

The Role of “Memorial Sites” in the Formation of Collective Memory – Thanatourism as a Component of Historical Politics

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Exploiting memory as a tool of manipulation can be possible even when we are entirely aware that we are subject to such processes. After all, so many of our memories are triggered unconsciously.¹ They can be activated by external stimuli independent of free will. Maciej Bugajewski’s analysis of the work of Paul Ricoeur confirms this notion. Ricoeur made a distinction between two types of memory: *anamnesis* (in Latin, *reminiscentia*) and *mneme* (Lat. *memoria*). The first variant indicates “the subject’s

¹ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans L. Coser, Chicago 1992, p. 48.

active pursuit of recollections of the past,” while the second occurs “when recollections appear unintentionally.”² Bugajewski points out that Ricoeur limits his comments to questions relevant to the analysis of anamnesis (this is surely related to his perception of man as a “capable human being”). When he applies a similar method in his analysis of mneme, he ends up eliding the crucial aspect of the unconscious nature of memory recall.³ Bugajewski shows us that a defining feature of mneme is “the subject’s passivity and his role as beneficiary in these manifestations.”⁴ This “passivity” is the very factor underlying the state’s power to activate manipulation tactics that yield such palpable effects, even when we are fully cognizant that these strategies are at play. Unconscious recollections are also capable, to a degree, of influencing how we form judgments and make conclusions.

Research on the mechanisms of memory has revealed that while we can think of it as a unit informed by biological and psychological factors, we can also conceive of it as a construct produced through the engagement of society as a whole.⁵ This approach gained precedence as the concepts introduced in Halbwachs’ research began to circulate.⁶ Halbwachs associates the “social frameworks of memory” with “the result, or sum, or combination of in-

² M. Bugajewski, *Trudności filozofii pamięci. Ricoeur, Benjamin, Derrida*, [in:] I. Skórzyńska, C. Lavrence, C. Pépina (ed.), *Inscenizacje pamięci*, Poznań 2007, p. 39.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵ M. Sadowski, *Pamięć w aspekcie psychologicznym, kulturowym i literackim*, [in:] M. Sadowski (ed.), *Z badań nad prawem i administracją*, Wrocław 2014, pp. 296–301.

⁶ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 39

dividual recollections of many members of the same society.” The “frameworks” referenced in the title of his study “The Social Frameworks of Memory” serve to “situate the recollections of some in relation to those of others.”⁷

Halbwachs proposed that we make a distinction between what he saw as collective memory and historical memory. He believed the two should be conceived as units that function independently of one another. While the first category pertains to a specific social construct, “historical memory” is understood here as an objective image of the past.⁸ In the light of contemporary research on memory and history, this binary view seems rather antiquated. The prevailing perspective today assumes that both types of memory coexist, as it were, and should therefore be studied as one phenomenon (referred to as cultural memory).⁹

As studies in historical methodology have shown us, in practice, the “objectivity” of historical memory (proposed by Halbwachs) often turns out to be rather contrived. At this point, we should consider how the so-called objective truth is often construed as an attribute of “history,” a fact meant to justify its status as a science. Le Goff has already made the point that “Truth” should instead be conceived as a kind of unattainable ideal. Nevertheless, the historian has a moral obligation to strive toward a narrative as

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ M. Tamm, *Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies*, “History Compass” 6(11)/ 2013, p. 463.

⁹ Ibid.

close to the “Truth” as possible (for this is the only factor that sets the historian apart from the fiction writer).¹⁰ At the same time, it is crucial to remember that the historian is profoundly formed by the environment in which s/he works. Personal opinions and the special interests of certain communities end up influencing the formation of the views she puts forth in her research.

To a certain extent, the methodological “innocence” or “naivety” held by historians might call into question how they see the past. Despite several works from such disciplines as philosophy of history and historical methodology, in the long run, we can observe a certain reluctance on the part of historians to explore the literature that grapples with these issues. This is a direct consequence of the fact that practicing history requires no deep knowledge of philosophical or theoretical concepts, since it is rooted in a specific academic tradition that adheres to a specific procedure for describing the events of the past.¹¹ This lack of deeper reflection allows evaluative opinions colored by personal and political views to seep into the scholarship, which ultimately reflects negatively on research that is otherwise of great value. Of course, a certain level of subjectivity is inevitable regardless, but reflecting on this problem certainly helps to counteract it.

History should not be perceived as stable and unchanging, as it is constantly renegotiating its own terms.¹² The

¹⁰ J. Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. S. Rendall and E. Claman, New York 1992.

¹¹ P. Witek, *Historyk wobec metodologii*, “Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość” 2(20)/2012, pp. 81–82.

¹² J. Nowak, *Spoleczne reguly pamietania. Antropologia pamieci zbiorowej*, Kraków 2011, p. 19.

introduction of new forms of source material has provided impetus for these reassessments. Conflicting views of historical events held by different groups have also played a role. Collective memory is constructed positively in that it ignores all events that threaten to disrupt the interpretation favored by the group in question. The historian is often perceived as one who deconstructs this positive image¹³ by working to reconstruct the reality of events. On the one hand, the historian poses a threat to the coherence of the nation's historical politics, but he can also come to the aid of the regime by lending his credibility to legitimize the state's actions on the basis of scientific knowledge (which is often assumed to be objective).

The Role of Memorial Sites in Constructing Historical Politics

The term "historical politics" has only recently entered into academic discourse on a broad scale. However, we can easily find indicators that similar strategies have long been used to build a common vision of the past within a particular society. The simplest definition of "historical politics" stresses its influence on a national regime's construction of a specific vision of the past.¹⁴ These issues have naturally been discussed substantially in the academic community, which has led to the proliferation of definitions which attempt to comprehensively grasp the phenomenon. For the purposes of this article, the definition proposed by Eugeniusz Ponczka is most relevant.

¹³ Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁴ E. Ponczek, *Polityka wobec pamięci versus polityka historyczna: aspekty semantyczny, aksjologiczny i merytoryczny w narracji polskiej*, "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2/2013, p. 10.

Ponczka views historical politics as a “method for ‘practicing politics’ in which the true or perhaps less falsified and mythologized form of historical knowledge is instrumentalized [...]. This means that historical politics can manifest as a motivated manipulation of cherry-picked data on the past, including heavily mythologized narratives of events compatible with a political agenda agreed upon in advance.”¹⁵

It appears to be the case that contemporary historical politics work specifically to construct national identity by reaching back to tradition.¹⁶ However, it is crucial to remember that while state power exerts a definite influence on the formation of collective memory by creating (and destroying) sites charged with symbolic value for society, the state by no means has a monopoly over this process. Civil society often gives rise to grassroots initiatives that have no affiliation with official historical politics (which is certainly not to suggest that they are politically neutral). The memory of a particular event is often not shared evenly among all members of a given society. Yet, to uphold historical memory, one group will often decide to consolidate it in a fully material form, such as a monument or memorial site.¹⁷ Objects built to commemorate tragic events that impacted specific communities play an instrumental role in the formation of historical politics. The heated controversies stirred up between opposing

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁶ A. Beinorius, *Orientalizm i dyskurs postkolonialny: kilka problemów metodologicznych*, trans. A. Jaroszyk, “Porównania” 12/2013, p. 17.

¹⁷ R.B. Miller, *The Moral and Political Burdens of Memory*, “Journal of Religious Ethics” 37(3)/2009, p. 537.

groups, for instance, are a testament to the power these sites wield. It would suffice to note here the recent campaign taken up in Poland to destroy monuments commemorating soldiers of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.¹⁸ It seems that the impetus for these actions was a resistance to uphold the memory of those responsible for the death of many Poles. These sites carry their own symbolic weight. They are destinations for Ukrainians who feel a need to commemorate the people involved in this story. The vandalism of monuments can be read as an effort to expunge the memories of certain groups from social consciousness, often leading to a clash between two opposing visions of the past. In this regard, memorial sites become subjects in their own right in that they are expected to testify to the veracity of one narrative over another: “a battle for historical memory for the most part plays out as a struggle with monuments, or perhaps a struggle over monuments.”¹⁹

Historical Politics and *Damnatio Memoriae*

The case described above suggests that grassroots initiatives spearheaded by civilians can take a rather aggressive form. Le Goff has convincingly argued that by coopting collective memory for the formation of national identity, a state can, in extreme cases, seed nationalist beliefs among its people²⁰ (one symptom of this is the condem-

¹⁸ Zniszczyli pomnik żołnierzy UPA na Podkarpaciu. “To klasyczna prowokacja”, RMF24.pl, 10.03.2016, <http://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-zniszczyli-pomnik-zolnierzy-upa-na-podkarpaciu-to-klasyczna-nld,2160789> (September 9 2017).

¹⁹ M. Forycki, A. Małeckie, *Pomnik w roli głównej. Spektakle pamięci w “odzyskanym” Stargardzie*, [in:] *Inscenizacje pamięci...*, p. 249.

²⁰ J. Le Goff, *History and Memory...*, p. 15.

nation of memorial sites erected by other groups). Direct actions on the part of the state can also efface the memories of a specific event in collective memory. It might seem that the fully advanced nature of the contemporary administration would rule out such maneuvers. Yet the evidence suggests that practices falling under the banner of *damnatio memoriae* are entirely relevant today.

The term *damnatio memoriae* (Latin for the “condemnation of memory”) describes practices geared to wipe out all traces pointing back to a certain community or event. The method has been in practice since antiquity. In Egypt, the priests of Amon commanded their subjects to destroy all markers of Akhenaten, the pharaoh who decreed that the Egyptian capital be moved from Thebes to the newly constructed Akhetaten, and who named the sun god Aton as the country’s patron god. Upon Akhenaten’s death, the cult of Amon was restored (the pharaoh’s successor even changed his name from Tutankhaten to Tutankhamun), while the late pharaoh was condemned to oblivion.²¹

Some nations do not stop at eroding the memory of a specific event, but go so far as to substitute others in their place. Projecting a positive image of one group at the expense of another is a commonplace practice, and examples of it can be found in many societies. Studies conducted by social psychologists have indicated that stereotypical images reveal fundamental aspects of both groups involved. Stereotypes tend to be characterized as aggregates of

²¹ P.F. Dorman, *Akhenaten. King of Egypt*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Akhenaten> (August 14 2017).

biases and false data, but the reality is more complex. It is nevertheless worth noting that they function as a reductive mode of thought premised on distilling large volumes of information into categories.²² One consequence of dividing a group into “us” and “them” is something we might call accentuation. Accentuation involves rendering the differences between groups hyperbolic by collapsing differences internal to the groups.²³ This sheds light on the immense symbolic power of memorial sites that directly reference reductive images and reinforce them within the social world.

A Turkish museum in Iğdır testifies to the fact that a memorial site can be mobilized as a tool of *damnatio memoriae* and bonding agent for a social group. The Iğdır Genocide Memorial and Museum (in Turkish, Iğdır Soykırım Anıt-Müzesi) is devoted to the memory of Turks killed by Armenians during World War I. It might seem entirely natural to erect such a monument out of a desire to preserve the collective memory of a tragedy suffered by the Turkish people. Deeper knowledge of the historical context, however, suggests a very different interpretation. During World War I, an event occurred that was long neglected in the memory of European nations. The event in question was the Armenian Genocide, also known as Mec Jeghern (the Great Crime). Depending on which historical source one consults, the genocide involved the deaths of

²² M. Kofta, *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia a stosunki międzygrupowe: stare problemy i nowe idee*, [in:] M. Kofta (ed.), *Myślenie stereotypowe i uprzedzenia. Mechanizmy poznawcze i afektywne*, Warsaw 2004, p. 19.

²³ T. Baran, *Pomiar zjawiska infrahumanizacji “obcych” poprzez atrybucje słów typowo ludzkich i typowo zwierzęcych*, “Psychologia Społeczna” 3(18)/2011, p. 202.

anywhere from 300 thousand to 1.5 million people.²⁴ Officially speaking, these were acts of forced displacement meant to stave off the outbreak of a rebellion in eastern Turkey. Evidence shows, however, that the state took deliberate measures with the explicit goal of diminishing the Armenian population (e.g. by depriving them of food and water in transit).²⁵

Building a memorial site that depicts Armenians as criminals and enemies while denying the Turkish government’s genocidal actions has been the subject of heated controversy.²⁶ Many have seen this as an attempt to negate Turkey’s crimes and displace some portion of the blame onto Armenians (who had fought the Turks in self-defense). Public figures holding important offices took part in the official opening of the museum in Iğdır on October 5 of 1999, among them President Süleyman Demirel.²⁷ Their attendance speaks to the event’s broad reach. This surely suggests that the museum figures as a crucial component of how historical politics function in Turkey.

It is also worth noting that the museum’s grounds boast a 43.5 meters tall monument (making it Turkey’s tallest monument) commemorating Turks lost in the struggle with Armenians. Dominating over the space, the memori-

²⁴ For example, see: A.J. Toynbee, *Armenian atrocities. The murder of a nation*, London 1915, p. 19.

²⁵ For example, see: V.N. Dadrian, *The history of the Armenian genocide. Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, Oxford 1995.

²⁶ B. Ayata, *Critical Interventions: Kurdish Intellectuals Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, *The Armenian Weekly*, 29.04.2009, <https://armenianweekly.com/2009/04/29/kurdish-intellectuals-confronting-the-armenian-genocide/> (November 9 2017).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

al not only has an instrumental function within the Turkish community, but also addresses a gesture of defiance to the Armenian government.²⁸ The Armenian capital lies forty kilometers away from Iğdır, which seems to suggest the museum's location was chosen for symbolic reasons. The rivalry enacted through historical politics in both nations is also voiced in this statement made by the governor of Iğdır: "Whenever the Armenians look towards their holy Mount Ararat, they will see our monument."²⁹

In the European context, it is difficult to single out such clear-cut links between integrative processes and acts of *damnatio memoriae*. Yet likeminded practices seem to be at play in the contexts surrounding many memorial sites in Eastern Europe. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many nations that fell within the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War erected memorials for victims of the communist regime. Sofia's wall and chapel commemorating those killed in 1994 is one such example.³⁰ Other instances include the wall built in Prague for victims fallen in 1947-1968³¹ and several memorials throughout Poland (such as the Monument to the Victims of Communism in Lodz). When these cases are all taken together, a certain common dominator emerges: the condemnation of the communist regime by the "new" democratically elected government. On the one hand, the communist legacy is rejected by foregrounding

²⁸ T. Hofmann, *Armenians in Turkey Today. A Critical Assessment of the Situation of the Armenian Minority in the Turkish Republic*, Bruxelles 2002, p. 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ C.C. Montero, *Study on how the memory of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes in Europe is dealt with the Member States*, Contract No JLS/2008/C4/006, p. 131.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

the criminal nature of its administration. At the same time, social discontent is leveraged to reinforce the dominant political attitude.

As the above cases demonstrate, erecting memorial sites to commemorate the victims of a previous regime often functions as a form of propaganda. We can identify similar practices in countries outside the European cultural sphere. Take, for instance, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia. In this case, the choice of location was by no means arbitrary. During the Khmer Rouge regime, Tuol Sleng (which translates to the Hill of Poisonous Trees) was one of 150 execution sites.³² The institution was founded by members of the new regime for many reasons, one of which was to broadcast its image as defender of the oppressed, having emancipated Cambodia from its bloody past. Some scholars have insisted that commemorating the victims of these historical atrocities was actually of secondary importance.³³ This claim is corroborated by the new regime’s duplicitous strategy to fill its ranks with many people with direct ties to the previous regime. By retaining high offices within government, these people were able to effectively dodge attempts to try them in court for their crimes.³⁴

Rarely will a state invest in promoting memorial sites that fall within its territorial borders but are linked to other

³² H. Locard, *State Violence in Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979) and Retribution (1979–2004)*, “European Review of History” 1/2005, p. 134.

³³ S. Chen, H. Xu, *From fighting against death to commemorating the dead at Tangshan Earthquake heritage sites*, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 4.08.2017, s. 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2017.1359281> (8.09.2017).

³⁴ H. Locard, *State Violence...*, p. 134.

cultural groups. For the most part, this reflects prevailing historical politics that seek to wipe out the traces of specific events. The Armenian Genocide serves as a clear example of this dynamic. While the Jewish community has met with little resistance from other nations in its efforts to give the Holocaust a special status, the Armenian tragedy has been long suppressed by the Turkish government. Of course, the indifference shown by other European nations that have made no effort to preserve the event's memory has been no help in this regard. We should note, however, that at first, public opinion took great offense at the Turkish government's behavior, and even Germany, Turkey's erstwhile ally, voiced its critique.³⁵ The very fact that the crime was forgotten for so many decades in spite of this initial reaction demonstrates that actions pursued in the mode of so-called *realpolitik* leave a deep imprint on the formation of collective memory.

It might seem to be the case that historical politics mobilizes memorial sites (and by extension thanatourism) mainly within the scope of local society. This idea is supported by the fact that sites that do not impact our sense of identity and make no reference to images of cultural groups serve only one function – they are tourist attractions. Yet the case of the Holocaust (and its surrounding circumstances) demonstrates that historical politics rooted in death and suffering can affect other nationalities as well. However, research conducted by American scholars (among them Stephanie Marie Yuill and Thomas Thurnell-Read) has

³⁵ Y. Ternon, *Ormianie – historia zapomnianego ludobójstwa*, trans. W. Brzozowski, Kraków 2005, p. 275.

shown that most tourists who have no emotional connection to the place in question will visit these sites “out of convenience.” On the other hand, a survey polling visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau collected many answers confirming that a sense of obligation led visitors to feel it would be wrong to bypass the site if they found themselves in its vicinity.³⁶ This suggests that a large-scale event is necessary to evoke feelings of moral obligation to a cultural group outside one’s own. Genocide necessarily leaves its imprint on the imagination of all people. It provokes terror and at the same time, a sense of curiosity that is entirely justified. These motives also compel people to visit memorial sites commemorating such events. Some come out of respect, others are driven by curiosity, and the rest are following the prevailing behavioral norm out of fear that they will otherwise be judged for a lack of sensitivity or empathy—in these cases, one visits these sites because it is simply the appropriate thing to do.

Translated by Eliza Cushman Rose

³⁶ A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Turystyka śmierci jako zjawisko kulturowe*, “Teksty Drugie” 3/2012, pp. 180–181.