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The Controversy of Multidimensional Memories and Memorials: Case of Neue Wache, Berlin

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The paper analyses the conflict around German collective memory and the perception of German historical monuments, focusing on the case of Neue Wache memorial. The research reviews the evolution of memorial conflict, analyses the existing methods of working with historical trauma and suggests possible solutions for the Neue Wache monument.

The work demonstrates the possibility of maintaining a productive discussion on the sites of memory without radical changes possibly harmful for the community. The paper analyses historical background of Neue Wache, its current state and relevant commemorating practices.

Key words: historical memory, contested memory, war on monuments, Neue Wache

Introduction

The modern times proved to be an era of rethinking historical memory. This process requires including new strategies and new discussions about past events and their importance in the policy of memory. This issue inevitably involves the physical representation of memory, i.e. monuments.

The phenomenon of monument destruction can be encountered throughout the world history, from ancient to modern times. Some of the notable examples are: Russia after the 1917 revolution; Germany after the fall of the Nazi regime; Ukraine in the early 1990s after gaining independence and after Maidan events of 2013–2014; Iraq in the early 2000s after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Questioning appropriateness of public monuments has always been a staple of societal conflict.

One of the most recent and relevant cases of such controversies can be found in the United States. Monuments depicting Confederate generals in a favourable way has been heavily criticised in 2015–2017. Communities throughout the United States have made it clear that they are not willing to tolerate heroic representations of people who have been involved in defending slavery. A lot of groups have advocated removal of these statues. These proposed measures have been seen as radical to the more conservative part of the American society, triggering a national divide. This situation is a clear example of the society not being silent about their dissatisfaction with memorials in public spaces.

However, there are multiple silent conflicts around the world that reflect the same issue of controversial memory being physically fixed in urban space. They can be silent for a variety of reasons, e.g. authoritarian government having complete power over removing or keeping memorials. In some cases the opposite situation is possible: the society decides for itself that the conflict is resolved until a certain event, situation or social group provokes the discussion again.

Germany is an example of a country with several examples of silenced memories, mostly connected to the 20th century. Many researchers (Farmer, 1995; Forest, et al., 2004; Geyer, 1995; Kattago, 1998; Lang, 1996) point to the complexity of German historical memory and related identity. They are concerned about the way history is represented within the society. One of the important issues of German past is the idea of victimhood. By the 21st century the clear division into prosecutors and victims disappeared. Here, the idea of a victim in German history and commemoration of victims should be revised (Kattago, 1998).

The research on the Neue Wache case is an example of silenced memorial issue. The monument itself is currently not the center of any discussion; however it remains adjacent to some very relevant conflicts in the society. The research provides several ideas of how to resolve this kind of problem without provoking a negative response. Neue Wache memorial in Berlin is an important site related to the discussion surrounding victims in German history due to the

meaning it carries nowadays, being the "Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Dictatorship". Perpetuating the idea of a victim in a physical object before defining its meaning can provoke a strong response which might turn into violent protests against the monument and those who protect it in the nearest future, as it already happened in the United States in 2017 and in post-communist countries in Europe.

Theoretical framework: Memory studies

1. Collective memory theories

One of the crucial theoretical frameworks for this paper is the theory of sites of memory (or realms of memory) introduced by French historian Pierre Nora (Nora, 1989). In 1984–1993 together with other French scientists he developed an ontology of sites of memory in France, as a part of French national identity research. Sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), the central term of Nora's work, usually become an embodiment of ideology, "extremely ideological, full of nationalism, and far from being neutral or free of value judgements" (Den Boer, 2008: 19). Nora observed that most of the sites of memory were created solely for the purpose of indoctrination and serving the government in its goal of uniting the nation. He defined a site of memory as any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of community's memorial heritage (Nora, 1989).

The concept of "site of memory" has a strong connection to the concept of collective memory, introduced by philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his work "La mémoire collective" (Halbwachs, 1997). The concept of memory, as the idea of the past shared among the defined community or the whole society, has been offered by this work. The main function of collective memory is to give a member of the society the possibility to recall and re-experience an event important for the community that they did not take part in directly (Halbwachs, 1997). In contrast, each member of the community has personal memory, which, by Halbwachs's theory, is defined by collective memory and creates collective memory at the same time. However, the most valuable contribution of the theory is the understanding that collective memory or any type of memory does not indicate any historical accuracy, thus cannot be trusted as a valuable historical source. According to Nora, sites of memory are the physical representation of sometimes "not accurate" history (Nora, 1989). Moreover, the perception of the past is constantly changing through time, as well as collective memory. It is logical to suggest that physical representation of an old interpretation of history, e.g. monuments, is not appreciated by members of the society after a dramatic switch in understanding of their mutual past.

Theory of Halbwachs is constantly criticised as the field of memory studies is being developed. In the 2000s German egyptologist and historian of culture Jan Assmann clarified the term "collective memory" and introduced a new idea of cultural memory, a form of collective memory shared by people of the same

culture (Assman et al., 1995). Cultural memory is not connected to the experience of individuals; it contains multiple memories attached to crystallised symbols of the past. It radically differs from communicative memory, another term introduced by Assmann, which is closer to private memory. Communicative memory is a memory of non-distant past shared by an individual with their generation and 2–3 generations around them. Communicative memory depends on experience, while cultural memory is fixed, structured and presented to the society by specialists (Assmann et al., 1995).

It is important to understand the main features of historical memory and sites of memory that are crucial for the research. Firstly, memory is subjective and fragmented, people remember the past differently, sometimes ignoring the accepted academic version of history and public agreement on what society considers "true" history. Secondly, sites of memory represent a crystallised version of memory of the past. Finally, private memory about the past and personal understanding of existing historical symbols may provoke the feeling of frustration and anger within the society towards crystallised memory they and their community do not agree with.

2. Strategies of handling contested memory

Controversial and problematic historical memory is something a lot of countries face these days. The most recent example is the United States, where the question of whether to dismantle or to keep the Confederate monuments in their places became an especially relevant issue at the end of 2017. The society has been divided on this question, with radical groups spreading violence across the country, while some left-leaning activists turned to vandalism due to inefficiency of policy makers.

With memorial conflicts being such an important part of modern societies, there are multiple methods of coping with the issues of contested sites of memory. The first option is to take the problematic monument away, or destroy it. The second option is to ignore or silence: monuments stay in their place without any changes and they are pushed away from the public discourse. Finally, the third option is bringing context to monuments.

At first sight, the demolition of contested monuments and ignoring their contested nature seem very different. In the first scenario the society does not have a monument reminding them of traumatic past; the second scenario, however, relies more on the concept of ignoring the problem, i.e. not highlighting it. However, if we look closer, both strategies reach the same result. The general public might not notice the monument or its disappearance. The specific groups holding traumas or contested version of memory, however, are those who feel the harm of these actions. These groups will not have a relief point, a moment of forgetting and rethinking the situation. Both of these strategies lead to radicalisation of either those who were against the monument, or those who were supporting it.

The third option, recontextualisation, tries to solve the issue both for the general public and groups whose interests are strictly connected with the monument. The process of recontextualisation is supposed to provide people with arguments for productive discussion and to make this discussion objective. Due to memory being more about emotions rather than facts, this context will clarify all points of disagreement, which are the main part of controversy in such social issues.

These days, there are several ways to create a context which can transform the discussion about the contested monuments. First of all, it is possible to provide info-signs that explain the many-sided history of the site. Secondly, there is an option of "balancing out" the monument. This concept is widely illustrated by Charging Bull on Wall Street in New York which was supported by the sculpture of Fearless Girl in 2017 with the sign "Know the power of women in leadership. SHE makes a difference" (Lee, 2017). The goal is to find a problematic statement carried by the initial monument and balance it out with a counter-statement. For example, the controversy of the Confederate statues could have been solved by accompanying them with monuments dedicated to victims of slavery and those who fought for their freedom. Thirdly, there is an option of moving the statues that can be moved to the museum, making them visually a part of history, but separating them from the modern agenda. Finally, there is an option of actualisation through art: it includes traditional art forms (sketching, non-fiction movies, public art) and digital art forms like projects presented at the site or online projects. The main idea of art is to make the problem relevant again and provoke a discussion, guiding it in a productive and non-violent way.

Analysis of the research field

The research on the contested memory of the Neue Wache monument covers the problem of consistent changes in people's opinion about specific sites of memory and their correlation with radicalisation of society. The rise of nationalist movements is an important concern for the European society, especially for Germany, due to specific historical background. Reconsideration of history and attitude towards objects of historical heritage in these circumstances can easily trigger the policy of protectionism and nationalist ideology. To deeply understand the case, it is important to look at the historical background of the Neue Wache monument; then, to deconstruct the symbolic meaning of the monument; finally, to think of possible solutions to the existing memorial problem.

1. Historical background of the Neue Wache monument

The history of the Neue Wache monument is complex. Nowadays it can be portrayed as an embodiment of no less than three different meanings: remains of the Prussian Kingdom, celebration of war heroes and commemoration of war victims. It is possible to say that through the history of the monument one can see the history of Germany throughout the 20th century.

The building itself was constructed at the beginning of 19th century in the Mitte district, Berlin, exclusively for utilitarian reasons. The building served as a guardhouse for soldiers who were watching over the city residence of the King Frederick William III (Ladd, 1997: 217-218). This is how the memorial's name, "new Guardhouse", (Neue Wache) appeared. In the late 19th century, after the establishment of the German Empire, the guarding duty became mostly ceremonial, and the guardhouse became a living museum of the Prussian Army (Marcuse, 1997). Until World War I the building was used as a central site for celebrations, for example William I's 100th birthday in 1897. After the war Neue Wache was abandoned and forgotten for a while.

In 1929, Prussian Prime Minister Otto Braun decided to preserve the deteriorating Neue Wache and use it for memorial reasons. The architect Heinrich Tessenow converted the guardhouse into a monument to soldiers who died in the Great War (WWI) (Koshar, 1998: 138-139). In 1931, Neue Wache was named a "Memorial Site for the Fallen of the World War". For the officials the monument slowly developed becoming the symbol of national unity. The Reich Minister of Defense Wilhelm Groener portrayed the monument as the embodiment of "heroic greatness", the "holy fire of patriotic devotion", and the "spirit of duty and readiness to sacrifice" (Marcuse, 1997).

For the people, however, the idea of the monument itself and its appearance were unclear. "The Tessenow project was not only a heavily debated artistic event but a public anomaly. An opening in the roof of the famous Berlin landmark shed dramatic light on a simple block of black Swedish granite decorated with a silver oak wreath. At the foot of the block was a stone carrying the dates of the war. Such simplicity had a negative effect on the public's ability to identify with the monument <...> The Volk streams in, docilely takes off its hat, but then with a certain embarrassment stands around the block, around which an all too orderly circle of donated wreaths lay" (Koshar, 1998: 138-139).

In 1933, the Nazis started the discourse around the monument, naming it Ehrenmal (Cenotaph) and then renaming it Reichsehrenmal, making the Neue Wache a central site for annual celebrations again (Marcuse, 1997). This time it was used for Heldengedenktag, the Day of Commemoration of Heroes, which emphasised specifically heroes, suppressing the idea of remembering the dead. The appearance of the monument was not changed at the time (Ladd, 1997: 217-218). The cross to the back of the wall, as a symbol of the "Christian Volk in a new Reich", was the only addition they made (Mosse, 1990: 97-98).

The building was almost destroyed during and after World War II: the wreath was stolen, and the porch collapsed after the severe bombing. During the 1950s, the memorial was restored by the GDR officials and was rededicated in 1960 as "Mahnmal für die Opfer des Faschismus und beider Weltkriege", the "Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and both World Wars" (Ladd, 1997: 217-218). In 1969, the interior was redesigned: the central spot was given to the eternal flame, the stones marking the grave of the Unknown Soldier and of the Unknown Resistance Fighter appeared, and the set of urns with soil from concentration camps and World War II battlefields appeared (Marcuse, 1997). Also, the changing of the guard was introduced. The GDR publication in 1988

said: "For the majority of visitors the deep meaning of the memorial and the military ceremony are clear from the antifascist tradition of our country. Sometimes visitors don't quite understand how to reconcile the military ceremony and this tradition. Displays of military honour at memorials in the traditional historical national way are common in many countries, among them in the GDR. Here, as in all socialist countries, the historical forms of military ceremony are continued" (Demps, 1988).

After German reunification in the 1990s, Chancellor Helmut Kohl decided to rededicate Neue Wache as a "worthy common memorial for the victims of both world wars, tyranny, racial persecution, resistance, expulsion, division, and terrorism" (Ladd, 1997: 217-218). In 1993, the sculpture "Mother with her Dead Son" was established in Neue Wache, the enlarged version of a Pietà modelled by Käthe Kollwitz in 1937 (Ladd, 1997: 217-218). It was an expression of private grief for her son who died in World War I. The initial statue fifteen inches high was copied and made four times higher by Hermann Haacke.

2. Analysis of the Neue Wache symbolic meaning

The major problem of the symbolic meaning of the Neue Wache monument is the combination of contexts and its current position. The site became Germany's national war memorial and thus played a role in mediating the collective process of mourning. The historical context, which has not disappeared from the memory of the society, allows different social groups to choose the meaning for themselves, provoking misunderstanding with others and ruining the united picture of collective memory about the past (Forner, 2002: 548).

It is important to consider several memorial layers interwined within one monument. Memorial and historical contexts of one object inevitably intertwine, sometimes raising questions and leading to radical social denial.

The main question which should be asked: what has the Neue Wache monument symbolised throughout its long history? At first, being built for the military, Neue Wache served the symbolic idea of Prussian and then German militarism greatness and traditions. It was later taken over by the Nazis, who transformed the militaristic spirit of the site in their own way, connecting it to a different army and a different ideology, still celebrating the greatness of the nation.

After the Nazi period, the monument became firstly the symbol of those who died in both World Wars and at the hands of the fascist regime and only then a combined symbol of the victims of both World Wars, tyranny, racial persecution, resistance, expulsion, division, and terrorism. The reunited Germany became the fourth regime to use the same site as a national memorial. However, the idea of combined commemoration has immediately become controversial. The site radically changed its purpose from glorifying the concept of war into

commemorating its victims. The transition was accompanied by changes in regime and political perspectives, trying to identify who was right and who was wrong.

Helmut Kohl's idea of Neue Wache as a symbol of national commemoration of victims had to become a large-scale project of uniting people around their common trauma. He saw it as "exemplary for the political self-conception and the process of politically coming to an understanding of our people in recollection, mourning, and warning" (Marcuse, 1997). On the day of Neue Wache reopening in 1993 some protesters appeared trying to sabotage the event (Ladd, 1997). The position of protesters was clear as they did not accept the idea of united memory. Many of the invited social group representatives (Berlin Jewish community, some political party members, the VVN — the association of political persecutees of the Nazi regime, etc.) did not come due to the same reason.

What was the problem with united national symbol dedicated to victims? The issue was in the term *victim* itself. "Kohl wanted to create a single category of victims as an expression of national unity. <...> The many objections to his project for the Neue Wache also reveal how fractured that identity remains" (Ladd, 1997). The unified memorial meant not only the joined commemoration of victims, but also unification of the level of suffering people experienced. The memorial was not supposed to highlight any specific group's level of suffering, on the contrary, it underlined the idea of all suffering being equally shared by everyone. The most complicated and the least acceptable was the idea to also commemorate those German soldiers, who sacrificed their lives in the name of dictatorship. Even if on personal level the need to accept soldiers as victims is understandable, on the level of collective national memory it was not acceptable in the 1990s (and still remains debatable). That would mean that Neue Wache equated the level of suffering of perpetrators and victims. "German murderers are not victims!" was the slogan of those who came to the Neue Wache opening (Ladd, 1997).

Another issue is the statue within the memorial. The sculpture "Mother with her Dead Son" does not correspond with feelings of victims of dictatorship. The monument, being the enlarged version of the statue modelled by Käthe Kollwitz in 1937, does not have a unique meaning separated from the original sculpture or the past of the Neue Wache as a whole. Kollwitz made a monument representing her private memory and private grief (Ladd, 1997). However, the transfer of private trauma to public memory created a controversy of disconnecting with other victims the memorial should have been representing. A group of victims does not appreciate the monument, saying that this sculpture is not about them. Initially the monument was dedicated to the author's dying son, who was a soldier in WWI. For the victims of Nazi regime the image of German soldiers was compromised, so they could not associate their tragedy with the tragedy of the sculpture protagonist, portraying him as a prosecutor. (Bartov, 2000: 39) Also, victims do not associate themselves with the sculpture, because they were not dying in the hands of their mothers, they were dying in camps and prisons (Wang, 2014). Due to these issues, Helmut Kohl had to provide an explanatory info-table on who is commemorated in Neue Wache.

Another dangerous situation is that the existence of controversial traumatic memory in urban space can become a reason for rapid escalation of the already existing serious conflicts within the society. For example, the Nazi past has not vanished completely from Neue Wache; it was one of the central sites for the regime. Nowadays, people associating themselves with the Nazi ideology might see this monument as not a commemoration site of war victims, but a celebration of the Nazi past. This point becomes even more problematic considering the fact that the monument's aim is to preserve memory of Nazism, fascism and tyranny victims in general.

Currently, it is believed that Neue Wache is mostly forgotten. "The Neue Wache is now relatively ignored. Germany has far hotter irons in the fire, especially the national Holocaust memorial project" (Marcuse, 1997). However, it does not mean that the monument has no power to create a discussion and conflict. It means that the common narrative avoids the topic of Neue Wache and allows people to understand it in their own way, thus raising the idea of multiple meanings usually confronting each other.

3. Suggestions for the Neue Wache case

The two main questions to be addressed in the first place in terms of multidimensional memory around Neue Wache are how to negotiate the public memories of different regimes and who is commemorated by the memorial. Both questions can be addressed by acknowledging the complexity of Neue Wache memory's nature.

The monument adaptation to modern discourse relies on the fact that there is no unified memory and no unified past the memorial represents. It is important to recognise inherent differences of all pieces of history relevant to Neue Wache. All eras the monument went through, i.e. pre-Nazi Germany, Nazi Germany, East and West Germany and Reunited Germany, have different perspectives of what Neue Wache should be celebrating or commemorating. Therefore, it would be wrong to either unite them together, or to choose only one interpretation of the monument's purpose. To eliminate strong ideological connection people might have with Neue Wache, it is important to stress the historical part of the monument. By highlighting only one era, we prove that this is the correct interpretation and understanding of the monument. However, in the process of dealing with contested memory we need to avoid right and wrong meanings, presenting as many facts and background as possible.

Another point the society needs to agree upon is what is more important to highlight. Neue Wache represented prosecutors and victims at different moments of its history. It would be logical to assume that all of them should be represented in the process of adaptation. However, the monument currently should focus only on victims. Why is it important to leave Neue Wache only to victims? While we cannot judge which era should be portrayed as dominant in the monument, we can, however, understand what is more valuable for us as a society: to emphasise the perpetrators or to commemorate the victims. Prosecutors are always questionable characters in history, no matter whether

they won or not. The idea of the victim, however, sparks empathy in people. The idea of someone suffering from injustice brings the society together to avoid more unjust actions in the future. Therefore, leaving the monument only to victims may guide the discussion within the society from punishing the prosecutors to the idea of helping the victims.

Currently, the full name of the memorial, the "Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the victims of War and Dictatorship", is not justified. The new form of the memorial should represent all stages the site has gone through to become the representation of all victims. This means that the memorial space should be planned according to the idea of maximum representation. The information should be delivered not through informational tables, but through its appearance as a whole. Info tables are not enough, because the majority of people do not read them, especially considering the language difference and sometimes inability of organisers to provide all possible translations. The language the memorial uses should be non-verbal, and closer to symbolic. The space should tell the history of the memorial guiding people through each stage, showing the specific time period, its circumstances, features and victims.

The space of Neue Wache allows the authorities to make it into more than just a memorial. It can become a full museum of memory and German identity. Museums usually use both verbal and non-verbal language to tell the society the complicated history. One of the positive sides of museums is that even non-verbal controversial signs and symbols lose their symbolic strength and importance in museum context. A museum broadens the context and at the same time shows the past tense of the event, emphasising history over memory.

The concept for Neue Wache offered here is the same concept a lot of modern historical museums use, planning the space as a long corridor representing a timeline of events, people and major changes in society and its country. Neue Wache, therefore, would be representing all the regimes that the monument has gone through and major events that came with these regimes, and the consequences these events created. There are multiple chronicles of celebrations and photos taken near the site. One way to fill the space with historical context would be to display the original footage or pictures taken in Neue Wache in each represented regime.

The sculpture of a mother, which is now the central part of Neue Wache and which causes an issue by not fully representing the unified victimhood idea behind the monument, in this situation should be put into the context of WWI, the period of time and the event it was initially dedicated to by its author. Therefore the statue would not only represent its initial meaning, but also the memory of WWI and WWII would be separated and defined individually, creating a better understanding of those two events and the beginning of the 20th century in Germany in general. Also, this way the personal memory of the author will be recognised and respected.

Obviously, the exhibition should be most careful about the Nazi period. However, by bringing the real context with real footage and proper explanation of the regime and its severity, it is possible for Neue Wache to become not an obstacle for German past rethinking, but a proper argument for uniting people. The discussion on who is the victim of the Nazi period in Germany will be revisited and possibly reconsidered. The guilt of the Nazi regime which still exists in Germany is a consequence of silencing the issue of victimhood of WWII. By sparking the discussion again, it is possible to free the modern Germans from the guilt of the Nazi regime.

Modern technologies can help to create the sense of altering reality inside the space. The atmosphere would slowly shift from one period to another, showing the essence of time and how the site is transformed throughout its history. It is possible to support the exhibition in the monument with an online platform containing more resources like documents, archive footage and audio tour around the site.

The history of the building, however, should be emphasised the perspective of its initial purpose. Its main point should be the moment of creation at the beginning of the 19th century. All other transformations were made to manipulate the meaning of the inner space of the building from one era to another. The outside view of Neue Wache has to become an architectural monument of the Prussian Kingdom and stay as it is, with the main accent on what is inside, not outside. For example, a lot of art museums located inside the historical buildings often separate the exterior from the artefacts they contain. They represent two different entities, which should participate in urban space and memorial background of the city and the society as two separate units.

Combining the idea of Neue Wache exterior, as a 19th century building, and interior, which represents all eras of the monument respecting and commemorating each historical epoch separately, is an opportunity for the society to fully see the site's retrospective and its prospective for Germany in the nearest future.

Conclusion

Neue Wache as a memorial dedicated to victims and its role in urban and community spaces should be reconsidered. The conflict which can arise after silencing the topic for a very long time might become a point of major disagreement in the society, as it is based on long-term historical and cultural trauma Germany has been carrying for more than 50 years.

Recontextualisation appears to be the only solution in the silenced and multidimensional memories due to their complexity and controversy. A drastic solution will only lead to radicalisation of the party that is not satisfied with the outcome. Creating a proper context is not an easy task, however, some countries managed to cope with their past through putting certain sites in

context. For example, the Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary, a place where all the soviet monuments are displayed. It was created as a visual description of what dictatorship is about.

However, not everyone knows how to contextualise a problematic site. For example, in the United States the majority of their Confederate monuments is still left without any changes. For Neue Wache changes are possible, especially while the conflict is not in an active stage and memory is still silenced.

First of all, the building itself needs to reclaim its initial history and purpose prior to any type of ideology applied to the site. After that, it is recommended to create a space where all the stages of historical site development would be combined and shown separately but at the same time.

The issues of silenced memories should be recognised by the vast majority within the society and should be resolved with a high level of accuracy and expertise. The 20th century brought a lot of controversial memories to Europe and the rest of the world. The problems we faced will not disappear on their own. It is time to face these problems and be active trying to solve them.

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