
**The Politics of Memory in
Germany, Israel and the
United States of America**
By Matthias Haß

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Montréal, Qc, Canada
H3T 1P1

Matthias Haß, Dr. phil. is a post-doctoral fellow at the CCGES and an independent researcher in Berlin. He is a free lance consultant for The House of the Wannsee Conference and the Topography of Terror Foundation in Berlin.

Areas of expertise: 20th Century German History, National Socialism, The Holocaust, The Politics of Memory, Civic Education

He can be reached at: MHass@yorku.ca or at MatthiasHass@web.de

Abstract/Zusammenfassung

This paper examines three national memorials dedicated to the memory of the National Socialist past – Yad Vashem in Israel, the Topography of Terror Foundation in Germany and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the United States – and explores how they reflect debates on National Socialism in their respective countries. The view articulated in this article is that memory does not exist beyond the specific societal context in which remembrance takes place. Memory is not something abstract. It is inseparable from time, place, and people who imbue events with specific meanings.

Der Aufsatz befasst sich mit drei nationalen Gedenkstätten zur nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit – Yad Vashem in Israel, der Stiftung Topographie des Terrors in Deutschland und dem United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in den USA – und untersucht wie sie jeweils die Diskussionen über den Nationalsozialismus in ihren Ländern reflektieren. In dem Aufsatz wird die These vertreten, dass Erinnerung nicht jenseits des spezifischen gesellschaftlichen Kontexts existiert, in dem Gedenken stattfindet. Erinnerung ist nichts Abstraktes. Sie ist abhängig von Zeit, Ort und den Akteuren, die den Ereignissen besondere Bedeutungen zuweisen.

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Introduction

It is possible to address the politics of memory in Germany, Israel and the United States in a number of ways.¹ One could take an abstract approach, focussing on cultural memory, developing theories of remembrance and asking questions: How and what do societies remember. How and what do they forget? What are the mechanisms of cultural memory? What purpose does cultural memory serve? What is the relationship between the memory of individuals and the memory of societies (Assmann, J. 1999; Assmann, A. und Harth 1991; Assmann A. 2003; Halbwachs 1985)?

One could also look for concrete examples of political memory in which historical events are remembered in a specific form, such as monuments, historical museums and official days of remembrance (Young 1988, 1990). The content of the event, the framework in which it is depicted, the emphasis and perspective would also reveal information about the society which does the remembering. For a number of societies affected by National Socialism and the Holocaust, these events of the 20th century play a central role in their national collective memory. They also play a significant role in discussions of universal memory (Levy und Sznajder 2001).

My paper examines in detail three national memorials dedicated to the memory of the Nazi past – Yad Vashem in Israel, the Topography of Terror Foundation in Germany and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the United States – and explores how they reflect debates on National Socialism in the respective countries. I argue that memory does not exist beyond the specific societal context in which remembrance takes place. Memory is not something abstract. It is inseparable from time, place, and people who imbue events with specific meanings. Speaking of a single universal memory, therefore, is misleading since it overlooks the exact context in which memory is formed. Theories of universal memory

¹ I would like to thank Mark Webber, Miriamne Fields and Dorothea and Reinhold Brinkmann for invaluable comments and corrections concerning content and form of the paper.

assume that people mean similar things when they use the same words. The struggle to define the Holocaust, which will be discussed later, suggests that this is not always the case.

To begin it is necessary to clarify two points: the specific field of political science on which the research of this article is based and my personal motivations for pursuing this subject. The research approach of this paper is based on a subfield of political science in Germany called "*Historische Grundlagen der Politik*," or in English, "historical foundations of politics." Historically oriented political science both influences and is influenced by the research of modern history, which defines itself as historical social science. This creates a mutual relationship to the benefit of both disciplines. By combining politics and history we are able to analyze political problems, their structures and underlying interests, from a historical perspective. This perspective, in turn, makes it possible to recognize the consequences of former political decisions (Wolfrum 1999; Steinbach und Wolfrum).

History is never only about the past. It is also an image that people create based on the present reality in which they live. Historically oriented political science also analyzes the political function of interpretations of the past; it analyzes historical debates and images of the past and attempts to form a collective identity based on history. To ask if there might have been alternatives to the historical past, whether events might have turned out differently, also serves to destroy myths about the past and about the inevitability of history.

If we analyze political decisions, the implementation of decisions, the possibilities and impossibilities of controlling political decisions and the consequences of these decisions, it becomes clear that they are based on former political decisions. Coming to terms with past decisions and changing wrong or outdated political decisions is thus one of the important motivations for political decision-making. The analysis of these political decisions from a historical perspective defines the subfield of political science in Germany called the historical foundations of politics.

This subfield of political science has a long tradition in Germany. From the very beginning of the Weimar Republic historical study was included among four fields of political science at the

Deutsche Hochschule für Politik in Berlin. Friedrich Meineke, one of the most influential German historians in the first half of the 20th century, was responsible for this department (Münkler 2003; Bleek 2001). After 1945, when political science was re-established as an academic field of democratic education, history always played a major role. Some of the most well-known early studies on National Socialism were written by political scientists: Ernst Fränkel's *The Dual State*, Franz Neumann's *Behemoth* or Eugen Kogon's *The SS-State* just to name a few.

The whole field of contemporary history was from its inception strongly influenced by methods and questions of political science and therefore often regarded with suspicion by university historians. Since the sixties, political scientists working in the field of politics and history were often judged by their colleagues as conservative and backwards-oriented. That had also to do with the German historians' self-image. They often saw their role as writers of national history giving meaning to the nation's past. This self-image has changed with the establishment of broader approaches to history. The history of every day life history, gender history, and social history also entered the spectrum of historical analysis over the last decades (Berg 2003).

Although the field of historic foundations of politics is an important area of research, it has only a shadowy existence in the whole spectrum of political science. The importance of this historical, political approach for the research of this article was made clear during a conference in Washington D.C. in 1994 involving directors of sixteen German memorial sites and the staff of the Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. During his opening remarks, the director of the Holocaust Memorial Museum Research Institute commented that he would like to see a museum like the one in Washington built in Germany, too. This comment led to some surprise among the participants. Their reaction stemmed not so much from the revelation of the director's ignorance regarding the situation in Germany (for example that there are almost one hundred different memorial sites in Germany dedicated to the memory of the Nazi past), but because his implicit assumption that commemoration of an event of European history in the first half of the 20th century could be transferred to a North

American context and from there should be re-imported to Europe (Stiftung Topographie 1995; Hass 1994).

This example raises questions about the contexts in which national museums like the Holocaust Museum in Washington exist and were developed. During a research project on the history of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, it became evident that the debates about the National Socialist past in the United States were much different from those in Germany. The perspectives, the goals and the entire approach to dealing with the history of the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities were based on a different premise. The idea to compare three different national memorials from the perspective of their societal context emerged from this recognition. This article presents some of the results of the comparative research conducted over the last few years on this subject.

My paper will begin by clarifying the context in which three national memorials, Yad Vashem, the Topography of Terror Foundation and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, were established. This will shed some light on the national discourses on the Holocaust that took place in each country. The research focuses on the processes that led to the establishment of the three national institutions and raises questions about the different motivating interests of the actors involved, about the concepts of each institution, and the meaning and function of the institutions in their respective societies. How are national memorials founded? Is it possible to establish a national memorial according to its original vision or must compromises always be made? Is there a single definitive approach and to what degree can it remain uninfluenced by the surrounding society? Who participates in the founding process? What are the consequences of establishing a national memorial? These are the questions which provided the foundation for the research.

It was important to select institutions that fit these questions and which shared a few basic elements in common. It would not have made sense, for example, to compare the museum in Washington to a regional memorial run by a grassroots organization in Germany. The following criteria were used for the selection: What makes them “national” institutions? Where are they located? What is the relationship between the history they address and the

current function of the institution? From which perspective is the history presented? Each society considers its own historical role within the history of National Socialism, and these considerations have an impact on the historical presentation. For example the Topography of Terror exhibition in Germany, the society of the perpetrators, places the perpetrators at the center of interest. A society such as Israel, where many survivors settled and where the establishment of the state was inevitably bound to the Holocaust, clearly addresses the victims, survivors and the struggle to resist the Nazis. The United States, however, that was only indirectly involved in and affected by the historical events addresses its personal experience with the Nazi atrocities: the liberation of the camps, immigration policies and the degree of aid provided during the war. This basis of comparison provided the common ground for the project.

Anyone familiar with the situation in Germany may question the decision to include the Topography of Terror exhibition into a comparative study like this. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the Holocaust Museum in Washington are both memorials erected on neutral sites outside of Europe. These sites have symbolic meaning but they are not directly connected to the historical events of National Socialism. For the Topography of Terror, however, the opposite is true: The Topography of Terror exhibition is located in an area in downtown Berlin where from 1933 to 1945 the central organizations of National Socialist terror, persecution and mass murder were located: The Gestapo, the SS, the Security Service of the SS, the Reich Security Main Office. This is clearly a site heavily contaminated with Nazi history (Rürup 1987).

After Germany's re-unification in 1990, the site, which for twenty-eight years had been situated directly on the border of divided Berlin, found itself again at the center of the city. The grounds, bordered at the north side by one of the few remaining segments of the Berlin Wall, also contain clear remnants of the cold war and the divided city. The site is hence significant not only for the Nazi past, but also to post-war contemporary German history. It is situated right across the street from the Berlin parliament building and not far from the new Potsdamer Platz and many federal government ministries. Its central location also gives a new meaning to the site that is historically grounded, but increasingly anchored in the present, especially since there are almost no remnants of the original historical buildings once occupied

by the Nazis. All of these factors led to the decision to include the Topography of Terror exhibition in the study.

For each institution a slightly different focus was chosen in order to more clearly show their uniqueness. The section on Yad Vashem, for example, focuses on the changes inside the institution after 1967 and the political use of memory at that time, followed by a documentation of the development of the memorial up to the end of the 1990s. In the section on the Topography of Terror Foundation, the role that grass roots organizations played as initiators in confronting the history of that particular site builds the centre of interest. A commission of experts that tried to combine the grass roots groups' interests with those of official politics is also examined. For the research on the Holocaust Museum in Washington, emphasis is laid on the process of creating the permanent exhibition and the role of different lobby groups in this process.

Yad Vashem and Israeli Society

The way in which Israeli society dealt and continues to deal with the history of the destruction of the European Jewry has changed in form, content and intensity over the last decades. These different forms of coming to terms with that past can be placed in three thematic categories: "Catastrophe and Heroism," "Catastrophe and Rebirth" and "Catastrophe and Redemption." The catastrophe of destruction is juxtaposed by the heroism of the resistance fighters, the renaissance of the state of Israel, and by the clearly religious connotation of hope for redemption (Friedländer 1994).

Many of the discussions and debates around Yad Vashem reflect this ambiguity. Even the official English name of Yad Vashem, "The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority," suggests this double role. The name Yad Vashem itself goes back to the bible: "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial an everlasting name [a yad vashem], that shall not be cut off"(Isaiah, chapter 56, verse 5). The first plans for a memorial date back to the year 1942, a point in time when the majority of the victims were

still alive. Nevertheless in the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, there was a strong belief that Nazi policies of mass murder would bring Jewish life in Europe to an end. The site chosen for the memorial is part of the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem. Mount Herzl, on the other side, is the central cemetery for Israeli soldiers. Theodor Herzl and the prime ministers and the presidents of the state are also buried there. The choice of the site reflects central interpretations of the Holocaust in Israel: the role of heroism is more prominent than the martyrdom of the victims and the Holocaust is closely connected to the founding of the state of Israel – from catastrophe to rebirth. But it is also important to recognize that Yad Vashem is on the side of the hill turned away from the city, whereas the graves of the prime ministers face the city (Segev 1996; Weitz 1996).

The memorial itself was founded through an act of parliament in 1953 and the duties of the national memorial are clearly defined in the founding law. The nine articles clarify who is to be remembered: the victims, the families, the communities, the heroes, Jewish soldiers, partisans, their helpers, and those who tried to maintain their dignity. Of the nine articles, six address resistance. That is a clear statement. The consideration of resistance is one of the main tasks of Yad Vashem. And resistance is very broadly defined. Implicit in this focus of resistance lies the assumption that all those who did not resist went – to use a common phrase of that time “like sheep to the slaughter.”

The first plans for Yad Vashem included an archive, a library, a synagogue, a hall of remembrance, a hall of heroism, and an eternal monument. Not only were different areas designated for the memory of different groups – for example a hall of remembrance for the six million victims, a hall of heroism for the fighters against Nazism – different areas also made allowance for different forms of remembrance – a synagogue for religious ritual, the eternal monument for secular Zionist patterns. It was also planned from the very beginning to collect the names of all victims. From its inception Yad Vashem also saw one of its functions in providing a symbolic grave to the many victims who had none.

In the beginning the memorial site lacked a clear definition. Several components were seen as crucial: the archive, different commemorative areas, symbolic citizenship for the victims (a

component that was ultimately never realized), but there still lacked a clear understanding of the meaning of the institution for Israeli society. Yad Vashem was not a memorial museum in our current understanding. It was not clear who the audience was. It was vaguely stated that all material should be published to make it accessible to the people. Why this would be of interest – what the purpose was – was not expressed. It was assumed to be self evident. This explains in part why there were no debates and societal conflicts surrounding the founding of Yad Vashem: The institution lacked a clear aim. The duties of Yad Vashem were: (1) to collect and publish documents of the Holocaust, (2) remembrance and memorialization, (3) teaching the lessons of the Holocaust, whereby this last aspect was realized relatively late.

In the first years of its existence Yad Vashem was not the central site of Israeli memorial culture. Remembrance of the Holocaust was not even of significant importance in society. The survivors remained quiet. Developing the state and society were more important priorities which left little room for the past. The former partisans and resistance fighters were the only ones to use Yad Vashem as a place of remembrance. This changed slightly in the late 1950s when the council of Yad Vashem initiated that state-wide ceremonies be held on Yom Ha Shoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day. This led to a decision to hold the official ceremony at Yad Vashem with state officials. The event, which was often attended by the president, the prime minister, the chief rabbis and various ministers, brought public attention to the memorial for the first time. The ceremonies were held in the secular self understanding of the new state – religion only played a minor role. But already by the early sixties, representatives of religious groups met at Yad Vashem to instill the memorial day with a stronger religious character through prayers and rituals.

Until the mid-sixties Yad Vashem remained an institution without wide public awareness. Hardly any connections were made between current events and the history of the Holocaust. The public controversies about the Holocaust, the debate about compensation from Germany, the Kastner trial, the Eichmann trial, all this happened outside of Yad Vashem. The discourses about “catastrophe and heroism” and “catastrophe and rebirth” had no specific place. But this would change dramatically after 1967.

The Six Day War had a major impact on the meaning of the Holocaust within Israeli society and also at Yad Vashem. After the Six Day War, Yad Vashem became involved in debates on the politics of memory. During the official ceremonies on Holocaust Remembrance Day, speakers now drew clear connections to the current political situation, especially to the conflicts with the Arab states and the Palestinians. And the number of visitors increased. More and more groups of soldiers came to Yad Vashem (or were brought there). These visits served the purpose of helping the soldiers to identify with the past events by give meaning to their present battle. The history of the Holocaust was used to mobilize society. In theses debates the battles against the Nazis merged with the battle for independence and the wars in 1948, 1967 and also 1973, forming one single battle for the survival of the Jewish people. An example from the war of 1973 gives evidence to this. In 1998 I conducted an interview with Shalmi Barmor, who at the time worked in the department of education at Yad Vashem and later became that department's director. Barmor was a Sabra, a young Israeli, born in the country. In the following passage he articulates how important the Holocaust had become to the present Israeli struggle:

In 1973 in December, in December we were mobilized. The war was in September - October. December and January I was still in the army. And they call me to go back home to work. The others are sitting in Africa, in Egypt. They call me to go back home. I didn't ask questions, I am going. The Jewish people need me to save them, I am going home, who needs to be here? I come to Yad Vashem and they say that next week a whole paratrooper brigade will come to visit Yad Vashem and I should teach them as decreed by general Raphael Itan Raphul who is today a minister in the government. He was the head of the northern command ... Because, when he visited the height of Hermon (an area in the north of Israel occupied by the Israelis. M.H.) the soldiers who were an elite group told him that they were scared. The soldiers told him that they were scared; they didn't say that they want to get off. He said: "What? You are scared; you are not ashamed to say that you are scared?" And he starts telling: "You know what happened in the Holocaust?" And he sends the whole brigade to Yad Vashem so they shouldn't be scared. So, they came and they said "you can talk to us". They told me what happened. "You can talk to us, you should know that nothing will change. We are totally humiliated in being here". And I was so ashamed of this situation, I was so embarrassed by the situation that we actually sat and told war stories. ... And I said you know this is stupid. You have this moron. What do you want me to do? You want them not to be scared? Why, because we tell them something about the Holocaust? What is this idiocy? But this shows you how the

Holocaust was mobilized; sometimes with more tact, sometimes with no tact at all (Barmor 1998).

In official speeches in Yad Vashem a direct connection was also made between the National Socialists and some Palestinian groups which were described as students of Streicher and Himmler. The Holocaust served the purpose at that time of forming a national identity. Before we judge the inappropriateness of this, we should consider that it also indicates how alive the memory of the Holocaust still was at this time. The memory was not something abstract and far away – it imposed itself as a precursor of a concrete threat of a new destruction. It seemed like history was repeating itself. This new threat of destruction meant that the stories of survivors who did not participate in resistance and partisan activities were ignored. Their stories were not understood and the victims were often defamed as having gone “like sheep to the slaughter.”

This use of Holocaust memory for political purposes was ongoing in the late sixties and seventies. Since the eighties, however, the situation has changed and the number of direct references made between the Holocaust and current political affairs has lessened. There are two reasons for this. The first lies in the institution of Yad Vashem itself, which developed an increasingly professional attitude as a museum, an educational institution, and a memorial fulfilling a specific task. The second reason has also to do with the complexity of the political situation in Israel and international interests. Using historical events of the Holocaust to elucidate political affairs seemed more and more impossible and inappropriate.

One consequence of mobilizing Holocaust memory for Israeli society was that Yad Vashem’s importance grew and the memorial was expanded. The small exhibition from the late 1950s was revised and in 1973 the new central exhibition was opened. The focus was nevertheless still on partisans and resistance, but gradually changes began to take place. The educational work began, often initiated by young people like Shalmi Barmor. And plans for new places of remembrance at the memorial developed and were realized one at a time: the memorial for the children, the valley of the destroyed communities, the memorial for the Jewish soldiers of various armies. Thus we can see the broadening perspective of the history of the Holocaust.

The narrow focus on resistance changed into a more complete and differentiated presentation of various aspects of persecution. The relatively simple structure of the institution was very helpful here. Since 1972 Yitzhak Arad was chairman of the directorate of Yad Vashem. He was responsible for the memorial for the next thirty years and for the changes and the expansion. And he practically had a carte blanche to do this. The question is why he wasn't more bound to structures of control? One reason is that the need for a change was unquestioned within Israeli society. And that is very different from Germany, for example (Zuckerman 1998).

Another reason has to do with Arad himself, whose life experiences granted him credibility and the authority to implement the changes. He fought during the Nazi era as a partisan in Eastern Europe against the Germans, immigrated illegally to Palestine and fought against the British mandatory power. Following independence he had a career in the army and was leader of a tank brigade. He was consequently the highest ranking educational officer in the Israeli army. And from that position he became chairman of the directorate at Yad Vashem. No-one suspected Arad of misusing remembrance of the victims or betraying the dominant ideals of the Ashkenazi-Zionist Israeli society (Arad 1998).

Yad Vashem has undergone several changes through its history. It is visited by more than two million people annually. What began as an archive and research institute developed into a place of memory and remembrance. The focus on resistance has expanded to include a broader perspective that considers all different groups of Jewish victims. An historical museum and a department of education were added to the various sites of remembrance. They define the profile of Yad Vashem in the present. The importance of the institution within Israeli society has grown considerably since the 1970s. This is a reflection of the changes in Israeli society that have taken place since then. Until society began to intensely address the Holocaust, Yad Vashem lacked a concrete mission. But since interest in the history of the Holocaust took off after the Six Day War in 1967 the meaning of Yad Vashem also grew. Since then it has served to define and articulate the meaning of the Holocaust in Israel. The ways that Israeli society commemorates the Holocaust were defined here. It is a trusted institution representing a basic consensus among all Israelis.

It is important to note, however, that the interests of state and institution were congruent and for that reason there were no debates or fights about the concept and the ideological lines of Yad Vashem. The use of the Holocaust for political purposes and the use of Yad Vashem for these purposes did not face any opposition in Yad Vashem itself. Later, the broadening of the perspective – which required making clearer distinctions and providing fewer opportunities for political use and misuse – and the museum changes and development of an educational institution met the needs of society and were applauded from the official political side. Yad Vashem now holds an almost sacred status, comparable to other sacred places. It is the secular, Zionist sanctuary of Israel.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in 1993 but its history goes back to the year 1978. It seems logical that there be a national memorial to the Holocaust in Israel but it is less obvious there be one in the U.S. It requires explanation (Linenthal 1993; Novick 1999).

The first ideas for a museum came from the administration under President Carter. Internal planning as well as foreign affairs played a role in these plans. After the U.S. sold F16 planes to Saudi Arabia and began to hold talks with the PLO, relations with Israel and the American Jewish communities were at a low. The administration developed plans to create a memorial to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust in order to improve these relations. Although knowledge of existing memorials was very limited at that time, it was believed that plans for a memorial were a good starting point for better relations. Only a short time before the TV series “Holocaust” had been broadcast on television in the United States to great acclaim.

On May 1, 1978, during an official visit of Israel’s Prime Minister Begin accompanied by 1000 rabbis, President Carter announced the establishment of a commission with the task to develop a plan for a Holocaust memorial. It took another six months before the commission

was finally assembled. The search for a chairman who would give a clear profile to the commission and who had a strong enough character to fulfil the task led to Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Holocaust and author of numerous books on the subject. But there were some doubts as to whether Wiesel had the qualities needed to handle the political arena and fund raising. The commission was made up of twenty-five people – survivors, historians, representatives of Jewish communities, rabbis. There were also five members of the House of Representatives and Senate which suggests that the planning for the museum took place in a highly politicized atmosphere (Report 1979). Lobby groups were involved from the very beginning.

The first important goal was to convey the need for such a museum to the American people. Jewish communities were interested in the project from the start. The Holocaust was a formative event for them and they had an interest in adding it to the value system of the United States even if only as an example of the negation of these values. Different approaches were pursued to convey the project to the American public and help them to identify with the history. The first was through the integration of stories of American war veterans. The second was through the stories of survivors who made their way to the U.S. after the war. The third approach was through the direct reference to American values. The Holocaust, it was argued, shows what can happen if fundamental American values are missing. The direct relation to these American values was made evident through two quotations engraved at the entrance to the museum. One is from George Washington: “The government of the United States ... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance” and the other is from the Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal, ... they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The central focus was to transfer an event of European history to the American society.²

The transfer of the story of the Holocaust to the U.S. was also effective because different communities of immigrants were actively involved in the planning. These immigrants were primarily Jewish, but Polish-American, Ukrainian-American, and Armenian-American

² International discussions held in the nineties about the internationalisation of Holocaust remembrance make clear that these attempts only aimed to adopt the concept of the USHMM. But that is only possible if we detach the museum from its concrete political and social context.

communities as well as others also participated in the project – a fact that led to angry political debates and conflicts. One example of such a conflict was the representation of Armenians and the Armenian genocide in the museum. The question was raised as to whether Armenians and their catastrophe should be acknowledged in the museum and if so in what context. Should they receive their own chapter or perhaps just be mentioned? Finally a compromise was found: they are mentioned in a quotation from Hitler, in which he asks the provocative question: “Who today still speaks of the Armenians?” (Berenbaum 1993).

Behind these angry debates there always lurked the question of what would be an adequate definition of the Holocaust. In Israel this question is answered in a clear statement: The Holocaust was the murder of six million Jews. In Germany discussions had to be more general since Germany is obligated to remember all victims of Nazi atrocities. In the United States, however, the situation was more complex (Rosenbaum 1996). How the Holocaust was defined would determine which groups would be honoured with victim status and thus be represented in the museum. It made a considerable difference whether the Holocaust was defined as the murder of six million Jews or of eleven million victims, that is, six million Jews plus five million other victims including three million Poles, hundreds of thousands of Hungarians and many, many others. Or another alternative: perhaps it could be acknowledged that there were millions of victims while maintaining that the Jews are special because of the National Socialist plan for their total annihilation.

The issue was argued at length, and ultimately it was decided that the focus should be on the persecution and destruction of European Jewry. But in the permanent exhibition there are several sections where other victim groups are at least mentioned: political opponents, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the mentally and physically handicapped, different national and ethnic groups, Soviet prisoners of war and even the Armenians.

In the American context the war veterans play a major role. This is illustrated by a comment made by Sybil Milton, the former senior historian of the museum, regarding disputes with Holocaust deniers: “You’ll find as many American military vets and American government representatives who are extremely hostile to deniers. For one reason it’s their personal

experience; they were there. ... The best defence weapon you have against a denier is take a southern liberator from an American unit, preferably not too well educated, and let him loose. You don't have to do anything. He'll defend his own memories and experience; you really don't have to do anything." (Milton 1995). Sybil Milton reminds us that the museum functions as a link between the history of the Holocaust, personal American experiences, and current political debates.

Since its opening in 1993, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has played a major role in current political affairs. Demonstrations for human rights, for the rights of homosexuals, and other groups begin at the museum. After a number of churches of African American communities were violently attacked in 1994 in Southern states, the museum supported the representatives of these communities (Parsons 1999). This all happens within the framework of the laws that define the tasks of the museum as teaching the lessons of the Holocaust. In the context of the United States this means teaching the universal lessons of the Holocaust and raising the question of what can happen if fundamental American values are absent.

The Topography of Terror Foundation

The Topography of Terror Foundation is situated on the grounds where between 1933 and 1945 the headquarters of the Secret State Police, Security Service of the Reich leader of the SS Heinrich Himmler, and the Reich Security Main Office (after its establishment in 1939) were located. These organisations made up the power centre of persecution and the administration of mass murder within the German Reich and all over conquered Europe (Rürup 1987).

Many of the buildings on the grounds remained standing after the war until the mid 1950s when most of them were torn down. The site became an empty lot in the middle of the city. A construction company sorted building material here. For over twenty years little interest was paid to the history of the site, but this began to change in the late 1970s. Grassroots

organisations started asking questions about the site and organised the first tour of the grounds. The emerging interest in developing the Gestapo Terrain – that was the name given to the site in the beginning – was the work of private citizens. They formed initiatives which encountered strong opposition from the official political side. In the first years official Berlin politics showed no particular interest in having the site and its history addressed.

Finally in 1983 a competition to redesign the site was held. The plan called for a memorial site for the victims of Nazi atrocities to be integrated into a recreational park for the neighbourhood residents. That aim clearly tried to combine two impossible tasks and as a result the mayor of Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen, chose not to have the winning design carried out.

Despite this action by the official political side, the grassroots organizations continued to pursue their aim and in 1983 founded an association called “Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin,” (Active Museum of Fascism and Resistance in Berlin) (Endlich 1988, 1990). In 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, this association organised a public event called “Nachgraben.” This word in German contains both the idea of looking over something carefully and digging something up. This was also the time of the Bitburg affair when the German Chancellor and the American President shook hands over the graves of SS men (Hartman 1986).

The project to develop the site continued and since 1986 a group led by Prof. Reinhard Rürup, a historian at the Technical University of Berlin, has conducted historical research on the site. In 1987, in connection with the 750th anniversary of the city of Berlin, the exhibition “Topography of Terror: Gestapo, SS and Reichssicherheitshauptamt on the ‘Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain’” opened. The exhibition was to be open for half a year. At the same time the citizens’ initiatives organised conferences to discuss future plans for the site. And this is where a dramatic change occurred: The Berlin Senator of Cultural Affairs³ became engaged in the project and from that point on the official political side was also involved in determining the

³ Berlin as a city state has the status of a province within the German federal system. The Senate is the equivalent of the provincial legislature and Senators are the equivalent of provincial Ministers.

future of the project. Ideas developed by the citizens' initiatives were adopted. The initiatives had called for open processes, provisional solutions and the involvement of citizens and the public. All these suggestions were now supported by the Berlin administration, but then the local government took control and determined how the history of the site was to be interpreted. The initiatives were not in a position to react to these signals from the political side and became inactive (Akademie 1983, 1986).

It is important to note that the fights between the official political side and the citizens' initiatives were not solely limited to concrete issues on how to deal with the site. They were ideological arguments, discussions about general images of the Nazi past and debates on the politics of memory. Compromise was often out of the question since there was an underlying subtext of ideological differences that made compromise and consensus extremely difficult (Rucht 1997).

Finally, in 1989, a commission of experts worked for over year on a plan for the future of the site. This commission tried to find a solution that would be acceptable to the different interest groups, the government administration and the initiatives of citizens. National and international experts were invited to participate and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the commission also tried to take the new political situation into account. Without the work and engagement of the commission the project to develop the site probably would not have continued. It ultimately led to the establishment of the Topography of Terror Foundation (Abschlussbericht 1990).

The commission recommended that a documentation centre be created. That term "documentation centre" is not unimportant in revealing the self-perception of the Topography of Terror Foundation. It sees its task in historical documentation, not as a museum or a memorial site. This means that it presents the objective facts, based on documents without obvious interpretation. The design or display of the exhibition is not to be at the forefront of the presentation. The commission also proposed that a visitors' centre accompany the documentation centre. The post-1945 history should remain visible and the visitors should become personally involved with that history during their visit. These suggestions took into

consideration some of the demands of the grassroots organisations. The commission also stated that the Topography of Terrors is a site of regional, national and international significance and should therefore be financially supported by the federal government.

Despite the very specific suggestions made by the commission, the Berlin administration delayed the development over the following years. But it is important to note that the conflict did not run along clear-cut party lines. The Senator of Cultural Affairs who took action in the mid and late 1980s was from the CDU, the conservative party. The Senate in power in 1989 and 1990 was made up of a coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party, parties originally affiliated with the project. But this Senate did little to move the project along. Finally in 1995 (the first step was taken in 1992), despite all the delays and ongoing debates, the Topography of Terror became a foundation under public law. The Senate in power was a coalition of the CDU and SPD.

Immediately in 1992 a competition for the design of a new building was held and the plans by the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor were chosen. Since then – and it has been over ten years now – practically nothing has happened. The levels on which the discussions are currently held, however, are very different from those of the early phases of the project. There are hardly any open political conflicts. The stagnation now has to do with architectural and financial questions. The costs of construction continued to rise. It is common in Germany and especially in Berlin to begin construction based on estimated (too) low costs only to later realise later what everybody secretly knew: the price will probably be double. The Topography of Terror is one of the few cases in which the Finance Senator stopped the project and demanded a realistic calculation of the costs. Such an act would have been unimaginable for the renovation of the Reichstag or the new chancellery, but not for a museum addressing Germany's role in the Holocaust.

In the last few years the financial problems and also some technical building complications with the design were solved, but in the meantime the construction company went bankrupt. It should not be overlooked that the politicians who are now in charge and who express their

frustration about the miserable conditions of the project are the same ones that made the decisions that lead to this situation.

In the spring of 2004 the foundation's research director Prof. Rürup, the man officially in charge for the whole institution, resigned from his position with a statement that he no longer sees the political will to bring this project to fruition.

It is important that the Topography of Terror was a project started by citizens' initiatives and grass roots organizations and only later taken over by the official political side. The initiatives are still involved in the project; they have a seat in the international council and on the advisory board. But their hands have been tied during this present phase of stagnancy and therefore they cannot raise their critical voices in the way that is needed. The project needs fresh impulses from the outside.

Comparison

In presenting three institutions in their societal contexts, it was a tremendous challenge to find a basis for comparison that also takes into account the individuality and originality of each memorial (Kaelble 1999; Hass 2002). The institutions of this study were compared on four different levels: (1) the divergent processes of development; (2) the structures of the institutions; (3) the concepts and perspectives of the exhibitions; (4) the use or misuse of history by the three institutions and the role of these institutions in their respective societies.

1. The process of development

Did the participants involved in the development process have clear goals and aims from the very start? Is it in principle possible to begin developing a national memorial or museum with a concrete goal that is independent of the country's societal discourses and historical context? It is striking that in the case of all three institutions, the aim of the project at the onset was

significantly altered during the process of development. Yad Vashem was built in the beginning of the 1950's following discussions to found a memorial that had taken place even before the state of Israel was founded. Over time, different components of the memorial were developed, but at the beginning Yad Vashem existed for the most part as an archive and a place for collecting the names of the victims. The duties laid down in the bylaws were vague and open to different ideas.

The Topography of Terror was also erected without a clear plan and thus without a clear aim. This vagueness was fundamental to its development. Endless debates were carried out in Berlin to discuss the various forms that were possible for addressing the history of National Socialism. When the foundation was established in 1992, five years after the exhibit had opened and ten years after discussions had begun, different ideas were still being considered. Still today the clear duties and responsibilities of the foundation, and what role research, exhibitions and educational work are to play remain undefined.

The goals of the USHMM, in comparison to the Topography of Terror, were relatively clear, but as at Yad Vashem, they remained vague over the years. The task of establishing a Holocaust memorial existed from the very beginning. During the first six years of planning, however, it remained uncertain what kind of memorial it would be. The aim was to establish a national site for the diverse needs of American society. The fights that erupted over how the different areas of the museum were to be filled illustrated this clearly. From the start it was not even clear whether the institution should encompass a museum or function solely as a memorial. It was not decided whether other genocidal events should be mentioned or whether the site should be dedicated exclusively to the Holocaust.

The examples make clear that in general it is not necessary to have a clear and unalterable goal from the start in developing a national museum. In fact, the opposite is the case. Flexibility in goals and openness to changes in the development of aims in the founding process are an advantage to establishing an institution like the three analysed in this study. With time, however, it becomes essential that the individuals and groups involved in the development

process find a basis for agreement on basic and concrete goals; otherwise the entire process risks losing its dynamic and becoming unproductive.

Moreover, it can be said that national memorial sites depend on a concrete societal context and cannot be developed independent of societal discourses. This may sound banal but given some of the recent discussions on transferring memorial conceptions from one society to another without regard for the specific conditions of both places, it does seem to be an issue that requires more attention.

2. The structures of the memorials

The differences in the structures of the three institutions are obvious. Yad Vashem consists of two central bodies: the directorate and the council. The chairmen of the directorate, Yitzak Arad, and his successor, Avner Shalev, played a major role in the development of the institution over the last thirty years. They defined the development of Yad Vashem in both content and form. The directorate oversees their decisions. There is no additional external control or advisory board as exists for the Topography of Terror with the *Stiftungsrat* (foundation committee). Decisions in Yad Vashem are made and approved from within. This freedom to make decisions in-house forms the major difference between Yad Vashem and the other two institutions, Topography of Terror and the USHMM. In Berlin and in Washington, different lobby groups, grass roots organizations, survivor groups, ethnic and religious groups, parties and governments are all represented on different bodies of the institutions and try to exert influence on the content and the form of the memorial museums. In Yad Vashem the chairman of the directorate has the authority to make decisions. In Israel, there are hardly any public debates about the memorial itself. One explanation for this may also be the fact that National Socialism is perceived only through the perspective of Jewish victims.

In Germany the importance of the history of National Socialism for society has been debated since the 1950s (Reichel 2001). This is especially true for the history of the perpetrators. This is a fundamentally different situation to Israel and it is represented in the structure of the Topography of Terror. Different interest groups try to exert influence on the institution. In the

Arbeitsausschuss (working committee) the views of different lobby groups were represented in the debates from the very beginning. They also have a say in the development of the agenda. The federal administration and the Berlin city government are both represented on the *Stiftungsrat* (the foundation committee). They oversee the work and determine the budget. In addition, there is an *Internationaler Beirat* (International Advisory Council) made up of representatives from national and international organizations and memorial sites. The entire structure reflects the history of the Topography of Terror, which derived from a network of lobby and interest groups with diverse political agendas.

The USHMM is again different on this point. The council has more than purely representative functions. From the very beginning, the chairman of the council played an important role in determining the design of the museum. He also represents the museum to the public. This is done in Yad Vashem by the chairman of the directorate and at the Topography of Terror by the *wissenschaftlichen Direktor* (the scholarly director). The main responsibility of the director of the USHMM is to provide leadership inside the institution. This entails mostly administrative duties and conceptual guidance of a federal institution with a few hundred employees. The director of the USHMM does at times also represent the museum to the public, for example through fund-raising campaigns. But in contrast to Yad Vashem, the chairman of the council also takes over many of these responsibilities, especially regarding fund raising. The director of the museum and the chairman of the council of the USHMM have to cooperate on a lot of issues. The main task of the chairman of the council is to represent the museum to the public, but he also defines the direction of the museum.

In conclusion we can say that there are no pre-determined structures and bodies for memorials and museums dedicated to the National Socialist past. All three institutions reflect their own history and development and the specific needs in Israel, Germany or the United States respectively. The freedom to develop plans and designs for an institution as a whole is ultimately determined by the context of the society in which the institution exists. Since these contexts vary widely it is not possible to evaluate and judge these structures in comparison to one another. Nevertheless, the analysis of the different structures of these institutions does reveal the role that National Socialism plays in each of these societies today. A society that

engages in controversial debates and discussions about the importance of the past for the present is unlikely to have an institution in which a single director is permitted to make decisions independently. An advisory and control board also faces a crisis of legitimacy if there is a consensus on the subject in society, if general debates on the politics of memory are missing, and trusted institutions already exist. It seems to be unnecessary.

3. The exhibitions

An important question for the analysis of the three permanent exhibitions is whether the story they tell is integrated into a larger narrative of history. If so, than the next question is in what broader history is the exhibition story embedded. For all three institutions of this study the story is not presented as an isolated part of history without addressing the period before and after. Larger historical contexts are present in each of the institutions ensuring that the presentations are not abstract or aestheticized, without a time and context. But the question still remains: what is the larger historical context?

Yad Vashem presents the history of the Holocaust from the perspective of the Jewish people, or to be more precise, from the perspective of the Jews of Europe. The story of destruction is not portrayed through individual biographies, nor as a story of structures and institutions. The fundamental question raised in the exhibition is “What happened to our people in the European Diaspora during National Socialism?” The Zionist historical narrative in Israel serves as the framework to answer this question. In doing so the memorial achieves a function and a meaning for the Israeli society ex-negativo. Hence the story of the destruction of the European Jews is integrated not into a larger narrative of the history of National Socialism but rather into the story of the European Jewish Diaspora. In fact the larger background history of National Socialism is not told at Yad Vashem. The exhibit was enlarged in the early 1990s and a section was added that deals with Jewish life in Europe prior to National Socialism. Thus the framework for the story is the history of European Jewry not Nazi Germany. Consequently, the exhibition does not end with the liberation from National Socialism, but continues up to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. From a Zionist perspective, the era of the Diaspora

came to an end with the establishment of a Jewish state. The story of the Holocaust is shown in this historical context. But the question must be asked whether this narrative of the destruction of European Jewry set within Jewish history fosters a theological approach. Religion has become more important within the Israeli society since the 1960s and with it a mystified and glorified narrative of the secular founding of the state of Israel (Bauer 1999). These factors form the basis for understanding the exhibition of Yad Vashem.

The story told in the USHMM is very different from the one in Yad Vashem. Before entering the exhibition every visitor is given an identity card with information about a person who was persecuted during the Holocaust. This attempt to personalize history is programmatic: “What happened to the individual human being during the Holocaust?” But the museums approach to present history is broader. Sections were also added to the exhibit that provide a larger view of the historical development. There are, for example, chapters about the development of German society, exclusion from this society, the reactions of Jewish communities, the persecution of other victims, the responses of foreign countries (especially the U.S.) before and during the war, trials held after the war, immigration to the United States, the founding of the state of Israel. These different chapters serve to make the main themes of the exhibition clearer to visitors and present them in a larger historical context. The conceptual basis of the exhibition is historical learning through the personal life stories of individuals. Compared to the exhibition in Yad Vashem, the context of German and European history in the 1930s and 1940s is given considerable attention.

References to the American value system also appear in most parts of the exhibition. This is natural given the placement of the museum on the capital’s National Mall. George Washington’s famous statement and a passage from the Declaration of Independence are both engraved into the walls at the entrance of the museum and convey American values. These quotations are used to show the importance of individual rights over the rights of the state. The museum and also the permanent exhibition are integrated into a philosophical and ethical framework of fundamental American values that are to be conveyed to the visitors. The lacking historical context is replaced by ethical lessons. In the Ejszyski Tower in the permanent exhibit we can clearly see both elements in place. In the tower hundreds of personal

snapshots show the private lives of individuals, families and friends. Protection of individual life is one of the central duties of the American society. Whereas in Yad Vashem the story of the Holocaust is integrated into a larger Jewish history, at the USHMM the lessons of the Holocaust are taught by stressing America's own fundamental values.

In comparison to Yad Vashem and the USHMM, the exhibition of the Topography of Terror Foundation follows a more narrowly defined history of National Socialism. The exhibition does not focus on the history of the Jewish people, nor does it use individual biographies to convey lessons on human values. The main chapters of the exhibition are:

- (1) The history of the site from 1732 to 1996, with the years 1933–1945 taking up about two thirds of the space.
- (2) The institutions that were located on the site after 1933 – Secret State Police, Security Service, Reich Security Main Office, Reich Leadership of the SS.

This section addresses questions such as: Who organized what against which groups? Who were the perpetrators, who were the victims, which measures were taken? To answer these questions, the exhibition presents short biographies of perpetrators and victims. General information on National Socialism is integrated to a large degree into the section addressing the different institutions. The exhibition concept is not limited to the destruction of the European Jews. It aims to document all the crimes that were organized by the institutions of the perpetrators located on this site. Thus the whole exhibition narrative is more closely tied to a general history of National Socialism than is the case in Yad Vashem or the USHMM. This approach of using a concrete site as a starting point goes back to the grassroots organizations that set off the early debates concerning this site. They always insisted that an exhibition must deal directly and concretely with the site and its function in National Socialism.

It remains to be seen whether in the future the three institutions will have to adjust their concepts to a broader presentation of the historical events of National Socialism. With the ongoing historicization of National Socialism, it might be necessary to add more aspects of general history to meet the demands and needs of Israeli, German and American societies' interest. But for the time being the general outlines of the three exhibitions are effective and require no immediate changes.

4. The use and misuse of history

The importance of the history of National Socialism becomes clear when analyzing how it is used and misused for special interests. Discourses on the National Socialist past that are conducted in different societies always involve instrumentalizing this history (Zuckermann 1998). A public debate on the politics of memory always involves the specific interests of the actors involved. Historical events are used to build and strengthen an identity or to deny this use. Historical references are invoked to attack political opponents or as a means of persuasion. Political ideas are fought for by using selective historical events and leaving others aside. If the debates about the past were without a purpose, they would not be public. In the debates on the politics of memory, the terminology of “instrumentalization” implies a judgment. To “instrumentalize” something is to place it in the service of a specific purpose. But it is important to differentiate clearly between legitimate and illegitimate forms of “instrumentalizing” history,

Since the founding of the state of Israel, debates about the destruction of the European Jews have had political import. Some of the debates on the politics of memory blurred the differences between memory and politics. The discussions about appropriate forms of memory were indistinguishable from arguments with the ideological opponent. In the first two decades of its existence, Yad Vashem mainly addressed historical events, but the focus remained incomplete since it was limited to resistance and the partisan struggle. Memory served political goals and was ideological. But this is not necessarily an illegitimate form of exploitation since the historical events were not taken out of context. We can still criticize this use of history as incomplete and ideological, but this is a different discussion.

After the Six-Day-War the memory of the Holocaust became more complete. In Yad Vashem, Arab neighbours and (in war) enemies were equated with the National Socialists. The conflicts in the Middle East seemed to be similar to the historical events of the Holocaust. The remembrance of the Holocaust was thus used in public speeches at Yad Vashem to the point where historical events were adulterated and distorted. This was clearly an illegitimate use of history that continued for almost a decade. During the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 this form

of exploitation was not longer present. By this time Yad Vashem had successfully and consistently fought against illegitimate uses of the past. What does still remain, however, are the legitimate forms of “instrumentalization.” The history of the destruction is an integral part of the phase leading up to the founding of the state of Israel and forms the foundation upon which the state was established. The institutionalized forms of victim remembrance always include identity building, and the memory of history is always connected to the present. This can be debated but it is legitimate as long as the historical events are not falsified.

The Topography of Terror Foundation was illegitimately exploited in the beginning, although this may not always have been obvious. In the early eighties discussions about the site were used to express general criticism of West Germany. The roll-of the site in these discussions had little to do with its concrete history, and therefore these debates are an example of an illegitimate use. At the time, reference to the history of the perpetrators was unreflective and empty since the concrete historical events had still to be researched and the demand that responsibility be accepted for the legacy of the perpetrators was without content. The Berlin Senate’s response to these demands also fell into this pattern since they referred to the criticism of society and not to the historical site itself.

After historical research on the site began, illegitimate exploitation soon ceased. Since then debates around the Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain have encouraged a better understanding within Germany of its responsibility to acknowledge the history of the site and National Socialism in general. The concept for the Topography of Terror exhibition that was developed for Berlin’s 750th anniversary celebration was so deeply grounded in historical facts that little room was left for historical exploitation. The debates on the politics of memory in Germany that have taken place since 1987 no longer use the Topography of Terror foundation for improper purposes. Unfortunately the institution itself has not taken advantage of this fact to publicly address the issues and problems of using history to serve current political agendas. There were a number of occasions when this would have been welcome: the debates on Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, or the dispute around the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht, just to name a few.

The United States poses a very special situation. The fact that the USHMM stands in Washington D.C, the nation's capital, is itself a use of the history of the Holocaust for ongoing goals (Flanzbaum 1999). Moreover, one of the aims of the USHMM is to draw attention to crimes against human rights worldwide. This broadly conceived task and the distance that the United States has to the historical events of National Socialism are the reasons for the unconscious (mis)use of the history to fit the needs of American society. References to present events, for example the events in Bosnia at the time, were made during the opening of the museum in 1993. Media coverage made clear that the museum saw its duty in addressing current political problems through lectures, exhibitions and other events. The task of functioning as a moral institution was a clear intention of the planners of the museum. The report of the President's Commission on the Holocaust already included the suggestion to establish a Committee on Conscience. This committee was supposed to report on genocide around the world and serve as a warning institution. During the opening ceremony of the museum, both President Clinton and Elie Wiesel referred to the events in the former Yugoslavia. They both drew analogies between the past and the present. A visit to the museum, so the message, will also draw the attention of visitors to current events in the world. There was hardly any report that did not mention in one way or another the importance of recognizing that "mass extermination is a recurring nightmare. It is happening again in parts of Africa and, especially now, in the former Yugoslavia. Another reason to remember." (Woodward 1993). This quotation reflects the fact that the aims of the museum require that the Holocaust be used to serve other purposes. In transporting the historical events from a European context to the United States, the perception of them is fundamentally altered. Legitimate and illegitimate forms of exploitation cease to be distinguishable. This means that the continually recurring debates that serve to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of the Holocaust become blurred by geographical, temporal, and societal distance.

All three museums dedicated to remembering the mass crimes committed under National Socialism exploit the very history they are trying to preserve. Public expectations, academic standards in the institutions themselves, political demands and media claims all play a role in this process. The institutions can increase their relevance to society only by remaining connected and responding to its needs, but this must happen in accordance with their mandate.

This fragile structure is continually challenged by the temptation to use the historical events for current political purposes. Nevertheless there is no alternative to accepting this challenge and reviewing critically whether the history of the Holocaust is being used in a way that is legitimate or illegitimate.

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