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A Personal Reflection on the Nature and Value of Public Memory in Holocaust Memorials

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Abstract

In this article I critically reflect on my experience with Holocaust memorials in Eastern Germany. When designing a memorial, there are many important questions for those building the memorial to consider. These questions include: What historical or social factors have contributed to the felt need for the creation of a memorial? What kind of thoughts, reactions, or emotional responses will the memorial evoke within the observer? Or, will the memorial provide the opportunity for physical or emotional interaction or a new understanding that is meaningful? In this analysis, I provide some historical background for the creation of memorials in East Germany and the desire to preserve and learn from the past. I then describe my personal experiences with and reactions to some of these memorials, and end with a cautionary reflection from East Germany about how public memory can be abused. Based on these experiences, I conclude that the best way to memorialize past atrocities is for designers to include a diversity of responses that are able to engage people in multiple ways, including cognitive and abstract representations of the event or people being memorialized.

There are many important factors to consider when researching and discussing the nature and value of public memory, and the reasons behind the creation of public memorials. Laura Carroll, a professor at Abilene Christian University, has recognized that “it’s important to first note the political and social implications of monuments and memorials.”¹ What historical or social factors have contributed to the felt need for the creation of a memorial? It is also important to consider how the observer will interact with the space and place of the monument.² What kind of thoughts, reactions, or emotional responses will the memorial evoke within the observer? Will the memorial provide the opportunity for physical or emotional interaction or a new understanding that is meaningful? When creating and designing a memorial, it is difficult to decide how to best memorialize an event. Should it be artistic? Should it aim to play on the observer’s emotions? Should it rely on artifacts alone? These are a few of the important questions that ought to be asked when considering the nature and role of public memory.³

There are many examples that could be used when discussing the nature and value of public memory. With these examples in mind, I visited multiple cities in Eastern Germany.⁴ Due to my personal experiences and interest in these cities, I will use the memorials that I visited and

¹ Laura Carroll, “Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials” (paper presented at the annual Conference of College Teachers of English, Lubbock, TX, February 27–March 1, 2014), 1.

² See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspectives of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 137-148, for a detailed description on this topic.

³ For Jennifer Hansen-Gluklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenge of Representation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 9, “this question of the possibility of representation has become eclipsed by more current issues concerning the impact of mass media on remembrance and the diminishing number of Holocaust survivors who can provide personal testimony.” The questions I have posed are clearly part of a much larger conversation and set of concerns.

⁴ My thanks to the ACU Honors College for a travel grant that facilitated my study of modern European history with Drs. Ron and Janine Morgan during May and June of 2014. The travel grant, and Ron and Janine’s expertise, enabled me to study and research the topics that I discuss in this paper.

studied during my time in these cities to reflect on the nature and value of public memory. While my analysis is limited to these cities and my experiences in them, the principles and concepts that I will discuss below are applicable in the larger conversation regarding the nature and value of public memory.

What historical factors contributed to the need for creating memorials in Germany? On May 8, 1985, the 40th anniversary of the surrender of the Nazi government, West German President Richard von Weizsacker climbed a podium in Bonn's parliament building and spoke out against intentionally forgetting the atrocities of Germany's recent history. Weizsacker stated:

All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it. The young and old generations must and can help each other to understand why it is vital to keep alive the memories. It is not a case of coming to terms with the past. That is not possible. It cannot be subsequently modified or made not to have happened. However, anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.⁵

Reflecting on the atrocities that were committed in Germany before and during World War II, Weizsacker encouraged German citizens to reflect on the country's past and cautioned that Germans learn from previous mistakes in order to avoid committing them again. After interviewing Weizsacker, and later reflecting on Weizsacker's speech, *The New York Times* writer James Markham wrote:

[Weizsacker's] truest legacy ... may ultimately be in confronting Germans unflinchingly with their past, so that they can go more sure-footedly into the future. Almost doggedly, Helmut Kohl likes to say, "We Germans have learned the lessons of the past." Behind this oft-repeated cliché lies an impatience, an eagerness to get out of the past, even to bury it. Weizsacker's life has taught him to be warier. "When one looks into history 40 or 50 years later," he said, leaning forward in his chair in the presidential villa for emphasis,

⁵ As quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3. Weizsacker's words are particularly relevant as Germany is currently considering how to best manage the influx of foreign refugees into the country. See G. Daniel Cohen, "Between Relief and Politics: Refugee Humanitarianism in Occupied Germany 1945-1946," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 3 (2008): 437-449, for a detailed historical account of how Germany and its allies addressed large numbers of displaced people within Europe following World War II.

“it is better as a young person to judge someone for having behaved wrongly if one has also experienced such a situation. The tendency to believe that people then were evil but today they are good is very widespread. And this tendency, naturally, is not good.”⁶

Weizsacker believed that Germany could not move on into the future until it had faced its problematic past. Even though many of the German people he was addressing in this speech were not involved in or were not even alive during the atrocities that Weizsacker was referencing, he was warning the German people that they would be susceptible to repeating the same or similar mistakes of the past if there was not a committed effort to confront and learn from that past. While Kohl, in his impatience, was ready to move on and overlook the past, Weizsacker challenged the German people to learn from the past in order to make a better future. Results of Weizsacker’s encouragement for action can be seen in the Holocaust and World War II monuments and memorials created throughout Germany.

There is always some uncertainty about how to best memorialize past events. What historical factors need to be considered? Which group’s narrative should be most prominent? Which figures or events are worth focusing on? After visiting the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, I think the spatial aspects are a very important aspect of the memorial. The guide mentioned that the designers decided on the location for the memorial because it is in a very central part of Berlin and in a place that many people would see each day. If the designers had decided to put the memorial at a concentration camp an hour outside of the city, the memorial would not be seen by as many people, nor be as accessible to them. Based on my experience, I thought the memorial was designed in a way that encouraged an individual to symbolically walk through a tiny glimpse of what the life of a Jewish person during the

⁶ James M. Markham, “Facing Up to Germany’s Past,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Jun. 23, 1985.

Holocaust may have been like in an abstract way. I want to emphasize the word *symbolically*.

James Young asks, “How is a post-Holocaust generation of artists supposed ‘to remember’ events they never experienced directly?”⁷ By no means can we truly understand what the experience was like. However, the symbolism strongly impacted me while walking through the memorial. Descending towards the middle of the memorial, I could not help but notice how the large stone blocks seemed to be leaning over me, and it appeared to be getting darker.

Admittedly, not a part of the memorial, the noises from the teenagers running around and screaming added an audible element to the experience. At times, I would briefly ascend and get a look over the top of the stones, and then I would descend into darkness again. The perpendicular walkways through the large rectangular blocks were disorienting; I could not see who was walking up from the left or right, even though I could hear other people around me. These sensations contributed to the idea that the memorial encourages the observer to engage in critical and creative thought concerning the experiences of the Jewish people during the Holocaust.

Their reality would have been disorienting, dark, and foreboding. There may have been glimmers of hope at times, followed by a return to the darkness, with victims unable to know where their loved ones had been taken or if they were still alive. Those loved ones may have been right around the corner in the darkness, or gone forever. Thus, this memorial takes an abstract, artistic approach to memorializing the past.

⁷ James E. Young, “The Holocaust as Vicarious Past,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 51, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 71. He continues, “Born after Holocaust history into the time of its memory only, a new, media-savvy generation of artists rarely presumes to represent these events outside the ways they have vicariously known and experienced them. This post-war generation, after all, cannot remember the Holocaust as it actually occurred.” As members of “a new, media-savvy generation,” we must keep this in mind as we discuss Holocaust memory and memorials.

In her reflection on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Laura Carroll mentions that the memorial “feels unanchored and undefined.”⁸ She continues, “Since one of the purposes of Holocaust memorials is to invite us to ask ‘how can we ensure the ‘never again?’ , I would argue that the more the audience can interact with the memorial in a personal, concrete way, the closer we are to answering that question.”⁹ I understand and agree with the importance of the audience interacting with a memorial in a concrete way, but I do not think that *must* be the main purpose of every Holocaust memorial. Carroll mentions the purposes of Holocaust memorials, but does not go into any detail about what the other purposes are or what they should be. However, in her reflection on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Dekel writes that “visitors create a space for self-realization and transformation, in which they explore their relations to the past and to present memory politics. They do so through reflection on the memorial’s lack of stated meaning, alongside the impossibility of representing the Holocaust.”¹⁰ I believe this was the intent of the designers. While Carroll may be correct, I do not think her concerns apply for the aboveground memorial. I think the belowground museum at the memorial does a very good job of balancing the observer’s interactive and cognitive experience. Inside the museum, the collection of personal letters was very striking. There is a room with short summaries about the lives of individual people and a voice reading their names in succession. The most impactful display for me was the room that charted the movements of the different Jewish families across Europe. I enjoyed reading about their histories, and charting their movements on the maps. These displays brought together different aspects of the victim’s stories

⁸ Carroll, *Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials*, 5.

⁹ Carroll, *Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials*, 5.

¹⁰ Irit Dekel, “Ways of Looking: Observation and Transformation at the Holocaust Memorial, Berlin,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 71.

and experiences that we often learn about at different times. Likewise, the comprehensive historical aspect of these displays encouraged a meaningful concrete experience. The more artistic and abstract aboveground aspect, combined with the museum belowground, provides a well-rounded and comprehensive experience with the memorial—the personal, concrete experiences Carroll describes. The memorial as a whole is challenging and it encourages the observer to critically and creatively think about and reconsider prior assumptions and thoughts.

The memorial at Grunewald Station in Berlin provides an example of a different, yet still appropriate and effective, way of memorializing the past. Carroll notes the memorial was “erected by Deutsche Bahn, the German rail, as recompense for their participation in transporting people to concentration camps.”¹¹ As I exited the train station, and ascended up the staircase, I found myself in the memorial. This echoes Yi-Fu Tuan, who writes, “Space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning.”¹² The space’s definition and meaning became clear to me as I walked along the train tracks. I was struck by the simple presentation of the numbers of people, specific dates, and the locations of the concentrations camps that are listed along the train tracks. It was a modest presentation, but a very powerful one. A person walking alongside the train tracks could very easily imagine people standing in the exact same place, waiting to be shipped off to the ghettos in Litzmannstadt and Warsaw, or to a concentration camp such as Auschwitz or Theresienstadt. The simple yet concrete presentation of the names and dates affected me in a different way than the experience of walking through the abstract concrete slabs in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The space had undoubtedly been transformed because it acquired new definition and meaning due to the creation of the memorial.

¹¹ Carroll, *Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials*, 6.

¹² Yuan, *Space and Place*, 136.

While different, this experience was, and still is, important for my understanding of the history it memorializes.

My experience at the Buchenwald concentration camp outside Weimar, Germany was another excellent example of the value of public memory. As I began the tour at Buchenwald, I was expecting a tour similar to the tour I had experienced at Auschwitz a few years before. Many of the original buildings no longer remain standing at Auschwitz, but there was an informative and comprehensive tour that included many powerful historical displays. The guide at Buchenwald gave the group some background information about the history of the concentration camp, and then began to describe the few original buildings that remain standing at the concentration camp. As I moved through the camp, I wondered why the main gate, crematorium, hospital block, and two guard towers remained the only buildings still standing. I knew that the Nazis attempted to destroy all of the buildings at Auschwitz as they fled the camp, but that was not the case at Buchenwald, which holds the distinction as the first concentration camp to be liberated by US troops. The Nazis at Buchenwald did not have time to try to cover up their actions, and as the guide continued explaining, I began to better understand what had happened. The USSR used Buchenwald as an internment camp for those deemed to be hindering the establishment of Stalinism up until October 1950. The Soviet-backed German Democratic Republic (GDR) then decided to demolish the camp. However, as the Buchenwald Concentration Camp website states, “The combination of obliteration and preservation was dictated by a specific concept for interpreting the history of Buchenwald Concentration Camp.”¹³ Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott discuss the concept of partiality of memory, which the actions of the GDR regarding Buchenwald exemplify. The three authors write, “Because a collective’s

¹³ Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, “The 1950s,” *Buchenwald Memorial*.

memories are selective, they are seen as also deflecting other memories. Perhaps the most common assertion among public memory scholars is that memory is operationalized by forgetting.”¹⁴ The GDR chose to mold and shape history in a way that would support the future they desired to create and portray. As the guide pointed out, the GDR wanted to exaggerate the truth by forgetting important details in order to create a history that would describe Communist ideals (such as the cooperation of the prisoners) and a narrative (for instance, the uprising of Communist prisoners against the SS guards) that did not actually occur in the way the leaders desired the country to remember it. In order to write the history the leaders desired to portray, the memorial designers had to intentionally cut out, forget, and recreate parts of the story.

The GDR’s use of Buchenwald as an important aspect of the country’s history became apparent as I passed by the huge tower on the edge of the camp, which had been erected following its use as an internment camp by the Soviet Union. Blair, Dickinson, and Ott discuss how memory of the past narrates a group’s identity, and the use of the camp by the GDR is a prime example of this. The authorial trio note, “So important is public memory to groups’ self-definition and adherents’ identity, that some scholars ... have articulated it directly with patriotism.”¹⁵ The guide talked about how the GDR used the memorial its leaders had constructed on the edge of the camp as a place for the *Jugendweihe* (Young Pioneers) ceremonies, during which young East German boys made their pledge to the socialist state.¹⁶

¹⁴ Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” In *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, ed. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 9. See Björn Krondofer, “Is Forgetting Reprehensible?: Holocaust Remembrance and the Task of Oblivion,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 2 (June 2008): 233-267, for a detailed discussion on the role of forgetting in attempts at memorializing the Holocaust.

¹⁵ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” 7.

¹⁶ I have written about this ceremony in more detail in Brady Kal Cox, “Ethnographic Study of Select Residents of Leipzig, Germany” (Unpublished ACU Honors College Research Project, 2014), 1-15, after

These were meant to be patriotic, nationalistic events that would have encouraged devotion to the socialist state, and the events are directly related to another concept discussed by Blair, Dickinson, and Ott. They describe how memory relies on certain material supports, and cite the work of Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, who argues “to secure a presence for the past demands work ... [such as] ... erecting a monument.”¹⁷ This is what Blair, Dickinson, and Ott refer to as the “infrastructure of collective memory.” The GDR built the tower and the rest of the memorial as part of creating and maintaining a collective public memory. The use of the camp is indicative of how the Soviet-backed GDR valued public memory and how they desired to shape it in order to foster patriotic zeal for their socialist state. Due to maintenance on the memorial, I was unable to complete the entire memorial walk. Had I been able to, I would have been guided down the walkway by Communist-inspired artistic reliefs. Nevertheless, walking up the steps while looking up at the looming tower was quite an experience. I can definitely imagine how powerful the monument would have been as part of the *Jugendweihe* ceremonies, and how influential these events would have been in creating and maintaining the fabricated public memory. The intentional modification of the infrastructure of collective memory that occurred at Buchenwald should serve as a cautionary reminder of how public memorials can be abused and used for negative purposes, such as rewriting history to favor a skewed or even inaccurate perspective of a historical event.

The nature and value of public memory are ambiguous topics that are seemingly impossible to define. The nature and value of each memorial or public monument is affected by

conducting interviews among local residents of Leipzig who had been members of the *Jugendweihe* during their childhood.

¹⁷ As quoted in Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” 10.

present concerns, group identity, partiality of memory, history, and various other factors.¹⁸

Carroll argues “that certain spaces can invite different types of interactions, even if we have no prior experience with those spaces. They can offer intimate knowledge, provide their audience with ways to feel anchored, create meaning, and serve as sacred place.”¹⁹ Based on my experiences, I agree. Each space is affected by various factors that shape an individual’s interaction with the space. Carroll also states, “memorials ... serve as a tool for moving forward, for remembering, for teaching, for understanding, and when audiences and visitors are invited in as participants, fellow world makers, the sacred happens.”²⁰ I agree with Carroll’s claims. The nature and value of public memory should encourage meaningful, sacred experiences. These experiences should also encourage the observer to think and learn in order to avoid repeating the atrocities of the past. However, we should not expect all of these spaces to provide personal, concrete ways of ensuring that these atrocities never happen again.

Tuan summarizes the tension that arises when discussing the nature and value of public memory. He writes, “Here is a seeming paradox: thought creates distance and destroys the immediacy of direct experience, yet it is by thoughtful reflection that the elusive moments of the past draw near to us in reality and gain a measure of permanence.”²¹ There will always be some uncertainty about how to best memorialize the past. However, we cannot let this paradox of thought and experience prevent us from engaging in the work of learning from the past. Should memorials that encourage public memory be artistic? Should they aim to play on the observer’s emotions? Should they rely on artifacts alone? There are many other questions that could and

¹⁸ Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” 6.

¹⁹ Carroll, *Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials*, 4.

²⁰ Carroll, *Public Memory in German Holocaust Memorials*, 7.

²¹ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 148.

should be asked. However, after researching and visiting many memorials during my time in Eastern Germany, I believe the best method for memorializing past events is to encourage a wide variety and diversity of methods and expressions. No one memorial will affect every observer in the same manner. A variety of memorials that emphasize different aspects through the use of different means (e.g., abstract, concrete, etc.) will encourage meaningful learning experiences. We must also be mindful about how those before us have shaped and sometimes tampered with the narratives of the past in order to support an agenda or one-sided perspective. An effective way to create accountability in this regard is to encourage more critical thought and reflection about how we portray the past. Again, based on my personal experience with memorials, this is best done by encouraging a diversity of opinions, perspectives, and sets of expertise when designing and creating memorials. This approach inspires a more comprehensive representation of the past and expands the ways in which we can learn from it.

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