

Uwe Neumärker
Director
Foundation "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe"
Berlin

Germany's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Debates and Reactions

Abstract: *The article outlines the history of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin as a very good example of how long any such procedure is, from idea to realisation, as well as how strong the debate how and whom to commemorate.. Federal Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe also supervised Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma, Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime and the Memorial to mass murder of patients from mental hospitals. Besides that, the author analyzes the initiatives and solutions for other monuments in Germany's capital New Guard Room, as well as the Concentration Camp Sachsenhausen near Berlin.*

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Key words: *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin, Nazi period, citizens' initiative.*

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Germany's capital Berlin is a very good example of how long any such procedure is, from idea to realisation, as well as how strong the debate how and whom to commemorate.¹ It is quite a complex topic in all its aspects, and has filled hundreds of pages of at least five dissertations and many more diploma works.

At a public forum held on 24 August 1988—that is four and a half decades after the end of the war—to determine the future use of the Prince-Albrecht site (the former site of the *SS-Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, the Gestapo and today's outdoor museum Topography of Terror), the journalist Lea Rosh proposed an "unmissable symbol" to remember the murder of European Jewry. The suggestion sparked mixed reactions, ranging from enthusiastic approval to sharp rejection. She then founded an association for promoting her idea, which still exists. But she never in her wildest dreams expected that it would take about 17 years to realize this monument. While Rosh's plan met with growing sympathy among the public, and soon also in political circles, it received a generally negative reception from experts and some sections of the West Berlin public. The argument for an artistically

¹ The article is a version of the paper prepared for the international *conference If not now, when...? The Future of the site of the Old Fairgrounds (Sajmiste) in Belgrade*, held in Belgrade, 10-12 May 2012. Its organizers were The Federation of Jewish Communities in Serbia, Foundation for an Open Society in Serbia, Stiftung Erinnerung-Verantwortung-Zukunft from Berlin and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Serbia.

conceived memorial did not sit well with developments in the culture of memory at the time, which had been influenced by a proper scepticism regarding modern art in general and the concept of memorials in particular. Memorials were characterized as affirmative and statuary and the preference was for prompting reflection, for more active forms of remembrance. Moreover, with their proposal, Rosh and the other members of her citizens' initiative, put themselves in opposition to the concept behind the Topography of Terror exhibition, in place there since 1987. The Topography project is also an example for the developments in the late 80-ies in West Germany and West Berlin, when local initiatives began to rediscover and mark historical sites of Nazi crimes, and to explore the victims, with the state getting involved later with financing.

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Citizens' initiative

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two post-war German states in October 1990, Berlin yet again became the capital of Germany and by decision of the German Bundestag from June 20th, 1991, Berlin became seat of the parliament and the government. There was the need to combine two very different cultures of memory from East and West and to find a united way of remembrance. A discussion about national and historical self-understanding was ignited. Part of this discovery process was the debate about a memorial for some six million victims of the Holocaust in the very centre of the capital. This also led to a broader debate about the way of dealing with the National Socialist regime. What's more, this was also connected with the question of coming to terms with the SED dictatorship and its heritage; the debate therefore concerned "dealing

with the difficult legacy of two totalitarian regimes in Germany". It became a question of not forgetting the victims of the Great Flight and the expulsion of Germans from the Eastern territories, and counting all the victims as those who perished or were murdered, as well as the survivors. It was important to agree on the fact that there should be no competition in commemorating and coming to terms with these periods, and at the same time it was important to underline the "historic uniqueness of the dimension of the National Socialist regime of terror", which in turn should be "determined by the knowledge about the singularity of the Holocaust" in an ongoing manner. A concept of state politics of commemoration was developed in working groups of the German parliament, which was to meet these requirements.

In the mid 1990s, public interest also focused on the open and anonymous artistic competition for the design of the Holocaust Memorial, held in April 1994. Parallel to the competition, there were efforts to defuse the equally controversial question concerning the fact that the memorial would be specifically dedicated to murdered Jews. This in turn was a consequence of a debate around another central monument, located in the *Neue Wache* (New guard room) on Berlin's boulevard Unter den Linden. This was and is dedicated to the "Victims of War and Tyranny". Criticism arose because such a dedication to all victims of both Nazi and Communist Terror is on the one hand equalizing the two dictatorships in Germany, and on the other, is a memorial for everyone and therefore for none specifically. But, it is important to point out: all these discussions were carried out in civil society openly and publicly and were unusually passionate.

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Neue Wache

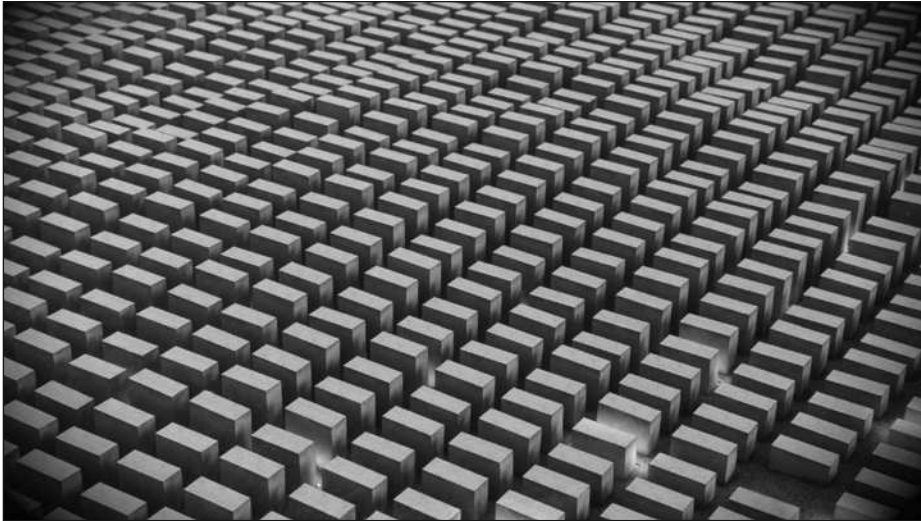
Part of the debate was the fear, raised by the existing memorial sites, such as the former concentration camp Sachsenhausen near Berlin, that the project of a National Holocaust Memorial could lead to a centralization of the memorial site landscape that had grown over the previous ten years. They were also concerned that the new project would siphon away from them hard-won financial support and visitors.

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Sachsenhausen

In one of the last meetings of the Bundestag to take place in Bonn, on June 25th 1999, after two architectural competitions, a surprisingly clear majority of parliamentarians (314 to 209) voted for the Memorial designed by the Jewish-American architect Peter Eisenman. During the course of the debate, much support had grown for the idea of adding something that would give information about the Holocaust, thereby explaining the reason for the memorial and its dedication. A Federal Foundation was founded to build and run the Memorial. But the Bundestag resolution did not put an end to the discussion. The ongoing national and international debate over the pros and cons of this memorial proved to be an appropriate form of remembrance—perhaps even the best form of remembrance.



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

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The memorial, consisting of the field of stelae and the underground Information Centre, is a national memorial in so far as it is aimed at German society and built in its name; it is an expression of our—the non-Jewish Germans’—responsibility for the past. The Jewish communities in Germany always stated, that they do not need this Memorial. In form, too, it breaks from the tradition of national memorials: Eisenman’s memorial design is a large, abstract sculpture of 19,000 square metres and completely accessible to pedestrians day and night.

The memorial is therefore a place of remembrance dedicated to an unimaginably large number of murdered or perished human beings, but it surely does not predict any interpretation. This is its strength and weakness at the same time; some call it “arbitrary”. And that’s why the main function of the “Information Centre”, 800 square metres exhibition space, is to “personalize and individualize the horrors of the Holocaust”.

Despite of all other prophecies of gloom, this Memorial has become one of the main visitor’s magnets in Berlin since its inauguration on 10 May 2005—60 years after liberation in 1945. Year after year, some 470.000 guests visit the Information Centre. All the heavy debates seem to be forgotten.



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Inside the Information Centre: De Mayo family from Belgrade, photos and facts

The Parliament's voting for the Holocaust Memorial also stated clearly that Germany shall "appropriately honour and remember all victims of National Socialism". The state support for the Holocaust Memorial and the acknowledgement of the ongoing necessity of memory in the present and future was a signal for other groups to demand their own memorials. On the one hand, criticism of this kind of fragmentation of the commemorative landscape is understandable and a universal memorial for all victims of National Socialism is imaginable; on the other hand, however, this concerns very different groups of people with their own stories of persecution. The only thing connecting them is the term "victimhood". Even if the individual mourning of those concerned takes place at the historical sites, the existence of a national memorial in the centre of the German capital has a highly symbolic meaning. And as different as the respective histories and backgrounds may be, there should be no "second-class" victims. In the course of these discussions in the mid-nineties and pushed by its Central Council, it was agreed that a memorial to the Sinti and Roma who were murdered as "Gypsies" was to be built, which was inaugurated in autumn 2012.



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Memorial to the Murdered Sinti and Roma of Europe

A memorial to homosexuals persecuted under the National Socialist regime was dedicated in May 2008, initiated and fought for by activists of the gay movement.



Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime

And in November 2011, the Bundestag decided to build a memorial site at Berlin's Tiergartenstraße 4, again after strong pressure from interest groups and a Round Table. Located here were the headquarters of the organisation which from 1940 to 1945, initiated, coordinated and implemented the mass murder of patients of mental hospitals under the codename "T 4" action. A competition aimed at finding ideas for a future holistic memorial site will try to combine commemoration and documentation. Because memorials remain only symbols of good will for future generations without necessarily containing information. Despite it being a group of victims of note, since murders of patients can in many respects be considered the preliminary stage of the Holocaust, it remains widely unknown to the public. Just like many others, such as the Soviet POW's for example.

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Tiergartenstraße 4

All four of those memorial sites are supervised by the Federal Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

The Holocaust Memorial has gained its place in Berlin's, Germany's and the European landscape of remembrance. Nonetheless, the process of discussing how to tackle the Nazi crimes and how to honour its Jewish and non-Jewish victims is still ongoing. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe is only one—if a very significant—answer to this question, and far from the last.

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Uve Nojemarker

Nemački Spomenik ubijenim evropskim Jevrejima.
Rasprave i reakcije

Apstrakt

Članak je posvećen kratkom pregledu istorijata Spomenika ubijenim evropskim Jevrejima u Berlinu kao veoma dobar primer toga koliko dugo može proteći od ideje do njene realizacije, kao i koliko žučna može biti rasprava oko toga kako i koga se sećati. U nadležnosti Savezne fondacije „Spomenik ubijenim evropskim Jevrejima“ takođe su i Spomenik ubijenim Romima, Spomenik posvećen homoseksualcima progonjenim tokom nacionalsocijalističkog režima i Spomenik masovnom ubijanju pacijenata duševnih bolnica. Osim toga, autor analizira inicijative i rešenja za druge spomenike u glavnom gradu Nemačke *Neue Wache*, kao i spomen-područje koncentracionog logora Zaksenhau-sen nadomak Berlina.

Ključne reči Spomenik ubijenim evropskim Jevrejima, Berlin, nacistički period, građanske inicijative.

