



Duty to remember, need to forget

military-Earth thinking notebook

L'Ingénieur principal Benoît BOUZEAU

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The concept of the duty to remember has become an unavoidable concept in recent years. While recognizing the importance of the past for any society, it is a question of not allowing oneself to be trapped in it at the risk of turning one's back on one's future. It is therefore necessary to forget the details of the past in order to retain only the useful lessons.

During the ceremonies on November 11, Mr. Kader Arif[1] said the following: "All the combatants in this conflict which next year will mark the beginning of the centenary are now missing. The Great War has gone from memory to history". The whole point of the dramatic events that mark societies is to be transformed, when the time comes, by passing into collective history. In recent years, however, the concept of the duty to remember has emerged as a moral obligation for peoples to relive the tragedies of the past. But can we look to the future by focusing on the past? While it is essential to remember the past, which forms the basis of any society, it is also essential to forget part of it in order to build the future. After taking stock of the notions relating to the duty to remember, we will identify some avenues for reflection on how to make the most of the past without becoming a willing hostage to it.

State of the art

- The concept of the duty to remember and its application in France

As is often the case, the meaning of words is subjective. Depending on whether you are a soldier, an activist or a historian, the duty to remember has a different meaning.

For the military, it is mainly linked to the commemoration of the dead for the Fatherland. Honouring the dead is not only an act of gratitude turned towards the past but also a way

of promoting the values defended by these heroes. "The duty of remembrance is to use all means to ensure that tribute and recognition to those who have gone before us and have accomplished exemplary lives, research, exploits, sacrifices ... are part of the actions carried out.

But the duty of remembrance is not limited to this patriotic conception. It is described by its defenders as a moral duty attributed to a State to keep alive the memory of past suffering of certain sections of the population, especially if it bears responsibility for it. It begins with the recognition of the victim status of a group. This then leads to concrete measures aimed at providing reparation, whether material or non-material, to enable the category concerned to move beyond its past.

The concept of the duty to remember appeared in France in the 1990s. The first law on the subject was the Gayssot Act (13 July 1990), which made it an offence to contest the existence of crimes against humanity. The first topic addressed in the name of the duty to remember was the responsibility of the French state for the persecution and deportation of Jews during the German occupation of the Second World War. On July 16, 1995, President Chirac thus acknowledged the responsibility of the French State for the persecution of the Jews between 1940 and 1944. 3] This duty of remembrance was then extended to other causes. This was the case, in particular, with the Taubira law of 21 May 2001, by which France recognised the slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity, requiring school and research curricula to give these subjects the consistent place they deserve.

In the name of the duty to remember, surprising measures have also been adopted. For example, President Sarkozy's proposal in February 2008[4] to carry out a duty of remembrance towards the Jews of France by asking each middle school child "to adopt a Jewish child of the same age who died in deportation". This measure has hardly been applied, both for practical and polemical reasons.

- A subject of debate

In addition to the anecdotal and irrelevant idea of the binomial with a deported Jewish child, the duty to remember provokes opposition or at least questioning.

As it is currently used, it raises first of all a problem of legitimacy: should memory be imposed by law? Historians are generally rather reticent about the concept of the duty to remember. They sometimes see it as a risk of establishing historical truth dictated by politicians' electioneering aims following community demands. Opposition groups have thus formed to denounce the risk of reclaiming history for partisan purposes. For example, the association of history and geography teachers demanded in May 2005 that each of the actors remain in his or her place: "It is up to historians to write history and teachers to teach it" [5].

5] The duty to remember is all the more questionable as it is difficult to define its scope. Who can be recognized for the sufferings they have undergone? How can they be evaluated? What is their share in the contemporary situation? Once Pandora's Box had been opened, many communities had demanded compensation, public acknowledgement of the responsibility of States and even privileges in the name of the suffering of their ancestors. Not only is there nothing to define the conditions that give rise to the right to the duty to remember, but it is often difficult to carry out research in the absence of reliable sources of information. This encourages the emergence of communitarian demands that do nothing to contribute to pacification, or political manoeuvres that instrumentalize the suffering of the past. In the name of the duty to

remember and in order to put pressure on French diplomacy, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika thus equated the colonisation of Algeria in 2006 with genocide[6].

6] Finally, the concept as it is applied today carries the risk of sustaining or revealing frustrations. Indeed, constantly reminding oneself of the sufferings suffered can lead the populations concerned to cultivate their frustrations and not allow themselves to combine their collective history with the present and then the future. As Esther Benbassa[7] states, "In the long run, the cult of memory imprisons those who claim it and makes them turn their backs on the future"[8]. 8] Moreover, the permanent guilt of a generation that did not live at the time of the events can lead to a rejection of the duty to remember. This is the case in Japan, where national repentance linked to the actions of the Japanese empire, particularly in China, has created deep exasperation and a strong revisionist current. The mere fact of belonging to a nation that committed mass crimes in the past does not make every individual today guilty of those crimes. The duty of remembrance has reached its limits here because it can have an effect strictly opposite to the desired one.

The duty to remember is therefore a vague notion, with contested legitimacy, without any established rule on the conditions for its application, the consequences of which may be counterproductive.

Perspectives

Without rejecting the duty of remembrance outright, it is a matter of determining the principles that will enable the latter to fulfil its peacemaking function more serenely.

- Avenues for reflection

Remembrance is now considered an obligation and forgetting is considered a mistake, even a fault. The latter, however, is unavoidable, especially in view of the human capacity to remember. It is also salutary for allowing oneself to envisage the future. The main thing is to choose what one wishes to remember and what one accepts to forget.

Even as societies seek to preserve much of their history, they must take into account the limited human capacity to remember all the events of the past. Since it is not possible to remember everything precisely, it is reasonable to forget the details of events that are too old and have little meaning for the living population, concentrating instead on the lessons to be learned from them. In this case, cultivating the specific memory of an ancient conflict has little resonance in the present and does little to cement a nation to face the challenges of the present or the future. The Battle of Bouvines[9], for example, was one of the first great French battles against foreigners. And yet, despite the magnitude of its consequences on the destiny of our country, it would not occur to anyone today to commemorate it on a national scale.

It is nevertheless important to preserve the "useful memory", the one that makes societies better. Contrary to the quote attributed to Confucius, according to which "experience is a lantern to be carried on one's back which never illuminates anything but the road travelled", the past - including dramatic events - can be used to guide their future. However, it is a matter of selecting those memories that can be used to prevent the same dramas from reoccurring. The creation of the United Nations in the aftermath of the Second World War was based on this principle. Although there are still too many

conflicts, this organization has managed to avoid or limit many of them.

In addition to this useful remembrance, it is necessary to forget the grievances that peoples may have had throughout their history. The desire for revenge only encourages the escalation of violence. Breaking this escalation to extremes presupposes that at least one of the parties agrees to forget their resentment. Refusing hatred is not easy, especially when it comes to mass crimes, and seems easier to preach than to practice. If the French had to be at war with all the peoples they have opposed, we would be entrenched in our hexagon without any possibility of exchange and development. The Mitterrand-Kohl meeting in Douaumont on September 22, 1984, where the two men celebrated the reconciliation of their nations hand in hand, is a symbol of the ability to sublimate the oppositions of the past.

Another line of thought would be to seek greater visibility for commemorations: the grouping together of events that are similar. The multiplicity of commemoration dates, each drowning in a shapeless magma, would make it possible to identify them better. Each event would also be more representative. Indeed, a micro-event for a limited category of people can hardly mobilise a nation. It would therefore be a matter of encouraging the grouping of commemorations to make them more universal by placing them within a broader issue.

- Two concrete proposals

In order to avoid the multiplicity of commemorations of mass crimes, it would be appropriate to define memorial categories. Indeed, no distinction should be made between the sufferings suffered, whatever the population concerned and whatever the number of victims: it is no more serious to persecute a Jew in Europe in 1940 than it is to persecute a Christian in the Middle East in 2013. The message transmitted to the new generations must, in fact, bring together and not discriminate between the causes, for human dignity does not vary according to the population which is the victim of suffering. For example, it would be possible to group together victims of genocide (Gypsies, Armenians), political victims (deportees from Hitler's Nazi regime or Stalin's communist regime...), religious victims (Jews, Catholics, Copts), economic victims (slave trade). It will thus be a question of not limiting a duty of remembrance to one category of population but to one type of damage suffered. This would avoid, in particular, the communitarian militancy which favours the division of a society. The duty to remember would then make it possible to defend human values above all divisions.

In the context of a greater readability of actions linked to military memory, we could take advantage of the disappearance of the last hairy ones to thoroughly reform the ceremonies of tribute to the dead for France. We would then have to continue along the path begun by the law voted on the subject [10] under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency in 2012, setting 11 November as the date for commemorating all the dead for France. This would mean, on the one hand, setting a date other than November 11. Indeed, this historically charged date overshadows all other conflicts that are supposed to be commemorated at the same time. On the other hand, no other date of national commemoration should be retained to give this event national unity around the citizens who fell for the Fatherland.

The memory of all our dead could then be honoured without focusing on the two world conflicts which, although they are the most significant, are not the only ones in which

French people have died in the field of honour. The choice of a single date would in fact constitute a strong symbol by placing all the soldiers who fought for France on the same level. It would finally allow us to pay tribute to those soldiers, whether conscripts or enlisted, who died on behalf of the French people, on the orders of the government, in our former colonies or in foreign theatres of operations. A soldier does not choose the war he fought in the name of his country and none of those who have died for France since 1945 deserve the silence that weighs on their graves.

Combining national unity and symbolic significance without favouring any particular conflict, 14 July seems a plausible solution. This solution would make it possible, in particular, to give new meaning to our national holiday by paying tribute to those who defended the Fatherland or fought in its name far from its borders. The military parade would then take on a deeper meaning by placing the footsteps of the younger generation back in the footsteps of their heroic forebears.

Just as dead leaves are transformed into humus to fertilize the soil and allow the development of new plants, the dramas of history must be valued to allow the advent of better days. Freezing the past is not only illusory but also dangerous because of the threat of tension it poses. Without seeking to replace the duty to remember with a "duty to forget" that is so irrelevant, it is therefore a question of commemorating in a useful way to make society better, according to a reading grid that is less attached to detail but more universal. The duty of remembrance should therefore itself respect a duty: that of promoting peace by spreading a message that is free of any communitarian, ideological or political manipulation.

To consider memory with reason and not with passion, a vast programme!

1) Minister attached to the Minister of Defence, responsible for veterans.

2) Excerpt from the article by Lieutenant-Colonel (H) R Taurand. Source: ANOCR website / testimonies

3) Speech on 16 July 1995 at the Velodrome d'hiver on the occasion of the commemoration of the Nazi round-up on 16 July 1942.

4) "Speech by Nicolas Sarkozy at the annual CRIF dinner on 13 February 2008", lemonde.fr

5) Ref: website of the League for Human Rights, section law of 23 February 2005, motion adopted by the association of history and geography teachers adopted and published on 22 May 2005.

6) Libération.fr, 18 April 2006.

7) Director of studies at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sorbonne. Specialist in Jewish history. Personal website: estherbenbassa.net

8) Article "La guerre des mémoires - La polemique autour de l'héritage colonial français libère les revendications mémorielles" of 5 January 2006, Libération.fr

9) In 1214, Philippe Auguste, King of France, faced the German Emperor Otto and some revolted vassals.

10) Law n° 2012-273 of February 28, 2012

Saint-cyrien of the promotion "de la France Combattante" (1997-2000) the Senior Engineer Benoît BOUZEAU spent the first part of his

career in the infantry and as a trainer at the Schools of Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan. Having chosen to serve in the defence infrastructure service, he is currently at the EMSST in training at the Engineering School of Angers.

Title : l'Ingénieur principal Benoît BOUZEAU

Author (s) : l'Ingénieur principal Benoît BOUZEAU

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