



The sensitive scars of the Second World War in teaching European history

Maaris Raudsepp^a and Anna Zadora^b

^aTallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia; ^bUniversity of Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyse the Second World War (WW2) and the Holocaust as genocide during WW2 as sensitive topics in history teaching as perceived by 719 teachers from Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Serbia and the Netherlands. Using the thematic content analysis of open answers to an online questionnaire we explore the reasons for the sensitivity of these topics. The reasons for sensitivity were found to lie in cognitive and emotional barriers to treating the atrocities, violence and discrepancies between different perspectives on WW2 of social memory groups. A relatively new dimension, confirmed by the research, is the problem of the aestheticisation of the violent past. This can lead to banalisation and even legitimisation of the violence and aspects of the violence that pupils perceive to be fascinating. The results are discussed in the framework of multi-layered collective memory.

KEYWORDS

History; teaching; the Holocaust; atrocities; Second World War

Introduction

The historical significance of the Second World War (WW2) cannot be overestimated – it is a transnational event that has shaped much of our contemporary world – from geopolitical architecture to collective patterns of thought and action, underlying values, norms and institutions. Empirical studies of global historical knowledge show that WW2 is the most frequently nominated event in the free recall of events in world history, and Hitler the most often recalled individual in collective memory (Liu et al. 2005, 2012).

Behind the consensual significance of WW2 there is a plurality of historical experiences during the war and diversity of representations and points of view. For example, evaluations of the effects of WW2 differ among pupils from victorious, defeated and uninvolved countries (Paez et al. 2008; Bobowik et al. 2014). Kattago (2009) distinguishes three broad narratives about WW2: a Western, a Soviet/Russian, and a post-Soviet narrative – each of them highlighting different aspects of the war. Although on the transnational level, since the 1990s, formal and informal rules and norms regarding Holocaust remembrance and education, have been put in place, memory cultures in different parts of Europe have adopted these norms differently (Kucia 2016).

The teaching of WW2 today takes place in fluid contexts. As the generations with direct experience of WW2 disappear, so the role of communicative (living, embodied)

memory (Assmann 2008) diminishes. The meanings of WW2 and the Holocaust are revised by growing forces of nationalism and radical fundamentalism. Immigrant pupils in the classroom may bring with them conflicting viewpoints on the history of WW2. The expansion of historical culture to the digital sphere provides young people with novel forms of engagement with historical events, such as, videogames (Kansteiner 2017).

In this article, our aim is to describe and analyse the reasons for difficulties in teaching WW2 including the atrocities of the Holocaust, as revealed in the perceived sensitivity of WW2 related issues among teachers across Europe and Israel. We outline some dimensions of collective 'problem space' in teaching about WW2 today. Inherent tensions between different *components* of historical culture and different *layers* of collective memory are used as an explanatory framework complementing the approach adopted by Goldberg, Wagner and Petrović (this issue).

Inherent tensions in history teaching

Teachers in general can be described as 'dilemma managers' (Lampert 1985, 192) who accept conflicts as an endemic and continuing condition of their work. The constructed and interpretative nature of any historical knowledge adds tensions especially to history teaching. We proceed from the hypothesis that perceived sensitivity emerges as a consequence of an actualised tension between different components of historical culture. There are tensions between different dimensions (cognitive, political and aesthetic) of historical culture (Rüsen 2005) as well as between different components of historical culture – academic historiography, school history and popular history (Carretero 2017a).

There are certain differences between academic historiography and different varieties of non-academic (popular, public) history. Ideally, history as academic scholarship is focused on critical analysis of evidence. Non-academic history is focused on identity enhancement and promoting collective self-esteem. Academic history is never 'done', it is transformed through new evidence, whereas collective memory strives towards rigid forms (narrative templates, essentialist identities) (Wertsch 2008).

In psychological terms, these spheres of knowledge – thinking with the help of scientific or everyday concepts – require qualitatively different cognitive mechanisms (Toomela 2003). Unlike other school subjects, in history teaching academic knowledge has to compete with lay understandings of the past, possibly contributing to the issue sensitivity. Transformation of pre-schooling historical consciousness into critical historical thinking may be an educational goal but we do not know of any studies on its effectiveness.

Non-academic history is carried by different layers of collective memory and there are tensions within and between these. A multi-layered model of collective memory (Glaveanu 2017) includes three main arenas where the relation to the common past is constructed. The macro-societal level operates through stable and widely shared consensual collective/cultural representations; the meso-level concerns inter-group relations and operates through group-specific narratives and social representations, and the micro-level operates through individual remembering and personal meaning making (see Figure 1).

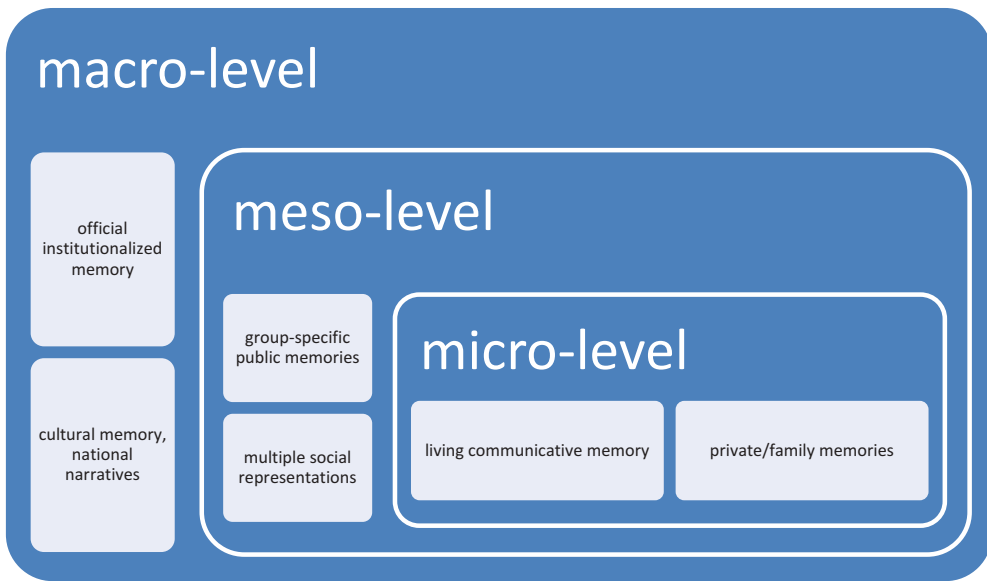


Figure 1. Layers and components of collective memory (according to Glaveanu 2017).

Macro-level processes of collective memory relating to the past proceed through the politics of memory that produces normative narratives and official versions of history. These are transmitted through school system, curricula, textbooks, as well as through institutionalised commemorations. In addition, national communities may have deeply engrained and widely shared storylines which can be used to generate multiple specific narratives with the same basic plot. A deep level of collective cultural memory has strong emotional resonances and is a fundamental part of the identity claims of a group (Wertsch 2002). National narratives are consensual ‘good stories’ for constructing national identity and cohesion. Moreover, they are very stable and may persist even if contrary evidence is produced by historians (see Grever and van der Vlies 2017). Examples of the national narrative of WW2 that are an integral part of positive national identity and contribute to national cohesion can be found in Russia (Great Patriotic War) (Wertsch 2002) and Finland (Meinander 2011).

Meso-level processes of intergroup relations and communication produce multiple social representations of history (Wagoner 2015), which reflect the point of view of particular mnemonic communities. The social representations of history ‘interact imperfectly with the reliability of sources [...] or the need to construct an accurate historical record’ (Jovchelovitch 2012, 444); they may, therefore, be controversial and polemical. In extreme cases, historically related groups with antagonistic interests may construct conflicting and inverse representations of the same shared event (so called hetero-referential representations (Sen and Wagner 2005)), where each group’s historic victory is perceived as entailing the other group’s defeat and each group’s painful loss confirms the other’s superiority. Social representations of WW2 differ among those who fought in enemy armies, among collaborators and members of resistance movements, combatants and civilians, in generational groups, etc. Group

level collective memory is closely related to group identity processes, which strive to build and maintain a positive self-image and minimise negative aspects of group identity. Other social psychological processes that shape collective memories are stereotyping and group essentialism. The tendency to use essentialist 'victim' or 'perpetrator' identity may lead to simplistic explanations of WW2 through psychological traits of Germans and of their leaders at that time or to the perception of Jews as model victims. A desire to enhance positive in-group identity is often behind the phenomena of competitive victimhood (as a means for gaining moral superiority) and perpetrator trauma. Memories of WW2 may also include competitive victor-hood – who is more responsible for victory in WW2 – the Soviet Union or the Allies? Power and status relations between groups are related to the differentiation of dominant and counter narratives of history.

On the micro-level, personal experiences and private perspectives of individuals and families shape the relation to the past. On this level, personally relevant communicative memory, which is transmitted through personal communication, dominates. The socialising mission of the very strong and rich in resources educational system is in competition with other social actors (Schissler 2005). Family is the first and the most credible actor of socialisation and can contradict official discourses transmitted by an educational system. Rosenzweig and Thelen argue that people 'prefer contracting their own versions of the past to digest those prepared by others' (1998, 38). In the digitalised context this micro-level 'vernacular' memory triumphs over institutionalised memory. The concept of 'microhistory' or 'everyday history' from the point of view of individuals who appeared after WW2 is also an element of the changing paradigms in history writing and teaching. It was a shift from glorious history written from the point of view of big actors (states, nations) to individual 'embodied' histories: personally experienced or transmitted by the family. Such embodied histories are more easily shared between groups and individuals, seem legitimate and are accepted without questioning. Kansteiner (2017) points to the fragmented, interactive and confrontational nature of memory culture in the digital sphere. A new contrast between settled and regimented *versus* fluid, fragmented and interactive digital memories has emerged.

All these components of memory culture participate in history teaching and help to perform its different (and sometimes competing) goals: a) promoting critical thinking and historical consciousness, and b) building collective identities (designated respectively 'enlightened' and 'romantic' goals by Carretero (2011)). The tension between these goals may be challenging for teachers. A critical stance may focus on the deconstruction of some aspects of collective memory or elite mythmaking (e.g., how the Holocaust has been used for political purposes) in order to create critical and informed citizens. In contrast, an identity building stance may tend towards using mythical narratives in order to cultivate a positive assessment of the past of one's own social group, enhance value consensus and shared moral emotions among pupils.

Different layers of collective memory may be differently emotionally charged depending on the strength of respective forms of identity (national, regional, social group, familial identity). Tensions between these layers of collective memory operate in the classroom (represented among pupils as well as the teachers), and outside it. History teachers have to coordinate these levels of collective memory, they are positioned as 'mediators between different fields or perspectives (academy, science, politics, different

nations, different worldviews or ideologies, etc.), or between different group-bound social memories' (Kello and Wagner 2017, 203).

The outlined theoretical scheme, which differentiates academic and non-academic aspects of historical consciousness, and different layers of collective memory, will help us to locate the perceived reasons of sensitivity as tensions between different components of historical consciousness, and propose means for overcoming them on the basis of underlying mechanisms.

Collective memory of WW2 in different countries¹

Although our aim is not comparative (due to different quality among the samples), we outline some characteristic features of collective memory of WW2 and the Holocaust in different countries, relating to their different roles in WW2 and their trajectory of post-war memory work and memory politics.

According to the *Finnish* national narrative (Meinander 2011), Finland fought in WW2 for its national survival with pure motives. Self-defence against the aggression of the Soviet Union during the Winter War united the Finnish nation, which was formerly divided in the civil war. The public memory emphasises national sacrifice and pride in Finnish military performance. It stresses the necessity of being deeply grateful to those who contributed to those achievements, most importantly war veterans, but also wartime women and the Finnish leadership. War is, paradoxically, seen as essentially positive and an indispensable experience, something that is fundamental to the very essence of the nation and part of making Finland what it is today (Meinander 2011). Growing scholarly research takes a more critical stance and pays attention to the darker and silenced sides of the wartime, which, however, hasn't yet contributed to a turn in the realm of public memory (Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012).

Estonia, Belarus and Serbia as *post-socialist societies* are similar in their recent focus on nation-building, profound changes in dominant official narratives and sharp societal divisions regarding history. For example, there are combatant groups that evoke controversial evaluations (e.g., legionaries of Wehrmacht in Latvia and Estonia are perceived as victims or heroes of war, or as war criminals (Kaprans 2016). Estonia and Belarus were part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. The history curriculum and textbooks presented the canonical version of the WW2 and the Great Patriotic War in all soviet republics (reproduced today by Russia), which is still alive among the older generation (see Wertsch 2002). Similar to other East European countries, new national narratives no longer depict the Soviet Union as a WW2 hero.

Estonia is an example of a divided society with regard to the WW2: veterans of the former enemy armies (Red army and Wehrmacht) live side by side and maintain divergent family memories and master narratives (fight against fascism vs implicit fight for Estonian national sovereignty). The mnemonic division between ethnic Estonians and Estonian Russian-speakers reflects not only polemical Estonian and Russian national narratives, but also reversal of official and counter-narratives on WW2. The Russian viewpoint has been largely ignored or disrespected in Estonian history textbooks (Pääbo 2011; Kello 2018) and official commemoration practices (Kattago 2008). The memory of the Holocaust has been relatively weakly integrated into the Estonian collective memory as it is overshadowed by stories of repressions during Stalinism (Weiss-Wendt 2009; Pääbo 2015). Controversies between the

Estonian and Russian communities over the commemoration of WW2 have become explicit in the so-called events of the Bronze night (the reaction to the relocation of a memory site) (Tamm 2012; Raudsepp and Wagner 2011).

In *Belarus*, history teaching is in general a very sensitive issue because current political authorities continue the old Soviet tradition of the massive use of history teaching as a means of legitimation. Teachers work under political pressure and often 'adjust' their opinion if they disagree with the official interpretation of the facts. There are two major competing traditions which divide Belarusian historiography: Soviet and nationalist (anti-Soviet). The Soviet tradition is strongly supported by the current authorities and promoted through the educational system. WW2 in its complexity (Partisans, Red Army, and collaboration) is considered as a part of the complex Soviet history. Belarus is the only post-Soviet state to have fully adopted the interpretation of both the former Soviet authorities and today's Belarusian political regime on the fundamental role played by WW2 in the construction of the country's historical narrative and national identity. This memory serves to sacralise the Soviet legacy and legitimise the present political system which is anchored in this legacy. The educational system aims to transmit the official Soviet interpretation of a sacred role played by the Second World War in the history of Belarus (Zadora 2016).

An intra-national divide concerning collective memory is also characteristic of *Serbia*. The complicated configuration of resistance movements in Serbia during WW2 has produced controversies both in the public sphere and among historians that are reflected in history textbooks (Stojanovic 2013). The dominant narrative about WW2 has been repeatedly inverted after the dissolution of Yugoslavia: since the year 2000, the representation of the competing resistance movements has been significantly changed in comparison to the socialist era and the 1990s – the evaluation of both the Chetnik and partisan movements has been changed in favour of the Chetniks. In the public discourse on WW2, Serbia is depicted as a victim-nation and the patterns of describing the Holocaust refer mainly to Serbian victims.

In *Israel*, the Holocaust is the most prominent constituent of Jewish collective memory and identity. It is excessively taught in schools and, paradoxically, serves as a means for collective empowerment (see Goldberg 2017a). Yet there are also controversial issues related to the Holocaust. For example, during the final solution, did the Judenraten 'collaborate with the devil'? Did the Zionist movement do all it could to save Jews? Should the allies be considered as bystanders or saviours? Is the Holocaust unique to the Jewish people? In today's politics, analogies with Nazis are frequently used.

Germany has the difficult identity position as the prototypical WW2 villain. Collective remembering of Hitler and the Nazis is one area where there appears to be little in-group favouritism in Germany: Holocaust denial is against the law, WW2 concentration camp visits are a part of the educational curriculum for school children, and service on a kibbutz in Israel may substitute the mandatory military service. Issues of collective guilt and collective shame pervade German collective remembering of the Nazi era (Liu and Sibley 2015). Paradoxically, a robust sense of pride related to a 'widely shared belief in Germany's extraordinary accomplishments in the arena of memory politics' has emerged (Kansteiner 2017, 307).

In *Austria* today, there are few public discussions about WW2 except for evaluations of the so-called 1938 Anschluss as annexation or occupation. A more prevalent are discussions of Austrians' involvement in the Holocaust. This issue also surfaces in the context of the restitution of works of art to Jewish families.

In *the Netherlands* there is ongoing sensitivity about Islamic pupils who deny the Holocaust (Ensel and Stremmelaaar 2013). Also, every spring there is debate about the national remembrance of WW2: which victim groups should be mentioned and who should be left out? There has been controversy as well about the invitation of German politicians to the ceremony and about the remembrance of German victims (soldiers or otherwise) and collaborators (Hondius 2010; Somers 2014). Another sensitivity is that a large majority of the Dutch Jewish population (75%) has been deported. The percentage is high compared to other European countries. This is a sensitive issue because suggests the willing and effective collaboration of the Dutch people with the Nazis in the deportation of Dutch Jews. Researchers have discussed and studied these events for decades (e.g., Griffioen and Zeller 2011).

In *France*, WW2 is rather marginal in political discourse because of the capitulation and the Vichy regime. This is particularly noticeable when compared to talk of WW1 which is treated as the sacred great war and the pride of French historical discourse. The present political context is also responsible for the marginalisation of WW2 and Holocaust issues because of 'victimhood competition': black and Muslim communities believe that Jews are the subject of special treatment with excessive information provided 'silencing' other atrocities. This attitude prevents appropriate social discussion and teaching about WW2 and the Holocaust.

Concerning the topic of WW2, we got a good 'diversity sample' (Jansen 2010) – there are countries with different roles in, and experiences of WW2, different collective memories of the Holocaust and different socio-political trajectories after the war. Typologically, we can distinguish opposites on several dimensions related to WW2, e.g., positive collective self-image (Finland) vs critical self-image (Germany), societal consensus (Finland, Israel) vs. societal divisions (Estonia, Belarus, Serbia), the centrality of the Holocaust in collective identity and memory (Israel and Western Europe) vs marginality of the Holocaust in national memory (Eastern European countries).

Method

The sample consisted of 719 teachers from Austria, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Serbia and The Netherlands. The data were collected in 2015 and 2016 within the context of an international study on sensitive historical issues (a part of the COST Action IS 1205, 'Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union'). The questionnaire on sensitive issues in history teaching (see details in Goldberg et al., [this issue](#)) included both predefined country-specific sensitive issues to be rated, as well as items which enabled open responses by respondents. Country-specific predefined sensitive issues explicitly included WW2 and the Holocaust, as well as WW2 related events and phenomena. The issues were assessed according to their perceived sensitivity in teaching.

The items used for qualitative analysis were the following: Are there issues (topics) that you have experienced as sensitive in your teaching practice? Please name at least

two. How (in what sense) were these issues sensitive, to whom and why? We scanned through the open answers and selected all responses that mentioned the Holocaust, WW2 and events or phenomena related to them. The responses in which reasons for sensitivity were given were coded using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). We approached the topic of WW2 in an inclusive way, taking into account all the accompanying sensitive events during WW2 mentioned by the respondents.

In order to better understand the reasons for sensitivity, we analysed the answers to open questions in the questionnaire. First, we counted all answers that mentioned WW2 or the Holocaust as an experienced sensitive issue. Thereafter we coded the open answers to the question 'How (in what sense) were these issues sensitive, to whom and why?' inductively and formed families of codes (themes) in accordance with the structure of reasons for sensitivity that was revealed in factor analysis of the survey data (Goldberg et al., [this issue](#)): (1) emotional reactions, (2) societal controversies, (3) conflict between academic historiography and lay understanding, (4) pedagogical issues, (5) lack of impartial knowledge, and (6) teachers' personal ambivalence. These categories highlight the dominant meanings in the teachers' answers and are not exclusive, so that partial overlapping of content was possible. For example, concern over feelings may accompany all sensitive themes. At this level of analysis, only the broadest categories are meaningful. Subsequent analyses separately at the level of different countries might be able to draw out more detail. Below we present examples of the teachers' responses arranged according to the main themes. Because of overlapping categories, exact quantitative proportions of the themes is not available.

Findings

In all countries WW2 related predefined topics were among the first three sensitive topics, although the rated level of sensitivity varied. Some present-day or recent 'burning' issues have slightly outmatched WW2, which took place more the 70 years ago and does not have an immediate impact on the teachers' and pupils' lives. In spite of that, the issue of WW2 is still debated, sensitive and difficult to teach. In [Table 1](#) we present the percentage of teachers who marked a predefined topic related to WW2 as very sensitive for them.

There was great variation in the perceived sensitivity of predefined issues related to WW2. On the one hand, nearly half of respondents in Serbia perceived issues related to WW2 to be very sensitive. On the other hand, the majority of teachers in Finland did not perceive the predefined issues to be sensitive at all. At the same time, a significant proportion of teachers in Italy, Germany, Israel, Austria, and Estonia designated WW2 a sensitive issue. This can be understood from the historical and political contexts of these countries: WW2 is associated with certain country-specific events that remain contradictory today. The spontaneously mentioned sensitive topics in the open answers related to WW2 included the Holocaust (genocide), political and ideological aspects (National socialism, Fascism, Communism, anti-Semitism, racism, eugenics), political figures (Hitler, Stalin), the suffering of civilians (children, women as victims of violence, Leningrad siege), atrocities executed by all sides involved (e.g., bombardment of Dresden by Americans, treatment of prisoners of war), remembrance and commemoration of WW2 by different memory communities, country-specific events (Anschluss in Austria, *foibe* massacres in Italy, annexation to the

Table 1. Percentages of respondents in different countries who marked a predefined topic related to WW2 as very sensitive.

Country	Issue	Respondents (%)
Austria	Anschluss, annexation by Germany	25
	Holocaust, WW2	31
Belarus	WW2	2
Estonia	Loss of independence	8
	WW2	24
	Participation of Estonians in atrocities (Holocaust, deportations)	22
Finland	Cooperation with Germany during WW2	1
	Concentration camps in Finland during WW2	–
	WW2	8
France	Holocaust, WW2	25
Holland	Holocaust	16
Israel	Jewish Councils in Holocaust	24
	Zionist reaction to Holocaust	7
Italy	Fascism	29
	Italian resistance	41
	<i>Foibe</i> massacres (mass killings of local Italian population)	34
	WW2	9
Serbia	Different military and political movements during WW2 in Serbia	49

USSR in Estonia and Belarus, resistance and collaboration in the occupied countries, role of Catholic church in Italy and Serbia), analogies with contemporary events (Israeli-Palestinian conflict, experiences of discrimination and racism by minorities).

We now turn to the reasons for the sensitivity of WW2 as experienced by our respondents. On the whole, for the teachers, emotional reactions, societal controversy and the scarcity of impartial knowledge were the most frequently cited reasons for an issue's sensitivity. Interpretation of the themes according to our theoretical framework is presented in the discussion section below.

Emotional reactions

WW2 related topics may produce affective reactions that teachers try to control. On the one hand, teachers anticipated excessive negative feelings aroused by descriptions or images of atrocities and suffering during WW2, or tried to avoid hurting someone's feelings when particular groups have been involved. On the other hand, some teachers expressed concern over the lack of feelings and indifference of pupils regarding WW2.

Emotional reactions to atrocities

This kind of sensitivity to feelings regarding WW2 topics was mentioned by teachers in all countries, as the following quotations testify:

Dealing with illustrations of suffering and violence, especially of kids – for the pupils, as well as for me, because it is not easy to look at those illustrations, bear them, analyse them and talk about them. (Germany)

Teachers worried, not only about hurting pupils' feelings, but also about the difficulty of explaining why such atrocities happen.

The genocide of the Jews, for example, is an event, which itself contains numerous questions of a political, ethical, philosophical, cultural nature. The following pupils' questions: 'How was it possible to accept the idea that part of humanity was harmful, unnecessary, superfluous, on the face of the earth?' These questions made me realise how much this event troubled their sensitivity. (Italy)

Holocaust, what was done during WW2, crimes against humanity, using child labour, deportations. These [issues] are very hard emotionally: it is emotionally difficult to explain the issue and [it is] also [emotionally difficult] for the pupils to deal with it. The children cannot understand that such cruelties have been, and are, committed. (Estonia)

At the same time, some teachers noted different, unintended emotional reactions by pupils. On the one hand, WW2 era atrocities or ideologies may evoke undesired interest and fascination. For example, a German teacher noted: 'Holocaust: it is difficult not to evoke either wrong empathy or desire for sensation' and an Italian teacher responded: 'The racial laws – the idea of superiority...that seduces young people...who are easily seduced by the myths of evil'. On the other hand, topics of WW2 may leave pupils indifferent. For example, a German teacher wrote: 'Impression that the "effect" of National socialism decreases and that the experiences of that time does touch pupils emotionally any more' and a Dutch teacher noted 'WW2 is not always taken seriously by all pupils, for many of them it's of course a long time ago now and they find it hard to empathise'. WW2 atrocities and the Holocaust are extremely particular issues. On the one hand, the emotional aspect objectively decreases along with time and the disappearance of direct witnesses. On the other hand, it still remains a living issue, which can be related to the discursive construction of WW2 memory, which articulates the memory of WW2 and the Holocaust as a founding memory of a unified Europe: as some researchers have asserted – 'Europe was born in Auschwitz' (Mattera 2016). At the same time, the political will to teach the Holocaust to a younger generation as an inoculation against atrocities may produce adverse effects. For instance, in France teachers mentioned that information about the Holocaust is considered by pupils as excessive. As one French teacher wrote: 'Young Muslims say "we talk too much about Jews and Holocaust"'.

The emotional aspect of atrocities in WW2 teaching can be a pedagogical tool for teachers as emotions can improve the memorisation of information and provoke the right moral reaction – condemnation of atrocities. One of the purposes of history teaching is relating to the future – orientated dimension of memory: teaching about past atrocities is a means of preventing future atrocities. At the same time, the use of emotions in teaching has intrinsic risks and therefore needs to be channelled and controlled.

Emotional reactions of victimised groups

The Holocaust, violence and sufferings during WW2 may evoke strong, painful emotions in pupils, especially when they have family members who were directly involved in the events. Strong negative emotions arise also when dealing with the past victimisation of the in-group. Reactions may involve wounded collective self-esteem, and hostility towards the perpetrator group:

The genocide against the Serbs in World War II – It's hard to stay objective and within the limits of what science is talking about! Sometimes there are too many emotions when talking about it! (Serbia)

Here the identity-enhancing processes of collective memory comes to the fore with 'us' as the victimised in-group set against the 'other' as perpetrator. The nation provides a sense of ontological security through the internalisation of a protective we-identity. Sensitive situations arise when members of victimised groups are represented among the pupils. In addition to the persecution of Jews and Roma, the victimisation of other minorities including disabled people was mentioned as emotionally sensitive:

For example, the persecution by Nazis of the mentally handicapped is tedious to speak when a pupil is blind or in a wheelchair, and he asks what would have been done to him (Finland); Holocaust – for me and for a Jewish girl who asked me not to talk about it because the topic made her sad. (Italy)

Some researchers claim that sharing an experience of suffering can provide strong cement for national unity (Nussbaum 1996). Among the teachers in Italy and Germany we noticed that responses to our question about issues experienced as sensitive included a tendency to put forward suffering and not violence immediately linked to the issue of moral responsibility for these countries.

Emotional reactions by perpetrator groups

Similarly, teachers anticipated painful feelings among members of groups that had played a negative role in history, who had committed criminal or morally undermining activities during the war.

Especially when I give micro-historical research tasks, such as the research on objects, letters and interviews with living relatives, the 'discovery of a past' not 'on the right side' can be difficult for children. (Italy)

The desire to be on 'the right side' is very important and appeals to the need for a positive identity. The search for 'the most glorious possible past' (Snyder 2002) often leads to historical myths. As one Italian teacher pointed out: 'It is difficult to accept that in our history there are almost no heroes'.

Affective reactions may arise in response to learning about the national in-group's misdeeds during WW2. Such topics are morally sensitive and may harm positive group identity and lead to disillusionment with historical myths. This theme was most pronounced among the Finnish teachers, probably as a reaction to the prominent role of WW2 in the construction of a positive image of the nation (Meinander 2011):

It is difficult for pupils to accept that the Finns are not better than others, that there were other than national defence motives, that there were fascists in our country and that grandfather or other relative could have been a fascist. (Finland)

Leone (2017) demonstrates that despite negative emotions that arise when confronted with information on the in-group's wrongdoings that has been silenced, this experience has a positive empowering effect that may lead to moral reparation.

Emotions arisen because of analogies with contemporary group strife

Managing pupils' emotional reactions can also be necessary when discussions in the classroom become too emotional and sharp, hostile opinions are expressed in relation to certain groups hindering educational process. Emotional reactions and controversies may arise when historical analogies are used for dealing with contemporary events (e.g.,

Holocaust and Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and competitive victimhood is transposed to contemporary intergroup relations:

The Jewish genocide, sensitive in a sort of ‘victimhood competition’ on the part of pupils of black communities and/or Muslims who believe that Jews are the subject of special treatment. (France)

An Israeli teacher wrote: ‘Holocaust – when we try to compare the Holocaust to other genocides in history’. In the Netherlands, several teachers noted the comparison pupils make between the Jewish population in Europe in the period of the Holocaust and the people living in the state of Israel nowadays. When taught about the Holocaust, some pupils of Muslim background rejected the narrative of Jewish victimhood because of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their identification with the Palestinians. For example, a teacher wrote that when teaching about the Holocaust, ‘the Western rather pro-Israel attitude can cause friction with a pro-Palestine attitude of Muslims’. The relation between Muslim minorities and the Holocaust is a societal issue in Western Europe (see Savenije and Goldberg, [this issue](#)) revealing characteristics of social representations as essentialist (Jews as essentially victims or perpetrators) and the resilience of the cultural layer of collective memory.

The familiarity, the comfort and reassurance of home are affective anchors for the nation. On the one hand, the emotional characteristic of official discourse is a political goal, but in reality emotions can hinder teachers’ everyday work. Teachers can feel it incumbent on them to control pupils’ emotional reactions to prevent hostility. Learning facts about WW2 events may trigger negative attitudes towards groups that are depicted as perpetrators. Hostility may also be anchored in WW2-related ideologies (anti-Semitism and xenophobia) which are resurgent in many countries. Learning about WW2 may inspire pupils for inimical behaviour towards each other on the basis of some group characteristics.

Second World War – Partisans, Chetniks, Usthas – The themes were sensitive to the pupils, as they caused extreme right-wing reactions in them, exclusiveness, intolerance towards other nations and non-inmates. (Serbia)

Anti-Semitism – the awakening of Nazism in children who “hate” the Jews, then Roma, all non-Serbs. (Serbia)

The dominance of moral education aims in teaching about the Holocaust was clearly formulated by one Serbian teacher:

I’m never comfortable when dealing with issues related to mass crimes during the Second World War, but only because of how to approach such a sensitive subject to the pupils and to attain the correct moral effect on pupils and avoid the spread of religious or national hatred.

Societal controversy

Many topics were identified as controversial in society in general, touching upon oppositional ideologies, actual political conflicts or clashes between different memory communities. Descendants of WW2 victims and perpetrators, participants in resistance and collaboration, or even fighters in former enemy armies may sit in the same

classroom and bring conflicting versions of collective memory to the history lessons. It seems that many teachers are not prepared to manage such multiperspectivity in their classroom. This type of sensitivity was mentioned in all countries, most often by teachers in Serbia, Estonia, France and Italy. The challenge for teachers is manifold – it is necessary to navigate between different and sometimes conflicting representations of history, to neutralise expressions of the arising tendencies of neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism (as well as Holocaust denial and glorification of Hitler or Mussolini) that counteract the humanistic aims of the curricula and lead to intolerance towards certain groups. It is also necessary to maintain respect to the complexity of personal (familial) experiences and memories of pupils and overcome possible resistance by pupils if lay representations do not support the official narrative. For example, in Israel, where the Holocaust is the most prominent constituent of Jewish collective memory and is excessively present in the curriculum, deviations from the official version are marginalised:

Holocaust education here is coercive, anyone thinking differently than the rest is cast out. That doesn't allow an alternative approach. I believe showing harsh pictures or texts or teaching dryly causes irreversible damage to pupils...How to teach the Holocaust without spinning to historical truth (since the saviours and rebels were such a marginal minority and emphasising them sins to the facts). (Israel)

This teacher underlines the moral educational aim of teaching about the Holocaust. There are conflicting representations of WW2 in different social groups and nations, which sustain historical divisions (e.g., different resistance movements in Yugoslavia, division between former enemy countries represented now by different memory communities in Estonia and Finland). Co-existence of such polemical (and in some cases hetero-referential) representations in society makes the teaching of history difficult.

The prevalent reason for sensitivity is different perspectives/viewpoints on a historical event by social memory groups and/or Estonian and Russian textbooks, media and official positions. (Estonia)

There are different interpretations by different parties on war-related events. If we talk about the Winter and Continuation War, the interpretation is different in Finland and Russia. It is important to be aware that various interpretations are being raised in class and the basis of their arguments should be examined. (Finland)

WW2 – The existence of two resistance movements against the occupying forces that were ideologically opposed and a discussion about which resistance movement really fought against the occupiers – some of the pupils came from families whose ancestors fought on the ethnic side, and some on the partisan side. (Serbia)

Controversial narratives may stem from the groups' different roles in particular WW2 events; there are always bystanders and implicated subjects as well as victims and perpetrators (Rothberg 2009). A difficult task for teachers is to find some balance between these different subject positions without hurting anyone.

Remembrance and commemoration of WW2 by different groups was mentioned as a controversial topic in the Netherlands and Estonia. If remembering is a collective action of viewing a constructed past from the lens of the present, there may be

discrepancies between institutional and vernacular remembrance, between remembering by different mnemonic communities.

It is noteworthy that, although for the majority of teachers, societal controversies make history teaching more difficult, there are also teachers who enjoy these controversies.

...this can lead to a more or less evident tension in the classroom: this is not always a disadvantage: history gets suddenly close and alive. (Italy)

...but there is also the pleasure of comparison of different points of view. (Italy)

The more sensitive is a topic, the more interesting is the lesson. Topics may be sensitive due to their topicality at the moment, due to controversial views, due to differences in communicating these topics to different people. (Estonia)

Teaching the Winter and Continuation War has become more interesting since almost every class has Russian-based pupils. (Finland)

Conflict of academic historiography and social representations of events

Although historiography may be politicised and express the interests of certain (elite) groups (participation of historians in the construction of political memory (Onken 2010)), teachers distinguish a separate type of controversy located between academic views based on critical knowledge, and lay representations of history. History taught in schools, which conveys elements of academic historical knowledge, is often resisted by simplistic, one-sided, stereotypical representations, originating from the family, mass media or other sources. The tension between historical academic thinking and intuitive everyday thinking is evident here: 'meaningful learning implies important processes of radical conceptual change going from the intuitive notions to more complex ones. In this vein, history requires understanding concepts that differ from everyday conceptions and explanations' (Carretero 2017b, 355). This contradiction as a reason for sensitivity was mentioned relatively more often in Serbia, Italy and France. Legitimacy of the school history narrative and the epistemic authority of teachers may be at stake here. A French teacher wrote: 'Pupil distrust the teacher's discourse, it is regarded as at best naive or biased at worst complicit in the plot (conspiracy)' and a Serbian teacher noted 'Pupils are trying to simplify everything; they are all black or white, stereotypes are hard to break, and some of them are not ready to see events or personalities from another angle and do not express empathy'.

Historical representations based on communicative memory may be resistant to change as the following data extracts testify:

Pupils who had different views on these topics had different opinions about these topics from what they could read in the textbook, especially because many of them had formed attitudes on these topics in the family circle and beyond and thus regarded them as fundamental and unchangeable, not allowing even an reasoned alternative opinion to reach them. They were sensitive to me because, in order to adequately understand their complexity, I needed additional effort and patience to help pupils objectively approach these often controversial topics. (Serbia)

No critical relationship. Pupils accept the information they get outside the school and from the textbook without looking at the wider picture (everything is black or white). The other is always guilty, we are the victims. (Serbia)

Referring to fascism and resistance as sensitive topics, an Italian teacher wrote: 'They have a very vague and superficial knowledge of the two periods in question, surely influenced by ideologies and family narratives'.

The difference between an academic (rational, rigorous, and factual) and a vernacular (often emotional and mythologised) approach to history was well described in this response from an Estonian teacher:

Theoretically, all the themes of history can be sensitive/have many different interpretations. Important is the teacher's ability to perceive contradictions and to focus on them in the classroom/enable discussions on the basis of the perspective that the historical truth does not exist and it is always subjective, depending on the writer's nationality, political motivation and other factors. Instead of historical truth, it should rather be said about historical objectivity, i.e., follow-up of facts and text, etc.

Pedagogical issues

An issue may become sensitive because of perceived pedagogical inadequacy. There may be contradictions between the official goals of teaching (perhaps to teach humanism and tolerance. For an overview of teaching goals in curricula see Sakki and Pirttilä-Backman, [this issue](#)) and the available teaching materials, which might not take into account the plurality of institutional and vernacular discourses in society. Although history textbooks usually contain multiple discourses from various social fields (Klerides 2010), these discourses may be presented in a more or less balanced way. Concerning WW2, problems related to biased textbooks were mentioned. by teachers in Italy, Serbia, Finland and Estonia.

Ustasha genocide against the Serb people in the NDH from 1941 to 1945; the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the genocide against the Serbian people; – The first two themes are very poorly addressed, both in textbooks and in class. There is a lot of exaggeration, or fear to talk about it with the pupils. (Serbia)

History textbooks are to some extent adapted to daily-political topics, so that history teachers have major problems in interpreting teaching units that relate to this period. (Serbia)

A Finnish teacher observed tension between critical historiography and textbook content concerning WW2: 'Finland as an occupier in Continuation War, a myth of a Finnish soldier – the contents of textbooks do not always correspond to the most recent view of history research'. An Arab Israeli teacher described pupils' reactions to biased teaching materials:

Holocaust is a sensitive issue: I don't object to it as such, on the contrary it is a duty to teach it, but the approved materials present Jews only as the persecuted never having an opportunity to develop their cultural economic life before the Holocaust, while the truth is totally different...the pupils become apathetic and discredit the claims of the material. Pupils say they study the whole book about Jews and Judaism, but not

a chapter on the Naqba [lit. Catastrophe- the Palestinian term for the defeat and collapse in the 1948 war].

International organisations like UNESCO, OECD in the PISA report raise the alarm on the literacy issue in developed countries because the young generation in Europe has difficulties in reading and writing – it is not a reading generation any more. In this context, compulsory school books can be one of the rare books that pupils take into their hands. Factual inaccuracy, political control over textbook writing and tendentious interpretations can undermine textbooks and the educational system complicating the work of teachers who need relevant and ‘trustworthy’ sources.

Lack of impartial knowledge

Several WW2-related issues were perceived to be sensitive by teachers because there was no consensus among historians or there was not sufficient impartial knowledge. Some events related to WW2 do not have a consensual description or assessment in historiography and sometimes formerly dominant paradigms have been changed (e.g., topics like the reunification of Western Belarus, annexation of Estonia, resistance movements in Serbia and Italy). Such historiographical ambivalence does not support teachers in navigating conflictual field of representations.

The result is a poor state of historiography in our country, insufficiently scientifically popular and quality works, a small number of historians who are visiting in more watched TV shows. A number of topics were controlled by the Communist regime and had very biased interpretations of the events on which he fidgeted his own legitimacy. They are sensitive to pupils who either do not know anything and they are first reading or wearing, most often dogmatic, attitudes from their own cultural environment or simply have something to do with them somewhere. The reason for confusion and distrust is more controversial opinions, followed by the wings that only winners write history. (Serbia)

A particular example of an ambivalent assessment of an event in WW2 was presented by a teacher from the Netherlands: ‘Presentation of Americans as heroes in WWII (bombardment of Dresden, for example)’. Teachers from France referred to the difficulty of teaching history due to historiographic debates and lack of consensus among the historians:

There are many methodological problems, there is no chronological progression, but a fragmented vision of history. Now we must teach a history that is close to academic and historiographic debates, I’m not sure it’s very positive. The teaching of historical facts is now replaced by improbable discussions around documents. The problem of developing a true critical reflection with regard to sources.

Teacher’s personal ambivalence

Teachers’ personal ambivalence regarding the topic of WW2 as a reason for sensitivity was rarely explicitly mentioned. Implicitly the discrepancy between teachers’ personal convictions and hegemonic representations or official narratives could be present in the responses that referred to the biases in textbooks (Serbia, minority teachers in Estonia). Italian teachers referred to such kind of conflict more explicitly. One teacher responded:

'Resistance in Italy – I feel emotionally involved in that experience because I participated in the political events of my time'. Another teacher noted 'My family of origin has suffered the consequences of fascism on the Adriatic coast and therefore I am afraid to be emotionally involved and unable to do a good lesson'. Teachers' internal strife was a silenced issue but history teachers cannot avoid being confronted with internal strife about sensitive issues: they are members of society, some belong to minority groups, and some have direct personal experience of sensitive issues.

It is interesting to note that the phrase 'force of inertia' was often used by the French teachers. Inertia can hinder the teaching of sensitive issues because teaching sensitive issues requires time to search documents, for reliable sources, to have arguments and to discuss with pupils. Teaching sensitive issues demands courage – courage to face pupils' sometimes hostile reactions. Not every teacher has the courage, the resources or the motivation to leave their 'comfort zone' and to face sensitive issues with their classes.

Discussion

In the countries studied, WW2 and the Holocaust appeared to be among the most sensitive topics for history teachers, demonstrating inherent tensions between academic history and collective memory and between different layers of collective memory.

The reasons teaching topics related to WW2 and the Holocaust may be challenging can be divided into two major categories: firstly, relating to the regulation of emotions – either avoiding excessive hurting of pupils' feelings or managing their explosive reactions in response to historical information. Secondly, dealing with socio-political conflicts or different perspectives related to WW2 and the Holocaust. Inadequacy of personal, pedagogical or academic resources for meeting these challenges aggravated the situation.

The desire to regulate pupils' emotions is related to the goal of moral education. Our results suggested that empathy and grief in response to learning about the victims of war atrocities and the Holocaust was one of the moral lessons of WW2, whereas indifference or fascination with the atrocities were understood to be indications of moral failure. The Holocaust remains an emotionally charged event for everybody. The concept of moral injury – 'Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations' (Litz et al. 2009, 700) is appropriate here. Confronting the atrocities of the war and Holocaust may cause hesitation and profound changes in pupils' sense of right and wrong. At the same time some teachers noted disturbing tendencies among some pupils for fascination or, conversely, indifference.

A relatively new aspect of the difficulty of teaching the Holocaust is related to the problem of the aestheticisation of the violent past. This aestheticisation can lead to a banalisation and even legitimisation of the violence with some aspects of the violence being seen as fascinating by the pupils (proved by numerous and popular videogames inspired by the WW2 when the Nazis are victorious). Moral identity was also at the base of the teachers' attempts to avoid painful feelings among those who identify with victim or perpetrator groups from WW2. Collective victimhood may become a moral asset and motivate competitive inter-group victimhood. In contrast, the trauma of perpetrators is related to the need to restore the moral status of one's group (see Goldberg 2017a). The

failure of moral education can stem from pupils' resistance to sensitive topics. Bilewicz et al (2017) propose three approaches to Holocaust education to avoid the rejection of moral lessons: 1) empathic education with greater focus on victim experiences, generating feelings of regret instead of collective guilt; 2) a moral exemplars approach, presenting individual heroism as an alternative to the passivity or cruelty of others, thus avoiding essentialist conceptions of groups; 3) focusing on local identities, instead of national ones, in order to include the victims into the common identity.

Some teachers face cognitive and emotional challenges when they have to coordinate different perspectives in relation to historical events in the classroom. Our theoretical framework distinguished two kinds of contradictions:

- (1) between an academic historiographical perspective and collective memories (scientific concepts vs lay concepts)
- (2) between perspectives of different layers and segments of collective memory – official vs counter-memory, discrepancies between different perspectives on WW2 in textbooks, media and official positions, perspectives of a majority vs minorities, and different memory communities.

Our findings illustrate the complexities of teaching the history of WW2. Different layers of collective memory intervene and interact in the classroom, influencing the teachers' strategies in dealing with sensitive issues. Collective memory is relational, it designates 'our relation, as individuals and communities, to the collective past' (Glaveanu 2017, 256). A topic becomes sensitive through the way the pupils relate to the historical events in the context of particular teaching goals. On the macro-societal level continuity or ruptures of dominant ideologies, hegemonic representations and cultural memories may be reflected in the biased textbooks or in perceived pressure to be loyal to a national narrative. The meso-level of intergroup strife is especially prominent in history teaching. It emerges in the classroom through debates and the affective reactions of pupils who have acquired certain social representations of WW2 through their groups of belonging and may juxtapose these with the history taught at school. There may be emotional and hateful discussions on the competing narratives of historical events in the (electronic) media. Both teachers and pupils may be politically involved. These contextual factors may promote antagonism in the classroom. Such a mnemonic divide may also be based on incompatible deep memories that distort or ignore information that does not fit into the particular group's memory scheme (Wertsch 2008). The micro-level of personal experiences/private memories permeates the teaching of WW2 and the Holocaust both directly (some witnesses of WW2 events are still alive) and indirectly (through analogies with more contemporary events, such as, the Palestinian conflict). WW2 is a topic which involves aspects of family memories and the direct involvement of family members in the events in question.

Our findings indicate that many teachers do not have the skills and or techniques to deal with multi-layered and diverse viewpoints. Supposedly, teachers who are orientated towards moral consensus and identity building goals perceive such contradictions as more difficult to manage, while teachers whose main aim is to cultivate critical thinking tend rather to appreciate a diversity of viewpoints. In an analysis of various teacher positions in relation to sensitive and controversial issues, this particular position is

characterised as 'enhancing heterogeneity' (Kello 2016). Plurality is a prerequisite for teaching critical thinking, a tool to motivate pupils, to make them active actors in learning rather than passive consumers of knowledge.

An additional difficulty arises from the ambiguity of historical knowledge concerning certain events. For example, there may be not enough scientific evidence, a lack of consensus among historians or shifts and discontinuities in the assessment of certain events that widen the gap between scholarly discussions and lay representations. There is inescapable divergence between critical historiography and different forms of collective memory. This controversy makes teaching difficult because a teacher has to overcome resistance from pupils who are reluctant to change their stereotypical beliefs when confronting the beliefs of other groups or a more neutral position. Academic history is inevitably conflictual: there are competing interpretations of sources, concepts and paradigms. The use or misuse of history for political purposes turns historiographical conflicts into political ones. The historical knowledge transposed into the educational system and materialised in textbooks need to be balanced between a consensual 'stabilised' discourse and the importance of teaching the next generation about existing debates among historians on important issues. Links between the empirical classification of perceived sensitive problems in teaching WW2 and our theoretical model are presented in the Appendix.

The heterogeneous content of collective memory is not necessarily problematic in a pluralistic democratic society (Kattago 2009); it becomes sensitive when combined with adverse intention. Goldberg (2017b) has described how different layers of collective memory can be used in negotiating intergroup conflict. Michael Rothberg (2009) distinguishes competitive memories which compete with alternative collective memories in a zero-sum game on the one hand, and multidirectional memories which function as complementary viewpoints. The latter may be used for constructing solidarities, possibly even between conflicting narratives. Usually different collective memories are understood as competing with each other. Memories can crowd each other out of the public sphere. For example, too much emphasis on the Holocaust is said to marginalise other traumas or, inversely, adoption of Holocaust rhetoric to speak of those other traumas is said to downplay or even deny the Holocaust's uniqueness. In contrast, Rothberg (2009) proposes the concept of multidirectional memory which functions according to a nonzero-sum logic (both/and rather than either/or) and is disengaged from exclusive group identities. In this way, it can enable one to use the Holocaust as a vehicle to articulate other histories of suffering, including those of Palestinians. The shared terrain of multidirectional memory creates possibilities for unexpected forms of solidarity.

From a comparative perspective, our findings indicate that there are common difficulties in teaching WW2 and the Holocaust in all the countries involved and there are reasons of sensitivity that are specific to certain countries. WW2 is a highly important and complex issue for all European countries. On a national level, when the war is interpreted from a heroic point of view, it can serve as a pillar of history and identity discourse, as in Belarus and Finland. There are also specific contextual tensions related to WW2 in each country. There seems to be a relatively high macro-level consensus concerning WW2 in Germany, Israel, Austria, the Netherlands and Finland. In those countries, classroom controversies arise in interaction with immigrant pupils with

alternative views, in particular, pupils with Muslim cultural backgrounds. Post-socialist countries (Serbia, Belarus, and Estonia) have undergone macro-level ruptures in the dominant narratives of WW2, and there were deep intra-national divisions between different memory communities. Some teachers did not feel well prepared to manage the tensions between different viewpoints.

Conclusions and implications

The importance of our analytical distinction between different components of historical culture and layers of collective memory is that it points to different social and psychological mechanisms operating behind historical narratives. Awareness of the existence of these heterogeneous components of teachers' 'problem space' (Kello and Harro-Loit 2012) is the first step in managing tensions in history teaching. Some knowledge about the logic of operation of particular layers of collective memory and their underlying mechanisms might increase teachers' abilities to manage ambivalences and conflicts in history teaching, to seek specific resources and methods of coping with difficulties. For instance, when representations of WW2 function on the level of normative or deep-rooted national narratives (like the Great Patriotic War in Russia, Belarus, and among Russian minorities in other countries) they cannot be changed simply by historiographical arguments or counter narratives (Wertsch 2002). Social representations that express deep loyalty for some groups, supported by communicative processes and status competition in society, are also resistant to change.

The multi-layered structure of collective memory enables flexible combinations in promoting critical thinking and group commitment: being critical on one level, one can maintain emotional attachment on another. We suggest that a transnational European level of identity should be the focus of consensus concerning the main lessons of WW2 and the Holocaust. It is possible to deal with diversity, coordinate perspectives of different components of historical culture, relying on some axiomatic common values. Transnational consensus building refers to the supra-national layer of collective memory which could be cultivated in addition to national, subnational and family memories (Assmann 2014; Rigney 2012). At the same time, teachers can also use the controversies strategically for achieving their teaching goals. In all countries, divergent and opposing representations concerning WW2 were among the most often cited reasons for the sensitivity of teaching these topics. In cooperation with historians and psychologists, several publications have appeared recently which include recommendations for teaching history in the context of past or present inter-group conflicts (Psaltis et al. 2017).

One of the important findings from our study is the ambivalence of teachers' strategies. The responses showed a gap between the perception of practices by teachers and the practices themselves. WW2, Holocaust and atrocities are identified by the majority of the teachers in all countries as sensitive. On the other hand, not many teachers cited these issues as the subject of specific training that could strengthen their teaching practices. Numerous respondents did not want to receive any training on sensitive subjects. While all teachers are confronted with the need to deal with these issues, and the majority felt them to be uncomfortable situations for which they lacked appropriate resources and effective tools. Many teachers reported bypassing sensitive topics, so the majority of the 'time bombs' are not being defused within the education system.

Being aware of different layers of collective memory may help teachers to deal with sensitivities in history teaching. On the highest, supra-national level, a European moral consensus is necessary in relation to WW2, by which we mean axiomatic condemnation of antisemitism and other racist ideologies and related atrocities. On national and subnational levels, it should be acknowledged that different viewpoints and critical discussions may take place and that the polyphony of collective memories may be in conflict with each other and with academic historical knowledge. The challenge would be to find ways of preventing them from erupting into disruptive confrontations.

How might teachers manage relations between different collective memories and mnemonic communities? Concepts of dialogical (Rigney 2012) and multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) try to focus on mutual recognition and interaction between different memory communities in order to overcome the traps of essentialist perspectives and competitive victimhood which fuel intergroup conflict, and to create new kinds of solidarity and affiliations across groups and cultures. An optimistic stance allows us to redefine European identity 'in terms of an ability to reach a point of reconciliation where enemies turn into neighbours (...)', or claim that 'out of multiple bitter experiences Europeans have been forced to learn the art of reconciliation and how to transcend the past while also remembering it' (Rigney 2012, 614). So far, social and psychological mechanisms leading to such reconciliation are poorly understood, and so this wish remains utopian.

Note

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Appendix

Links between empirical categories of sensitive issues and our theoretical model

	Academic history vs collective memory	Layers of collective memory		
		Macro	Meso	Micro
Emotional reactions			x	x
Societal controversy		x	x	
Conflict of academic historiography and social representations of events	x			
Pedagogical issues		x	x	
Lack of impartial knowledge	x			
Teacher's personal ambivalence				x

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