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**Workshop 7**  
**"From national narratives to shared memories:  
Is a Pan-European memory possible?"**

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This workshop report on the on-going development and construction of the House of European History in Brussels will provide some idea of how this museum is going to build up a "reservoir of European memory". The purpose is to give some insights into methodological and organizational decisions and the structure of the narrative of the permanent exhibition, aspects which can be considered exemplary in dealing with the subject matter of "European memory". A short film serves as an introduction. The workshop report is supported by a power point presentation.

### **Is there such a thing as a common European history?**

The House of European History, a museum under construction in Brussels, is based on the idea that main events and key developments in European history, which have been formative for the continent, were transnational even though they were experienced in very different ways. The House of European History wants to become a "reservoir of European memory", of a shared memory in the dual sense of the word: at the same time both uniting and dividing. Common European history has bound us together and it has divided us.

The House of European History is a project initiated by the European Parliament. From January 2011 onward, an academic project team - now composed of 29 historians, museum professionals and assistants, coming from 14 different nations - started to work on this project, developing concept, mission and vision of this new museum and the historical content and narrative of the exhibition.

### **Who is going to build a house needs a fundament. What is our theoretical basis?**

According to Julia Kristeva "the European identity is complex... in permanent movement and many-headed. A kaleidoscope." (Julia Kristeva, 2013) In today's cultural theory, the question of collective identity seems to have become central to any understanding of history. Since the 1990s this key concept has had an overwhelming success. Nevertheless we have decided to avoid this term. The concept is too simple and reductionist, it is essentialist and static. Making the House of European History a stage for the presentation of a pre-defined European identity would be an authoritarian step that would block rather than foster the

necessary social debate on this highly meaningful question. Instead of defining an identity 'from the top down' the House of European History should become a platform for the dialogue on European identity and the emergence of a European consciousness.

### **What are the leading questions?**

The goal is neither the presentation of European history in general nor an addition of national histories. We focus on those events and developments that have been formative for the continent and ask: What binds Europe together? What are the most relevant events and common developments in European history and which experiences, interpretations and memories do the various nations and social groups bind to them, each of the nations and groups having been involved in a different way? The exhibition will focus on phenomena, a) which are originally European, b) which have spread all over Europe and c) which are relevant up to now and considered distinctive marks of a European civilisation.

### **What is common theme of the narrative and how to visualise European history?**

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century will be the centrepiece of the permanent exhibition, with particular attention paid to the process of integration after WW II. The exhibition will not be limited to the outer borders of the European Union. As we do not have our own collection yet, we depend on loans from museums and collections from all over Europe. In the last years the curators have been visiting around 300 institutions in order to find objects, which have a "European dimension".

I would like to give you three examples how we are going to present history and memory:

1. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe entered modernity – politically, economically, socially and culturally. The concepts of human and civil rights, self-determination, industrialization and liberal market economy were leading factors in this transformation process. Also "citizenship" in the modern sense of the word is an "invention" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before WWI, Europe reached the peak of its global power. The exhibition will point out that social and political tensions and international rivalries led to the build-up of an enormous and multifaceted potential for conflict, which then exploded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an 'Age of Destruction' – shaken by two traumatic world wars, an economic crisis of unprecedented depth and the decline of liberal democracy, while totalitarianism advanced. The dialectics of modernity became manifest in the mutation from extreme rationality, as it had been developed in modern times, into the extreme irrationality which became apparent in the different scenarios of mass war and totalitarian terror. In this context the comparison between National Socialism and Stalinism is a constituent part of the exhibition. These two extreme manifestations of totalitarian systems should be placed face to face in order to explain both their similarities and their differences.
3. The exhibition pays special attention to the memory of the Shoah. As the 'break of civilization', the Shoah is the beginning and the nucleus of the European discourse of memory. The exhibition documents different strategies of justification and suppression, showing how the memory of the Shoah was put aside for a very long time. In the meantime, the recognition of the Shoah has become the negative reference point of European self-consciousness - constitutive for the European self-image that cannot trust

its own humanistic traditions any more. As Tony Judt has put it, the re-discovered memory of Europe's dead Jews is the definition and guarantee for the re-discovered humanity of the continent.

These are three examples for the way we are going to explain European history: The presentation of key events and pace breaking developments in European history build the framework story in which different national experiences and memories can be exposed. Doing it like this, the presentation of history will be complex rather than uniform, more differentiated than homogeneous, critical rather than affirmative, but with a synthetic perspective towards a European self-awareness. The advantage of this concept lies in its multiple perspectives and its critical potential. The "reservoir of European memory" should contain the European experiences and interpretations in all their diversity, contrasts and contradictions. Our goal is to encourage the visitors to become acquainted with other perspectives and to transcend their national prejudices and bias towards an enlarged understanding of historical communalities and interrelations.

### To sum it up:

There are three convictions, which are fundamental to our project:

- The huge revolutionary and traumatic events in European history were cross-border developments. To broaden the perspective of historical investigation is more suitable for the understanding of historical complexity.
- Shared memory can be the starting point for a learning process in which different experiences and diverse interpretations are mirrored and related to each other in a new way. The construction of European history and memory is inseparably intertwined with the awareness of differences.
- The House of European History should become a platform for the dialogue on European identity. The construction of a transnational, pan-European memory should take place within a process of communication, in the light of public discussion.