

12. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**Dead Soldiers Fighting: War Monuments and Memorials
Beyond Memory and Representation**

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: »Dead Soldiers Fighting«—why this title?

It is based on the observation that dead soldiers have a much more colorful afterlife than most other deceased. Very often their remains and the monuments erected for them are sent back into battle, as it were, since their resting places are of geopolitical importance. Just recall the many war memorials and burial sites that were built in the Soviet-occupied zones immediately after the Red Army marched into Eastern Europe. At the same time these monuments serve to strengthen internal political legitimation. States like to show the surviving dependants that they know how to render proper respect to those who have given their lives on their behalf. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, for example, has a considerable budget for maintaining memorials and burial sites abroad. War memorials also represent a generational perspective, more so than other types of memorials, since they are very often instigated by survivors. In many cases the defense of their viewpoint against other interpretations also resembles a battle. Added to this is the fact that the first burial site of the soldiers is frequently not their last resting place. Dead soldiers will often be exhumed, reinterred, and then honored with new monuments, frequently for political reasons. In discussions concerning war memorials, military language is often employed — gravestones stand in »rank and file,« old monuments are »decommissioned« or »withdrawn from service,« and so on and so forth.

BCZ: The notion that the perspective on the past is changeable and that conversing with it always conveys something about the present —is not exactly a new insight. For some time now commemoration studies have dealt with this complex set of themes, and there is also extensive literature on commemorations to fallen soldiers. Why the need for this colloquium?

My wish was to go beyond the perspective of memory studies and not only to look at commemorations that deal with the past. This approach includes a strong

normative impulse, as it is influenced by historians who are disquieted by other social actors depicting the past in ways that these professional connoisseurs of yesteryear hold to be incorrect. There exists a tension between historical representations and the historical approach of »how it actually was.« For the colloquium we instead wanted to bring together history and cultural studies as well as anthropology and sociology in order to elucidate a number of new perspectives with respect to the materiality of monuments—from the logistics and architectonic challenges involved in the internment of a large number of fallen soldiers to the importance of monuments for the military presence of the occupying powers. Monuments, including war monuments, structure urban space and the rituals that take place within it; for reasons that do not always have to do with "memory" they are converted, removed, rededicated, ignored, or used by artists and protesters as a projection surface and platform. Of course the aspects of memory and remembrance are important, but even more important for an adequate understanding of the significance of war memorials is to understand them not solely as stone representations but to take them seriously as physical manifestations and the practices that they enable.

BCZ: What practices are you referring to? Inaugural ceremonies and rituals of remembrance?

Not only. The quiet reverence that one shows at a tomb, an invention of the modern era, is as much a part of it as the political demonstration that uses a plinth as dais. But there are also everyday situations: repeatedly walking past a monument that you hardly notice until it is up for demolition and then suddenly it becomes an important component of your life-world.

What I find particularly interesting are temporary artistic reinterpretations of monuments whose meaning has allegedly been fixed for all time. For instance the monument dedicated to the Soviet-Polish brotherhood in arms in Legnica, Poland, which depicts two soldiers and a rescued child, was reinterpreted as a symbol of homosexual marriage. Another example would be the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who uses light projections to alter a monument's appearance. Or the monument to the Red Army in Sofia, a bronze relief depicting Soviet soldiers, which would long have faded into insignificance were it not for performance artists who sought to convey political messages by painting it as Santa Claus and Ronald McDonald to protest against consumerism, adorning it with Guy Fawkes masks to protest against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, with Pussy Riot helmets or the national colors of the Ukraine. Such interventions are often condemned as being

provocative or even outrageous. But it is often precisely these provocations that breathe new life into a monument and rescue it from oblivion.

For West Germans all this might sound somewhat disconcerting. The Federal Republic's war monuments no longer have the political and social importance they did from the Napoleonic Wars up to the Second World War and even for a brief period thereafter. Here in Germany we tend to build monuments to commemorate victims, not heroes, with fallen soldiers likewise commemorated as victims. In the eastern part of the country, where almost every city had a Soviet war memorial erected in its center in 1945 or shortly thereafter, this tradition is far more widespread. And Germany, whose design vocabulary shaped the building of war monuments worldwide in the nineteenth century, is generally the exception in this regard. Depictions of heroism are still important in many countries. At the same time, dead soldiers are increasingly being seen within the context of their ancestry and no longer solely with respect to their national affiliation. It is in this way that families are given a greater say in how these things are managed. The martial statue of a warrior, the allegorical figure of a bereaved mother and the standardized funerary monument are all increasingly giving way to the family shrine or to the personally designed commemorative site online.

BCZ: The complexity of the subject necessitates very detailed research and thoughtfulness with respect to a wealth of national, epochal and individual differences. Wouldn't such a theme be better addressed through individual lectures using visual aids instead of a discussion format like the Berliner Colloquien?

In conceiving the colloquium I wanted our guests to do more than just describe well-known examples. It was important to disclose certain commonalities and universal truths, while at the same time better distinguishing the various national particularities by placing them in an international context. In order to deal with the empirical wealth of information available on this theme and to guarantee a genuine exchange of views, we had to slightly change the colloquium's customary format. Instead of the usual ten-minute presentation to kick off each section, this time all participants were invited to give a 2-3 minute presentation of what struck them as a particularly compelling memorial. These mini-profiles were gathered together in a brochure and presented in the form of a slide show during breaks in the colloquium. . The presentations served first and foremost as material and reference points for our four rounds of discussion. The format proved extraordinarily successful and will be used in future colloquia when participants arrive with a variety of different empirical experiences and backgrounds.