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MEMORY POLITICS IN WESTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

This paper examines how ten West European states have dealt with the legacy of the Second World War, and how this process has either provided opportunities or constraints for radical right parties within them. It contributes an ideational perspective to the growing debate about the variation in the radical right's electoral success across Western Europe. After developing a typology for analyzing the process of "dealing with" history, the paper concentrates on three cases. In Germany, a "culture of contrition" has prevented radical right parties from consolidating themselves in the party system. In France, the National Front gained strength before the Vichy past became a salient issue but has since been hampered by growing norms against historical revisionism. In Italy, where debates about fascism have been divisive, the MSI was able to enter the political mainstream despite its open nostalgia for Mussolini.

Keywords

Radical right parties; historical memory; Nazism; Vichy; Fascism

Over the last decade, the legacies of past atrocities have emerged as salient political issues across advanced industrial democracies. From Australia to Canada, victim groups have demanded redress for systematic violations of human rights committed by the state or by members of society. Public debates over historic injustices have produced a variety of different outcomes, such as official state apologies, reparations, and the creation of national holidays to remember the victims. At the same time, they have also produced denials and backlashes, fueled far right political forces, and generally become enmeshed in partisan political conflict. This should not strike observers as surprising, for debates about past atrocities raise issues central to contemporary politics: national identity, the treatment of minorities and immigrants, and the legitimacy of radical right politics in democratic states are just some of the topics at the heart of “dealing with” history. The past, in short, has become a field of political contention, albeit one that has only recently become an object of study for political scientists.¹

Europe provides a fascinating laboratory for examining the relevance of the past to contemporary politics. Across Europe, the Second World War in particular has only become more politically salient as distance from it increases. The exculpatory narratives of the war that reduced Nazism, fascism, and wartime collaboration to a small—and unrepresentative—group of national political elites have unraveled over the last several decades. The tales of nations united in resistance that served as the symbolic foundations of both the postwar French and Italian states have been challenged. In Austria, the consensus that the state had been “Hitler’s first victim” was eroded during the presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim in 1986. More recently, politicians and academics in Switzerland and Sweden have been forced to revise the widely accepted view of their states as neutrals who kept their hands free of Nazi atrocities. The Dutch have questioned the “Anne Frank” narrative that long shaped their historical memory of the war years, and have begun to confront the fact that 75% of Dutch Jews were sent to the death camps, a figure higher than in any other part of occupied Europe. For reasons of space, this paper focuses only on cases in Western Europe, but it is important to note that countries in Central and Eastern Europe—most notably Poland—have also been the sites of intense public debates about the Second World War as previously hegemonic anti-fascist narratives have eroded.

One reason for the collapse of the European “founding myths,” as one scholar has referred to them, is the end of the Cold War.² In the early postwar period, the United States was willing to overlook the extent of wartime collaboration or support for fascism in its search for allies in the war against communism. With this imperative no longer operative, claims by victim groups, which might have been quietly buried in the past, have been supported by the US government. Certainly other factors have played a role as well. The impending disappearance of the generation of survivors has arguably forced governments into quick action in the realm of reparations. Progress in historical scholarship, coupled with the discovery of voluminous archival materials in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, has radically changed our understanding of the period. More controversially, the growing importance of the Holocaust for Jews, particularly in the United States, has led to increased claim-making against those who persecuted Jews, as well as those who profited from such persecution.³

But one of the most important reasons for the return of history has been the resurgence of the far right in Western Europe. This is not because such parties as the French National Front (FN), the German Republicans (REPS), or even the Italian National Alliance (AN) actually represent a revival of fascism. Rather, they belong to an emerging party family that falls under the rubric “extreme-right,”

¹ There are some important exceptions: James W. Booth, “Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory and Debt,” *American Political Science Review* 92, 2 (June 1999): 249-263; Nancy Bermeo, “Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship,” *Comparative Politics* 24, 1 (April 1992): 273-291.

² The term ‘founding myths’ is from Tony Judt, “The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,” *Daedalus* 4 (1992): 83-118

³ On this point, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

“right-wing populist” or “radical-right.”⁴ Their defining feature is nationalism, and they have all appealed to racial stereotypes and xenophobia.⁵ Although mainstream parties throughout Europe have often done this as well, far right parties have made draconian immigration policies central to their program and engaged regularly in a radically xenophobic political discourse.

Yet even if the claims of a resurgent fascism are misplaced, the very fact that they are being made is important in and of itself. Political elites across Europe have, to varying degrees and to varying success, tried to fend off the right-wing populist challenge by linking these parties to a fascist or collaborationist past. At the same time, many far right parties have woven apologetic interpretations of the Second World War into their contemporary political identities, thereby transforming history into a partisan political issue. For these reasons, the process of “dealing with the past” and the electoral success of far right parties cannot, I argue, be separated. As of yet, however, scholars have largely failed to link the two.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to explore the connections between memory and the far right, and at the same time contribute to the growing debate concerning the cross-national variation in support for right-wing populist parties. One of the most puzzling aspects of the far right phenomenon has been its divergent trajectory in advanced industrial societies over the last several decades. Far right parties differ not only in terms of their electoral support (see table one), but also in terms of their integration into the political system. They have become members of national coalition governments in Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In Denmark and Norway, current governments rely on support from far right parties. In Belgium and France, the far right is strong but so-called “cordon-sanitaires” have kept it out of political office. In Germany, Sweden, and Wallonia, far right parties have been either electorally insignificant or have collapsed after a single electoral success. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilder’s Party of Freedom (PVV) may avoid collapsing like previous incarnations of Dutch right-wing populism, such as the List Pim Fortuyn and the Center Democrats, but it is too soon to tell.

Table 1: Successful and Unsuccessful Radical Right Parties as of July 2009.*

<u>Party</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	Austria	Success
Belgian National Front (FNb)	Belgium (Wallonia)	Failure
British National Party (BNP)	Great Britain	Failure
Center Democrats (CD)	Netherlands	Failure
Danish People’s Party (DF)	Denmark	Success
German National Party (NPD)	Germany	Failure
German People’s Union (DVU)	Germany	Failure
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	Netherlands	Failure
National Alliance (AN)	Italy	Success
National Front (FN)	France	Success
New Democracy (ND)	Sweden	Failure
Northern League (LN)	Italy	Success
Progress Party (FrP)	Norway	Success
Republicans (REPS)	Germany	Failure
Sweden Democrats (SD)	Sweden	Failure
Swiss People’s Party (SVP)	Switzerland	Success
Vlaams Belang (VB)	Belgium (Flanders)	Success

* Success is defined as winning 5% of the vote in three successive national parliamentary elections.

⁴ I use the terms “right-wing populist” and far right interchangeably in this paper. In so doing, I align myself with those scholars who view populism as one of the defining features of this new party family: Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, eds., *The New Politics of the Right* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Jens Rydgren, “Radical Right Populism in Sweden: Still a Failure but for How Long?” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 25(1): 27-54.

⁵ On the debate over the definition of the radical right, see Roger Eatwell, “The Rebirth of the ‘Extreme Right’ in Western Europe?” *Parliamentary Affairs* 53 (2000): 410-414; Cas Mudde, “The War of Words: Defining the Extreme Right Party Family,” *West European Politics* 24(4): 1-21; An expert survey conducted by Martin Lubbers appears in Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Parties and Electoral Competition*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Why has the far right been strong in Denmark and weak in Sweden? Why has the far right been a powerful force in Austrian politics but a marginal player in Germany? Scholars have attempted to explain such cross-national variation with reference to differences in patterns of immigration, unemployment, or electoral rules.⁶ There is a great deal of scholarly debate over the significance of these variables, and a consensus on any one has yet to emerge.

This paper sketches out an ideational explanation for the divergent development of the far right in three European states: Germany, Italy and France. The far right has been electorally weak and politically marginalized in Germany. In France, the far right has done well in elections but has been prevented, by a combination of electoral institutions *and* political party strategies, from wielding political power. In Italy, the far right is not only electorally strong but has become a party of government. My central claim is that ideas about the wartime past, specifically ideas held by elites from mainstream political forces, have played a central role in the different trajectories of these parties.⁷ While I am not claiming that ecological correlates and electoral institutions do not matter, I argue that the success or failure of postwar far right parties needs to be understood in the context of the political-cultural environment in which these parties find themselves. While a much richer evidentiary base is obviously needed to make the argument compelling, the goal here is simply to demonstrate that it is plausible.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. The first section offers a cross-national comparison of how 10 different European states have come to terms with the wartime past. This exercise in classification is necessary both to provide some concrete indicators for a “fuzzy” subject, and to provide a basis for future comparative work. The second section lays out in greater depth the connection between this process and far right parties. The third section focuses on Germany and argues that the “culture of contrition” that evolved during numerous critical public examinations of the Nazi past has kept far right political parties weak and marginalized.⁸ The fourth section turns to France, a case that has shown marked variation in the extent of dealing with the past over time. Before Vichy became a salient political issue in the late 1980s, the National Front was able to rise rapidly and consolidate itself in French politics. Since then, the French political establishment has used history as a weapon against the far right, justifying its current marginalization with reference to the “lessons of history.” The fifth section turns to Italy and argues that the necessary condition for the regeneration of the far right was a change in elite ideas about the fascist past and the legitimacy of the MSI during the transformation of the Italian party system. The sixth and final section discusses how the past has become an important issue in the politics of the European Union and European Integration. I argue that contrition and an ongoing critical examination of historical complicity is becoming a pan-European value.

I. Comparing Contrition

How can one compare the process of dealing with the past across European countries? There are several possible indicators that allow researchers to compare the extent and level of dealing with the past across cases. These are best presented as responses to three different questions.

⁶ On immigration as the central variable in the success of right-wing populist parties, see Pia Knigge, “The Ecological Correlates of Right-Wing Extremism in Western Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research* 34(2): 249-279; Matt Golder, “Explaining Variation in the Success of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 36(4), (2003), 432-466; Rachel Gibson, *The Growth of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe* (Lewiston, NY.: Edwin Mellen, 2002); On the relationship between electoral rules and right-wing populist party success, see Robert Jackman and Karin Volpert, “Conditions Favouring Parties of the Extreme Right in Western Europe,” *British Journal of Political Science* 26 (1996), 501-521; Golder (2003), Norris (2005), and Elisabeth Carter, “Proportional Representation and the Fortunes of Right-Wing Extremist Parties,” *West European Politics* 25(3) (2002): 125-146.

⁷ I treat the cases of Germany and Austria more fully in David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ I borrow this phrase from Karl Wilds, “Identity Creation and the Culture of Contrition: Recasting ‘Normality’ in the Berlin Republic,” *German Politics* 9, no.1 (April 2000): 83-102.

First, to what extent have official state representatives recognized the crimes of previous regimes and condemned them or apologized for them? Second, for how long have political elites and the general population critically discussed wartime behavior, and how politically salient have these debates been? Third, have elites converged around a particular interpretation of the fascist, collaborationist, or “neutral” past, or do different historical interpretations still compete in the marketplace of ideas? Below I treat each of these variables (also summarized in table 2) in turn.

State Recognition

State recognition of past complicity varies enormously across countries. At one pole are states like Turkey, whose representatives have repeatedly denied the existence of the Armenian Genocide. Germany occupies a unique position at the other end of the spectrum; its official representatives have not only apologized for past atrocities but have turned contrition into a form of statecraft. Most states—including the states of Western Europe-- fall somewhere in between these two poles. Yet the timing and nature of official recognition of atrocities committed during the Second World War still differ markedly across them. Of the three original fascist states, Germany was the first to acknowledge responsibility for genocide by offering restitution to the state of Israel in the early 1950s. Since then, German presidents (the head-of-state) have offered numerous apologies to countries and groups that suffered under Nazism. Austria, the other surviving successor state of the Third Reich, offered an apology only in 1991, and this was delivered by the Prime Minister (the head of government) rather than the head-of-state (president).⁹ Italy has yet to offer an official apology either to the victims of Italian aggression in Africa and the Balkans, or to the domestic victims of fascism.

Of the states with collaborationist pasts, France became the first to offer an official apology for complicity in Nazi crimes when President Jacques Chirac, the Head-of-State, did so in 1995. In 1999, the Norwegian government issued an official apology to Norwegian Jewry. In 2000, Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok extended an apology to all the victims of the Nazis. The Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt apologized for the government’s role in the deportation of Jews in 2002. In 2003, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen offered the first public condemnation of collaboration, although he stopped short of issuing an apology. Of the two neutral states under analysis, the Swiss President apologized for the country’s role in laundering Nazi gold and for turning back Jewish refugees, in 1997 and 1999, respectively.¹⁰ Sweden’s Prime Minister Goran Persson first publicly recognized the “political and moral responsibility for what Swedish officials did—or failed to do—during the war years” in 2000 but did not issue an official apology.¹¹

Public Debates

The duration and intensity of public debates about the past are another source of variation among the cases.¹² In Germany and the Netherlands, public discussions of national complicity began in the 1960s. In France and Austria, such debates date from the mid-1980s. In all the other cases under consideration, public deliberation about past atrocities was virtually absent until the middle of the past decade. The timing of such debates influences the extent to which members of the population have rejected the pleasant postwar founding myths that had previously dominated political discourse and school curricula. Whereas Germans have been exposed to critical historical examinations of their past for forty years, Belgians and Danes are only beginning to change their attitudes about their states’ pasts.

⁹ It was also in the context of a speech on Yugoslavia to which foreign journalists were invited but Austrian ones were not. Interview with Therezija Stoitsits (Greens), Member of Parliament, 5 July 2002, Vienna.

¹⁰ I do not include the Portuguese case in this essay, for three reasons. First, Portugal lacks a right-wing populist party since the Portuguese People’s Party is really a national conservative party. Second, debates about the extent of collaboration during the period of “neutrality” have really not unfolded in Portugal. Third, as in Spain, discussions of Portugal’s wartime past are inextricably linked to a domestic fascist regime. That being said, I do agree with scholars who argue that memories of a recent authoritarian experience have prevented the emergence of the far right on the Iberian Peninsula.

¹¹ *The Independent*, 27 January 2000.

¹² For a theoretical discussion of public debates, see Art (2006).

The intensity of public debates also differs markedly across Western European states. In Austria, France and Germany, public debates about the past have been quite significant in both politics and the media. I have therefore coded them as “high.” In the Scandinavian states and in the Netherlands, public debates about the past have been rather low volume affairs. Belgium and Switzerland each received a score of “medium.” These codings reflect my substantive knowledge of the cases, but the results of a Lexis-Nexis search for each state using equivalent search terms should improve our confidence in them.¹³ In Italy, public debate about fascism was muted for a long period, but the political salience of history has risen markedly in the past couple of years as Berlusconi and his coalition partners have tried to undermine Italy’s official anti-fascist consensus. The current Mayor of Rome, for example, refused to condemn Fascism as an absolute evil in an interview with the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper during a trip to Israel in September 2008.¹⁴ In the same month, Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa defended fascist soldiers who defended their homeland against the Anglo-American landings during the 65 anniversary of Rome’s resistance to Nazi occupation. The left has protested vigorously against what it sees as an attempt to rewrite history and some have even warned that the immigration policies of the Lega Nord (Berlusconi’s current coalition partner) and the self-defense militias the party appears to support constitute a revival of Fascism.

Consensus or Disagreement

The presence or absence of an elite consensus regarding historical interpretation is the final, and most crucial, variable in the overall process of “dealing with the past.” By consensus, I mean that elites from across the political spectrum (with the possible exception of the far right) have accepted the fact that their states were complicit, to varying degrees, in wartime violations of basic human rights. This elite consensus can be the product of intense public debate. In Germany, France and the Netherlands, politicians have converged around an interpretation of the past, after years of discussion, which recognizes crimes against humanity and assumes responsibility for them. In the three Scandinavian countries, where debates about the wartime past emerged later and have been of lower intensity, politicians have largely updated their historical interpretations of their respective nation’s past. Of the three, Swedish elites have made the most extensive attempt to change mass attitudes in line with this new consensus. In 1997, Prime Minister Perrson launched an extensive Holocaust education campaign which involved publishing and freely distributing a book about the Holocaust and Sweden’s wartime behavior. Over 800,000 thousand copies of this book, titled “Tell Ye Your Children,” have been published, making it the most widely distributed book in Swedish history after the Bible.¹⁵

It is important to note that public debates can also produce polarization. In Austria, a long-standing public debate about Austrian complicity in Nazi crimes has not produced an elite consensus, but rather enduring polarization between those who recognize a high degree of Austrian complicity and those who view Austria as primarily a victim of Nazi aggression. In Switzerland, many politicians have resisted changing their previous attitudes about Swiss neutrality in light of recent debates over Nazi gold and the sealing of borders to refugees. Similarly, as I suggested above, Italian politicians still offer radically different interpretations of the fascist experience, and history has become a battle ground of contemporary partisan politics.

¹³ To get a more objective measure of the salience of the memory of the Second World War in the politics of 10 European states, I conducted a Lexis-Nexis guided news search of major international newspapers using the following search terms in the full-text of articles: Country name (variable), Second World War, and Memory. To correct for the fact that large countries (such as Germany) received more coverage than smaller ones, I divided the total number of articles for each country by its population according to the CIA’s world factbook. I assumed that the percentage of irrelevant articles produced by the search were equal across countries. This produced the following results: France 57.2, Norway 47.1, Germany 45.1, Austria 44.3, Switzerland 37.9, Belgium 33.9, Denmark 31.3, Sweden 23, Italy 20.7, the Netherlands 19.3. This rank ordering is mostly consistent with my subjective coding of the cases based on my knowledge of them. The major difference concerns Norway, which ranks second in the Lexis-Nexis search but which I have coded as “low.” My suspicion is that the relatively small number of articles (217) may have contained a high number of irrelevant hits.

¹⁴ At the same time, Alemanno has also supported the construction of a Holocaust museum in Rome.

¹⁵ Interview with Paul Levine, co-author of “Tell Ye Your Children,” 25 May 2005, Stockholm.

Belgium offers an especially interesting case of elite conflict over history, for the rifts in this debate have been superimposed on the broader dispute between the Walloons and the Flemish. Many Walloons contend that Flemish nationalists have a highly collaborationist past, and it is a historical fact that thousands of Dutch-speaking Belgians did fight on the German side, in large part to promote the interests of their language group.¹⁶ The Flemish, for their part, argue that the postwar punishment of collaborators was overly harsh and used primarily to suppress postwar Flemish nationalism. Some Flemish politicians, and not only those from the former extreme-right Vlaams Bloc, have sought amnesties for the “victims” of postwar justice. The Walloons have denounced such initiatives, and have forced government officials with links to groups working on behalf of collaborators to resign. Since the late 1990s, the past has become a persistent issue in Belgian partisan politics.

Table 2: Comparative Contrition

Country	Form of Complicity	First Official Recognition of Complicity	Beginning of Public Debate	Intensity of Debate	Elite Consensus?	Theme for the Far Right?
Germany	Fascist State	1952 (apology)	1960s	High	Yes	Yes
Austria	Fascist State	1991 (apology)	1980s	High	No	Yes
Italy	Fascist State	NONE	1990s	High	No	Yes
France	Collaboration	1995 (apology)	1980s	High	Yes	Yes
Netherlands	Collaboration	2000 (apology)	1960s	Low	Yes	No
Belgium	Collaboration	2002 (apology)	1990s	Medium	No	Yes
Norway	Collaboration	1997 (apology)	1990s	Low	Yes	No
Denmark	Collaboration	2003 (condemnation)	1990s	Low	Yes	No
Switzerland	“Neutrality”	1997 (apology)	1990s	Medium	No	Yes
Sweden	“Neutrality”	2000 (condemnation)	1990s	Low	Yes	Yes

II. The Far Right and the Second World War

What is the connection between historical memory of the Second World War and the recent development of the far right? It is important to note that the past has clearly not been significant for some right-wing populist parties. Far right parties in Scandinavia and the Netherlands have not made the defense of national history into a political issue. The late Pim Fortuyn, for example, clearly and consistently condemned Nazism, as has Geert Wilders. Members of the far right Danish People’s Party identify explicitly with the Danish resistance movement rather than with Nazi collaborators.¹⁷ It would also be misleading to claim that the electoral success of the far right can be explained primarily with reference to their historical interpretations. Most Austrians, for example, did not vote for Jörg Haider because of his apologist interpretations and qualified defenses of Nazism, although this certainly helped mobilize his extreme right base.¹⁸

The links between the far right and the past are more complicated, yet certainly consequential. Many far right parties intertwine apologetic narratives of the war years with an essentialist view of national identity, opposition to immigration, and rejection of cosmopolitan values. As the self-proclaimed defenders of the national from the pressures of European integration and globalization,

¹⁶ It should be noted that the Nazis found collaborators in both Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders, the Nazis installed the nationalist Vlaams National Verbond (VNV) before replacing them with a smaller group named De Vlag. In Wallonia, members of a right-wing Catholic movement named The Rexists were appointed to posts in the government.

¹⁷ Interview with Jesper Langballe (DV), Member of Parliament, 17 May 2005, Copenhagen.

¹⁸ Art (2006).

these parties aim to protect the history that constitutes their respective nations. They have represented their societies as the victims of international conspiracies to degrade their pasts and identity. They have downplayed the crimes committed in their state and denied that anything can be gained by forcing their populations to “work through” or “come to terms with” a past that belongs to a disappearing generation. In Austria, Jörg Haider (FPÖ) skillfully rode the chauvinist reaction against international censure of Austria’s wartime behavior following the Waldheim debate in 1986. Christoph Blocher, the leader of the far right Swiss People’s Party (SV), mounted a similar attack against international critics and domestic traitors after the Nazi gold story broke in the mid 1990s. In France, Le Pen has described a critical examination of the Vichy regime as an affront to the nation’s honor. And in all of these countries, right-wing populists have decried the “politically correct” histories disseminated by elites out of touch with the values and historical memories of ordinary people. History, in short, has become another rhetorical weapon in a populist attack on the political and intellectual establishments.

The past also matters to the extent that mainstream political parties, and the media, have used history as a weapon against the far right. Again, it does not matter whether or not far right parties actually possess the ideological baggage of fascism for them to be effectively linked with it. But as I argue below, history can only be an effective weapon where there is an elite consensus renouncing the state’s wartime behavior and a commitment to eliminate any vestiges of support for it. This elite consensus has been the most solid, and politically important, in Germany.

III. Germany: The Culture of Contrition

In the immediate postwar period, it seemed scarcely unimaginable that Germany would later become *the* internationally recognized model of a society that has critically examined its shameful past and turned contrition into a form of statecraft. Leaders from across the political spectrum in the late 1940s and 1950s generally portrayed Germans as the victims of a small clique of Nazi fanatics who had hijacked the German state. The Christian Democratic Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s “founding myth” of postwar Germany was designed to avoid alienating the millions of Germans who had embraced Nazism. Although Social Democrats spoke more explicitly about German complicity than Christian Democrats, they were unwilling to challenge Adenauer’s policy of rapidly reintegrating former Nazis into German politics and society through broad amnesties. Although Adenauer did recognize Germany’s moral burden by paying reparations to Israel, the Nazi past was nearly altogether absent from German political discourse in the first several postwar decades.¹⁹

This began to change in the 1960s when the ideological cleavage between the German Right and Left widened. A series of trials, including the Eichmann trial in Israel, and parliamentary debates about removing the statute of limitations for crimes against humanity raised the importance of the Nazi past in contemporary politics. Members of the leftist Student Movement pointed out the ideological and personal continuities between Nazi Germany and the Federal Republic, and used them as a weapon against the political establishment. The anti-authoritarian “New Left” that grew out of the student movement, and later coalesced into the Green party, defined itself as a reaction to the Nazi past.²⁰ The Right, for its part, drew parallels between the student movement and the radicalization of the Left that contributed to the collapse of Weimar. When some fringe movements of the New Left turned to terrorism in the 1970s, conservatives argued that this was a consequence of a “false mastering of the past” which had destroyed traditional political values, such as patriotism.²¹ Conservative politicians and intellectuals called for Germany to develop a “normal” national identity, which involved redefining Germany’s relationship with its history. While not denying the crimes of

¹⁹ On early efforts to deal with the Nazi past in Germany, see Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Norbert Frei, *Adenauer and the Nazi Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003?).

²⁰ Andrei S. Markovits and Philip S. Gorski, *The German Left: Red, Green and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK.: 1993), 18-21; As Green politician Joschka Fischer once remarked, “most of us became Greens precisely because of German history.” *Die Zeit*, 7 February 1985.

²¹ Alfred Dregger (CDU), quoted in Helmut Dubiel, *“Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte”* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999), 156.

Nazism, conservatives emphasized the positive sides of German history and claimed that the Left's obsession with the years 1933-1945 was hampering Germany's political development.

This simmering debate between Right and Left reached a new peak in the mid-1980s. Two factors contributed to the explosion of public debate about the Nazi past. First, upon coming to power in 1982 Chancellor Helmut Kohl identified "normalization" of the Nazi past as one of his central goals. Second, the passing of several forty-year anniversaries related to the Nazi past— and particularly the fortieth anniversary of Germany's capitulation on May 8th, 1945-- gave Kohl the opportunity to stage-manage several commemorations consistent with his preference to "allow the past to pass away." The visit by President Reagan and Kohl to the Bitburg cemetery, where former members of the Waffen-SS were buried, was to mark the symbolic end of the Second World War.

Yet things did not go as planned, in large part because Kohl miscalculated the degree of opposition within German society toward putting the past to rest. Members of the student movement had, by the early 1980s, come to occupy important positions within politics and the media. The German public had also been exposed to a powerful, if maudlin, reminder of the Nazi past in the form of the Hollywood mini-series "Holocaust" which millions of Germans watched in 1979.²² If Kohl had hoped to normalize German history, his actions had the unintended effect of transforming the Nazi past into a salient political issue for the German Left.

Public deliberation about the Nazi past was intense, and the details of that debate cannot be reproduced here. The important point is that the balance of political forces adopting "contrite" positions toward the Nazi past shifted fundamentally as a result. To put it simply, the Left won. Bitburg created a public relations fiasco that rendered conservatives wary of trying to normalize the Nazi past. Moreover, several important figures within the Christian Democratic camp, particularly President Richard von Weizsäcker and CDU Party Chairman Heiner Geissler, publicly sided with those politicians and intellectuals who demanded that contrition for the Nazi past remain a central duty for all Germans. A discernable shift occurred within intellectual circles as well. When Ernst Nolte published an article challenging the notion that the Holocaust was a unique event, and was thus comparable to other atrocities such as Stalinism and genocide in Cambodia, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote a passionate rebuttal. This "Historians' Debate" (*Historikerstreit*) was carried out in the pages of Germany's prominent newspapers and weeklies for several years, and nearly every German intellectual of any stature participated in it.²³ In the end, Nolte stood virtually alone.

As politicians and elites reached a consensus, contrition became the only publicly acceptable position for politicians to take regarding the Nazi past. Contrition became, in other words, the cornerstone of what I refer to as "political correctness-German style." Like race in the United States, the Nazi past has become the "third rail" in German politics, and politicians who have challenged the contrition discourse have seen their careers end within a matter of days.²⁴ At the same time, German politicians are expected to participate in ceremonies marking critical events in the Holocaust (such as the Pogroms of November 9, 1938 and the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1944) and to demonstrate contrition in relations with other foreign countries, especially Israel and Poland.

What is the relationship between the rise of the culture of contrition and the fortunes of right-wing populism in Germany? The Republicans (REPS) emerged during the height of debates about the Nazi past in 1983, and rejection of the contrition narrative was always a central element of its members' political ideology. The party's leader, Franz Schönhuber, had lost his job as a radio announcer in Bavaria after he published a book defending his record in the Waffen-SS. During speeches at the REPS' first party congress, party founders called for an end to "mastering the past"

²² On this point, see Andrei Markovits and Beth Noveck, "Germany," in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, ed. David S. Wyman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 428-32.

²³ On the Historians' Debate, see Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

²⁴ An example was the former President of the Bundestag Phillip Jenninger (CDU). On November 9, 1988, Jenninger delivered a speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Pogromnacht* (also referred to as "Kristallnacht") before the German Bundestag. Although Jenninger was clearly not attempting to defend ordinary Germans who participated in attacks on Jews, a combination of poor speechwriting and oratorical skills gave the impression that he was. SPD and Green parliamentarians left the room in protest, and CDU politicians convinced Jenninger to resign the next day.

and for Germans to develop a healthy national identity. The very first page of the 1987 party program laments that “the war propaganda of the victorious powers has entered our history books, and our youth must believe their exaggerations and falsifications to a large degree because an objective history is not possible.”²⁵ In-depth interviews with REP politicians revealed that many joined the party specifically because of the party’s defense of Germany’s wartime history. The rise of the REPS was thus, in part, a by-product of the public debate about the Nazi past.

But the REPS’ failure to reproduce the gains of other right-wing populist parties across Western Europe was also intimately connected with the results of that debate. After initial breakthroughs in several state elections in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the REPS won only 2.5% of the vote in national parliamentary elections in 1994 and quickly became politically irrelevant. During its brief heyday, however, the party received enormous attention from German political parties, the media, and civil society. When the REPs captured 7.5% in the West Berlin state election in 1989, all of these forces immediately focused on the meaning of the REPs for German democracy. The overriding consensus was that right-wing populism represented a threat that needed to be repulsed.

The “culture of contrition” both structured political and social actors’ reactions to a new far right party and provided them with weapons for combating it. For parties and intellectuals on the left, it was patently unacceptable for a party with a revisionist reading of the Nazi past to consolidate itself in Germany. Social Democrats, Greens, trade unionists, and a variety of groups from civil society organized to battle the REPS at every opportunity. This entailed organizing protests during REP campaign events and meetings, harassing REP politicians and party members, and blocking public and private venues for REP political activity. While some have deemed this behavior “helpless antifascism,” these acts of disruption, repeated hundreds of times across Germany, had a large cumulative effect. As I detail in depth elsewhere, they undermined the REPS ability to recruit capable party members and perform many of the necessary tasks of political organization.²⁶

Although the German Right was less involved in protest activity, its response was no less consequential for the development of the REPs. The CDU/CSU could have conceivably agreed to cooperate with the new party, particularly because the REPS went to great pains to represent themselves as ‘national conservative’ and thus potential coalition partners. There were indeed isolated politicians within the Christian Democratic camp who argued for this course. Yet the overwhelming response within the CDU/CSU was that anything short of complete delegitimation and marginalization of the REPS was politically impossible. Kohl’s drive to make Germany a ‘normal’ nation had paradoxically turned contrition into a pillar of German political culture. Not only would overtures to the REPs reignite charges that Christian Democrats were attempting to bury the Nazi past, but many (perhaps most) German conservatives believed that right-wing populism was a dangerous and politically illegitimate force in the successor state of the Third Reich.²⁷

In contrast to many other parties on the Right in Western Europe, the CDU/CSU adopted a strict and comprehensive policy of ‘marginalization’ (*ausgrenzung*) toward the far right. *Ausgrenzung* prohibited personal contact with REP politicians, reliance of REP votes to pass legislation, and support for any REP candidate or proposal. This occurred at every political level. Even party members in communal parliaments, which are not normally known for their ideological battles, were instructed to vote against the most mundane proposals of REP politicians, such as the installation of a traffic light, on principle. Critically, the central justification for this policy was based on the CDU/CSU’s dramatic change of position regarding the Nazi past. The CDU party chairman Heiner Geissler justified *ausgrenzung* on an internal party report that found that the REPs were not a possible coalition partner because they sought to downplay the Nazi past.²⁸ Edmund Stoiber, the leader of the CSU, also

²⁵ Die Republikaner, *Parteiprogramm* (1987).

²⁶ These arguments are extended in David Art, “Reacting to the Radical Right: Lessons from Germany and Austria,” forthcoming *Party Politics* (Spring 2007).

²⁷ This point emerged in dozens of in-depth interviews by the author with CDU and CSU politicians conducted in 2001-2002 in Berlin, Stuttgart, and Munich.

²⁸ Richard Stöss, *Die Extreme Recht in Der Bundesrepublik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1989), 215.

grounded *ausgrenzung* in part on the REPs' "irresponsible dealing" with the past and the party's similarity to Nazi demagoguery.²⁹

By preventing the REPS from forming coalitions, by protesting against them, and by generally using the rhetorical weapons of the German "lessons of history," political elites in (West) Germany created insurmountable problems for the REPS. The particular way in which Germans have confronted the Nazi past has thus proved to be a powerful constraint on right-wing populism. It must be emphasized that this was not the inevitable result of Germany's Nazi past, for even this past has no inherent meaning. As noted above, German elites held different views about the years 1933-1945 over the postwar decades. It was through the process of public debate that the "culture of contrition" became a requirement for German politicians from both Right and Left. As a final note, this culture only prevails in the former West Germany where such a public debate was possible. In eastern Germany, very different patterns of memory prevailed and the far right has found much more hospitable terrain.³⁰

IV. France: The Shadow of Vichy

For nearly five decades, the myth of the French nation united in resistance against foreign occupation was a central, and uncontested, part of French political culture. The construction of this narrative began immediately after the end of the Second World War. Charles De Gaulle and his followers consciously exaggerated the scope of the internal Resistance to include everyone except a small band of traitors.³¹ French men and woman, the majority of whom had been neither resisters nor collaborators, were invited to identify with the Resistance, which was presented as "an abstraction, an achievement not of the résistants but of the nation as a whole."³² The Gaullists maintained that "True France" had never ceased to exist during the Occupation and was embodied in the Resistance. Vichy was a "parenthesis," an aberration in French history, and Gaullists categorically denied that Vichy had any connection with French society or with French political traditions.

The French Communist Party's (PCF) narrative of the war years was similarly exculpatory. The party glorified its role in the Resistance, which it conceived as a national insurrection, the culmination of a revolutionary struggle that had begun with the French Revolution, and continued in the Revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871. The PCF lauded the French people, and specifically the French working class, for their heroic role in this national insurrection. Like Gaullists, Communists maintained that the nation had rejected fascist ideology and resisted, either passively or actively, from the beginning of the occupation.

The view that France had been a nation of resisters was thus shared by both the French Right and Left. It was only in the 1990s that this hegemonic discourse unraveled, and that the question of French complicity in the Holocaust became the subject of public debate. Although it is true that Marcel Ophuis' 1968 film "The Sorrow and the Pity" had challenged the heroic wartime narrative, and that the historian Robert Paxton's 1973 book *Vichy France* radically altered the historiography of the Vichy era, these critical examinations of French complicity hardly penetrated beyond a rather narrow intellectual circle.³³

The rise and consolidation of the National Front occurred before Vichy became a salient issue in French politics. In 1983, the FN managed an electoral coup in by-elections in Dreux, an economically depressed city on the outskirts of Paris. But perhaps more important than the showing itself (the FN only gained 9% of the vote) was the fact that the center-right formed a join list with the

²⁹ Hans-Gerd Jaschke, *Die Republikaner* (Bonn: Verlag J.H. Dietz, 1993), 59.

³⁰ For an analysis of the far right in eastern Germany, see David Art, "The Wild, Wild East: Why the DVU Does Not Matter but the NPD Does," *German Politics and Society* (Winter 2004).

³¹ Stanley Hoffman writes that de Gaulle was a firm believer in "pedagogical sublimation" and was fully aware of the mythical nature of his narrative of the war years. Hoffman, foreword to *The Vichy Syndrome*, by Henri Rousso (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), viii.

³² Rousso, *Vichy Syndrome*, 71.

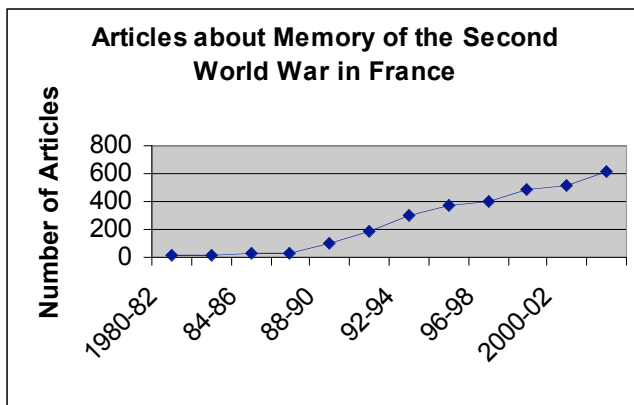
³³ In fact, France's most prestigious publisher, Gallimard, rejected Paxton's book for publication.

extreme Right party in order to defeat the Left. Neither the FN’s xenophobia, nor its open defense of the Vichy regime, appeared to rule it out as a potential alliance partner. To be sure, conservative politicians took different positions on the legitimacy of the FN. While Jacques Chirac, then the mayor of Paris, ruled out any deals with the FN, other politicians, such as Charles Pasqua and Raymond Barre, were ambiguous. Pasqua famously noted in 1988, for example, that the mainstream right shared the same values as the FN. Many conservative voters were also sympathetic toward cooperating with the radical right. Even after Le Pen had referred to the gas chambers as a “minor detail” in the Second World War, nearly one-third of mainstream right sympathizers supported electoral deals with the FN.³⁴

The French Left was also complicit in the rise of the FN. When Le Pen complained that he was not receiving enough media attention in 1982, Mitterrand convinced the leaders of France’s three public television channels to increase their coverage of the party.³⁵ In 1986, Mitterrand’s government changed the electoral rules for the 1986 presidential and parliamentary elections, replacing the two-ballot majoritarian system with proportional representation. The FN, which had captured 9.7%, gained 35 seats in the National Assembly. This bolstered the party’s national profile and endowed it with legitimacy.

During the 1980s, the link between the Vichy past and the FN was rarely made. Mitterrand himself had good reason not to bring up the Vichy past. As a young man, the President had been a junior minister in the Vichy regime before switching over to the Resistance. As President, Mitterrand repeatedly refused to apologize on behalf of the French state for the persecution of Jews. Before his death, he reiterated that “France was not responsible” for crimes committed by a “minority of activists who seized the occasion of the defeat to take power.”³⁶ He also played a central role in preventing the trials of several important Vichy officials, such as Rene Bousquet, and delaying the trials of others, such as Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon.

Table 3: The Memory of World War Two in France³⁷



It was only in the mid 1990s that a national debate about the Vichy past occurred. The proximate cause for it was the trial of Touvier, a member of Vichy’s national militia who was convicted of committing crimes against humanity in 1994. After that, calls by Jewish groups for an official apology from the French state became increasingly strident and received greater media attention. In 1995, Jacques Chirac became the first French President to acknowledge the complicity of

³⁴ Jonathan Marcus, *The National Front in French Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 143.

³⁵ Nonna Mayer, “The French National Front,” in *The New Politics of the Right*, Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall eds. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 21.

³⁶ *Le Monde*, 18 July 1995.

³⁷ The number of articles was generated from a Lexis-Nexis guided news search of major newspapers using the search terms (full text): France, Second World War, and Memory.

the French state in the Holocaust. In his address commemorating the Vél d'Hiv roundup, Chirac emphasized the domestic support for the Nazis' racial policies and programs, stating that "the criminal insanity of the occupying forces was seconded by the French, by the French state."³⁸ The President's speech also sparked demonstrations of contrition from other important groups in French society. For the first time ever, the French Catholic Church apologized for its silence on the Jewish deportations. France's main police union also apologized to Jews and expressed its "eternal regret" for the arrests made under Vichy.³⁹

It was in this atmosphere of contrition that the trial of Maurice Papon, a Vichy civil servant charged with deporting Jews, commenced in 1997. However, the Papon trial demonstrated that contrition had not yet become a political consensus. Philip Seguin, the head of the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) denounced the "climate of collective expiation and permanent self-flagellation" that was damaging public spirit. Other Gaullists distanced themselves from Chirac and asserted that since "Vichy was not France," France could not be held accountable for crimes against humanity. They considered the Papon trial a pretext for "throwing serious discredit on the honor of our country, on General de Gaulle, and on the Resistance." In an open letter published in the conservative daily *Le Figaro* titled "Enough! Enough! Enough!," Seguin charged that the Papon trial had become nothing less than "the trial of General de Gaulle and Gaullism" as well as "the trial of France."⁴⁰

This defense of the Gaullist narrative was clearly motivated by partisan competition as well as by Seguin's and other politicians' fidelity to de Gaulle's legacy. Seguin nearly admitted as much when he questioned whether "this delirious atmosphere...does not serve an implicit objective: that of continuing to prop-up the electoral force of the National Front." French conservatives like Seguin did not want the FN to become the primary beneficiary of a backlash against the growing culture of contrition in France. For his part, Le Pen was certainly representing his party as the defender of French history, arguing that "politically organized Judaism" was becoming an insidious influence.

Since the Papon trial, the French government has taken further steps to raise the salience of the Vichy past in contemporary politics and an elite consensus has emerged. On July 16 2000, the country marked its first national day in memory of the racist and anti-Semitic crimes of the French State." The month before, President Chirac had opened a permanent exhibit in the national military museum in the Invalides that documented the persecution of French Jews by their fellow countrymen and their state.⁴¹ During the Presidential campaign of 2002, in which Le Pen effectively ended the Socialist Prime Minister's Lionel Jospin's political career by finishing second to Chirac in the first round, Chirac and elites from across the political spectrum used the Vichy past as a weapon against the far right. "In our darkest hour," Chirac reminded an audience at an election rally, "it was the leaders of the extreme right who betrayed the French people by allying themselves with the forces of evil and our nation's enemies."⁴² He accused the FN of "embracing a past of shame, cowardice, and betrayal" and claimed that "history has definitively disqualified them from speaking in the name of France."⁴³

French elites have thus begun to embrace contrition and, like their counterparts in Germany, use history as a weapon against the far right. In contrast to Germany, however, public debates about the Nazi past occurred after a right-wing populist party had consolidated itself in the party system. It is interesting to speculate whether an earlier, critical, and sustained examination of Vichy would have constrained the rise of the FN. Of more current relevance is whether the unfolding culture of contrition in France will continue to keep the far right from wielding a greater degree of political power.

³⁸ The Vél D'Hiv was the former bicycle race track where French police imprisoned 13,000 Parisian Jews before sending them to Nazi death camps. The round-up, which proceeded contrary to German orders and without the participation of German soldiers, stands as an important example of Vichy's willing collaboration in the Final Solution. *Le Monde*, 18 July 1995.

³⁹ *Financial Times*, 1 April 1998

⁴⁰ Insert *Le Monde* references

⁴¹ *The Times*, 17 July 2000

⁴² *The Independent*, 3 May 2002

⁴³ *The Scotsman*, 3 May 2002

V. Italy: Mussolini's Children?

Of the three cases under examination here, it is in Italy where a critical public discussion of the wartime past has, until recently, been the most limited. Although the brutality of the Italian Fascist regime pales in comparison to that of the Nazis, Italians did systematically commit crimes against humanity in both Africa and in the Balkans. Yet, as one scholar notes, "Italian actions against others are still not part of the broader national consciousness."⁴⁴ As a result, there exists virtually no literature on the memory of Italian war crimes. Politicians do not discuss them. Italians, by and large, still prefer to think of themselves as victims, and the older generation in particular continues to identify with the antifascism on which the Republic was founded.

Still, an antifascist consensus—always much stronger in the North than in the South-- kept the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI) on the margins of Italian politics for nearly five decades. The MSI did enter into some local governing coalitions in the early postwar period, and the party consistently polled around 6 percent in national parliamentary elections. Yet because the ruling Christian Democrats (DC) ruled out cooperation with the neo-fascists, the MSI was confined to the political ghetto until the dramatic collapse of the Italian party system in the early 1990s.

As several scholars have noted, the dramatic reversal of the MSI's fortunes was primarily the result of changes in the political environment.⁴⁵ When the 'Clean Hands' (*Mani Pulite*) investigation exposed the massive degree of corruption within both the DC and the PSI (the Italian Socialist Party), the MSI became one of the only existing political forces untouched by the scandal. But the MSI could never have taken advantage of the crisis in Italian politics had it not received the support of other political actors, particularly of Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi, the media tycoon who formed his own party Forza Italia ('Go Italy') in 1993, overturned the MSI's status as a pariah party within a matter of months. His first important action was to express support for Gianofranco Fini, the ambitious young leader of the MSI, who was a candidate for the mayor of Rome in November 1993. Berlusconi's endorsement "If I were in Rome I would certainly vote for Fini" made headlines across Italy.⁴⁶ Although Fini did not win the elections, he placed a strong second, winning 47% of the vote. Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of the Duce, also posted a remarkable showing, winning 43% in the second-round of the mayoral election in Naples.

The next step in the so-called "customs clearance" (*Sdoganamento*) of the MSI occurred when Berlusconi entered into an electoral coalition with Fini's newly founded *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN). After his success in Rome, Fini sought to revamp the public's perception of the extreme right and succeeded in convincing party delegates to dissolve the MSI in favor of the AN, which Fini described as "a common home of all the right."⁴⁷ Although interviews with the party rank-and-file suggest that the neo-fascists had changed in name only, Berlusconi announced that he was forming an electoral alliance (The Freedom Alliance) with both the AN and Umberto Bossi's Northern League to contest the 1994 parliamentary elections. After nearly fifty years of isolation, the Italian extreme right had come in from the cold.

Berlusconi's near monopoly of Italian private television companies, which gives him the ability to "swamp the television screens with endless political commercials," was another critical factor in legitimating the AN.⁴⁸ Fini and Bossi were presented as politicians like any other, and their electoral alliances with Berlusconi brought them favorable news coverage at virtually no cost. In the

⁴⁴ James Waltson, "History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps," *The Historical Journal* 40, 1 (1997): 183.

⁴⁵ Piero Ignazi, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003); Tom Gallagher, "Exit from the Ghetto: The Italian Far Right in the 1990s," in *The Politics of the Extreme Right*, Paul Hainsworth ed. (New York: Pinter, 2000), 64-86.

⁴⁶ *La Repubblica*, 24 November 1993.

⁴⁷ M.J. Bull and J. Newell, "Italy Changes Course: The 1994 Elections and the Victory of the Right," *Parliamentary Affairs* 48, 1 (1995): 72-99.

⁴⁸ Paul Statham, "Berlusconi, the Media, and the New Right in Italy," *Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics* vol. 1, no. 1 (1996): 96.

event, the AN received 13.5% of the vote in the 1994 elections, nearly tripling its total from two years earlier and earning five places in Berlusconi's cabinet. Although the AN's first foray into government was to be short-lived (Berlusconi's Freedom Alliance lasted only nine months), the party, and Fini in particular, profited enormously from the experience. By early 1995, public opinion polls showed that Fini had become the most popular politician in Italy.⁴⁹

The AN's achievement of political respectability within a few years occurred without the party truly changing its attitudes toward the past. Fini's 1994 description of Mussolini as the "greatest statesman of the 20th century" sparked a minor uproar from the left, but did not come close to disqualifying him from public office. Nor did an interview with the newspaper *La Stampa* in which Fini said that "there are periods in which liberty is not the most important value. Fascism suppressed liberty of association for the benefit of social progress."⁵⁰ Outright praise for fascism was also common among other AN politicians. One of Fini's allies in Milan, Ignazio La Ruzza, described Mussolini as the historical figure he most admired. Roberto Predolin, La Ruzza's running mate, reserved that distinction for the Romanian fascist Corneliu Codreanu.⁵¹ Interviews with AN rank-and-file demonstrate that historical apologia and revisionism are widespread.⁵²

In marked contrast to Germany, and to France after 1995, historical memory in Italy did not preclude a far right party, and indeed a party that traced its roots directly to fascism, from forming coalitions and coming to power in Italy. This newfound permissiveness must be understood in the context of a general reevaluation of, and even a certain nostalgia for, the fascist era in Italian politics and society since the late 1980s.⁵³ As Paul Ginsborg notes, the Italian left also played a role in this historical revisionism by speaking the language of "national reconciliation" and letting "bygones be bygones." Francisco Rutelli, the left of center Mayor of Rome, even proposed naming a square after Giuseppe Bottai, a supposedly 'liberal' fascist leader.⁵⁴ Against this backdrop of revisionism, Berlusconi's contention that Mussolini had "never killed anyone" and "used to send people on vacation in internal exile" becomes more understandable.⁵⁵ And with Alessandra Mussolini regularly praising her grandfather on the Italian talk-show circuit, it is little wonder that Berlusconi's remark did not provoke the political fallout that a similar remark in France or Germany would have engendered.

Interestingly, the most significant efforts to atone for the fascist past have come from an unlikely source: Gianfranco Fini has changed course dramatically over the last several years. In November 2003, Fini visited Israel and denounced Fascism as an era of "absolute evil" in Italian history.⁵⁶ On the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (January 27, 2005), Fini spoke of a "moral duty to transmit to future generations the memory of this atrocity which must never be repeated, in any form." He even noted that "there are some people in Italy who, either through ignorance or bad faith, tend to minimize saying that the 1938 [anti-Semitic] laws did not have an important and tragic role in the persecution and extermination of the Jews."⁵⁷ It was statements like these that led Alessandra Mussolini and other hardliners to bolt from the AN.

What is one to make of Fini's contrition? As the Italian Foreign Minister, Fini has an obligation to uphold Italy's international reputation. Yet Fini's about-face has more to do with remaking his own party than limiting the damage of Berlusconi's gaffes. Visiting Israel has become the most efficient way for nationalist politicians in Europe to gain acceptability and to insulate themselves against charges of right-wing populism and chauvinism. Fini has also used history to move his party

⁴⁹ *Corriere della Sera*, 27 February 1995.

⁵⁰ Gallagher, 76.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵² Ignazi, 2003.

⁵³ *The Guardian*, 10 September, 2001.

⁵⁴ Paul Ginsborg, *Silvio Berlusconi* (New York: Verso, 2004), 155.

⁵⁵ *International Herald Tribune*, 29 October 2003.

⁵⁶ ANSA, 24 November 2003.

⁵⁷ ANSA, 27 January 2005.

from the extreme right to the center right in Italian politics. It is an open question whether the rank and file have followed their leader, but Fini recognized that refashioning the party as a national conservative one and cutting any lingering stigma of fascism were in the AN's long-term interests.

Over the last two years, the political salience of the war years has increased dramatically as the left has accused members of the Berlusconi government of fascist sympathies, while politicians like La Russa and Alemanno have refused to follow Fini's lead in categorically condemning fascism. The situation is similar to that in Austria, where elites continue to debate Austria's victim status. It is unclear whether this period of debate in Italy will lead to a new elite consensus, or whether the past will simply continue to be instrumentalized for partisan political purposes without a more substantive discussion that would help to counter a profound lack of historical knowledge among the general public. In any event, the lack of anything approaching a "culture of contrition" continues to provide space for both historical revisionism and far right politics in the country that first gave rise to fascism.

VI. The European Dimension

Before turning to contrition as a nascent European value, let me qualify the claims I have made to this point. I am *not* contending that historical interpretations of fascism, collaboration, or neutrality have been the only important variable in the divergent development of the far right across Western Europe. Clearly, electoral institutions matter— one can only speculate about the vote-share of the British National Party (BNP) in a PR system as opposed to first-past-the-post. Cross-national patterns of immigration and unemployment are also clearly important in any story of variation, although it is significant that some states that have experienced both in large quantities (Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands) have not developed strong right-wing populist parties. Conversely, some states without the combination of high immigration rates and unemployment (Norway), or without high immigration (Italy), have produced a powerful far right.

What I have argued is that ideas—in this case ideas about history—also play a central role in explaining the divergent development of far right parties in postwar Western Europe. In states with a strong or nascent "culture of contrition," the far right has been stigmatized by mainstream political forces and has been unable to consolidate itself in the party system (see table 3). This describes the situation in Germany, and appears to pertain in both the Netherlands and Sweden, although more research on these cases is needed.

Table 4: Historical Memory and Far Right Success⁵⁸

Elite Historical Consensus

		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Far Right	<i>Strong</i>	France Norway Denmark	Austria Italy Belgium Switzerland
	<i>Weak</i>	Germany Sweden Netherlands	

In states where historical consciousness remains polarized and elites continue to offer conflicting views of the past, the far right has had a far easier time recruiting allies and has generally benefited from highly-charged public debates. Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Italy fit this pattern. Norway and Denmark represent cases where far right parties have become strong without using history in

⁵⁸ Success here is defined as in Table One.

partisan politics. In France, as I have argued, the FN consolidated itself in the party system before an elite consensus emerged that the party was unacceptable given the Vichy past.

Given the small number of cases, and the large number of variables, it is impossible to determine the effect of ideas relative to other factors. But if the reader has been convinced that ideas about the past do in fact matter, then this paper has achieved its central goal. Further work might analyze any of the cases I have touched upon in more depth, or perhaps consider the influence of historical memory on partisan politics in other cases; the United States, South Africa, and states in Central and Eastern Europe might prove particularly fruitful.

Returning to Europe, there have been significant attempts to make remembrance of past atrocities a European value. In late January 2000, the heads of the fifteen member states of the European Union met in Stockholm for a conference on the Holocaust. When the Austrian Christian Democrats formed a national government with the FPÖ several days later, the response from the fourteen other member states was dramatic and unprecedented. Arguing that the presence of an openly apologist political party in a governing coalition violated European norms, the EU fourteen imposed symbolic sanctions on Austria. These remained in force for over six months, during which the Austrian Right railed against such discrimination but, at the same time, quickly pushed legislation through parliament that provided restitution for slave laborers and for Jews whose property was “aryanized” under Nazism. More recently, French politicians have argued that a critical examination of the Armenian Genocide on the part of the Turkish government become a prerequisite for EU accession talks. A small diplomatic row ensued, and a Turkish government official noted angrily that “there was no such genocide, so there is no question of recognizing a genocide that did not happen.”⁵⁹ Yet several months later, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan did call for an impartial study by historians into the deaths of more than 1.5 million Armenians between 1915 and 1923, marking the first sign of change in official attitudes toward this past.⁶⁰

Like groups within European states, the EU has clearly been using history for political motives. In the Austrian case, it is no coincidence that the two most vocal proponents of the sanctions were Belgium and France, both of which faced domestic problems with large far right parties. The French also have a host of other reasons for keeping Turkey out of the EU for as long as possible, and clearly recognized the potential for the Armenian issue to complicate accession talks. But the increasing use of history in politics may lead to its further institutionalization. Recently, European leaders commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (January 27, 1945) and the EU assembly unanimously adopted a resolution declaring January 27th “European Holocaust Memorial Day” across the EU. And after Prince Harry of Great Britain showed up at a costume party wearing a swastika armband, Germans called for an EU ban on Nazi symbols. Although the proposal was shelved due to concerns that it would limit freedom of expression, European leaders are currently discussing a compromise deal. As in so many other policy arenas, the institutionalization of contrition and remembrance would signal a “Germanization” of the European Union. Whether or not this would partially free Germany from shouldering the lion’s share of the burden for Nazi atrocities remains an open, and potentially vexing, question.

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⁵⁹ *The Times*, 15 December 2004

⁶⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 2005.