The Effects of Memorialization on National and Urban Identities

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1. Abstract

Memorials and monuments are lenses into the past, often depicting events integral to a nation’s history and formation. Our group was interested in investigating different types of memorialization in Berlin and connecting these structures back to national and urban identities. There are several different types of memorials that we explored, such as government commissioned memorials, uncommissioned memorials, historical buildings, and unintentional memorials. Likewise, we view memorials as non-static structures; monuments can change over time, both influencing and being influenced by individuals who interact with them. Therefore, we attempted to study the ways that memorialization practices affect the formation and constant reformation of both urban and national identities. We furthered our project by discovering to what extent these memorials serve as a representation of the national or urban populace, and how this representation leads to practices of exclusion and inclusion. Our project focused on several different forms of data collection-- primarily interviews with a variety of people, but also observations on memorial sites, and general surveys. We also spoke with students and instructors at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena to get their perspective on German history. Through our individual and group investigations, we attempted to answer four main questions: How do practices of memorialization compare in the United States and Germany? To what extent do memorialization and street art represent a changing Berlin identity? How do memorials resulting from the East/West divide highlight and shape German identity?

1. Question

Memorials occupy a physical space. As Brian Ladd states, “monuments are nothing if not selective aids to memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others. The process of creating monuments, especially where it is openly contested, as in Berlin, shapes public memory and collective identity” (1997, p. 11). Therefore, the spatial existence of memorials translates into a reflection of identity. Conversely, the physical presence of memorials also influences identity. This means that in addition to being a reflection of identity, memorials can also cause identity to change. By tracking how memorials have changed, the more will be revealed about how German identity has altered.

The creation of East and West Germany and subsequent reunification is one time point in history that resulted in the formation of memorials. After reunification, these distinct East and West identities were forced to merge, and Germans themselves were “far more interested in creating a united future than in preserving a divided past” (Harrison 2011). The conflicting identities resulting from these histories and memorials are what I aim to investigate. In particular, I attempted to determine how sites of commemoration resulting from the East/West divide both highlight and shape German identity. To answer this question, I examined various memorials resulting from these events in history and attempted to link together their effects on German identity and to further expose the use of memorials that is not just unique to Germany.

1. Background

**Group Background**

*Monuments and Memorialization*

Monuments are broadly defined as “anything that is enduring; an ancient building or site that has survived… because of its historical significance” (Mitter, 2013, p. 159). Likewise, Harjes (2005) describes the main three functions of memorials: “to mourn and commemorate the dead, to educate their audiences, and to politically and socially represent contemporary German citizens” (p. 139). However, several different types of monuments exist and have different effects on those who interact with the sites. For example, Mitter (2013) claims that there are two different kinds of memorials: durable and ephemeral. Durable monuments are “material ones such as sites, buildings, and images,” while ephemeral monuments are “transitory and mobile ones made of fragile materials” (p. 159). For the purposes of our project, we will focus on connecting national and urban identities to four different types of monuments found in Berlin and other countries: commissioned monuments, uncommissioned monuments, historical buildings, and unintentional monuments.

*National and Urban Identity*

The formation of a nation has been highly documented in the literature, and Sharp (1996) describes this process as “the repetition of symbols that come to represent the nation’s origin and uniqueness” (p. 98). Likewise, even though “it is not possible for all members of any nation to know even a small fraction of the other citizens of the country,” a sense of national identity is achievable because “nations are communities, [containing] very real bonds… perceived as linking distant people in the same territory” (p. 98). Mitter (2013) focuses extensively on the connections between memorials and national identity, specifically focusing on the phenomenon of collective memory, which “has a dialectical relationship with historical reconstructions of the past because both contribute to the idea of nationhood” (p. 163). The idea of a nation is described as “a construct that serves to forge a sense of unity and the feeling of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’” Nationhood, then, is upheld and constructed through collective memory, which “helps to fix our identity in the modern re-use of the past” (p. 163). Through this analysis, we can see that memorialization, which plays a role in establishing a collective memory, has a huge influence on the formation and upkeep of a national identity, a topic which we will be developing further through our individual research questions.

*Commissioned Memorials*

We define commissioned memorials as monuments that are constructed with consent or direction from a governing body. Because a group that represents the large community, city, or nation builds these memorials, a very specific and carefully planned narrative is constructed through these monuments, often attempting to “speak for” an entire population. For example, Harjes (2005) describes in detail the intricacies of the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, a publically funded memorial established in 2005 (p. 138). She describes the purpose for this memorial as being “the unified government’s wish to set a signal of integration: the integration of east and west German collective memory” which eventually became almost synonymous to a “democratic form of collective memory” (p. 141). In a similar vein, Sodaro (2013) writes about The Jewish Museum, established in Berlin in 2001 (p. 77). The Jewish Museum was not intended to be a Holocaust museum, but instead to focus on “a celebration of German-Jewish culture and history” (p. 77). Sodaro hypothesizes that the construction of this museum, then, is considered to be a “countermemorial museum” because it rejects the categorization of a Holocaust memorial and thus challenges the typically self-reflexive purposes other memorial sites serve (p. 76-77).

*Uncommissioned Memorials*

While a governmental body publically funds commissioned memorials, uncommissioned memorials are privately sponsored. Because the monuments then are representative of the goals of a private group or individual, the narratives offered through the memorial are often different than a commissioned memorial. Harjes (2005) describes one example of an uncommissioned memorial, a “countermonument” known as the “stumbling stone” project by Gunter Demnig. This memorial features metal plates and signs being installed in various places around Berlin, each with a reference to the systematic killing of the Jewish population, such as plaques denoting a victim of the Holocaust installed in front of their former place of residence (p.145). Because of the decentralized structure of the monument, people do not seek out these commemorations like they would a commissioned memorial, but rather something they stumble upon and are interrupted by (p. 144). As Harjes points out, uncommissioned memorials have no obligation to support a “particular vision of national identity” and in this way are able to create a more organic form of collective memory, one that sprouts from individual interpretation rather than government construction (p. 144-5).

*Historical Buildings and Other Unintentional Memorials*

Many times, memorials are not intentionally created, but rather become memorials after “they had lost the purpose for which they were built” (Mitter, 2013, p. 162). For example, Nazi architecture riddles many German cities, including Berlin, even though they were once used to further Hitler’s Nazi regime. Despite this sordid past, many of the Nazi buildings, such as Zoologischer Garten rail station, the 1936 Olympic Stadium, and many government buildings, are integrated into daily Berlin life, albeit serving a different function now than in the 1930s (“Nazi Past Lives on in Berlin’s Buildings,” 2005.) Thus, these buildings have become a sort of “hidden” memorial, as they are representative of German history but are not distinctly marked as sites of remembrance. Perhaps the most striking example of an unintentional memorial is the Berlin Wall, originally serving to divide East and West Germany, but has since transitioned into a monument that is maintained through government funding. Likewise, street art can function as an unintentional memorial, especially when considering the Berlin Wall. As described by Eva Youkhana (2014), street art often serves as a way for marginalized or oppressed groups to have their voices heard, and can be considered a memorial for their own experiences, often ignored in hegemonic narratives.

**Individual Background**

*Jasmine*

Historically, Berlin has been a breeding ground for sites of commemoration. One major time point paved the way for the growth of memorials— The Cold War. The separation of Germany into East and West and caused not only an increase in the number of memorials, but Germany, by default, was also split in this manner. Additionally, the events of The Cold War caused the former GDR (East Germany) in addition to the former FRG (West Germany) to commission their own respective memorials (Ahonen, 2011, p.138). More recently after reunification, there has been a shift in the types of memorials that are being erected to commemorate the outcomes of this point in German history (Harrison, 2011, p. 78). Because the erection of these memorials that commemorate events of the past are both a reflection of and an influence on German identity, it is important that their nuances are studied.

1. Research Methods

In order to determine the effect of memorialization, qualitative and quantitative methods were used. A survey distributed to Humboldt University Masters students allowed me to quantify the overall sentiment towards certain memorials in relation to their importance to German identity. The memorials mentioned in the survey include the East Side Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie, the Palace of Tears, and the Stasi prison. I also conducted interviews in order to uncover personal narratives relating to the East/West divide. Finally, I examined news reports and the overall history of the above-mentioned memorials to reveal trends in memorial usage.

*Survey of Humboldt Students*

A survey distributed to Humboldt Masters students was used to gather both quantitative

and qualitative data. Participants answered agree/disagree questions in regard to their belief in the existing social and political divides of East and West Germany, the importance of commemorating the East/West divide, and the importance of visiting these memorials if one is to be considered “German”. This was all quantifiable data. The survey also asked why or why not participants felt that visiting memorial X,Y, or Z was necessary to be German.

There were some severe limitations to this survey. The survey was written in English, instead of German. This likely limited understanding of survey questions by participants. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small with n=12 +/- 2—not every person answered every question and three people surveyed did not identify as being German. Furthermore, the mean age of the participants was 27.3 years. Most of the students would not have been born or would have been very young by the time the Wall fell in 1989. While this population has a handle on the German identity of today, they are likely unable to determine how that identity has changed. While a larger sample size with a greater representative age of German people would be ideal, this survey did reveal an overall sense of how these memorials are viewed. The free responses were also helpful in gaining a more rounded view of memorialization, though this view is not as thorough and detailed as the remarks collected from the personal interviews.

*Personal Interviews*

Over the course of three weeks, I conducted interviews to qualitatively assess the strength of the memory of the East/West divide. The interviews were conducted with various individuals found in public spaces in Berlin, in addition to a few staff members at the hostel Die Fabrik. Some interviews were conducted second hand with a translator present. These interviews had very little structure but typically started with questions like “What was it like to live in Germany during that time?” with various follow up questions. Unlike the survey, these interviews were used to identify various themes as opposed to asking specific questions about a known theme or memorial. The interviewees were between the ages of 35 and 60 years old—all of them had lived during the time that the Wall was up and claimed to be old enough to remember what life was like in Germany at that time. These interviews were analyzed based on what topics the interviewees mentioned and the descriptive language they used. Because of the relevant age of the interviewees and the amount at which they went at length on the subject of a divided Germany, this qualitative data is quite useful.

*News and Media Examination*

This was the most analytical research method. By researching news stories or major events about various memorials like the East Side Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie, the Stasi Prison, and the Palace of Tears, I attempted to interpret the significance of these events towards national identity. Specifically I analyzed news articles in addition to memorial websites. However, I was limited to English sites.

1. Findings

*Survey Results*

*Figure 1: (clockwise from left) Is there a social divide between East and West Germany today? Is there a political divide between East and West Germany today? Does Germany have an obligation to commemorate the East and West divide?*

Most participants (61 percent) believe that there is an existing social divide between East and West Germany today (Fig. 1). Only 46 percent believe that there is a political divide (Fig. 1). This indicates that at least socially there is a difference in East and West identity—these two distinct identities essentially still exist. Politically the data is more ambiguous. Additionally, the fact that 91 percent of those surveyed either strongly agree or agree that Germany has an obligation to commemorate the East and West divide emphasizes that East/West is still a key part of German identity (Fig. 1).

 With regard to popular opinion on specific memorials, the data was quite varied. At least 90 percent of students had visited both Checkpoint Charlie and the East Side Gallery. Conversely, only 43 percent of students had visited the Palace of Tears and the Stasi Prison. This suggests that Checkpoint Charlie and the East Side gallery are perhaps more relevant to German identity than the Palace of Tears or the Stasi prison. This survey also asked why visiting each respective memorial was an integral or non-integral part of being German. For every single memorial, the most commonly stated reason was “to remember our history” or “to have a physical reminder of our past”. However some participants remarked that the nature of these memorials had changed over the years. Two participants stated that Checkpoint Charlie was “too unserious”. Thirty-five percent of participants wrote that the East Side Gallery was “too touristy” and “only a place for group selfies”.

*Personal Interviews*

The interviews I conducted revealed some interesting themes as well. One 55-year-old man highlighted a subtle difference between East and West in regard to unification; “We call it a reunion but nobody feels that way. A reunion has to be shared. Some of us still feel this way.” Today, reunification is seen as a uniformly desired event, but in 1990 that was not the case and this interviewee suggested that there are still threads of this sentiment among East and West Germans. Another man highlighted the positive outcomes of communist rule in East Germany; “Everyone had a job, all kids went school, and divorce rate was much higher. There is a wanting for this back sometimes.” He further explained that a high divorce rate was a positive outcome because people had the option to actually get divorced, unlike people in West Germany which was a much more religious area. This notion of nostalgia, or a wanting for the past, is also reflected in an interview with a 60-year-old man from West Germany. He states that “the quality of living went down significantly after reunification. I now had to pay more fees to go to the dentist, and there was a wage freeze. West Germany was busy financing the reconstruction of East Germany.”

 An interview with a 52-year-old German woman revealed the seriousness of familial relations during and after reunification. After reunification, this interviewee discovered that her

**“My sister was my informant. It is hard to forgive something like this but the Stasi knew how to get to everyone. It is not the same now. You cannot know what people are capable of.”**

*Figure 2: Statement from a 52-year-old woman on family during the era of The Wall.*

family had been spying on her for the Stasi (Fig. 2). She expressed distrust towards her sister who had spied on her, and also a conflict of conscious when she admits that “the Stasi knew how to get to everyone” however.

 Former Stasi prison inmates and current Stasi prison tour guides made similar comments on broken relationships. A German woman who spoke English translated all these interviews. One woman discovered that her husband had been informing on her, which is why she ended up in prison for four months. They ended up divorcing in 1995. Another man didn’t realize that he had stayed at the Stasi prison in Berlin until visiting as a tourist. He recognized the wallpaper and later confirmed his imprisonment by viewing his Stasi file. Both former inmates stated that they work at this place of former psychological trauma for a feeling of catharsis and to reclaim the space.

*Memorial Analysis*

The existing clash between East and West is also apparent when looking at the history of specific memorials. Uncommissioned memorials to GDR officers who had died in altercations at the Wall were removed immediately after reunification. Commissioned officer memorials were also removed. However all those memorials had been commissioned by the GDR. There have been attempts, most recently in 2010 to create a memorial to these officers, but this proposal was shot down. Currently only private memorials to GDR officers exist.

The funding of the DDR museum is also an issue of contention. The DDR museum, which opened in 2008, focuses on what daily life was like in the former GDR (DDR in German). This includes both negatives and positive aspects, such as those mentioned by one interviewed man. This museum does not receive any government funding; it is supported by private donations, despite applying for state funding every year.

The usage of East/West memorials has also changed over the course of their existence. Every year on the anniversary of the fall of the wall these usage issues are revived. The East Side Gallery is a prime example of this. Is it an open air gallery or a memorial? Checkpoint Charlie is also a huge memorial of contention. In 2007, the museum introduced fake Ally soldiers in front of the museum. Visitors can take photos with these soldiers for two euros. The memorial of white crosses to those who died over the course of the divide has also been under fire lately. This memorial commemorates the lost lives of victims of East Germany. This past fall, an activist group, the Center for Political Beauty, moved these crosses to the borders of Europe to bring awareness to the lives of refugees that have been lost trying to get into Europe. This created a public outrage.

1. Conclusions

From the survey data, it is apparent that different memorials are valued differently. The key point being is that they are valued however. Memorials translate to memory and identity. It’s clear that memorials are a reflection of national identity simply by the fact that the German public gets upset anytime there is a movement to alter any memorial to the East/West divide ie: the white crosses, the East Side Gallery, Checkpoint Charlie and the soldiers, etc. Three major themes emerge when looking at this data: confrontation, altered relationships, and the use of memory.

*Confrontation*

With respect to confrontation, how do we confront the past? And does the past have a place in our future or a country’s future? How a country confronts the past determines how it is commemorated and therefore how it weaves into national identity. The soldiers of the Allies at Checkpoint Charlie are so controversial because it is essentially an appropriation of history. The commercialization of history lessens its historical impact—it cheapens it in effect. This is similar to Karl May’s appropriation of Native American culture, however Germans have a voice and therefore the power to oppose this appropriation that Native Americans did not have.

This type of commercialization was also echoed in the survey data. A few participants remarked that places like the East Side Gallery are now “too touristy” and “only a place for group selfies”. Checkpoint Charlie was called out for being “too unserious”. Through selfies it is almost possible to degrade and cheapen a very serious time in history—that is incredibly powerful.

It also appears that Germany is not ready to accept the former communist tendencies they formerly adopted. This is shown especially by the lack of government to the DDR museum, the one museum in all of Berlin that attempts to highlight what daily life in East Germany was like, and not only negative aspects like the Stasi and overall general lack of freedoms. This notion of moral absolutism is present everywhere not just in Germany but around the world. Individuals collectively and therefore countries as a whole find it difficult to commemorate the positive aspects of a regime or practice because of the negatives it also brought about. For example, individuals criticize Martin Luther King, Jr. for cheating on his wife, as if this somehow cheapens or lessens the validity of the work he did with respect to human rights. The former East Germany is basically still being rejected as a part of German identity.

*Altered Relationships*

Along with confrontation, altered relationships are another result of the East German era. At one point the Stasi employed 91,000, not including the additional unofficial informants to control millions of people. Less than 50 people were persecuted for these crimes because under the East German government, they weren’t technically considered crimes (Ahonen, 2011, p.140). Comparatively, the Third Reich employed only 7,000 official employees. A huge portion of East Germany was essentially spying on the other, for various reasons such as career advancement, monetary rewards, and of course, being threatened. This raises the question that was also raised after the Third Reich fell—how are people capable of doing things of this nature to other people? How is someone capable of imprisoning their wife or informing on their sister? How does human nature allow this sort of betrayal? This is a question that is almost impossible to answer.

What is even more interesting is the altered relationship among spaces. The feeling of catharsis that the former Stasi inmates admitted to having after working as tour guides is particularly unexpected. The reclaiming of space however is less of a national identity narrative and more of a personal narrative, though this would be intriguing to further pursue researching.

*Use of Memory*

The use of memory is perhaps the most complex topic to arise from this study. The notion of nostalgia occurs when there is yearning for the past occurs whenever the present isn’t working. For example, one man surveyed highlighted the great things from East Germany like job security and the ability to divorce, whereas during the time, most East Germans were obviously for reunification and the breakdown of the communist system. In essence this is a shift in memory—the memory changes the more someone is removed from the past.

Memory, and memorials, can also be used as a bridge to the present. The movement of the white crosses to highlight current refugee issues and the use of the East Side Gallery as an art space for other social issues unrelated to East Germany are the prime examples of this. As I discovered, the German public was not pleased with either of these developments. This raises an interesting ethics question—is it ethical to use something memorializing the past to memorialize the present? Or is it yet another appropriation of history? The outrage over refugee crosses suggests that the German public isn’t ready to take responsibility or to be held accountable towards this issue. This is the lingering notion of Germany not being an “immigrant country”. Conversely, the debate over the East Side Gallery suggests that Germans are not yet willing to make the Wall “unserious” yet. This divide is still a serious and integral part of German identity. However, perhaps the more these memorials are appropriated, the more that Germany will become more of an immigrant country or become less entrenched in the past. In essence, it’s clear that memorials are a reflection of national identity. What is unfortunately less clear from my research is how memorials can be used to *change* national identity.

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1. Cultural Sensitivity

This project was of particular interest to me because identity is such a fundamental part of who we are as individuals. There are so many aspects that shape identity—I was particularly interested in how physical reminders of the past play into the identity of the present. While my project focused on German identity, these findings are applicable to identity as a whole. The use of memory is a universal habit. What a country chooses to memorialize reflects on how they see ie: identify themselves. It is a physical representation that alters identity through changes in how the memorial is used.

I encountered many difficulties while pursuing this research. The language barrier was by far the largest hurdle. Because the survey my group and I distributed was written in English, students were forced to use a non-native language. This limits the use of their vocabulary and the ability to which they can express their thoughts. The same limitations applied to the interviews as well. My inability to speak German also made me feel very useless and unintelligent. To a German, I thought I appeared like an invalid who didn’t speak the language or like a person who was too entitled to learn the language of the country she’s staying in.

My lack of German initially deterred me from interviewing individuals. Gradually however I realized that Germans, more so than Americans, like to engage in these sort of discussions on identity, politics, and social constructs—regardless of my language ability. It seems they emphasize political correctness less and the sharing of ideas more. While I had heard of this trend before I left Seattle, I did not anticipate it to be so accurate. In general I was just really surprised how open people were—one woman was more than happy to share with me the struggles she faced after discovering how her family had been spying on her for the SS. The current political state of Germany in regard to East/West and also in regard to the US were discussed candidly with me.

I was definitely surprised to discover the view Germans have on Americans. While I was aware of the fact that the US is not viewed very fondly in the US, I was surprised by the homogenous view of the Germans. Some students at Humboldt did not want to mention Obamacare because they believed we were all opposed to it since it has been under such contention. Additionally, gun ownership was considered universal. More than three people asked me if I owned a gun and if they would be in danger coming to the US. While obviously there are major events that resulted in the creation of these stereotypes, I was surprised by how assuming most Germans were. Obviously this sort of opinion resulted in some lively, academic discussion. Perhaps these stereotypes are also a result of the relative lack of diversity in Germany. While Germany takes in the second highest amount of immigrants, it seems that society is much more stratified than in the US. For example, at Humboldt, I saw mostly only white students interacting with one another. On the U Bahn or S Bahn, the same thing occurred. I saw very little racial diversity among friend interactions. This was surprising to me considering that Berlin is such a global city. This would also have been another interesting area to research.

With regard to myself, I really enhanced my reflective skills. It is strange studying abroad, especially about topics like identity and memory. I felt very removed from the US and therefore better able to reflect on it. I’m now able to place in a broader context where the US stands—specifically, as an American, what do we value? What does it mean to be an American? We value freedom—what does it mean to be free though? We value diversity—but what does a diverse country actually look like? By studying another nation’s identity I am now more cognizant of my own nation’s identity.