According to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, all memory is a social construct, whether it is institutionalized (as are interpretations of the past offered by political elites) or individual (Halbwachs 1992). He argued that it is impossible for individuals to remember in a coherent way outside their group contexts. It follows that there are as many collective memories as there are groups in a society. In the literature on collective memory that has flourished since Halbwachs' classical work, collective memory has come to mean a phenomenon that is ontologically more complex than a mere aggregation of individual recollections (Middleton and Edwards 1990). These contemporary studies generally agree on the point that social or collective memory is a product of power relations in a society. According to Paul Connerton, the memory of a social group can be shaped by using the state apparatus "in a systematic way to deprive its citizens of their memory" (Connerton 1999: 14). Paul Ricoeur also argues that the past cannot be simply 'forgotten' and erased from memory, but is set aside (oubli de reserve) and used again when it is needed, i.e. when new political orders and elites try to re-introduce into social memory certain events that former regimes wanted to forget (Ricoeur 2004). According to Barahona de Brito et al., "the politics of memory is two things. Narrowly conceived, it consists of policies of truth and justice in transition (official or public memory); more widely conceived, it is about how a society interprets and appropriates its past, in an ongoing attempt to mould its future (social memory)" (Barahona de Brito et al. 2001: 37). Moreover, Olick and Robbins argued that collective memory is always something we do rather than something we have, which allows us to pose questions such as: who oversees the practices, who are the participants, what rites and rituals are observed, what stories are told? (Olick and Robbins 1998).

Answers to some of these questions are provided in the edited volume Confronting the Past: European Experiences, a collection of essays that deal with the issues of memory culture and the politics of the past. With the example of different case studies, i.e. on European experiences, these essays show what social practices and politics enabled the shaping of collective memories in societies after violent conflicts or after the collapse of old political regimes and their substitution with new regimes, which needed to come up with and legitimize their own versions of the past. The book opens with an introduction by Andelko Milardović, who gives an overview of the practice of dealing with the past in 20th century Europe from a political science perspective. His chapter offers a welcome definition of the term "dealing with the past", as well as an explanation of its three aspects: the politics of the past, transitional justice and the politics and culture of memory. Moreover, the chapter defines two approaches to the research of the past (the ideological and the scientific approach), but also provides a brief discussion of some European experiences in dealing with the past (such as post-WWII Germany). Serving as a kind of short theoretical introduction for the edited volume, the chapter opens up questions that will be dealt with later by other authors in the book.

The first part, "Politics of the Past", begins with Maja Sahadžić's interesting discussion of international legal and institutional mechanisms and instruments and their role in the process of creating consent about past events and promoting reconciliation. This chapter seems particularly interesting and important amid recent debates on the role of the ICTY
(International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) in dealing with the legacies of war crimes committed in former Yugoslavia and at a time when the tribunal is about to close its doors. Sahadžić argues that justice brought by international courts such as the ICTY and ICTR (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) “is not sufficient or adequate in creating background for confronting the past” (p. 45). She also argues in favour of mixed/hybrid courts (which blend both international and domestic legal standards and practices), because they have a more immediate influence in bringing justice and addressing the past. Moreover, she rightly observes that “to have an effective impact in assisting a society to come to terms with the past, international legal instruments and mechanisms need to integrate international elements into the local processes of confronting past traumas” (p. 50). Furthermore, Sahidžić adds to the debate on the role of international tribunals in reconciliation. Pointing to the fact that there is no direct and obvious connection between war crimes trials before international courts and reconciliation, she argues that the understanding of justice by victims and witnesses of violent events cannot be made equal to trials before these courts. In the end, she emphasizes the importance of social and economic factors, as well as reconstruction, employment opportunities and education in long and painful reconciliation processes. All these factors are usually put aside in the debates on the issue of reconciliation, which usually focus only on the role of war crimes trials, which is why this chapter makes an important point.

The following part of the book mostly focuses geographically on Central and Eastern Europe, but thematically addresses such different topics as an analysis of linguistic intergroup bias in the context of Central and East European past inter-ethnic conflicts (Csilla Bang, Zsolt Péter Szabó and János László), as well as a discussion of transitional justice in post-WWII and post-communist Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Csila Kiss).

The next three chapters take Croatia as their case study and analyze the role of history in the political culture of Croatia’s first president Franjo Tuđman and his politics of the past (Albert Bing); Croatia’s official politics of memory towards the Second World War and crimes committed during the war, as evidenced in the example of the Jasenovac camp memorial exhibition (Ljiljana Radonić); and historical topics that political parties emerging at the first multi-party elections in Croatia used in their political manifestos (Davor Pauković).

Ljiljana Radonić’s chapter is particularly interesting, as it gives an overview of the shifts in Croatia’s politics of the past, related to WWII, from 1990 onwards, but it also opens a discussion on European standards of remembrance and Croatia’s orientation in that direction after Tuđman’s death and the coming to power of the left-wing coalition government. But this orientation, as Radonić shows, continued even when Tuđman’s (reformed) HDZ party came back to power in 2003, although this “Europeanization of the Holocaust” (p. 163) provided Croatian political leaders with an opportunity to use references to the Holocaust to establish a victim-based identity for the Croatian nation and create a victim-centred national narrative. The chapter leaves us wondering whether Croatian political elites would have changed the official, collective memory of the past, which persisted during the 1990s, and whether the orientation towards anti-fascism would have been re-introduced in the official politics of memory, had it not been for European integration requirements and had Croatia not tried to harmonize its politics with that of the European Union and meet the desirable “memory criteria”.