collective memory that does not in some way serve a political purpose, either by strengthening a political ideology, or for political gain both nationally and internationally. However, upon examination of three examples of collective memory, namely Nazism, Italian fascism, and apartheid in South Africa, it appears that there is more to the persistence of collective memory than the serving of a political purpose.

A key example of collective memory that serves a political purpose is the development of the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust in Germany. Until the 1960s, many Germans remembered Nazism only in terms of its victimisation of the German population. Speeches in the 1940s-50s focused on the suffering experienced by Germans, and made very little mention of collective responsibility. Adenauer’s first Government Declaration in 1949 did not mention German guilt in the persecution of the Jewish people. There was a clear political purpose in shaping the memory of the war in this way, as it was consistent with the general consensus of the public at the time.

A changing political climate from the 1960s onwards however created a shift in the collective memory. Rising left wing radicalism from a new generation exposed to the Auschwitz trials of 1965, and the need of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) to project a good image of itself internationally, resulted in efforts by the FRG to frame itself as reconciling with the past. A memory of collective responsibility was far more politically beneficial. Chancellor Brandt’s visit to Poland and kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970 demonstrates this change in the remembrance culture, which was strengthened by the re-unification of Germany in 1990.

The memory today encompasses both of these versions of the past in order to prevent a suppressed memory of suffering being left to extreme right or left wing political groups. After the rising left wing radicalism of the 1960s-70s, there was fear of right wing revisionism. Therefore, an agreed-upon national memory that emphasised collective responsibility for the terrible acts committed under the Nazi regime whilst also recognising those who suffered within Germany was eventually reached. There was a need to accommodate both left and right wing positions in order to reconcile with the past. This is shown by the prominence of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, and the celebration each year of both Holocaust Memorial Day and the ‘People’s Day of Mourning’ (Volkstrauertag), which commemorates all German citizens who have died in armed conflicts. As well as appeasing both left and right wing political groups, this memory acts as an educational message to the new generation about the dangers of an oppressive society, and therefore serves a political purpose of strengthening the democratic system in Germany. It prevents a re-occurrence of a similar regime.

However, although the present collective memory of Nazism serves a political purpose, it also served other purposes. The most obvious of these is the economic benefit. By shaping a collective memory of national responsibility for Nazism, the FRG seemed a more reliable democratic country, making integration into Europe easier, which brought great economic benefits, such as aid from the Marshall Plan in 1948, helping an economy severely damaged by war and the resulting reparations. Nevertheless, economic and political purposes are closely linked, as these economic gains would have resulted in political ones.

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1 Remembering to forget? Memory and Democracy in Italy and Germany. Aline Sierp
2 Adorno. Stefan Muller-Doohm
Helen Markus

It must have been the case however that many individuals were motivated to take collective responsibility for Nazism for other purposes. With the re-unification of Germany and the end of the Cold War came groups of people who actively wanted to discuss and reconcile with the past. More publications, films and documentaries about the Holocaust and the Nazi regime were being made in the 1990s, such as Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List” (1993), which brought the memory into the public eye. Although there obviously was a political purpose to be served in reconciling with the past, many individuals may have also wanted to influence the collective memory of Nazism for social and personal reasons, such as remorse for their actions or the need to recognise the suffering of their ancestors under the regime. The collective memory of the Nazi regime does serve a political purpose, but its persistence is likely to be supported by individual social motivation of people within Germany to remember it.

By way of contrast, the collective memory of fascism in Italy is not held in the same way. Although the immediate post-war memory in Italy was similar to that in Germany, developments in international politics and the end of the Cold War did not have the same effect on collective memory in Italy as it did in Germany. Directly after World War II, there was a clear political purpose in choosing to support the creation of an anti-fascist collective memory that emphasised Italy as a victim of the regime. A liberated Italy after the war needed to show a detachment from non-democratic rule in order to make its reintegration into Western powers smoother, and the shaping of an anti-fascist collective memory helped this. In a Europe severely divided by the ‘Iron Curtain’, it was ever more important to gain international support. It could be argued that this anti-fascist view of the past had a significant part in enabling Italy to join NATO in 1949.

However, unlike in Germany, a changing political climate did not alter this collective view of the war in Italy. There is an argument that the rise of left-wing radicalism in the 1960s-70s, by groups such as the Red Brigades, was less politically threatening than in Germany, actually strengthening this collective memory and creating solidarity amongst mainstream parties.¹ In fact, neo-fascist views were re-awakened in 1980s Italy and in the later coalition under Berlusconi, who said that “racial laws were the worst fault of Mussolini as a leader, who in so many other ways did well” at a Holocaust memorial event in 2013.³ Conflict still exists over how fascism should be remembered in Italy between left and right, and “the last years have seen a further entrenchment of the two competing narratives [recognition of collective responsibility versus commemoration of Italian soldiers], impeding an objective investigation into the fascist past and rendering the integration of the two versions of history into one single remembrance culture increasingly impossible.”³ There is a political purpose on both sides, but this has not been sufficient to come to one national collective memory.

A further example of a collective memory that serves a political purpose is the memory of apartheid in South Africa. A prominent and shared collective memory of apartheid allows open but managed discussion of painful memories, potentially preventing extreme political chaos. This makes the formation of a liberal democracy in South Africa an easier and more continuous process, and so serves a clear political purpose. The influence of the government-created Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on collective memory in South Africa reflects this. As James L Gibson argues, the influence of the TRC’s investigation into apartheid has moderated views of the past both within South Africa and internationally. Their conclusions stress both that “the struggle was justified by the evil of the regime, but that abuses were committed by all sides in the struggle.”⁴ This balanced but hard-hitting view allowed all sides of the struggle to compromise and to form a joint democracy.

The investigations into human rights violations under apartheid would not have begun in 1996 if they had not been politically beneficial in some way and so the TRC, which was a government initiative, “the fruit of protracted negotiations between politicians”⁵, is a clear example of a way in which a government attempts

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¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/27/silvio-berlusconi-mussolini-jewish-holocaust-praise_n_2561566.html


³ Forgiving and forgetting: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Anthony Holiday
Helen Markus
to shape the collective memory of a population for a political purpose. As Eduard Fagan points out, this wish to remember the inequality of apartheid in order to establish a more diverse and equal future in a democracy is shown in the South African constitution which took effect in 1994. The preamble states that “the people of South Africa, Recognise the injustices of our past...Believe that South Africa belongs to all that live in it, united by our diversity.”6 This clearly shows the political purpose in recognising and reconciling with the appalling events of the past.

Furthermore, a remembrance of apartheid, and therefore efforts to reconcile with the past, has a significant economic purpose in South Africa. By making apartheid a prominent part of South Africa’s history, this creates a market for tourism in the country. 1 in 25 people now work in the tourism industry in South Africa,7 and monuments that symbolise the resistance, such as Robben Island, the high-security prison where political activists like Nelson Mandela were held, are now major tourist attractions. As in Germany before, economic gains generally result in political ones. As well as generating economic growth that leads to a more stable society politically, the growth of open cultural sites in South Africa helps to spread the memory of apartheid internationally as well as nationally, integrating the country with the rest of the world and therefore mainly serving a political purpose.

However, although a collective memory that is shared and that agrees with all the conclusions of the TRC would serve a political purpose, these conclusions have not completely defined the collective memory of apartheid in South Africa. By definition, different groups of people have very different memories of apartheid, due to the very different experiences people had. White people generally benefited from apartheid, whereas black people suffered deeply under it, and this will obviously have an effect on the collective memory, and the acceptance of the TRC’s conclusions. Additionally, apartheid is still a living memory for many South Africans, and therefore suffering under the regime is likely to be remembered more strongly. In the 2001 Truth and Reconciliation survey, it was found that, while generally agreeing, (although with obvious disparities between white and other groups), across all groups with the TRC’s statements that ‘apartheid was a crime against humanity’, and that the abuses under apartheid were largely committed ‘by the state institutions themselves’, not ‘by a few evil individuals’, there was not a collective agreement with any of the other statements.8 This may be because the memories of individuals under apartheid have a significant influence on collective memory. Some publications of individual memories will contribute to the collective memory in serving a political purpose, such as Nelson Mandela’s ‘Long Walk to Freedom’. As Sarah Nuttall writes, Mandela’s book serves a greatly important political purpose in using memory as “the basis on which oppression can be challenged and the political appears to set a framework for personal remembering.”8

However, many individual memories will be kept or told for other purposes. A key example of this is remorse. As Anthony Holiday writes, remorse is a “precondition for forgiveness”, and forgiveness “is an intensely private matter.”9 Remorse felt by those who committed crimes under apartheid will be a strong motivation amongst individuals for remembering apartheid, in order to achieve some sort of state of forgiveness. Perhaps more importantly, the memory of apartheid might also serve the purpose to individuals of giving their ancestors or loved ones recognition for their achievements in ending apartheid. At the opening of the Robben Island exhibition in 1993, Ahmed Kathrada, a former political prisoner, said that the Island should serve as “a monument reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil, a triumph of freedom and human dignity over repression and humiliation.”9 As well as this reflecting the memory of the island for a political purpose, this also suggests an individual wish for the memory of apartheid to be remembered in terms of the achievements of those who fought for freedom in the resistance.

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6 The constitutional entrenchment of memory. Eduard Fagan
7 http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=6166
9 Remembering tragedy, constructing modernity: Robben Island as a national monument. Harriet Deacon
In conclusion, these three examples of collective memory support the idea that a political purpose is a necessary requirement for a collective memory to persist. In these cases, the memory serves a political purpose, either through making the transition into a democratic society smoother, benefiting the economy for political gain or ensuring that all political groups have reconciled with the past in order to prevent a reoccurrence of an oppressive society. However, these three examples also suggest that, although a necessary requirement for a collective memory to persist, a political purpose is not a sufficient requirement. Other purposes arising from individual reasons for remembrance, such as the wish for recognition of the achievements of ancestors and remorse felt for being the oppressors or persecutors of a remembered regime, are also often requirements for the persistence of collective memory within the overarching political purpose. The memory does not serve a political purpose alone. I, of course, cannot account for all collective memories in this way, and the purposes collective memories serve may be very different in societies that have not made this transformation from a non-democratic society to a democracy, but these three examples certainly suggest that collective memories may serve political and social purposes. It will be interesting to see the impact of growing mass media, and in particular the use of social media, on collective memory in the future. Wider and easier access to information could impact to what extent a collective memory can serve, and be shaped for, a political purpose.

Word Count: 2409

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