

16. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**Brussels, Beutelsbach and Butovo:**

**Economic, Social and Political Constraints on Memorial Museums**

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### **Interview**

*Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: You have said that memorial museums face precarious conditions in their work. What does that mean?*

The idea for this colloquium, and therefore also for the term »precarious conditions,« emerged during a discussion of our personal experiences with smaller and independent memorial sites in Germany and Russia. We saw that most debates regarding places of remembrance refer to only a handful of established institutions. Yet in the course of our work we have encountered museums and places of remembrance around the world that do not correspond to the ideal image of memorial site work that is anchored in scholarship, didactically refined and methodically equipped to incorporate multiple perspectives. Often they do not reach out to younger visitors in a professional way. Extensive multimedia offerings are not available everywhere. Also, not all follow the Beutelsbach Consensus, which has come to be recognized as the minimum standard for historical and political education in Germany. We have also personally experienced many memorial sites that have indiscriminately intermingled educational and eyewitness work. Some institutions try to stir up visitors' emotions rather than soberly informing them. What's more, many memorial sites are operated by volunteers. These people are very committed and enthusiastic, but often have no experience in memorial site work. Hardly any have degrees in education.

It would be all too easy to criticize these manifest problems with reference to our own professionalism, recommend proven concepts, papers or guidebooks – and turn back to the bigger, better-equipped memorials. What impressed us, however, was the sheer determination of many of these memorial site operators. Against all local and wider resistance, they have founded and cultivated institutions to remind others of persecution and violence in their own countries. We do sometimes criticize the moral

and political agendas that they push more overtly in some places than others. But we care mainly about the basic conditions of their work, which would be defined as precarious from our point of view.

*From what vantage points have you inquired about memorial sites' framework conditions?*

We felt it was important to look at these conditions not only at a theoretical level. That was why we invited both academics and colleagues from the memorial site community to the colloquium. A whole bundle of questions were on our agenda: What does it mean in practice when a memorial site has neither sufficient funding nor historical and educational know-how, meaning it depends completely on the personal dedication of its underfunded workers? And, how meaningful is criticism that disregards these realities and bases itself instead on more typically ideal conditions? What does that mean for the established principles of memorial site work? Are there alternatives, both theoretically and practically?

The political environment also plays a key role. After all, if the state engages in the work of memorial sites, political instrumentalization and ideological usurpation can result. Recent events surrounding the Russian GULAG memorial Perm-36 reflect a degree of political influence that people believed had been overcome in Western Europe. Also, we have to take local residents into account. Examples that come to mind include some in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where much of the population is not only disinterested but hostile toward its own places of remembrance, especially those that look back critically at East Germany. This is another aspect that for us belongs among framework conditions that threaten work at memorial sites.

*Did you also speak about the role and function of eyewitnesses?*

This issue did crop up repeatedly during the discussions. It may even best illustrate the exceptional situation in which precarious memorial site work currently finds itself. Harald Welzer characterized the problematic, ambivalent role of eyewitnesses most succinctly by pointing out that they stand both for the communication of facts and for the moral reception of these facts. It is a similar story for work at remembrance sites based on the ideas and initiatives of victims of Nazi or Communist repression. In many instances of threatened memorial site work we can observe that these people often have to perform several roles: As eyewitnesses they represent immediate experience. But given the lack of funding they also have to convey facts about dictatorship and, on the side, help organize the institution's day-to-day work as well. Locally they are often the only people who even care about and

commit to the cause. How the respective remembrance sites deal with that and what the dual role of eyewitnesses means for the Beutelsbach Consensus was a matter of heated debate, as was the issue of whether eyewitnesses can sometimes compensate for the deficiencies of less than professionally run memorial sites. Against this background we also examined another aspect in depth, that of the »loss of eyewitnesses,« i.e. the foreseeable deaths of those people who personally convey the immediacy of their experience.

*What normative standards should political and historical education subscribe to, both in general and specifically regarding memorial sites? Could respect for human rights be a starting point?*

There are no easy answers to these questions. They are controversial among specialists, which is why it's no wonder they were occasionally disputed vehemently at the colloquium. Yet there was agreement on one point: We cannot allow the complexity of historical relationships to be reduced just to serve today's interests. Historical and political education should use these sites, which in general are crime scenes, to generate critical questions directed toward both the past and the present, and not to transmit complete solutions and national narratives that serve primarily to affirm the present day. In this respect, for example, the approach among some Eastern European states toward collaboration with the Nazi occupiers – especially regarding participation in the Holocaust – must be viewed critically. Respect for human rights, to address the second part of your question, is a precious commodity. Yet among memorial sites in Germany it seems to be on the retreat again. At the very least it has been criticized for some time now because, in regarding the Jewish genocide, it has led to a tendency of disregarding central factors in order to better integrate the Holocaust into the history of human rights abuses. That applies to anti-Semitism, for example. Also, the subject of human rights is itself prone to being usurped for political purposes. In Germany, the most diverse political groups pride themselves publicly for discovering human rights violations and/or protecting human dignity. The spectrum ranges from nostalgic clubs of former East German Communist functionaries to far-right admirers of Pinochet.

*The final section of the colloquium dealt with the above-mentioned Beutelsbach Consensus, which has gained widespread recognition in Germany. Devised in the 1970s, it lays down three principles that have since been espoused by school curricula and, for example, political education in Germany's armed forces, the Bundeswehr. These are the ban on indoctrination, the requirement of controversy and orientation on the pupil. Could this consensus also serve as an example for educational work at memorial sites in other countries?*

First we should point out that the Beutelsbach Consensus was originally formulated in 1976 for the practice of political education, not for memorial museums. However, it has found general recognition there too, despite the criticism leveled in the past 25 years on the work of memorial sites dedicated to remembrance of political persecution by the East German state. Outside Germany, one rarely encounters comparable codified standards. One important exception is the International Memorial Museums Charter, which was adopted in 2012 by 31 member states of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association. It is based on the principles of the Beutelsbach Consensus. Yet this does not answer the question of its suitability as a model for other countries. In discussions at the colloquium there was lively resistance to a »German-normed brand of remembrance,« for example. In a similar vein, criticism by German memorial museum specialists of the methods of their colleagues abroad was questioned – methods occasionally perceived as »casual.« The fact that such attitudes are often regarded as arrogant, especially in Eastern Europe, was not ignored.

The debate brought one more important aspect to light: As established as it may be, the Beutelsbach Consensus seems to be the object of some lingering uncertainty regarding its principles. Does it ban emotions at the sites of crimes committed? Does it require – possibly in a doctrinaire fashion – dispassion? Recommendations put forward at the colloquium for its updating were no less intriguing. One such suggestion was for its expansion to include aspects of trauma. From our perspective the discussion showed that the Beutelsbach Consensus continues to provide a solid foundation for historical and political education in Germany – not despite, but indeed because of the space for interpretation that it offers.