

# Social Representations of European History by the European Youth: A Cross-Country Comparison

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Supplementary Materials: Data, Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



## Abstract

The present manuscript examines the way young Europeans represent Europe's history. A study conducted in 11 European countries (N = 1406 students in social sciences) shows that the characters considered most important in the history of Europe are mostly men linked either to WW2, authoritarianism, or conquests and empires. Although these appear later in the rankings and despite some imbalance between countries, Europe's history is also associated with religious figures, artists, scientists, and philosophers. These results show that the representations of the history of Europe currently shared by young Europeans correspond, in part, to historical narratives based on a specific set of experiences, events, and values supposedly common to the peoples of Europe that were promoted by European elites throughout the integration process. Further, these results suggest that beyond the negative narrative of war and the crimes of totalitarianism, the history of Europe is also embodied by positive characters transcending national boundaries and associated with a set of key elements of the EU identity: democracy, tolerance, solidarity, humanism, and the Enlightenment. Finally, we also highlight the near-total absence of characters unambiguously related to colonization and, especially, decolonization, and a strong overall under-representation of women.

## Keywords

charters, collective memory, Europe, history, social identity, social representations

## Résumé

Le présent manuscrit examine la manière dont les jeunes Européens se représentent l'histoire de l'Europe. Une étude menée dans 11 pays européens (N = 1406 étudiants en sciences sociales) montre que les personnages considérés comme les plus importants dans



l'histoire de l'Europe sont principalement des hommes liés à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, à l'autoritarisme, et/ou aux conquêtes et aux empires. Bien qu'ils apparaissent plus loin dans le classement et malgré un certain déséquilibre entre les pays, l'histoire de l'Europe est également associée à des figures religieuses, des artistes, des scientifiques et des philosophes. Ces résultats montrent que les représentations de l'histoire de l'Europe actuellement partagées par les jeunes Européens correspondent en partie à des récits historiques fondés sur un ensemble spécifique d'expériences, d'événements et de valeurs, supposés communs aux peuples d'Europe et promus par les élites européennes tout au long du processus d'intégration. En outre, ces résultats suggèrent qu'au-delà du récit négatif de la guerre et des crimes du totalitarisme, l'histoire de l'Europe est également incarnée par des personnages positifs qui transcendent les frontières nationales et incarnent un ensemble d'éléments clés associés à l'identité de l'UE: la démocratie, la tolérance, la solidarité, l'humanisme et les Lumières. Enfin, nous soulignons également l'absence quasi-totale de personnages liés clairement à la colonisation et, en particulier, à la décolonisation, ainsi qu'une forte sous-représentation générale des femmes.

## Mots-clés

Europe, histoire, identité sociale, mémoire collective, récit fondateur, représentations sociales

## Resumo

O presente manuscrito examina o modo como os jovens europeus representam a história da Europa. Um estudo realizado em 11 países europeus (N = 1406, estudantes de ciências sociais) mostra que as personalidades considerados mais importantes na história da Europa são, na sua maioria, homens ligados à Segunda Guerra Mundial, a autoritarismos, conquistas e impérios. Embora com menor frequência e com padrões distintos entre os países, a história da Europa também está associada a líderes religiosos, artistas, cientistas e filósofos. Estes resultados mostram que as representações da história da Europa atualmente compartilhadas por jovens europeus correspondem, em parte, a narrativas históricas baseadas num conjunto específico de experiências, acontecimentos e valores supostamente comuns aos povos da Europa que foram promovidos pelas elites europeias durante o processo de integração europeia. Estes resultados sugerem ainda que, além da narrativa negativa das guerras e dos crimes do totalitarismo, a história da Europa também é encarnada por figuras positivas, que transcendem as fronteiras nacionais e personificam um conjunto de elementos-chave associados à identidade da União Europeia: democracia, tolerância, solidariedade, humanismo e o Iluminismo. Por fim, também destacamos a quase ausência de personagens inequivocamente relacionadas aos processos de colonização e de descolonização, além de uma forte sub-representação das mulheres.

## Palavras-Chave

Mitos de fundação, memória coletiva, Europa, história, identidade social, representações sociais

*In loving memory of our colleague and friend, Denis Hilton*

Since their creation, mostly in the nineteenth century, nation-states have attempted to establish their legitimacy by shaping their past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Renan, 1882/1994). This shaping of the past, presented through official narratives of national history, aimed, among other objectives, at creating a sense of shared identity (Hilton & Liu, 2017). To do so, states have often sought to put forward romanticized narratives of the past that essentialize the nation and erase the less positive aspects of the national history (Carretero & Kriger, 2011, as cited in Liu et al., 2021)<sup>1,2</sup>. Most national groups thus define their identity around narratives of “shared experiences” (László, 2008, 2013). And this representation of a shared past then helps maintain group continuity despite changing situations (Roth et al., 2017; Sani et al., 2007).

However, creating a collective memory at the national level is far from being an easy task. Alongside a national perspective, community dynamics coexist that develop alternative narratives of the past centered on the history of the community members (Liu et al., 2021). These alternative narratives exist side by side with the national memory, leading

1) This focus on national history is not only the prerogative of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-states. In Western Europe today, the historicization of national identity is at the heart of many debates about immigration, cultural diversity, and integration (Smeekees, 2014).

2) The focus on positive past events is not a constant in every country. See, for example, Hungary (László, 2013) and several African countries (Mendes et al., 2010).

here and there to a set of frictions (Bouchat et al., 2020). They provide alternative 'prisms' for interpreting national interests in crisis. They feature significant events and figures and act as symbols, "charters" in the construction of norms and values and the establishment of national political cultures (Liu & Hilton, 2005). What, then, about memories that go beyond the national framework? Even though the nation-state might not represent a model on which the European integration process should be based (Habermas, 2001; Licata, 2003), EU institutions have strived to foster a European identity by sharing social representations of history (Roos, 2021). In the present article, we raise the question of the correspondence (or lack thereof) between a collective memory of Europe that comes from the top and the representations of the history of Europe currently shared by young Europeans.

## Towards a European Memory?

As the European integration process progressed, the question of the creation of a European identity gradually arose. This shared identity was supposed to allow, among other things, the acceptance of common rules and supranational institutions (Eriksen, 2005; Herrmann & Brewer, 2004) and foster the feeling that Europeans share not only a common market but also a common cultural space (Roos, 2021). Sharing a collective identity in a strong sense would also facilitate the guiding of decisions in ethically sensitive policy issues such as social redistribution, defense, immigration, and biotechnology policies (Kantner, 2006). Intellectuals such as Habermas (2012) and Giddens (2014) consider a supra-national identity as one of the general conditions for the preservation and further development of the EU (Klimova, 2019; Spohn & Eder, 2016). To this end, the German philosopher Habermas (2001) emphasizes the need for a shared material understanding of a European way of life as well as a common interpretation of European history (on this last point see also Kantner, 2006). This concern, raised at the turn of the century, is shared by the European authorities since the beginning of the integration process, and attempts to create a European memory have existed ever since (Roos, 2021). This attention to memory issues has been reflected, among other things, in initiatives such as works on historiography (Loth, 2008), history teaching (Stradling, 2001), commemorations (Waehrens, 2011), the creation of the House of European History (Settele, 2015), and the Europe for Citizens Program (Kulczak, 2020).

One of the ways to promote a European memory is to focus on transnational aspects of European history. This transnational memory is primarily based on the generic notion of "European heritage" and values supposedly common to the European states. These values are explicitly underlined in the main treaties and appear in numerous European initiatives (Roos, 2021). The most important treaties (1957, 1992, 2000, 2007) highlight the values at the core of the European project: democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights (including the rights of minority group members), respect for human dignity, non-discrimination, freedom, equality between women and men, tolerance, and solidarity. These values are considered key elements of the EU identity and are highlighted in countless communications from the EU institutions. Further, states that are candidates for the EU must endorse these values<sup>3</sup>. Besides a focus on values, the generic notion of "European heritage" stresses the common culture and common long-term past of the European states. This common culture would be characterized by the influence of the "Greek Civilization", the Roman Empire, Christianity, Judaism, the birth of universities in the Middle Ages, humanism, and the Enlightenment. Thus, the notion of "European heritage" does not refer primarily to specific historical events, but to shared experiences of a long-term past. These experiences portray Europe as a geographical cultural area with boundaries separating it from "non-European civilizations" (Jordan, 1988; Sierp, 2020). As a case in point, the important influence of Islamic cultures across the European continent throughout its history seems to be downplayed, in line with a "Eurocentric geocultural imagination" (Aydın-Düzgüt et al., 2020; Fisher-Onar & Nicolaidis, 2021).

In addition to these shared long-term experiences, several 20<sup>th</sup> century events occupy a central place in European memory. They correspond to what Roos (2021) calls a "mid-term past". Among them, the "Europe born of war" constitutes an original matrix for EU integration in the face of the dangers of nationalism (Klimova, 2019). The "uniqueness of the Holocaust" has served for decades the role of the main post-war narrative for most Western European countries (Gensburger & Lavabre, 2012; see also Bodemann, 2005). In this sense, war is considered the ultimate negative charter against which a peaceful and democratic Europe was born (Bouchat et al., 2019). However, since the

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3) (art. 49 TEU)

Eastern enlargement of the EU in the 2000s, an important focus on the crimes of the Stalinist period has emerged. And States such as Poland and the Baltic States, over-emphasizing the betrayal of the Western countries during WW2 and the crimes of Stalinism, introduced significant counter-narratives in European memory (Jedlicki, 2005; Mälksoo, 2009). Currently, even if the hegemonic Western narrative of WW2 does not hold anymore (Choi et al., 2023), Stalinism and Nazism occupy a central place in the portrayal of European history (Fornäs, 2017).

Alongside these values, experiences, and events, there is also an effort to highlight the European integration process and its “founding fathers” (e.g., Schuman) to raise awareness of the added value of the EU. For instance, as early as 1976, the European Commission asked the European University Institute to carry on a historiography of European integration (Klimova, 2019; Loth, 2008). This academic work is accompanied by commemorations of specific events of the EU integration. These initiatives – be they academic or commemorative – correspond to a strategy of building a memory of European integration as such, and its positive effects (Calligaro, 2015).

However, attempts at creating a European memory from the top are not undertaken without resistance and contradictions (Snyder, 2016). They frequently clash with national dynamics, of which the shaping of memory is one of the classic prerogatives (Mälksoo, 2009; Spohn, 2005). They are also often characterized by an abstraction resulting from the lack of social frameworks rooted in national cultures (Calligaro & Foret, 2012). For instance, the memory of the Holocaust developed in Western Europe is perceived by particular mnemonic actors in Central and Eastern Europe as forgetting the complexities of interethnic violence in the East (Baker & Sawkins, 2023). At the same time, Western Europeans are wary that Eastern European national governments have a sufficiently critical perspective on their nationalist and anti-Semitic past (van der Poel, 2019; see also Kucia, 2016). Finally, references to the Holocaust and the crimes of Stalinism present Europe as a defender of democratic values in the face of dark periods in the past (Rigney, 2012). This simplistic dichotomy overlooks the complexity of European integration, as well as more controversial episodes of history such as colonialism, resistance to colonialism and post-colonial struggles (Buettner, 2018; Sèbe & Stanard, 2020). Indeed, while a number of European countries have a history of colonizing (e.g., Belgium, France, Italy, Germany) and others have endured imperial occupation themselves (e.g., Poland), “the EU remains curiously quiet about the memories of imperialism and colonialism” (Sierp, 2020, p. 686)<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence, there are important omissions in the version of European history that EU institutions have been promoting.

In summary, since the beginning of the European project, European institutions have promoted historical narratives based on a specific set of experiences, events, and values supposedly common to the peoples of Europe. These narratives refer to shared long-term experiences (e.g., Greek Civilization), values related to democracy and human rights, the 20<sup>th</sup> century World Wars and crimes of Nazism and Stalinism, and characters and key events of the European integration process. But they also omit important parts of Europe’s long-term and recent history. However, while many initiatives have been carried out from the top, little is known about the representations of the European past shared by the European youth.

## Social Representations of History

How individuals represent their group’s past can be understood through the concept of social representations of history (Liu, 2022). Social representations of history are social constructions of the past that take the form of symbols, patterns, and events that are part of the group’s culture (Bar-Tal, 2014). They also refer to characters and groups that are associated with specific moral roles (e.g., heroes and villains; Hanke et al., 2015). Social representations of history can be elaborated to produce historical charters – reified and canonical representations of history (Malinowski, 1926). These charters fulfill central functions in the life of the groups: They help define what individuals can and cannot do in their society (Liu & Hilton, 2005), contribute to the definition of the group’s identity (Hilton & Liu, 2008), and shape the way individuals interpret the world (Schori-Eyal et al., 2014). Or, as Hilton and Liu (2017) put it, they “explain and legitimize a group’s current political settlement, facilitate self-enhancing group categorizations, and structure political debate and justify collective courses of action” (p. 300). Different representations of the past are thus associated with

4) Although the memory of colonization has long remained largely absent from official discourse, the European Parliament has repeatedly called for funding for research on slavery and colonization (Sierp, 2020).

specific consequences in terms of social identity, interpretation of the world, and political attitudes (Hilton et al., 1996). These identity narratives take the place of symbolic existential truth for the group, even if they do not necessarily obey the canons of falsification or objectivist justification. They fit into and form part of the identity representations of social groups, through tradition and institutions, and create a strong consensus around the nation's origins. Representations of the nation are therefore hegemonic social representations par excellence (Moscovici, 2013). It is their very nature (imaginary, collective, institutional, ideological), which predisposes them to play such a role.

In the last two decades, a large number of studies have investigated the content of social representations of history at the national and supranational levels. And a set of systematic "biases" have been observed in studies on social representations of world history, revealing people's tendency to: 1. consider events related to war, terrorism, conflicts and revolutions among the most important in world history, to the detriment of other types of events, such as those related to socioeconomic issues or to scientific and technological achievements (Liu et al., 2005); 2. remember the most recent events (especially those involving the last three or four generations), to the detriment of the earlier ones (Liu et al., 2009); 3. overestimate one's nation's role in world history (Zaromb et al., 2018); 4. consider as more important the events that have taken place in Europe or the United States of America, thereby reproducing current power relations in the world order (Liu et al., 2005); 5. consider the earlier events as more positive than the most recent ones (Páez et al., 2016; Taylor, 1991). Further, results from recent studies that focus in particular on open-ended nominations of important persons/groups show some "biases" that were not the focus of attention in most of the previous studies; 6. The findings suggest that people mention nearly exclusively male personalities, as if history was a gendered endeavor. Further, the few women mentioned tend to follow a pattern consistent with gender stereotypes. 7. There is a tendency for people to remember most of the advances in science and technology and the conquest of human rights as if they were achieved by a single person rather than a group or a social movement (Cabecinhas, 2018).

In summary, social representations of history can take the form of charters that play key roles in the life of the groups: They shape who we are, legitimize social order, and influence our political attitudes. At a supranational level, representations of world history are characterized by a set of biases. In the remainder of this article, we will study the representations of European history shared by young Europeans with the country/university of each sub-sample as the unit of analysis<sup>5</sup>. More specifically, we will focus on the characters young Europeans find the most important in the history of Europe. Characters are of major importance in the social representations of history. According to Hilton and Liu (2017), "successful historical stories are likely to resonate in popular collective memory by proposing exciting and identifiable figures (e.g., heroes, villains, and fools) as well as providing memorable narratives" (p. 299). Compared to historical events that act more as cultural schemata that may be mobilized as lessons to justify action, characters symbolize, objectify and embody national and civilizational political cultures (Hanke et al., 2015). From a comparative perspective, we will appraise whether these characters correspond to the elements highlighted by the European Union's institutions or if – and how – they diverge from them. We will also focus on significant absences in young people's representations of European history that may reflect or diverge from above-noted omissions in versions of European history held by EU institutions.

## Method

### Context

This study was conducted in 2015 and 2016 in 11 European countries, including 10 EU Member States. The socio-political context in which it was conducted was marked by major events in Europe. Firstly, after the "Revolution of Dignity" in Ukraine, which brought the country closer to the European Union, Russia invaded Crimea and part of the eastern regions of the country in 2014. This invasion of European territory was followed by a period of significant tension between European countries and Russia (Biersack & O'lear, 2014). Another major event concerns what has been termed the 'European migrant crisis'. In the course of 2015, 1.3 million people entered Europe seeking asylum. This wave of

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5) As such, the analyses do not involve additional illustrative individual variables (e.g., gender, age, socio-economic status, ethnic background).



migration – the largest since the end of the Second World War – polarized most European societies on the issue of asylum (Berry et al., 2016). In parallel to this wave of migration, France and then Belgium were victims of large-scale jihadist attacks in 2015 and 2016. At the same time, Greece was undergoing a major economic crisis linked to its debt and the austerity measures imposed by a troika composed of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission. In this context, major tensions developed between Greece and Germany, where references to the Second World War were instrumentalized (Tzogopoulos, 2020). Another major event at the European level was the Brexit campaign launched by the British Conservative government and the victory of the separatist camp in the referendum (Koller et al., 2019). Finally, 2015 was also marked by the Paris agreements and the awareness of the climate emergency (Falkner, 2016). These developments were characterized by frequent references to national and European memories and made this period a particularly polarizing moment in terms of politics and identity in most European countries.

Besides the socio-political context in which the data collection took place, the samples in the present study are characterized by specific political and historical features. First, participants are labelled as members of countries. Nevertheless, beyond the country label, they were in most cases, recruited from a single university in a single city. Second, as shown above, the date of entry into the European Union might be a central factor in influencing exposure to a specific set of memory narratives. Third, country status as part of the core or periphery of the world-system impacts the remembering of collective events (Bilewicz & Liu, 2020). Finally, given the intimate links between Europe and colonization, it seemed important to specify the status of the countries studied in the colonization process. Table 1 (Supplementary Materials) provides an overview of societal-level variables characterizing the 11 subsamples.

## Participants and Procedure

Our online questionnaire was completed by 1406 students in social sciences (mainly psychology) from 11 countries (10 from the European Union, and Serbia;  $M_{age} = 22.73$ ;  $SD_{age} = 5.99$ ; 67.3% women). Specifically, the sample was composed of students from Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and the UK (see Table 2 in Supplementary Materials for a general overview). Distribution of gender varied across subsamples:  $\chi^2(10; N = 1406) = 137.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , as well as mean age:  $F(10, 1403) = 55.39$ ,  $p < .001$ . The characteristics of the samples are similar to the ones classically used in studies on social representations of history (e.g., Páez et al., 2008). However, while commonly used, these samples vary significantly from their national populations on a range of variables, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results obtained. Indeed, most – if not all – participants were born after the fall of the Berlin wall, are more educated, and potentially more in contact with other cultures than many other members of their population. Moreover, the lack of demographic data about socio-economic status and migration background limits the interpretation of the results' generalizability. Students completed the survey – which was presented to them in their language of education – in exchange for credits or as part of their courses. All items were translated from English by the researcher(s) in charge of data collection in each country. The present study is part of a larger questionnaire available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VXCQ5>. Completing the questionnaire took an average of 15 minutes. Besides questions about demographics, the present study relies on one specific question.

## Measures

Participants were asked to report the 5 characters or groups they find the most important in European history: “Imagine you were giving a seminar on the history of Europe. Write down the names of the 5 people or groups whom you consider to have had the most impact, positive or negative, on European history”. Participants were free to skip the question or report from 1 to 5 characters or groups. They were then asked to rate how positively or negatively (*valence*) they regarded each person or group, using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*).

Research on memory is highly dependent on how recollection is stimulated. Compared with pre-established lists of historical figures or with in-depth interviews, the type of question we used provides easily translatable and codable material while allowing for the emergence of original content (Hilton & Liu, 2008). However, this prompt also constrains the type of statistical analysis that can be conducted. Further, the limited length of the answers - one or a few words - does not allow the groups and characters to be located in specific narratives. And apart from their valence, this method

does not provide insight into the meaning given to each character within each sub-sample. It is with these limitations in mind, and the need to translate the answers from 11 countries into English, that we opted for this type of measure.

## Results

### Data Analysis Procedure

As the main objective of this paper is descriptive-comparative – to highlight the characters young Europeans find the most important in the history of Europe and appraise their distribution across countries – we voluntarily departed from complex multivariate analyses. In a first step, the characters and groups provided by each participant were cleaned of misspellings and translated into English. Next, they were coded to allow for comparison (e.g., “Adolf Hitler” and “A. Hitler” were coded into “Hitler”). The answers were then ranked in descending order and classified according to their order of appearance within each country. Given the low cell counts and the imbalance between subsamples, statistical comparison with chi squares did not make sense. This descriptive method is used in most comparative studies about social representations of history.

### Ranking and Valence

With all proportions kept in mind (given sample sizes that may differ between countries), Hitler is the most frequent figure in every country (1089 total occurrences). He is followed by Napoleon (511), Stalin (401), Churchill (227), Mussolini (202), Lenin (122), Marx (117), Caesar (111), Luther (102), and Charlemagne (99). These ten characters are either related to WW2 (Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, Mussolini), communism (Stalin, Marx, Lenin), great conquests/empires (Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon), or Protestantism (Luther). Their valence varies greatly (Table 4 in Supplementary Materials). Hitler is unanimously perceived negatively (1.25 with a low standard deviation), just like Mussolini and Stalin. Churchill, Marx, Charlemagne, and Luther are the characters in the top 10 who are perceived most positively (around 5 on a 1 to 7 scale)<sup>6</sup>.

### Asymmetries and Absences

Characters are mentioned much more often than groups. The first group mentioned is the Nazis (15<sup>th</sup> position, 74 occurrences), followed by the “Romans” (20<sup>th</sup> position, 52 occurrences). Regarding the gender balance, women are strongly underrepresented. The first woman (Merkel) appears in 12<sup>th</sup> position (91 occurrences), the second (Thatcher) in 16<sup>th</sup> position (69 occurrences). They are followed by U.K. queens (the two Elisabeth and Victoria). The group of women the most frequent is the “suffragettes” (8 mentions). These women are linked to the political sphere, with an overrepresentation of British characters.

Next, the scientists, philosophers, and artists are quite diverse but appear far in the ranking. Einstein (49), Tesla (40), Da Vinci (44), Marx (118), the group of Enlightenment philosophers (38), and several Greek philosophers (e.g., Aristotle, 30) are the most frequently mentioned members of these categories. Regarding religious figures, Martin Luther is the most frequently cited (102), followed by Pope John Paul II (51). Finally, besides Churchill – who is often associated with WW2 – the proportion of characters related to European integration is quite small. The next EU founding father is Robert Schuman (19<sup>th</sup>, 54 occurrences), followed by Adenauer and Monnet.

Another important result concerns the absence of major elements of European history. In particular, while numerous European countries had a long history of colonization, there is almost no mention of characters or groups linked to colonialism, resistance to it, and decolonization: Leopold II of Belgium is mentioned six times in the Belgian sample, Salazar and Mussolini, Portuguese and Italian dictators linked with colonization, are mentioned 58 and 57 times in

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<sup>6</sup> Overall, the mean valence of the characters mentioned at the first rank is more negative than the one attributed to the characters of the subsequent ranks (Figure 1 in Supplementary Materials). The pattern of the characters listed first is also characterized by a low diversity. This diversity increases as the order of appearance decreases (see Table 3 in Supplementary Materials).

Portugal and Italy, respectively. Interestingly, Zeca Afonso, who made the most famous music albums against the Portuguese colonial rule (recorded in Paris in 1973 and forbidden in Portugal), was nominated only by 2 Portuguese participants. Next, despite the central role of the economy in Europe and its role in the EU integration, there are very few characters or groups linked to the economy. Thomas Ford is mentioned two times in Croatia, Wolfgang Schäuble (German Minister of Finances during the Greek government-debt crisis) is mentioned three times by the Greeks, William Beveridge (British economist and Liberal politician whose work served as the basis for the welfare state) is mentioned three times by the Portuguese, the groups of the “bourgeoisie”, of capitalists and the European Coal and Steel Community were mentioned two times each in Finland. Finally, there is almost no mention of sexual minorities.

## Cross-Country Variations

Despite major similarities across countries (i.e., high prevalence of characters linked to WW2, communism, and conquests), there are also significant cross-country variations. First, the proportion of national figures differs greatly depending on the country. The Finnish participants do not mention any national character, the Belgians mention only two (i.e., Paul-Henri Spaak [5 occurrences] and Leopold II [2 occurrences]), and the Serbians four (i.e., Tito [24 occurrences], Karadzic [2 occurrences], Constantine the Great [3 occurrences], and Stefan Uroš IV Dušan [2 occurrences]). The countries from which participants mention the highest number of national characters are France (10), Germany (9), Italy (12), Portugal (9), and the United Kingdom (13).

Second, we have seen above that, with the enlargement of the EU, an important focus on the crimes of the Stalinist period has emerged. This seems reflected in the national samples mentioning Stalin. Indeed, participants mentioning Stalin the most frequently are Poles (80), Croats (54), Finns (37), and Serbs (37). Third, while women are strongly underrepresented overall, the number of female characters varies between countries. The Serbians did not mention any woman, the Germans mentioned only Angela Merkel, the Greeks mentioned Merkel and Thatcher, the Finnish Thatcher and Queen Victoria, and the Belgians, Queen Elisabeth from England and Thatcher. Most other countries mentioned four different female characters. Next, interestingly, the German sample is the only one that did not mention any scientist, philosopher, or artist.

Fourth, while the characters linked to European integration are few, the samples that mention the highest number of are from Belgium (6 different EU figures for a total of 37 occurrences) and France (6; 43 occurrences), followed by students from Italy (4; 15 occurrences). Students from Germany mention only one character but numerous times (1; 18 occurrences). Interestingly, Belgium is the only country where the “Founding Fathers” mentioned at the first rank are not nationals. Keeping Churchill aside, samples from Croatia, Portugal, Poland, Serbia, and the U.K. did not mention any character linked to European integration. Finally, there is also a strong imbalance in the number of religious figures mentioned between countries. The samples from Finland (50 occurrences), Poland (48), and Italy (35) mentioned religious figures and groups most frequently. Conversely, the British, the Greeks, and the Belgians mentioned few to no religious figures.

## Discussion

The present paper started from the observation that, since the beginning of the integration process, European authorities have sought to promote specific memories to create a shared European identity. Specifically, they promoted historical narratives characterized by at least four main aspects: 1. Specific values; 2. Long-term shared experiences; 3. World Wars and the crimes of the Stalinist period; 4. Elements related to EU integration. While many initiatives carried out from the top are well-documented, little is known about the representations of the European past shared by the European youth. In the present article, we raised the question of the correspondence (or lack thereof) between a collective memory of Europe that comes from the top and the representations of the history of Europe currently shared by young Europeans.



## Matches

Initially, we highlighted several similarities between elements emphasized in the official initiatives and the students' representations. The first concerns the centrality and prevalence of dictators. Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini appear high among the most frequent figures. These three WW2-related characters seem to constitute "moral villains" (Hanke et al., 2015). This is what the very negative valence that is associated with them suggests. Another WW2-related figure also arrives at the top of the most frequently cited: Churchill. The British Prime Minister, on the other hand, is largely associated with a very positive valence. This perceived importance of WW2, as well as the centrality of figures associated with clearly identifiable moral roles – heroes and villains (Gray & Wegner, 2009) – are similar to those highlighted in several studies on social representations of world history (Liu et al., 2005, 2009). According to Hilton and Liu (2017), "in the historical narratives of students globally, the World Wars can be theorized as providing a "global charter" that explains and justifies the structure of the modern world" (p. 301). This interpretation echoes the one emphasized by successive European authorities, for which WW2 and its atrocities constitute an original matrix for EU integration (Klimova, 2019).

In addition, communism-related figures (Stalin, Lenin, and Marx) are also perceived as highly important, mainly in Eastern and Northern countries (i.e., Poland, Croatia, Finland, and Serbia). These countries are also the ones that have been ruled by communist regimes or are neighbors of the USSR. The East-West division in the perception of the USSR has been emphasized in several studies (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021). However, even if the USSR is perceived as more important in the history of the world in the East, its role is controversial. Some countries see it more as a villain than as a hero (Poland), while others see it more positively than negatively (Serbia). These results echo the emphasis put by Poland and the Baltic states on the crimes of the Stalinist period (Jedlicki, 2005; Mälksoo, 2009). Interestingly, Marx is perceived positively whereas Soviet leaders are associated with a negative valence. This pattern echoes previous results showing that communist idealists<sup>7</sup> are perceived more positively than communist dictators (Hanke et al., 2015). This might reflect an effective distinction, by the students, between the communist ideology and the repressive regimes based on it.

The presence of Cesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon in the top ten of the characters seems to reflect the perceived importance of conquerors and empire builders in European history. Two of these characters are intimately linked with the Roman Empire and Christianity. These experiences correspond to elements highlighted through the notion of "European heritage", which refers to shared experiences of a long-term past portraying Europe as a geographical cultural area. All three characters are associated with a rather positive valence. Napoleon – who is not as ancient as Cesar and Charlemagne – is considered one of the most important in world history (Hanke et al., 2015). Interestingly, despite the bloodshed associated with his reign in Europe, he is less controversial than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even in countries that were highly victimized during his conquests. This may reflect the fact that the living memory of these abuses has almost completely faded today (Hanke et al., 2015). Finally, some religious figures and a significant number of artists, scientists, and philosophers – although these appear later in the rankings – are also mentioned by the students. This could be due to their high level of education. However, they also correspond to elements related to the Enlightenment, the centrality of universities, and the "humanistic values" promoted by European institutions.

## Social Representations of European History as Charters in Contrast With a Dark Past

Social representations of history that serve as charters contribute to the definition of the group's identity, explain and legitimize a group's current political order, and shape the way individuals interpret the world (Hilton & Liu, 2017). The high prevalence of Fascist dictators, mostly linked to WW2, and of communism among the students' representations of European history raises speculations about the supposed roles of these representations. A first interpretation considers the characters prevalent in the students' representations as symbols of "a history in negative" of European integration. In other words, these characters would embody narratives about the counter-model against which the European institutions were built. This "Europe born of war" has indeed acted as an original matrix for EU integration in the face

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7) Marx is also known as a social scientist/philosopher and is presently in the reading lists of social sciences university courses.

of the dangers of nationalism (Klimova, 2019). However, reference to the Holocaust and the crimes of Stalinism that present Europe as a defender of democratic values in the face of dark periods in the past is by far too simplistic and overlooks the complexity of European integration (Rigney, 2012).

A complementary way of interpreting these results is to look at the figures mentioned after the dictators and war leaders. These figures are both more diverse and of more positive valence. This pattern suggests that, after negative elements constituting a repellent, the history of Europe is also perceived as that of a “civilization” shaped in the long run by successive empires, marked by science and philosophy, as well as by Christianity. Moreover, despite significant variations between Belgium and Finland, on the one hand, and France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and the United Kingdom, on the other, national characters are never a majority in any country. This suggests that, despite certain ethnocentrism classically observed in this type of study (Zaromb et al., 2018), the history of Europe is not restricted to the experience of a limited number of “great” countries.

These elements suggest that beyond the negative narrative of war and the crimes of totalitarian regimes, Europe’s history is also embodied by positive characters transcending national boundaries and embodying a set of key elements of the EU identity: democracy, tolerance, solidarity, humanism, and the Enlightenment. This more positive understanding of European history is not incompatible with that of “Europe born of war”. Further, it does not allow for the assertion that the history of integration is one of movement from darkness to light. Indeed, a range, if not the majority, of characters associated with positive valence predate WW2. It appears that these positive elements and the “Europe born of war” narrative contribute to a common dynamic based on a contrast between the barbarism of the first half of the twentieth century and an age-old European civilization that the foundation of the EU has revived after WW2. Further research is needed to investigate such perceived temporal trajectories at the European level.

## Absences

Despite a significant overlap between the students’ representations and the memory elements put forward by the European institutions, our results also highlight the absence of central elements of European history among the students’ representations. One of the most striking is the near-total absence of characters unambiguously relating to colonization and, especially, decolonization among students despite a long history of colonization in numerous European countries. This is in line with Licata and colleagues’ (2018) results, which showed that social representations of colonialism were associated with national identification among participants from formerly colonized African countries, but not among participants from formerly colonizing European countries, as if colonialism only happened outside of Europe and did not profoundly affect its cultures and identities (Sèbe & Stanard, 2020). According to Ribeiro (2016), foundational texts by Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman never considered the (descendants of the) colonized populations living in Europe as part of it; “in other words, they never understood them as subjects of the same history” (p. 19).

According to Rosas (2016), in Europe, the official memory is structured in relation to the World Wars, but the same cannot be said in relation to the European colonial wars and the abrupt decolonization, despite the massive, forced population movements they entailed. These two legacies constitute us as Europeans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This imbalance between the memory of wars and dictatorships, and the relative colonial and post-colonial amnesia is all the more striking since, in some cases, colonialism and dictatorship were intimately linked. Indeed, for example, the figure of Mussolini is strongly associated with WW2 but little with the colonial crimes committed during his time in power. In short, the centrality of the “Europe born of war” narrative does not seem to leave room for a representation of “Europe born of (de)colonization”. However, since our data collection in 2016, numerous events related to decolonial struggles took place, culminating in the Spring 2020 protests in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement, so that representations of colonization and decolonization in Europe may have evolved. These bottom-up movements have been accompanied by symbolic gestures from several national authorities including, among others, expressions of apology or regret, and the restitution of looted artworks or human remains. Therefore, it would be worth collecting new data in the European countries concerned by these movements.

Another important aspect is the strong overall under-representation of women in the perception of European history. Moreover, most of the women mentioned are linked to the political sphere and/or to aristocracy and, as such, share attributes associated with traditional male gender roles. Overall, these findings are in line with previous research

(Liu et al., 2009). However, this under-representation of female characters seems even more striking given that most of our sub-samples are composed of a large majority of women. This illustrates how processes of marginalization and erasure of women's contribution to history are internalized by women, including those working towards their own intellectual advancement in university classrooms. As such, these results suggest that social inequalities that persist are difficult to overcome. Further, while respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities and non-discrimination are key European values, there is almost no mention of ethnic minorities, which parallels the above-mentioned silence about colonialism. Similarly, sexual minorities were nearly never mentioned.

Finally, given that the integration process and the key actors of European integration are publicly commemorated and highlighted by the EU institutions, we might have expected the participants to mention characters or groups of people linked to European integration. Yet, contrary to our expectations there were few mentions of these. Keeping Churchill – who is often associated with WW2 – aside, students from most countries did not mention any character linked to European integration. In contrast, participants from Belgium, France, Italy, and Germany mentioned European founding fathers most frequently. Given that these four countries are those that formed the basis of the EU in 1957/1958, this trend may reflect a longer exposure to European memory narratives than the other countries. This imbalance might also reflect economic, political, and ideological asymmetries between countries that are at the core of European integration and peripheral countries. At the time of this writing, the United Kingdom has left the European Union and important changes in the world order are taking place such as the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, while the narratives of integration emphasize economic success, economic asymmetries across the continent are so huge that, in the countries of the South or the East of the EU, the question of “internal colonialism” in Europe has been raised.

The remarkable memory absences highlighted above have theoretical and practical implications. Indeed, a critical memory of past relations of domination is necessary to foster support for policies of affirmative action and reparation for minorities. Also, recent research suggests that historical narratives can act as a source of resilience for minorities, and even drive their engagement in collective action (Freel & Bilali, 2022). The impact of memory on strategies of in-group engagement is particularly well elaborated in a recent study by Makanju and colleagues (2023). Drawing on a qualitative methodology, they suggest that, in particular contexts, appraisals of collective history can inspire current and future engagement such as seeking reparations or make progress for the in-group's future. The highlighting of more diverse but also less Manichean narratives of the past (discussed in the following section) through history curricula, commemorations, and cultural programs, therefore seems important, especially with regard to younger Europeans.

## Limitations

Despite its original results, this study is not devoid of limitations. The first and main one concerns the time of the data collection. This study was conducted in 2016, when Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the re-invasion of Ukraine had not yet taken place, as well as major societal changes such as the movements for climate justice (e.g., Fridays for Future), against sexual abuse and sexual harassment (e.g., #MeToo), the intensification of decolonial movements and the anti-racist mobilizations following the murder of George Floyd. Further, the global geopolitical context has led the European Union to move forward at an unprecedented pace (e.g., post-pandemic recovery plan, European Green Deal). At the same time, the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine – the largest military operation in Europe since the end of WW2 – has led to unprecedented investments in defense since the end of the so-called Cold War (especially in Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states) and to a leading role for Eastern European countries in shaping the European security orientation. These events likely influenced some aspects of social representations of European history. However, the central elements of the representations of European history probably persist today (i.e., WW2, fascism, communist regimes, and the great conquests). The results obtained would therefore deserve to be compared with those from a present-day survey and through longitudinal studies.

A second limitation concerns the measure that was used. We were interested in the characters and groups and their perceived valence. This measure, although common in this type of survey, does not allow us to highlight in a fine-grained way the “charters” structuring the representations of Europe's past. Thus, the values and stories behind the mentioned characters/groups remain hypothetical. Indeed, high standard deviations of the valence assessment for some

characters suggest they are interpreted differently, if not in a polemic way. Qualitative studies based on interviews or focus groups would usefully complement this study (see e.g., Makanju et al., 2023).

A third limitation concerns the composition of the sample. Our sample included university students born after the fall of the USSR, both more educated and potentially more in contact with other cultures than many other members of their generation. Most samples are also characterized by an overrepresentation of women. Although university students are commonly recruited as participants for this type of study, student samples may lead to underestimate real differences between and within countries (Henrich et al., 2010). For example, we can imagine that, for people who are further removed from the historical narratives taught at school, the range of historical characters may be narrower and the proportion of national characters greater than among students. Furthermore, studies have shown that representations of the past can vary significantly between generations, even within the same country (Bouchat & Rimé, 2018; Rimé et al., 2015). Another critical limitation concerning these samples is the lack of demographic data regarding their ethnic and cultural makeup. Thus, we cannot know whether some national samples are more or less homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic status and migration background. The generalizability of our results is therefore limited.

Another limitation concerns the prism of interpretation of the main omissions. In the discussion of this article, we have emphasized the absence of characters related to colonization and decolonization as well as the small number of female characters. Other absences could have been discussed such as that of Islam-related characters. The Islamic influence on Europe extends from the eighth century to the present day. However, no explicit mention of Muslim characters and groups is made in the different countries. This downplaying of Islamic influence in European memory is all the more intriguing given the significant presence of Muslim European citizens in some of the countries represented in this study for several decades, without mentioning recent arrivals of Muslim refugees, especially since 2015. Therefore, this aspect would also deserve to be addressed in a specific study. A final limitation concerns the comparison between countries. Although cross-country comparison was the main focus of the paper, comparisons by social class, gender, country of origin, or native language would also be relevant. The methods used in the present study did not allow us to carry out analyses based on such comparisons. Additional studies are therefore needed to refine our initial observations and test alternative interpretations.

## Towards a European Memory?

The emphasis on specific memory elements to create a supranational identity has been a constant since the beginning of the European integration process (Prutsch, 2015; Roos, 2021). In light of our results, though, we can see that, despite common elements, the characters perceived as most important by students still vary significantly between countries. This pattern suggests that representations of the history of the “old continent” are still far from being unified. This raises the question of the relevance of a singular pan-European hegemonic narrative to achieve a supranational identity. The history of Europe is, above all, marked by its extraordinary diversity, but also by its divisions. Faced with these, Ricœur (1992) proposed to elaborate “historical narratives that are themselves intersections between multiple histories” (p. 110). According to the philosopher, this is the only way to bring different groups closer together. For the European institutions, the undertaking that began at their inception constitutes a perilous exercise situated at the intersection between the construction of a supra-national memory and the articulation, or even the dialogue between the specific memories of the peoples of Europe. Or, as Mälksoo (2009, p. 673) wrote:

At the end of the day, it would be a categorical mistake to predict the imminent emergence of the common European historical vision in the first place. The question remains whether it would be viable to produce a better representational account of Europe’s problematic history in a singular pan-European narrative that would not merely incite a further proliferation of different histories. As the attempts to invent a shared past only tend to provoke more or less violent expressions of difference, it seems advisable for the EU not to focus on ‘settling its memory problem’, but to try to allow space for competing narratives, and find peaceful, if agonizing, ways to express and provoke different versions of the past instead.

Different visions of the past can be mobilized to learn to remember with others and to realize how interdependent our fates are as Europeans and as living creatures sharing the same planet. Thus, looking at our past through the prism of environmental and sustainability concerns could be one of many ways to reinterpret a multitude of local pasts in the context of planetary issues.

## Conclusion

This article represents a step forward in understanding the representation of European history among the youth. It shows that some of the memorial elements promoted by the European institutions are reflected in the social representations of European history held by young people in 11 countries. In particular, these representations echo the 'Europe born of war' narrative held by the European institutions, as well as references to Europe's distant past and cultural heritage and values. However, the results also suggest that representations of major aspects of European history, such as colonization and women's contribution to history, still need to be constructed in order to foster more inclusive European memories and, consequently, identities.

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**Data Availability:** For this article, a data set is freely available (Bouchat et al., 2023a).

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## Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials include the following items:

- All research data and the questionnaire for the study (Bouchat et al., 2023a)
- Additional information (subsamples' characteristics; ranking and valence of the characters and groups; Bouchat et al., 2023b)

### Index of Supplementary Materials

Bouchat, P., Licata, L., & Cabecinhas, R. (2023a). *European History Project* [Research data and questionnaire]. OSF.

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Bouchat, P., Cabecinhas, R., Licata, L., Charton, M., Chrysochoou, X., Delouée, S., Erb, H., Facca, L., Flassbeck, C., Haas, V.,

Kalampalakis, N., Franc, R., Mari, S., Pavlovic, T., Petrović, N., Raudsepp, M., Sá, A., Sakki, I., Sekerdej, M., . . . Hilton, D. (2023b).

*Supplementary materials to "Social representations of European history by the European youth: A cross-country comparison"*

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