



Why Europe Needs Historiographic
Tolerance

Dr. Eric Hendriks, Dániel Farkas, & Stefano Arroque

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The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasising the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

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About the Authors



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Why Europe Needs Historiographic Tolerance

Eric Hendriks, Dániel Farkas & Stefano Arroque

Abstract

Europe's Culture War revolves around competing understandings of democracy, divergent visions of EU cooperation, and, crucially, contested historical narratives. Historiography maps itself across the continent. Western European liberals tend to draw an anti-nationalist lesson from the darkest chapters of the twentieth century, while thinkers in the Visegrád countries and former East Germany align more closely with a national-conservative, anti-totalitarian, and anti-imperial reading. As political scientist Philip Manow notes with biting irony, the lesson drawn by the other is deemed worthless, nonexistent, even dangerous. "The enemy is now also the one who comes from a different history, someone who, as a result, appears not to understand history correctly, or refuses to understand it correctly and to draw the proper political conclusions from it." The other, in this logic, is no true democrat, no good European. But having different historical views is intrinsic to democracy on a continental scale. And to love Europe is to love its plurality. What we need now is a modest measure of historiographical tolerance, if only to keep our European Culture War within bounds.



Castle Hill and Royal Palace, Budapest. (Shutterstock).

Introduction

Western European liberals recurrently charge that anyone who disagrees with their anti-nationalist macro-interpretation of Europe's 20th-century catastrophes, like national conservatives and many others, particularly in Visegrád countries and former East Germany, has 'failed to learn from history.' The charge rests on the presumption that Europe's 20th-century catastrophes yielded only one true moral: that nationalism led inexorably to war, fascism, Hitler, further war, and genocide. That nationalism is incompatible with democracy. And that democratic majorities must therefore be tightly fenced in by the rule of law, supranational oversight, and mechanisms diluting national sovereignty. Behold the so-called singular lesson of European history, invoked as a universal prescription for all citizens of the European Union.

Deployed as a rhetorical weapon against national conservatism and its attachment to sovereign democracy, not to mention against the divergent historical memories of the smaller states in Eastern Central Europe, the lesson—late liberal, EU-centric, and anti-nationalist—implies that to be a good European is, above all, to be an anti-nationalist. Because nationalism breeds dictators. Hence, democracy must be hemmed in by law, sovereignty surrendered to Brussels, and elections treated with suspicion lest they deliver the 'wrong' result. Otherwise, we are warned, another Hitler may arise. We all know the script. We have, by now, all been bludgeoned with it.

But the liberal, anti-nationalist monopoly over 'the lesson of the past' obscures the deeper historiographic diversity that defines Europe. As Hannah Arendt once observed, Europe is "the heir to many pasts."¹ Different regions and groups have undergone distinct historical experiences and drawn equally distinct, if not always incompatible, conclusions from them.

Of course, this is not a call to indulge in chauvinistic revisionism, resentful irredentism, or antisemitic erasures. Such impulses are neither intellectually serious nor morally admissible. Any European who has truly learned anything from the last century knows these are pursuits best avoided like the plague. They corrode the very idea of the EU as a community of nations built on mutual recognition and shared historical reckoning. One such reckoning remains ongoing. As historian Adam LeBor notes in a report for the

Danube Institute, the main purpose of Budapest's Holocaust Memorial Centre, opened in 2004, was to "universalise the Holocaust among non-Jewish Hungarians": to instil the understanding that those murdered were fellow citizens, not some external group.² This simple realisation—still too thinly spread in post-communist memory culture—marks the line between genuine reflection and evasion.

The absence of robust historical reflection does not constitute an alternative interpretative macro-frame for understanding Europe's greatest 20th-century disasters, let alone one capable of contending with the liberal, anti-nationalist macro-frame. Also, more generally, the liberal, anti-nationalist macro frame should not be underestimated: it hits many historical and present-day political data points and offers a relatively coherent vision of a federalist European future shaped by the logic of pooled sovereignty.

Yet, there are legitimate alternatives to the anti-nationalist frame, too. At the heart of national conservatism lies a morally and intellectually serious historical lesson, drawn from the ruins of the Second World War and the early trials of the Cold War. Though genuine, this lesson is too often conflated with the chauvinist, irredentist and unreflective revisions cited above. This conflation serves strategic polemical reasons, as, famously, is the thesis of political scientist Philip Manow's groundbreaking work *Unter Beobachtung* (2024); for it obscures an ideological rival. Which rival? Which alternative 'lesson of the past' has been obscured by late liberalism? National conservatism's *anti-totalitarian* frame.

The Anti-Totalitarian Frame

The anti-totalitarian frame does not condemn nationalism per se. Rather, it indicts the specific form German nationalism assumed under National Socialism, and more broadly, the imperial ambitions and totalitarian violence of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In 1944, safely exiled in New York, Austrian-American economic theorist Ludwig von Mises wrote: "Nationalism ... determines in our age the foreign policy of every nation. What characterises the Nazis as such is their special kind of nationalism: the striving for *Lebensraum*."³ The Nazis and their war, in this reading, represented the most extreme culmination of *totalitarianism*,

¹ Quoted by Philip Manow in *Unter Beobachtung: Die Bestimmung der liberalen Demokratie und ihrer Freunde* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2024) 180.

² Adam LeBor, "Coming to Terms With a Dark Past: Hungary's Struggle over Wartime Historical Memory" (Budapest, Danube Institute report, February 2025), cited 19 May 2025, 6.

³ Ludwig von Mises, *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War* (Indianapolis, Indiana: 2011(1944)) 5.

one of the two “distinctive ideological trends” defining modern political history, the other being democratic *self-determination*.⁴

Whereas democratic self-determination was seen as the path to peace, the totalitarian trend—spreading widely through war economies and socialist doctrines but, by 1944, most visible in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalin’s Soviet Union—led inexorably to war. Totalitarianism, Von Mises argued, demands that the state be self-sufficient and thus necessitates the conquest of territory and resources. “Economic considerations,” he explained, “are pushing every totalitarian government toward world domination. The Soviet government is by the deed of its foundation not a national government but a universal government, only by unfortunate conditions temporarily prevented from exercising its power in all countries.”⁵

Alongside war and expansion, genocide was seen as another ‘logical’ and inevitable consequence of totalitarianism. German legal theorist Gerhard Leibholz, writing from wartime London, argued as much. In 1938, Catholic theologian Peter Tischleder paraphrased this point from Münster: “If the total state aims to function as both economic overlord and spiritual authority, then Gerhard Leibholz is right that a genuinely total state, in this sense, could not be established today without the physical or spiritual annihilation of dissenting minority groups.”⁶

Von Mises and Leibholz’s critical conceptualisations of totalitarianism were, in part, a reaction to the earlier affirmative account of the total state found in Ernst Forsthoff’s notorious 1933 work *Der totale Staat*. Forsthoff endorsed the total state with only minor caveats, and later joined the NSDAP. In the late 1940s and 1950s, critical reflection on the concepts of the total state and totalitarianism was further developed by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, whose *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) became a foundational text in post-war political analysis.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the anti-totalitarian frame was dominant in Western Europe. During the 1950s and 1960s, many saw the continent’s nations as having stood against not one but two totalitarian empires: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. Given the Soviet Union’s internationalist rhetoric, it was by no

means inevitable that liberal thinkers would draw the later conclusion that nationalism was the greater danger. That idea—central to contemporary EU orthodoxy—would only take hold in subsequent decades.

Some pioneers of anti-nationalist liberalism did appear early on. One such figure was legal theorist Hans Kelsen. In *Das Problem der Souveränität und die Theorie des Völkerrechts* (The Problem of Sovereignty and the Theory of International Law, 1944), Kelsen challenged the nation-state model and the value of state sovereignty, arguing instead for a supranational legal order grounded in universal principles of international law. Kelsenian politico-legal thought is a key source of the EEC and then the EU’s sense of mission; indeed, political theorist Stefan Auer goes so far as to describe the European Union as a “Kelsenian project.”⁷

Yet when the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was founded in 1951 by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the aim was pragmatic: to create economic interdependence that would make another German assault on France unthinkable. The ambition to overcome national sovereignty as such would not become mainstream in Western Europe until the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1950s and 1960s, wartime figures of national resistance were publicly honoured across countries like France and the Netherlands. The 1956 Hungarian rebels won admiration for resisting Soviet domination in the name of democratic ideals. During the Soviet invasion of Hungary that November, the director of the Hungarian News Agency sent what proved to be his final message: “We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe.”⁸ That sentiment resonated widely. Europe, after all, was still seen as a family of nations; hence, there was no contradiction between defending Hungary and defending Europe. Nor was there a perceived conflict between democracy and nationhood. Quite the opposite: the modern democratic state was premised on the idea of the nation as a community of equal citizens. Within what was then the mainstream, concepts such as ‘democracy,’ ‘liberty,’ and ‘Europe’ had not yet been cast in opposition to national sovereignty.

Indeed, in the first post-war decades, the liberal mainstream itself was predominantly pro-nationalist, too. Auer notes the

⁴ Ibid. 9.

⁵ Ibid. 9.

⁶ Quoted by Peter Fleck in “Wider den totalen Staat: Der Münsteraner Professor Peter Tischleder als moraltheologisch-sozialethischer Kritiker des NS-Staates” in *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 161, 2011, 139–148, 115, cited on 26 May 2025.

⁷ Stefan Auer, *European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 13.

⁸ Milan Kundera quotes by Auer, *ibid.* 140.

historical irony that today's liberal elites defend supranationalism and technocracy against populist nationalisms: "Across Europe, populist leaders on the right and the left have positioned themselves as the true defenders of national interests against faceless bureaucrats in Brussels, technocrats at the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, or judges in Luxembourg. Yet, not so long ago, defending one's nation was a liberal cause."⁹

Similarly, Israeli political theorist Yoram Hazony argues in *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018) that during the Second World War, the Allies understood themselves to be fighting for a Europe of free nations, i.e., nations rooted in sovereignty and self-determination. To the extent that nationalism was considered an enemy, German nationalism in particular was condemned.

These things were perfectly clear during the war itself. In their radio broadcasts, the United States and Britain consistently emphasized that, as an alliance of independent nations, their aim was to restore the independence and self-determination of national states throughout Europe. And in the end, it was American, British, and Russian nationalism—even Stalin had abandoned Marxist claptrap about 'world revolution' in favor of open appeals to Russian patriotism—that defeated Germany's bid for universal empire

In Eastern Central Europe, the trajectory was rather different. After 1948, when Stalinist regimes consolidated power in the Visegrád states and East Germany, official memory of the world wars and the Holocaust framed these tragedies as above all capitalist, fascist, and German crimes. Yet ironically, it is now in this region—Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the former East Germany—that the anti-totalitarian frame retains the most influence.

Western European liberal intellectuals, by contrast, have largely embraced the view that a strongly centralising—'sovereignty-pooling'—form of EU federalism is the necessary antidote to war and European disunion. From their perspective, their technocratic centralism does not come at the expense of democracy; on the contrary, it is nationalism and national populism that constitute the principal threats to democratic governance. Hence, resistance to their technocratic centralisation, such as that voiced from Hungary's Fidesz government, is often misunderstood or misportrayed as anti-democratic, and with it, the historical experiences and interpretations that underpin it.

⁹ Ibid. 134.

Obscuring Others' Past

Ironically, although the anti-totalitarian frame was once the dominant ideological lens through which post-war Western Europe understood its recent past, it has since been eclipsed in much of Western Europe by the now prevailing anti-nationalist liberal reading of history's lesson. That very anti-nationalist narrative now claims to have ascended first and obscures the historical primacy of the anti-totalitarian frame, reinterpreting the latter as reactive and resentful, or even as 'anti-democratic.'¹⁰

However, the ascendancy of the anti-nationalist macro-frame came later. It emerged gradually, rooted in a strand of liberal thought that gained traction in post-war West Germany and in the intellectual milieu surrounding the European Commission. A telling illustration of this post- or anti-national turn can be seen in the evolution of Jürgen Habermas. In the 1950s, the young philosopher advocated for a 'cleansed' German national identity.¹¹ But by the 1990s—by which time he had become something akin to the Bundesrepublik's official thinker—he had moved beyond that position, rejecting the broader principle of national self-determination for European states altogether. He wrote of "the alleged right to national self-determination" and deemed it "problematic."¹²

Much of the confusion arises from the fact that the anti-nationalist reading of history retrospectively projects itself onto the immediate post-war period, as if it had been the clear and widely shared insight all along. In doing so, it first denies that the earlier historiography constituted a distinct and coherent layer of interpretation, treating it instead as little more than a resentful backlash against the singular, supposedly self-evident lesson of history. What began as a polemical distancing of the new from the old has thus evolved into something deeper: the protagonists of the new paradigm have so effectively obscured the old, both to others and to themselves, that they now sincerely misrecognise it.

This partial misrecognition—combined with a degree of strategic distortion of the ideological alternative—lies at the heart of Europe's Culture War. The competing historiographical macro-frames are directly linked to differing conceptions of democracy, the rule of law, the nation, Europe, and the interrelation of all these ideas. They also

inform disputes over where the centre of gravity within EU cooperation ought to lie.

Political scientist Philip Manow puts it succinctly: "The enemy is now also the one who comes from a different history, someone who, as a result, appears not to understand history correctly, or refuses to understand it correctly and to draw the proper political conclusions from it."¹³ Manow speaks sarcastically. His point is that in the political and intellectual life of the EU realm, those who hold alternative (yet often fully sincere and serious) views of the past are cast as enemies of democracy—a game that, he argues, is harmful to EU politics, intellectual life in Europe, and the quality of Europe's national democracies.

What makes it particularly insidious is that the late liberal obscuring and stigmatisation of national-conservative historiography is closely tied to a stigmatisation of the latter's understanding of democracy and positive EU engagement. Everything is thus interconnected. The result is a situation in which the democratic Other within the EU realm is systematically vilified for refusing 'to learn from history,' as 'authoritarian,' 'far-right,' or 'anti-democratic,' with all the attendant consequences for the quality of public discourse and the health of the democratic space.¹⁴

For the European Union to flourish, it must foster a culture of *historiographic tolerance*, a willingness to accept that there are multiple, historically grounded ways of interpreting Europe's 20th-century past and its lessons for Europe going forward. As noted, there are indeed political actors and intellectuals who still shy away from confronting the darkest chapters of 20th-century European history. But the historical divide between those who engage seriously with that past and those who do not is not the focus here. Rather, the concern is with the divide *within* the domain of serious and genuine interpretations. Within that domain, it is essential to cultivate a measure of tolerance, grounded in an appreciation for the deeply pluralistic historicity of the European continent.

To engage with the pluralistic structure of historicity in Europe, this paper sketches an ideal-typical contrast by comparing Hungary and Luxembourg. The Hungarian case

¹⁰ Manow, *Unter Beobachtung*, 179–180.

¹¹ A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2007) 112–115.

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zu politischer Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997) 8.

¹³ *Unter Beobachtung* 180. "Feind ist nun auch der mit einer anderen Geschichte, aus der heraus er die Geschichte nicht richtig zu verstehen scheint bzw. sich weigert, sie richtig zu verstehen, die richtigen politischen Konsequenzen aus ihr zu ziehen."

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 179–180.

serves to illustrate the national-conservative, anti-totalitarian, and anti-imperial macro-frame for interpreting the darkest chapters of twentieth-century European history and their contemporary political implications. Hungary, with its strong national identity and its *népi* tradition, stands as a representative of this perspective. Luxembourg, by contrast—with its linguistic pluralism and deep institutional embeddedness within the European Union—embodies the late-liberal, anti-nationalist reading of the past and the supranational conclusions drawn from it.

That said, historical cases are inevitably marked by overwhelming complexity—far messier than what any ideal-typical model can capture. Accordingly, we also aim to acknowledge some of this complexity by tracing multiple historical trajectories and the roles played by various groups over time. Yet from within this complexity, a contrast can still be meaningfully drawn: a historiographical contrast that offers insight into the deeper fault lines of the European Culture War and may help us navigate it with greater clarity and tolerance.

*The Chancel Reredos, Saint Mark's Cathedral, Venice.
(James Mahony/National Gallery of Ireland).*



Hungary: The Nation as the Site of Democratic Solidarity and Resistance

The nation has long been central to modern Hungarian political thought and to its conceptions of democracy, social solidarity, and self-governance. Since the early 19th century, a democratising classical liberalism and Romanticism have jointly connected these categories. Hungary, in fact, possesses a pronounced nationalist tradition. The Magyars—Hungary’s main ethnic group, after whom the country is named in Hungarian—have cultivated a strong national identity, shaped in part by their unique status: their language forms an island in a vast Indo-European sea, and for centuries they were forced to assert themselves amid larger German-speaking and Slavic powers, contending with Habsburg, Russian, and Russo-Soviet imperialism. As a result, Hungarian national self-determination has generally been seen not as a problem but as a hard-won democratic achievement.

Still, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, a polarised situation has emerged in the capital city of Budapest, in which a politically influential network of anti-nationalist liberal intellectuals competes against the national conservatism and *népi* populism of Prime Minister Orbán Viktor’s ruling Fidesz Party.¹⁵ Budapest is a bit of its own universe, but countrywide, the national conservatism and *népi* populism are politically and intellectually dominant, or at least they are more dominant relative to anti-nationalist liberalism than are equivalent ideologies in Western Europe. The pleonasm ‘*népi* populism,’ which means something like ‘people’s populism,’ will be explained below.¹⁶

The political polarisation is mirrored in the competing ways Hungary remembers the great catastrophes of twentieth-century Europe: the Second World War, the Holocaust, Stalinist oppression, and, arguably, the First World War and its aftermath, which in Hungary centres on the Treaty of Trianon. This 1920 peace agreement formally ended Hungary’s involvement in the war but saw the country lose two-thirds of its territory and population, inflicting a lasting trauma on the national psyche. Writing specifically on Holocaust memory, historian Adam LeBor observes in a report for the Danube Institute that “Hungary’s deep political divide remains broadly reflected in the continuing contested approaches to Holocaust guilt and responsibility.”¹⁷ In that report, “Coming to Terms with a Dark Past,”

LeBor outlines the dominant memory cultures on both the left and the right, while also noting a gradual shift towards a more reflective engagement with the Holocaust. Still, Hungarian memory culture remains complex and contested, with ideologies, individuals, and political actors continually reshaping its contours in response to present circumstances. Against this backdrop, the dominance of national conservatism and populism has shaped a different interpretation of *Nie wieder* (‘never again’). In the West German context, the phrase refers primarily to the Holocaust, and is rooted in a broadly anti-nationalist reading of the past. By contrast, in Hungary, the prevailing narrative draws from a classical, anti-totalitarian perspective, seeing the horrors of the twentieth century as warnings against totalitarianism, imperialism, and—most insidiously—totalitarian imperialism. Rather than locating the root cause of Europe’s catastrophes in nationalism, Hungarian political thought often sees the nation as a bulwark of democratic resistance.

The following offers a concise historical overview of Hungarian thinking on the relationship between democracy, the nation, and nationalism. It aims to illuminate the intellectual and political context in which the anti-totalitarian lesson, prevalent in Western Europe and North America during the early Cold War, has re-emerged as the dominant interpretive framework in contemporary Hungary. This account also contends that such a framework can foster a legitimate and serious engagement with history, and that it need not be an evasion of moral responsibility or a failure to conform to the normative expectations of being ‘a good European,’ to borrow a phrase often heard in circles around the European Commission.

Nation, Democracy, Nationalism

Hungarian political thought on the nexus between democracy and the nation begins with the emergence of political modernity in the early nineteenth century and proceeds through the interwar period (1918–1939), the Second World War, the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, the Communist era (1949–1989), and concludes with Hungary’s post-1989 opening to the West and accession to the European Union in 2004. Though necessarily schematic, the following overview will highlight how, in Hungary, as elsewhere,

¹⁵ Balázs and Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* 283, 287.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 245–253.

¹⁷ LeBor, “Coming to Terms With a Dark Past” 7.

nationhood, national self-determination, and nationalism have historically and conceptually been closely intertwined with democratic ideals.

In present-day Hungary, where the *népi* tradition and national conservatism (both particularly influential among Calvinists) continue to shape political discourse, this connection remains vivid.¹⁸ Nationhood is not seen as a potential threat to democracy, but rather as one of its cornerstones.

In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, the prevailing assumption was that the development of the national community was intrinsically linked to Hungary's quest for self-government and, by extension, to the creation of a polity founded on equal citizenship. As Balázs Zoltán and Molnár Csaba explain in *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* (2024)—the first systematic account in English of Hungary's political tradition—nineteenth-century nationalism was largely seen as compatible with liberalism: “Nineteenth-century nationalism was, for the most part, thought to be reconcilable with liberalism as the dominant worldview of the political elites in Europe.

It was simply a new context of political thinking under the influence of the French idea of the nation that included everyone (the evolving democratic aspect) along the principles of equal citizenship and rights (the more pertinently liberal aspect).”¹⁹ European Romanticism further bolstered this model of national-democratic solidarity, deepening the emotional and historical sense of shared origin and destiny, and in doing so reinforced the egalitarian ideal within the nation alongside a heightened historical-cultural self-awareness.

The concept of a self-governing, parliamentary Hungary—drawing inspiration from French and English models—was frequently seen to stand in contrast to the ‘external’ rule of the Habsburgs, who had controlled Hungary since the 16th century. Especially from the 1780s, in their rivalry with Prussia, the Habsburgs embraced centralising, absolutist rule, often at odds with Hungarian calls for national autonomy. These tensions culminated in the 1848 Revolution, which was suppressed but left a lasting legacy.

In 1867, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise established a dual monarchy, granting Hungary considerable internal autonomy within the empire. While Austria and Hungary

shared a monarch and foreign policy, Hungary regained its own parliament and domestic governance, marking a partial fulfilment of nationalist aspirations within an imperial framework.

In the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, which had been established by the Compromise of 1867, a primary challenge for Hungarian national thought and democracy was conceptualising Hungarian self-governance and the relationship between Hungarianness and the multiple ethnic minorities now living in the expanded and empowered Hungarian kingdom.²⁰ Some intellectuals attempted to frame the Hungarian nation as a ‘political nation,’ a construct that, in theory, could incorporate various nationalities without requiring their assimilation, drawing upon the multi-ethnic legacy of medieval and early modern Hungary. Yet such notions fell short of satisfying the aspirations of the minorities themselves. The inherent contradiction of asserting a singular national sovereignty within a multinational polity did not escape Hungarian thinkers. Lajos Kossuth, the former leader of the failed 1848–49 National Revolution and War of Independence, cautioned that postponing a meaningful settlement with the nationalities risked eventual confrontation and the violent disintegration of the Hungarian state.²¹

This moment of truth arrived in 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy was defeated in the First World War. The neighbouring nations on the ‘winning side’—namely Serbia and Romania—as well as the newly created, pro-Entente Czechoslovakia, annexed large parts of the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, effectively absorbing all the regions with ethnic Hungarian minorities, and even many areas with Hungarian majorities. In this new situation, the Hungarian nation—defeated, humiliated, and now fragmented—at least no longer had to contend with the problem of managing significant nationalities within Hungarian-controlled lands, for such lands no longer existed, as Hungary's territory had been drastically reduced.

A new problem emerged: the inverse of the old one. Large parts of the Hungarian nation now found themselves living under foreign rule. In response, Hungarian politics embraced the fateful goal of revising the pre-1920 borders, a path that led to alignment first with fascist Italy and later with Nazi Germany, culminating in Hungary's entry into the Second World War on the side of the Axis. In return, Nazi Germany allowed Hungary to recover some of its lost territories, though this Faustian bargain quickly yielded its poisoned fruit.

¹⁸ Balázs and Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* 256.

¹⁹ Ibid. 289.

²⁰ János Gyurgyák, *Ezzé lett magyar hazátok. A magyar nemzeteszmé és nacionalizmus története* (Budapest: Osiris, 2007) 20–153.

²¹ Ibid. 140.

In 1944, the German Wehrmacht occupied Hungary, and Hungarian authorities and security forces became deeply complicit in the Holocaust. Approximately 565,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered—most of them deported to Auschwitz—following the occupation and with the active collaboration of Hungarian state actors. The near-total destruction of Hungary's Jewish community, long a vital presence in the cultural and economic life of Budapest and the nation, marked the end of Budapest's golden age, left a lasting scar on Hungarian nationhood, and stands as the most devastating tragedy to befall the Hungarian people in the twentieth century.²²

After 1944, and again after 1949, when the Hungarian People's Republic was established under Soviet tutelage and control, the central question—as it had been in the early nineteenth century—became how to assert nationhood and national history under conditions of subjugation. This tension came to a head with the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, in which Hungarian nationalism—though scarred by the Nazi collaboration and antisemitic violence of the 1940s—nonetheless served once more as a source of resistance, this time against Soviet domination.

In October 1956, a popular uprising erupted in Budapest against the communist regime and Soviet occupation, with the Hungarian nation asserting itself as the core of resistance. Students and workers demanded a return to political pluralism, free multi-party elections, civil liberties, and the restoration of national sovereignty.

Their vision of democracy stood in sharp contrast to the Soviet-imposed one-party rule: they called for parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and assembly, and an end to censorship and political repression. The revolt quickly spread across the country, fuelled by patriotic fervour and a profound desire to reclaim self-determination. The communist emblem was cut from the Hungarian flag, and Prime Minister Imre Nagy declared neutrality and announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact.

Though formally a mutual defence alliance, the Pact was in practice dominated by the Soviet Union and served as an instrument of Moscow's military hegemony in Eastern Europe, providing a veneer of legality for suppressing dissent. On 4 November, more than 200,000 Soviet troops invaded Hungary to crush the revolution. Around 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet soldiers were killed; hundreds were executed, thousands imprisoned, and nearly a quarter

of a million fled abroad. Despite the brutal repression, the uprising revealed the enduring strength of national consciousness in the face of supranational totalitarian imperialism.

Finally, with the decline of socialism in the 1980s, Hungarian thinkers once again identified national identity as a force capable of revitalising political life and paving the way towards a state grounded in broad popular support. The renewed centrality of the nation in Hungarian political thought arose from ideological experiments that sought to reconcile progressive ideals with national identity.

This may come as a surprise to contemporary Western European progressive liberals, who often regard progressivism and nationalism as mutually exclusive—and nationalism itself as inherently antidemocratic. Yet liberal and socialist progressivism have frequently intersected with nationalism since the latter emerged as a dominant current in European intellectual and political life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is at this convergence of nationalism, egalitarianism, liberalism, and democracy that the influential Hungarian *népi* tradition is situated.

Népi Populism

Central to Hungarian political thought is the *népi* tradition. *Népi*, which means popular, rural, or folkish, can function as a shorthand for the view that politics revolves around the struggle “between the elite and the people” and that, in this opposition, “the people” are “the bearer of moral righteousness.” Accordingly, for the *népi* tradition, the “people's will” is as important ... as is the idea of the ‘general will’ for Rousseau and democratic theory.”²³

In its more loving, Romantic variants, it extends solidarity to marginalised groups such as the Roma gypsies, who were portrayed empathetically in ‘orientalist’ and social realist paintings of the fin de siècle, such as János Valentiny's painting *Gypsy School* (1896), which hangs in the National Gallery in Budapest. In its more chauvinistic, paranoid, and hyper-nationalist variants, *népi* populism hunts for supposed hostile alien elements nesting within the national home—fifth columns—which, in the early and mid-20th century, were often imagined to be Jews and, in the late twentieth century, were seen as embodied by rootless liberals.²⁴

Népi populism emerged from a heterogeneous group of *népi* intellectuals active during the interwar period, who advocated for the vertical renewal of Hungary. In their Romanticism-

²² Adam Lebor, *The Last Days of Budapest: Spies, Nazis, Rescuers and Resistance, 1940–1945* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025).

²³ Balázs and Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* 246.

²⁴ Ibid. 246, 249, 266–267, 299.

tinged vision, Hungarian elites were to reconnect with the deep-rooted cultural traditions and values preserved in the ‘pure source’ of the rural agricultural population. In turn, these same rural communities were to be integrated into Hungarian modernity, offering a path out of entrenched poverty and subsistence farming. This project of national integration and vertical reform united intellectuals across the political spectrum, though it ultimately found its strongest resonance within right-conservative circles.

The *népi* tradition, a strand of Romantic modernity, experienced a revival in the 1960s as a protest against the alienating and, in the words of Balázs and Molnár, offensively “a-national” governance of Kádárist socialism. They write that:

*The Kádár regime was notorious for its indifference to Hungarian minorities abroad. It was essentially internationalist, or better, a-nationalist. Although népi-populism, as we argued, was also friendly toward the ‘foster brother peoples’ of Central Europe, the harsh treatment, often persecution, and coerced assimilation of Hungarians, especially in Romania, became an issue for them.*²⁵

The *népi* revival during the 1960s was, above all, an intervention, an intervention in response to this official disregard for the Hungarian nation. Driven by figures such as the poet Sándor Csoóri and the playwright István Csurka, the movement initially sought an alternative form of socialism—Csoóri wrote admiringly of Castro’s Cuba as a grass-roots socialist society and expressed admiration for Che Guevara—but soon came to demand governments rooted in national identity.²⁶ Reflecting in 1987 at the founding meeting of the post-communist Right in Lakitelek, historian Konrád Salamon observed that, “The népis wanted to mash socialism, democracy and nation together.”²⁷ Similarly, in his monograph on Hungarian communism, István Papp notes that Csoóri, after his theoretical forays into Latin American ideologies, was profoundly affected by his 1970 trip to Erdély and, more broadly, by his rediscovery of nationality as a source of community.²⁸

Some Hungarian liberalism came from the same *népi* source, which incidentally illustrates the deep historical intertwining of liberalism and nationalism, which had been the dominant pattern throughout Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For example, Miklós Haraszti, one of the founders of the Free Democratic Federation (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SZDSZ), started his political development criticising alienation, writing the sociographic essay *Darabbér* (Pieccrate) about his experiences as a factory worker in 1974.

These *népi* criticisms and politico-theoretical reflections continued into the 1980s in a hushed way under the circumstances of Soviet-style Socialism. By then, Socialism had exhausted the society’s resources, and with the entry of Gorbachev into the life of the Soviet Bloc, it was clear that reforms were coming. The debates of national identity and its place in late 20th-century Hungary, after the failures of past systems, came eagerly. Haraszti and his group (János Kis, Péter Tölgyessi, etc.) moved from criticising socialist alienation to demanding unfettered market neoliberalisation and integration with the West.

In contrast, Csoóri, Csurka, and their circle sought to update an ethnic national identity for the coming liberal-democratic age. Democracy, they argued, can only work in a unified nation of solidarity, and is in turn needed for such solidarity, as a technocratically managed Hungary can create just subjects. These idea about the interlinkage of national goals and democracy was strongly influenced by the heritage of Hungarian geopolitics. In the 1970s and 1980s (and continuing to this day), millions of Hungarians lived in neighbouring states, their ethnic regions remnants of Greater Hungary lost at Trianon. This ethnic dispersion created vulnerabilities.

In the 1980s, the Stalinist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu launched a campaign against ethnic Hungarians in Romania, denying them their self-governance rights, destroying and dispersing Hungarian villages, and forcing ethnic Hungarians into cities. Hence, respect for minorities was understood to align with Hungarian national goals. Firmly tying nationalism, concern for ethnic minority rights, and democracy together, the *népi* objective was to rebuild Hungary in a late socialist society and protect the dispersed Hungarian nation against the chauvinism of neighbours. In a way, the Hungarian *népi*-nationalists anticipated the 1992 warning of Fukuyama, the paradigmatic theorist of the unipolar moment. Fukuyama warned that for democracy to work, it needs a community that has “irrational” pride in its own institutions.²⁹ That functional irrationality the *népi*-nationalists loved to provide.

²⁵ Ibid. 276.

²⁶ Sándor Csoóri, *Che Guevara búcsúztatója*. Digital Edition of the Digital Literature Academy of Hungary (DIA), <https://konyvtar.dia.hu/html/muvek/CSOORI/csoori00526/csoori00089/csoori00089.html>.

²⁷ *A magyarság esélyei. A lakitelki találkozó hiteles jegyzőkönyve*, Sept. 27 1987 (New York: Püski, 1988).

²⁸ István Papp, *A magyar kommunisták*. Jaffa, Budapest, 2024, 320.

²⁹ See the discussion of irrational group identity as a basis for democracy: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Free Press, 1992) 472.



Gypsy School. (János Valentiny/Wikimedia Commons).

This integration of democracy and nationalism as an anti-imperialist platform meant the criticism of the West as well. In his essay *A Small Ecology of Culture*, Csurka warned about the flood of the “junk” of mass media products that were waiting to invade Hungary, which starved out of culture in the desert of Socialism.³⁰ The goal of Hungary in the post-communist period then was to rebuild nationally, setting the nation-state as the goal, not necessarily ever-greater market liberalisation or the ever-closer integration with the EU’s supra-national technocratic-legal order.³¹ When the emerging conservative forces formed into a party, the Hungarian Democratic Forum in the fall of 1987, market reforms and broad liberalisation were set as political goals of the Right, but the main goal of national self-building was not lost. The MDF and the conservative right primarily feared the encroaching global capital and technocracy as the primary threats of the post-communist age instead of awakening Hungarian nationalism as a threat.³² This drew accusations of not being sufficiently pro-Western, while, in the mind of its creators, it was a platform for sheltering the national community from destruction.

Of course, the emphasis on national identity drew criticism from the other end of the political spectrum. Opponents of the newly formed popular-national bloc warned about the unfortunate shadows of the Hungarian past, as we have seen: antisemitism and chauvinist attitudes against the neighbouring countries. The liberal criticisms amplified as the Right gained power in the first elections of 1990, and the question became the munition of daily political debates in a parliamentary system.

It did not help the Right that over the years, one of the core thinkers of the *népi* group, István Csurka veered into anti-semitic rhetoric, finally ending up on the hard right, as leader of the radical MIÉP, Party of Hungarian Life and Justice. The liberal groups and the left openly questioned the democratic commitment of the Right, as was anticipated, making an example of Csurka’s trajectory. There was even a movement, a ‘Democratic Charter,’ against the perceived authoritarianism of the nationalist government between 1991–94.³³ Yet, no matter how real or overestimated the danger of the radical Right was, the technocratic leanings of the 1994–1998 and

post-2002 governments left a sour taste for Hungarians and did not convince them that, generally speaking, the Right is the greater threat.

In the twenty-first century, the *népi* idea—and with it, the “irrational pride” Fukuyama referred to—prevailed, aligning under successive Fidesz governments with a more intellectually articulated form of national conservatism. Hence, the Hungarian mainstream does not seek unfettered global economic integration or purely technocratic governance, but rather a politics grounded in solidarity and a sense of direction for the nation’s life. Yet the triumph of the *népi* idea did not necessarily stand in opposition to Hungary’s opening to the Western world, nor did that opening undermine it. On the contrary, European integration appears to have contributed to a renewed sense of national wholeness, as the EU’s ‘virtualisation’ of borders between Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Romania has reduced the separation between the dispersed parts of the Hungarian nation.

It is not that there is no liberal rival, nor that contemporary Hungarian liberalism lacks a strong anti-nationalist strand. Balázs and Molnár observe that European liberalism “in the course of its history, ... has become more and more universalist and less and less committed to national independence.”³⁴ They go on to note that the same holds true for Hungarian liberalism: “Whereas 19th-century liberals were overwhelmingly nationalists, post-1968 liberals tend to reject nationalism.”³⁵

Moreover, the anti-nationalist and pro-EU federalist position of Budapest’s liberal intellectuals remains highly influential within the capital, a fact even reflected in demographic data. For instance, the European Quality of Government Index 2021 found that Budapest—one of the EU’s most politically polarised cities—was the only NUTS-2 region where more people identified with ‘Europe’ than with their own country or region. In every other region, national or regional identity predominated.³⁶ Yet, though Budapest is an ideological battleground and therefore a space in which historical meaning and memory are actively

³⁰ István Csurka: *Kis kultúrkológia*. In.: auth. cit.: *Közép-Európa hó alatt. Esszék, előadások*. Püski, New York, 1990, 20.

³¹ Compare Stefan Auer’s more general observations of the Visegrád states post-1989 in *European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 139–142.

³² Zoltán Balázs and Csaba Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) 281.

³³ See a history of the Democratic Charter at: András Bozóki, “Intellectuals in a New Democracy: The Democratic Charter in Hungary,” in *East European Politics and Societies*, 10(2), 1996, 173–213.

³⁴ Zoltán Balázs and Csaba Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) 8.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ European Commission, “European Quality of Government Index 2021,” cited on 21 May 2025.

contested, as LeBor shows in his Danube Institute report, the idea of the nation remains too powerful across Hungary as a whole for liberal anti-nationalism to serve as the dominant macro-level framing.³⁷ Balázs and Molnár observe that “large sectors of the electorate identify themselves as a ‘nation’ rather than anything else (e.g. a ‘democratic polity’—a ‘polis’ or a ‘republic’ or a ‘liberal society’).”³⁸ This underpins an alternative, and predominant, reading of the European catastrophes of the early and mid-twentieth century.

A Different Historical Lesson

The prevailing Hungarian understanding of the relationship between democracy, freedom, and the nation differs markedly from the anti-nationalist liberalism dominant in left-liberal intellectual circles in Western Europe. As a result, a different macro-frame shapes interpretations of the catastrophes of the early and mid-twentieth century. Hungary’s strong emphasis on nationhood and national sovereignty appears closely tied to its unique position as a linguistic and cultural outlier within a vast Indo-European language zone, its historical encirclement by large empires, and the repeated threats to—and compromises of—its state sovereignty in the modern era.

Yet, despite its idiosyncrasies, ideological divisions, and complex history, contemporary Hungary exemplifies the macro-frame that prevails across the Visegrád Four and parts of former East Germany, where the nation-conservative AfD is currently the most popular party. A relevant factor here may be, as Czech author Milan Kundera once observed, that the smaller nations of Eastern Central Europe can conceive of a future in which their own country ceases to exist. Like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and even Poland, Hungary is a small state “whose very existence may be put in question at any moment. ... A small nation can disappear—and it knows it.”³⁹ In any case, as Slovak Europeanist Stefan Auer notes, “people in [Eastern] Central Europe do not see a major contradiction between the fight for liberty and the idea of the nation.”⁴⁰

An example of the classical, anti-totalitarian framing is the House of Terror museum, which opened in 2002. The House of Terror museum occupies a building whose very address—Andrássy út 60—is synonymous with totalitarian

cruelty. Run by Hungarian Nazis, the Arrow Cross Party, following the 1944 invasion of Hungary by Nazi Germany, the site functioned as a centre of detention, torture, and execution. In the post-war years, the Communist secret police moved in, inheriting both the premises and many of the same personnel. The continuity of repression was striking. Now, the building is a harrowing exhibition space, the basement cells preserved. The curatorial narrative frames Nazism and Stalinism as twin manifestations of totalitarianism, drawing a direct line between their crimes.

Our argument is certainly not that there is nothing to criticise in Hungary’s memory culture regarding the catastrophes of the early and mid-twentieth century. On the contrary, recent controversies—particularly those surrounding public monuments—clearly highlight ongoing shortcomings in the country’s historiography and commemorative practices. A prominent example is the Memorial for the Victims of the German Occupation, erected in 2014 on Liberty Square in central Budapest.

The monument depicts a German imperial eagle, symbolising Nazi Germany, swooping down to seize the orb from the hands of the Archangel Gabriel, who, together with the orb, represents Hungarian sovereignty. The memorial provoked widespread criticism. As Adam LeBor observed, “Jewish organisations, their allies and critics of the government furiously attacked the memorial as an attempt to whitewash history and portray Hungary as an innocent victim of the Nazis, rather than an active and enthusiastic participant in the Holocaust.”⁴¹ Not a good sign, to say the least.

To be clear, our aim is not to celebrate Hungarian or national-conservative historiography or commemorative practices in their entirety. Rather, we simply contend that it is indeed possible to reach morally and intellectually serious reflections on the darkest chapters of the 20th century—and to cultivate the historical awareness and civic sensibility worthy of a good EU citizen—from within an anti-totalitarian and anti-imperial macro-frame. Its adoption, of course, offers no guarantee of depth or rigour, as much depends on the qualities of those who apply it.

In the anti-totalitarian frame, democracy, freedom, the nation, and national patriotism are cast as bulwarks against the totalitarian imperialisms that ravaged mid-twentieth-

³⁷Adam LeBor, “Coming to Terms With a Dark Past: Hungary’s Struggle over Wartime Historical Memory” (Budapest, Danube Institute report, February 2025), cited 19 May 2025.

³⁸Zoltán Balázs and Csaba Molnár, *Modern Hungarian Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) 62.

³⁹Milan Kundera. “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *The New York Review of Books* (1984), 33–36, 35.

⁴⁰*European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 140.

⁴¹LeBor, “Coming to Terms With a Dark Past” 11.

century Europe, namely, Nazism and Soviet communism. Like all interpretative frameworks, however, this one will be applied and reapplied, its conceptual contours evolving in response to shifting conditions.

As new totalitarianisms are identified (e.g., ISIS-style Islamic-Wahhabism or techno-surveillance authoritarianism), the evolving field of applications will act back on the framework's conceptual wiring. These shifts in how totalitarianism and imperialism are conceptualised will, in turn, reshape the ideals and self-understandings of democratic freedom in a recursive loop, as the latter are defined in contrast to the former. Such flexibility and future-orientedness are not only inevitable, but desirable. Interpretative frames, after all, are designed to facilitate learning and must remain conceptually open-ended to retain their relevance.

What is not on the horizon, however, is a full convergence with the normative logic of late liberal anti-nationalism, a convergence that would dissolve the current European culture war. As the following contrasting case study of Luxembourg will indicate, in combination with the above Hungarian case study, the European culture war is marked by such historical and historiographical depth that it is unlikely to be resolved through a simple interpretative convergence. The divergent path dependencies cannot be sidestepped. What is possible, however, is to cultivate a deeper understanding of these path dependencies, of the historically rooted divergences. Recognising that legitimate historical lessons, conducive to prosperous coexistence within the EU, are drawn on both sides of the History Divide may foster *historiographical tolerance*. Such tolerance could, in turn, help manage the Culture War more constructively.



*Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial in Budapest, Hungary.
(Mirko Kuzmanovic/Shutterstock).*

Luxembourg: From Grand-Duchy to Anti-Nationalism

The contrast with Hungary could scarcely be sharper than in Luxembourg. Unlike Hungary, which, partly due to the Magyars' linguistic and ethnic outlier status in Central Europe, developed a strong national identity already in the early 19th century, Luxembourg is a small, multilingual state in which no robust sense of nationhood took root until the late 19th century. Luxembourg has three official languages (Luxembourgish (*Lëtzebuergesch*), French, and German), just 660,000 inhabitants, and houses various EU institutions, including the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Here, imaginings of democracy, nation, and 'Europe,' including the imagining of the European 20th-century past, have a very different history of interaction than in Hungary.

A more explicitly nationalist phase did follow in Luxembourg's history, but, in keeping with broader Western European trends, this was not decisively interrupted by the Second World War. A common projection—especially common among late 20th-century liberal thinkers—mistakenly suggests that Western Europe, including Luxembourg, turned away from national identity towards supranationalism and internationalism immediately after 1945. Yet, as in other Western European countries, no such post-nationalist turn occurred in the direct aftermath of the war.

That shift came later. And when it did take root—in the 1970s and 1980s—it happened rapidly in Luxembourg. This acceleration can be attributed in part to the country's intrinsic affinity with the institutions that would eventually evolve into today's European Union. As such, Luxembourg is somewhat of an ideal type for anti-nationalist liberalism and the corresponding lesson drawn from the early and mid-20th century. But of course, its history, including the history of its engagement with history, has its complexities, too. The story starts in the 19th century.

The Grand-Duchy

Questions of national identity in Luxembourg would only become part of political and intellectual discourses from the late 19th century onwards. The Grand-Duchy is, at one time, one of Europe's oldest extant polities and the 'youngest' State in the Low Countries in its present-day

form. Luxembourg exists in its contemporary borders since 1839, when its independence, at the time in a personal union with the Netherlands under the Dutch King, was confirmed by the Treaty of London. The personal union would last until 1890, when Luxembourg's last ties with the Dutch Crown would be severed in favour of a cadet branch thereof.

Luxembourg's legitimating logic diverged from that of the nineteenth-century nation-states surrounding it, particularly after the unification of Germany, as it drew not from the existence of a distinct Luxembourgish nation but from its prior continuity as an independent polity. The social and political conditions necessary for the formation of a Luxembourgish national consciousness did not emerge until the closing years of the century. The concept of a Luxembourgish state and homeland gained real prominence only at the fin de siècle.

At that time, advocates of a Luxembourgish national identity framed their claims primarily in historical, cultural, and political terms, with linguistic and ethnic dimensions being layered in over the course of the twentieth century. Early literary and educational materials addressing national identity, such as school textbooks from the late 1800s, tended to emphasise a local, early Romantic attachment to the *Heimat*, the local, rather than a broader sense of the *Vaterland*, the nation.⁴² Artistic production with patriotic themes, ubiquitous in European cultural life of the period leading to and immediately succeeding the First World War, was also seen in Luxembourg, and transmitted to its citizens. Exemplifying this trend is a yearbook published for educational purposes, which "published in 1916, offered a literary tour through the country [...]. It seeks to show how incomparably beautiful our Luxembourg is, how it should fill every bosom with holy pride and with a strong, unshakable will: We want to remain what we are."⁴³

Interestingly, unlike in many other States where martial virtue was associated with nationalism and patriotism, Luxembourgish national identity was, by definition, pacifist, if not quasi-isolationist. One notable wartime slogan was "Heimat war Friede!" *Heimat wird Friede sein* (The Homeland is Peace! The Homeland will be peace!).⁴⁴

⁴² Sonja Kmec, Benoît Majerus, Michel Margue, Pit Péporté. *Inventing Luxembourg: Representations of the Past, Space and Language from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century*. National Cultivation of Culture, vol. 1. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Concurrently, the pre-1914 and interwar eras brought with them a push towards traditionalism, regionalism, and overall rejection of aesthetic modernism, often associated with the search for a Luxembourgian identity. As early as the 1900s, regional architectural styles, including vernacular ones, were favoured in the construction of social housing, and the search for an essentially Luxembourgian architecture was elevated to quasi-state policy on culture.⁴⁵ Elsewhere in the arts, and in a broader societal context, a rural-based vision of Luxembourg, opposed to “urban growth and moral decadence”, gained popularity, as did the study of folklore and the promotion of countryside life.⁴⁶ This idealisation of rural Luxembourg, which would become intrinsically associated with Catholicism, the peasantry, and pre-1914 societal structures, would play an essential role in developing a post-1918 Luxembourgian identity, albeit with significant changes.

The building of a Vaterland

Post-1945 Luxembourgish discourse on national matters witnessed a shift from the dominant historical-cultural approach, present since the 19th century, and the ethno-cultural discourses of the interwar years, to a civic, polity-oriented prism. The Luxembourgish state, rather than the *Heimat*-centred community, became the main ‘receptacle’ of national loyalty. The national (Vaterland) was superimposed onto the local (*Heimat*), whence cultural ties derive most strongly, albeit preserving the latter’s aspect as a cultural and societal frame of reference.⁴⁷

The emphasis on cultural aspects as markers of national identity would become more politicised over the course of the 20th century, becoming associated with a properly ‘Luxembourgian nationalist’ discourse. Eventually, in the late 20th century, following the broader trend in Western European liberalism that assigns an axiomatic status to the idea of nationalism as problematic and contrary to the normative structure that emerged directly after World War II, historical-cultural ideas on Luxembourgian identity grew controversial; they were deemed either ‘exclusionary’ or ‘the far-right’ (and as such negatively distinguished from a civic, polity-based patriotism). A particular feature of Luxembourgian national discourse, which will be explored in the next

section and would play a paramount role in its post-1945 development, is the interplay between its European and national identities.

The “de-*Heimatisation*” of Luxembourgian national identity was a gradual process, however. The post-war period was a period of consolidation and strengthening of national identity and patriotism, rather than a weakening thereof. Luxembourgian identity having been based on patriotism, pacifism, and opposition to German imperial expansion—and, as such, being fundamentally opposed to Nazism—the Grand-Duchy faced no fundamental issues in reestablishing a patriotic culture in the aftermath of the War.

The memory of Luxembourg’s resistance—and its people’s role within it—was enshrined as a cornerstone of the Grand Duchy’s political theology. It is estimated that around ten per cent of the entire Luxembourgish population actively participated in the Resistance, while much of the remainder, though passive, helped foster a social climate that enabled its activities and effectiveness.⁴⁸

Thus, post-1945 Luxembourg was considered as much a restoration of the previous polity, with most institutions being reestablished under the same names and similar structures as in the pre-war years, as it was a product of the resistance against Nazi occupation and totalitarianism. In the initial years of the post-war era, and until the end of the 1950s, the Luxembourgian state continued much of its conservative, quasi-traditionalist policies of the pre-war and interwar years.⁴⁹ These policies promoted an ideal of Luxembourg that had as its frame of reference the pre-war rural, Catholic society reflected and idealised in the *Heimat*-based national identity promoted in the Grand-Duchy’s early years.⁵⁰

Luxembourgian nationalism and its place in the public square were most impacted by the experiences of the German occupation and Resistance, the eulogisation of its ‘anti-totalitarian’ memory, and the rapid but steady societal changes of the 1950s and 1960s, which consolidated urbanisation and initiated the decline of the demographic and political influence of the Catholic milieu. Catholicism, even well-into the secularising 1960s, played an important role in the Luxembourgian vision of the national self, its patriotic role reinforced

⁴⁵ Philippart, Robert-Léon. “Heimathaus: l’architecture régionaliste au Luxembourg” in *De Clärrwer Kanton* (2016) no.1-3, 27–35; 69–76.

⁴⁶ Kmec et al, *Inventing Luxembourg* 170.

⁴⁷ Kmec et al, ‘Imagining Luxembourg’, p.170.

⁴⁸ https://onsstad.vdl.lu/fileadmin/uploads/media/ons_stad_71-2002_12-15.pdf

⁴⁹ Claude Wey, “Le Luxembourg des années 50, Une société de petite dimension entre tradition et modernité, tome III” (Luxembourg: Musée d’Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, 1999) 20–32.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 31.

by its role during the Nazi occupation as “*les seules autorités vraiment luxembourgeoises autour desquelles se maintenait et se ravivait l’espoir d’une renaissance nationale.*”⁵¹ The presence in power of the Christian Social People’s Party (CSV), the Christian-democratic successor to the more overtly Catholic, pre-war Parti de la Droite for the entirety of the 1950s and 1960s, would contribute to perpetuating such a worldview.

It would be only in the 1970s that the liberal Democratic Party (DP), in coalition with the Luxembourgian Socialist Workers’ Party (LSAP), would take power in the country, for the first time in the 20th century. In post-War Luxembourg, thus, patriotism and patriotic discourse, even if somewhat anachronistic in some of its language, were mostly perceived positively, as it was associated with the anti-Nazi resistance and the Grand-Duchy’s efforts towards the restoration of its independence. While any explicitly ethnic or overtly cultural (*Heimat*-based) associations were ruled out and downplayed, lest they be associated with Nazi doctrines of “Blood and Soil”, *Vaterland*-, polity-based nationalism and patriotic discourse, often with Catholic undertones, did not carry negative connotations with it.⁵²

National ideas, European destinies

Luxembourg was a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the precursor organisation to the European Community and the European Union. It has provided three Presidents of the European Commission—Gaston Thorn, Jacques Santer, and Jean-Claude Juncker—and two of the Founding Fathers of the EU. Robert Schuman, considered one of the most important personalities in the post-1945 European project, notwithstanding his French citizenship and service to France, was born in Luxembourg and spoke Luxembourgish as his mother tongue.

Over the course of the second half of the 20th century, Luxembourgian patriotic discourse would gradually be eroded in favour of a *mélange* of post-nationalism and Europeanism. Gaston Thorn’s praise of Luxembourgian genius and its benefits to the European project are a rare example of an interplay between the national and the European—and, in a way, herald the erosion of the former within the latter. Thorn himself would play an important role in the ‘Europeanisation’ of Luxembourgian identity. Luxembourg’s first non-Christian democratic Prime Minis-

ter since the end of the War, the liberal Thorn headed a centre-left coalition with the LSAP that would rule the Grand-Duchy for most of the 1970s.⁵³ Thorn was a committed Europeanist who referred to a united Europe under the then-EC as “*notre œuvre commune*” and constantly decried “nationalisms” as the cause of previous wars and conflicts on the European continent in his speeches.⁵⁴

In Thorn’s view, which is that of a centralising European federalist, the distinction between Luxembourg’s pacifist, Resistance-oriented nationalism and that of other European states was of a lesser importance. The key issue, instead, was the existence of competing national ideas, without which a “*Europe Unie*”, under a single European identity, could be formed.⁵⁵

While Thorn’s views were not immediately mainstreamed into Luxembourgian society, nor into its political system, they would gradually become a part thereof, to the extent that any Luxembourgian political party, to be considered *salonfähig*, would be all but required to espouse a strong commitment to the European project. The European project, and belonging to the EU, took centre stage in the Luxembourgian identity, thus elevating the scale thereof yet again, moving from *Heimat* to *Vaterland*, to the *Vaterland* in an existential link with an ever-closer European Union.

Towards the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, Luxembourgian society was significantly different from its 1950s counterpart, and so were its self-image and attitudes towards patriotic and nationalist discourse. The role of the Luxembourgian Resistance during the occupation, reified and eulogised in the new national narrative promoted in the immediate aftermath of the War, itself came into question, as more attention was dedicated to collaborationism and to the ‘passivity’ of much of the population in that period. The advancement of secularisation, as well as the generational shifts away from the occupation era, contributed to a gradual decline of the Catholic Church’s prestige within the Grand-Duchy, including in its patriotic role.

Most importantly, Luxembourg, already a land of immigration in the 1950s, if mostly from neighbouring countries, began receiving large numbers of new residents from much further away lands and cultures, at first, from Southern Europe and notably Portugal, then from outside of Europe. The advent of Free Movement of People under the European Union further accelerated this trend. Resistance to it—often articulated

⁵² Kmec et al, *Inventing Luxembourg*.

⁵³ That is to say, not belonging to either the *Parti de la Droite* nor its successor, the Christian Social People’s Party (CSV).

⁵⁴ Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, *Bulletin d’Information Mai-Août 1978* (Luxembourg: Service Information et Presse, 1978) 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 7.

through the language of nationalism—further reinforced the association between Euroscepticism and national identity.

The other side of the same coin is that EU-philia—strongly pronounced in Luxembourg—became increasingly centred on anti-nationalist liberalism, itself tied to what is often presented as a singularly insightful lesson of history. One of the most eloquent, nuanced, and thus persuasive exponents of this view was Jean-Claude Juncker, a Luxembourger and former Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy, who served as President of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019. In his 2018 State of the Union address, Juncker invoked this lesson in his defence of ever-closer European integration. “We must,” he argued, “reject unhealthy nationalism.”⁵⁶

The word *unhealthy* does considerable rhetorical work: who, after all, would champion an unhealthy nationalism? We must reject it, he explained, to prevent war—and the avoidance of war in Europe remains, in his view, the Union’s sacred mission. “Living up to Europe’s rallying cry—never again war—is our eternal duty, our perpetual responsibility.”⁵⁷ Fair enough.

From this, the case for further pooling of sovereignty at the supranational level follows almost seamlessly. It was the EU, not NATO, nor bourgeois civility, that Juncker credits with having secured peace in Western and Central Europe (this was, of course, before the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War). “We should be thankful we live on a peaceful conti-

nent, made possible by the European Union.”⁵⁸ Yet to his credit, Juncker tempers this with a simple yet beautifully balanced observation:

*To love Europe, is to love its nations. To love your nation is to love Europe. Patriotism is a virtue. Unchecked nationalism is riddled with both poison and deceit.*⁵⁹

Put that way, any patriot and good European would, of course, find it difficult to disagree. Juncker demonstrates how the late liberal macro-frame can be powerfully persuasive and inspiring, where it allows for balance and accommodates national patriotism within a broader European whole. How such ideals translate into the practical realities of governance remains an open question; in implementation, the principle of subsidiarity is all too often contested. Still, at the level of political rhetoric, this is a masterclass.

By the same token, national conservatives must also show that their national patriotism can coexist with a love for Europe and with constructive cooperation within the Union. In fact, the national-conservative tradition—and the anti-totalitarian macro-frame that underpins it—is perfectly capable of doing so. It follows, then, that certain forms of political wisdom are, at least in theory, accessible from more than one direction. This is precisely why the EU, as a realm with many distinct historical imaginaries, needs a greater degree of historiographic tolerance, if only to temper the unnecessary vilification that continues to animate its culture war.

⁵⁶ State of the Union 12. Cited 26 May 2025. https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/state-union-addresses-jean-claude-juncker_en

⁵⁷ Ibid. 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 13.

*European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker,
Brussels. (Alexandros Michailidis/Shutterstock).*



Conclusion: Historiographic Tolerance

There are many fundamental lessons to be drawn—and indeed being drawn—from the twentieth century. The preceding case studies of Luxembourg and Hungary have aimed to illustrate this diversity. Of course, Luxembourg and Hungary are not merely ideal-typical foils. Each has a complex history, in which different groups have played different roles at different times. Still, we can observe that Luxembourg, with its relatively fluid national identity, has moved more decisively towards a post-national liberalism geared toward ‘pooled sovereignty.’

Hungary, by contrast—rooted in a stronger romantic-national tradition, expressed for example in its *népi* movement—has, by 2025, embraced the anti-totalitarian and anti-imperialist lesson of the catastrophes of the early and mid-twentieth century, envisioning future peace as grounded in a European Union of cooperating sovereign nations.

To be a good European is to take Europe’s historical plurality seriously. Certainly, there are views of the twentieth century

that fail to engage meaningfully with its moral and political catastrophes—perspectives that can rightly be dismissed as intellectually unserious and ethically vacuous. But the European intellectual landscape is not merely divided between morally bankrupt and serious narratives. There is also, within the realm of serious and legitimate reflection, a *history divide*—a tension between competing, legitimate macro-frames.

The most significant of these are, on the one hand, the national-conservative anti-totalitarian and/or anti-imperialist frame, and on the other, the anti-nationalist liberal frame. Both are grounded in thoughtful engagement with Europe’s twentieth-century history. Both seek, in their own way, to shape a shared European future within the Union, guided by moral conviction and political imagination. And both are too deeply rooted in historical experience to be pushed off the map. That is why managing the European Culture War must also involve a measure of tolerance towards the historiographic Other.



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