



Open Forum

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Who Are the Memory Owners of Memorial Sites? The Question of Memorial Ownership and the Case of Babyn Yar

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The project of building a new memorial complex at the Babyn Yar extermination site in Kyiv is one of the most prominent and also most scrutinized memorial projects in Europe. The stakes are high, and those involved do not seem to have a problem with that. On the contrary, they often use vocabulary to boost the significance of the project that sounds unorthodox in the context of Holocaust memorials, calling it, for example, a “world-class holocaust memorial”.¹

To put the debate in context, it is worth taking a step back to examine the question of memory ownership in the field of Holocaust remembrance. Who builds major Holocaust memorials in our time, and why? Who is the audience, and who are these memorials built for?

Historical memory is at the core of what is commonly believed constitutes the identity of nation states, and as such, it has always been the arena of political conflicts in democratic and more authoritarian societies alike. Monuments, museums, and memorials are – aside from mass media and books – the most visible manifestations of the will to shape that identity.² But memorial culture is a process – it will never reach a final stage when people will lean back, and say that now, finally, memorial culture is ideal. Every generation interprets history anew, asks new types of questions, and tries to come to terms with its historical heritage.

That said, the function and the form of memorials have evolved significantly over time. In the period of modernization before the First World War, as people

1 Press release of BYHMC, January 25, 2021: <https://babynyar.org/en/news/324>, accessed on June 1, 2022.

2 See, for instance: Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone. Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

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flocked into the cities, and the empires and nation states' ruling elites tried hard to create a common identity and a grand narrative for the citizens, a huge number of monuments was erected all over Europe, many of them still shaping the landscape of our cities today. These monuments were mainly statues of men – intended to glorify the depicted monarchs, politicians, soldiers, poets and the like. Typically, these monuments were initiated by wealthy individuals or influential committees and subsequently approved by the state authorities.

After the horrors and the massive loss of human life of the two world wars, classical memorials built with the intent to “gather around the flag” of the nation-state seemed much less appropriate. Memorials dedicated to the victims were expected to become sites of contemplation and mourning. The dominating style of memorials changed: they became less vertical and more horizontal in shape, less figurative and more abstract, and also there was more opportunity for interaction with the visitor. One of the most famous examples of that change is the Vietnam Wall in Washington D.C. Initiated by Vietnam veterans and inaugurated in 1982, it was a radical break with the iconography of traditional war memorials. In fact, the break was so unusual that the Wall was soon complemented by a traditional statue depicting three servicemen in action.

The memorialization of the Holocaust in particular is an unusual challenge for any society. The Holocaust is a universal and yet very local subject at the same time. Everywhere in Europe, Jews had formed a minority, and the dynamics of relations between Jews and non-Jews varied greatly. In most societies, significant parts of the population considered Jews not to be a constitutive, genuine part of the nation. Moreover, as a result of genocide and of mass migration after the war, the number of Jews still living in most European countries is only a fraction of the populations that existed before the Second World War, which makes the representation of Jewish voices even more difficult.

In the case of Ukraine, the picture is especially complicated. The territory of Ukraine is virtually pockmarked by hundreds of mass shooting sites where Jews were murdered by the hundreds or in the thousands, and in many regions, virtually the whole Jewish population had been murdered. However, as many Jews had survived the Holocaust inside the Soviet Union, Jews were still – or rather, again – living in large numbers in Ukraine also after the war, especially in cities such as Kyiv or Odesa. Shaped by decades of pressure in Soviet times, many Jews chose to conceal their Jewish identity and continue to do so until today. After the collapse of the USSR, while Jews emigrated in unprecedented numbers (including a great number to Germany where Jews from the former Soviet Union now account for the majority in Jewish communities), there was also a renaissance of Jewish life, often fuelled by Jewish organizations from overseas. Jewish institutions were opened all over

Ukraine, and the Menorah Center in Dnipro claims to be the largest Jewish cultural centre worldwide.

But how does the process of building a memorial play out on the ground? Rightly or wrongly, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is often perceived as a model for other major memorial projects. In fact, Peter Eisenman's field of stelae has become so iconic that it is used regularly in the media as illustration of articles about the Holocaust – just like the railway tracks leading to the gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau, it has almost become a symbol of the Holocaust in itself.

Apart from its artistic quality, what makes this memorial remarkable is the context in which it was created. For starters, this memorial was built in the capital city of the nation that bears the responsibility for the Holocaust, and a memorial built by the perpetrators' descendants dedicated to their victims is unique in itself. As it is often the case with memorial sites in Germany, the memorial was initiated by a civil society public campaign and subsequently adopted by the sphere of politics – as opposed to the practice in most other countries where it is often the other way around. A long public debate followed, accelerated and heavily influenced by the German reunification process and the Bundestag's decision in 1991 to move the seat of government to Berlin.³ The debate took place at the same time when other crucial decisions were being taken, such as the refurbishing of the Reichstag building to host the Bundestag. Together, these debates touched on the very core of German identity, the essential questions being: how do Germans want to see themselves, and how do they want to be seen?

Most important of all, as the 1990s progressed, a widespread political consensus developed to proceed and build the memorial. True, there were many critical voices – not only from the usual suspects who were opposed to the memorialization of the Holocaust per se, but also from a number of critical intellectuals, some of whom feared that Eisenman's memorial would be susceptible to vandalism; in addition to those who worried that the very existence of such a central memorial would result in a collective reaction to stop talking about the Holocaust altogether. The argument was that once the memorial was built, German society would lean back and pretend that it has freed itself from its historical guilt. In the end, however, there was widespread support in the Bundestag for building the memorial and letting the federal government handle its administration. This consensus of all parties of parliament held for nearly two decades, until the emergence of the new right-wing

³ For a comprehensive documentation of the debate, see Ute Ute Heimrod, Günther Schlusche, eds., *Der Denkmalstreit – das Denkmal? – Die Debatte um das "Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas" – Eine Dokumentation* [The controversy around the memorial – the memorial itself? – The debate about the "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" – A documentation] (Berlin: Philo, 1999).

populist party, the AfD, whose leading politicians have since then challenged this consensus in a more or less systematic way.⁴ Nowadays, German memorial culture is increasingly being challenged on other fronts as well: a growing number of activists argue that it is too static and not inclusive enough regarding the memory of other victim groups, the perspectives of migrant communities in Germany, or that it ignores important aspects of history, such as the legacy of colonization.

This relatively long period of political harmony is all the more striking when compared with experiences of other European countries where the memory of the Holocaust is often much more contested. Generally speaking, in Western European countries, such as France, there was a tendency that debates around the creation of Holocaust memorials were conducted against the backdrop of discussions about the collaborators' role in the deportation of the Jews.⁵ These debates still blaze up from time to time with strong nationalistic movements and political parties present in most of these countries.

In Eastern European societies that are facing the challenge that they have to try to come to terms with the legacy of multiple dictatorships and occupation regimes, there is generally an even stronger tendency towards political polarization. Attitudes toward history have been a significant political battlefield ever since the emergence of national movements and continue to cause very serious cleavages between competing political camps. Since the end of communism, there have been bitter arguments in the countries of the region over who should be commemorated more prominently: the victims of fascism and German occupation, or the victims of communism and Soviet occupation? In the wake of 1989, with nationalist sentiment on the rise, a wave of iconoclasm swept through the region: hundreds of communist-era memorials were torn down, and street names were changed. Moreover, exactly because dictatorships have a strong tendency to use monuments and memorials exceedingly to force their ideologies on the population, in post-dictatorial societies there is often an aversion to memorials per se. Meanwhile, with the emergence of new political actors with new agendas, new heroes emerged in public discourse seemingly out of nowhere. Many of these new public heroes caused major irritation and sometimes international outrage: marches of Latvian SS veterans, a new personality cult around Ion Antonescu in Romania, or statues erected to Stepan Bandera in Ukraine were not easy to explain to a baffled international audience.

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/germany-far-right-holocaust-education-survivors/586357/>, accessed on June 1, 2022.

⁵ For a comparison between the debates in France and Germany, see: Peter Carrier, *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany since 1989: The Origins and Political Function of the Vél d'Hiv' in Paris and the Holocaust Monument in Berlin* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

In many instances, communism and fascism came to be presented as two sides of the same coin, summarised under the term “totalitarianism”. But as it turned out, the crimes of communism often received much more attention, as if to overcompensate for the decades when these had been taboo. Aside from institutions such as the Occupation Museum in Riga, this tendency manifested most spectacularly in the House of Terror in Budapest which in its very logo put an equal sign between the two dictatorships, while the permanent exhibition devotes much more space to the crimes of communism.

At the same time, the simplified view that the historical traumas and disasters were caused by these two totalitarianisms alone, could easily be used as an instrument to clear a nation’s conscience even in the light of widespread collaboration under both regimes: if these systems were forced upon the nation by foreign occupiers, then surely the collaborators were traitors, outside of the national collective, so there is not much need to come to terms with the past in a self-critical way anyhow. Whereas nationalistic voices maintained the innocence and the purity of the nation, it was typically Western-oriented liberal intellectuals who continued to ask critical questions about local participation in mass crimes and lay the finger in open wounds. As a consequence of this polarization, more and more people in societies with heavily contested memories and polarized political party systems got used to the idea that memorial culture was a zero-sum game between political camps; you get your memorials, we get ours.

From the 1990s, and especially after 2000, major Holocaust memorials and museums were established across the continent. The motivations to build them were numerous, and often differed from case to case. Apart from the genuine impetus to honour the victims, one of the motives to create new Holocaust memorials might easily have been the political elites’ understanding that this was expected of them as they strived to join Western structures such as the European Union. Another important aspect was the anticipation of the international visitors’ expectations. With the rise of low-budget airlines and tourists’ increased interest in 20th century history (including, but not limited to so-called dark tourism), there is growing pressure on local governments to contextualize their historical sites. In fact, the aim of luring visitors to Kyiv was often voiced in the discussions about building a new memorial centre at Babyn Yar as well.

These internal and external expectations are especially pressing for central sites of the Holocaust. By now, most of them have become memorial sites; some of them only in recent years while many older memorials have been overhauled and modernized. Especially Poland is investing heavily in sites of memory also with the clear intention to influence the country’s international image. The Polish state makes a point of preserving central sites of the Holocaust: such as the former extermination camp sites of the Aktion Reinhardt as part of universal human heritage, while at the

same time putting increased emphasis on non-Jewish Polish victims of the German occupation and on the stories of Polish rescuers.⁶

Regarding the future memorial complex at Babyn Yar, the challenge is an extremely complicated one. Babyn Yar, being one of the central sites of the Holocaust and well-known for the complex history of its commemoration, has to live up to unusually high expectations on a local, national, and global level. On the local level, there is the expectation of the citizens of Kyiv – Jews and non-Jews alike – that a new memorial complex also speaks to them and takes their perspectives into account. On the global level, there is the anticipation of the international community of those interested and invested in preserving the memory of the victims of the Holocaust that the 33.000 victims of the Babyn Yar massacre are finally commemorated properly at the site and that their memory is preserved for future generations. That also involves questions about education and how historical information is presented at the site. However, in the case of Babyn Yar, financed mainly by private donations of well-known businessmen, the national level is perhaps the most difficult challenge at a time when historical memory in Ukraine and Ukrainian identity itself are heavily contested. It is, by no means, unusual or illegitimate that private organizations or wealthy individuals initiate or finance major memorial projects, but in the case of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre (BYHMC), it was the involvement of Russian oligarchs (albeit with Jewish-Ukrainian roots) that raised many eyebrows. After a new management and a new artistic director took over, the emphasis of the project shifted spectacularly towards creating a series of memorial elements aimed less to educate and inform but to emotionally overwhelm the visitor. Profound problems surfaced: international experts turned away from the project, while public figures based in Ukraine, including numerous well-established Jewish organizations, protested heavily against the plans.

Of course, reaching widespread consensus on memorial projects of this scale is nearly impossible, and it is also a common phenomenon that once projects are finished, the public reaction is much more positive than was expected beforehand. In the case of BYHMC, however, at a time when the donors' motives are difficult to discern not least because some are close to the regime that threatens the very existence of Ukraine, it is an alarming sign when the objections of central public figures are so clearly ignored.

The full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, changed everything. The Babyn Yar memorial project is put on hold, the vicinity of the site was targeted by Russian missiles at the early stages of the attack on Kyiv. At the time of writing, one hundred days into the war, it is impossible to say how, and when the war

⁶ See for instance the international campaign promoting the story of resistance fighter Witold Pilecki (1901–1948).

will finally end, and it is even more difficult to speculate on how this war will affect historical memory in Ukraine. An independent post-war Ukraine, even if victorious, will have to come to terms with the traumatizing memory of enormous sacrifices and huge loss of human life. It is likely that concerning the historical narrative, there will be an even stronger emphasis on the fight for Ukrainian independence and self-assertion vis-à-vis Russian imperial ambitions over the centuries.

If that will be the case, what will that mean for the interpretation of what happened in Ukraine during the Second World War? What kind of consequences will that have on how the history of the Holocaust is told? How much will the memory of the current war overshadow the memory of the Second World War, and who will be there to commemorate the Holocaust? To put it somewhat provocatively: how can Ukraine reconcile the memory of Bandera and Babyn Yar at the same time? To solve these hugely complex questions, honest and critical public discussions will be needed, and those can only take place in a democratic society. For the sake of building a memorial culture that takes all these narratives into account, it is essential that the people of Ukraine are able to live and thrive in security and in peace.