

Conference Report on "Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age"

International and Transdisciplinary Conference, University of Hamburg, October 9-11, 2014

Kaya de Wolff

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When Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder published their seminal study *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (orig. in German 2001; translated into English in 2006), the idea of "cosmopolitan memory" was perceived as an important impetus to shift focus from national cultures of remembrance towards forms of Holocaust remembrance that transcend national and ethnic boundaries. However, Levy and Sznajder's argument that the Holocaust represents a key event which developed into "a moral certainty that stretches across national boundaries and unites Europe and other parts of the world" (2006, p.8) received criticism; it has also provoked further empirical research and theoretical discussion calling for more differentiated accounts, in recent years.

The conference "Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age" contributed to this discussion by presenting a range of insightful case studies concerning memory and transnationalization which reflect on challenges for present and future Holocaust remembrance and research. As organizers JULIA LANGE and MARIUS HENDERSON (Hamburg) explain in their introduction, the aim of the three-day conference was to "open up a range of additional and new perspectives by re-conceptualizing the practices, conditions, and transformations of Holocaust remembrance within the framework of a more comparative and dynamic European, global cultural, intellectual, literary and political history." Lange and Henderson observed that, paradoxically, national paradigms that continued to dominate the research agenda within cultural and literary studies have traditionally been at the forefront of addressing inter- and transcultural phenomena. Against this background, the main objective of the conference was to explore the "transnational entangled memories of the Holocaust in Western and Eastern Europe, Israel, and North and Latin America after 1945" and to provide a platform for critical discussion. On the one hand, the conference encouraged studies that emphasize the "specifics of national commemorative cultures and their historical variability"; on the other hand, in terms of "entangled memories", selected papers focused on the "the

interplay between national, local and global perspectives in the medial construction of the historical event."

The conference gathered international researchers from different disciplines. The eight panels featured papers written by PhD candidates from Austria, Germany, Israel, Poland, Sweden, the UK, and the USA, along with papers by senior lecturers and prominent keynote speakers. The participants addressed a broad variety of topics with regard to Holocaust memory, and while many focused on literature, performance and memorials, several investigated film, drama, visual arts, and new media.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks: Holocaust Memory in a Global Age

The first panel "Methodology/Translation/Education" offered an insightful reflection on transnational discourses and practices of Holocaust remembrance that served as a helpful framework for the following case studies. OLIVER PLESSOW (Kassel) emphasized that the globalization of Holocaust memory also implies various attempts to promote transnationalized educational approaches around the globe. He argued that "while these activities did not result in a single way 'to teach the Holocaust', the development of transnational Holocaust education follows distinct paths." The paper focused on principal actors and institutionalization and stressed that in the transnational Holocaust discourse, "not everyone gets a chance to speak." First, many institutional actors are experts in networking, and, second, there are significant 'hotspots' of Holocaust education, especially in the US, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, and Poland. However, similar debates are taking place on national and transnational levels, which focus on the tension between an approach of commemoration of the past vs. learning for the future; on target groups; and, most importantly, on the limits of a universalization of Holocaust memory. This last point is related to very controversial debates concerning the uniqueness of the Holocaust, comparisons between the National Socialist past and memory or Communist crimes and commemoration. Also relevant: the transferability of the events mentioned above to other conflicts and instances of genocide and the imperative to deal with today's conflicts.

In her paper "Holocaust Memory in Translation: Reconstructing Testimony Beyond National Boundaries", SHARON DEANE COX (Edinburgh) addressed another crucial challenge by exploring the role of "the translator as secondary witness". Using the examples of the two testimonies by Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire* (1957; translated into English as *An ordinary camp*, 1958), and Sim Kessel, *Pendu à Auschwitz* (1979; translated as *Hanged in Auschwitz*, 2001), the paper demonstrated how "the mediations of survivors become entangled with mediations of translators" as well as with their confusions and errors. As Deane Cox pointed out, the confusions in the case of Maurel were the result of faulty translation, a text written in the present tense translated into one written in the past tense; this culminates in the subsequent misrepresentation of the experience of trauma. In the case of Kessel, history was distorted by use of wrong numbers. The striking findings presented in the paper highlighted the need for attention and caution by future translators. It called for an "ethics of

Holocaust translation" and a commitment based on a "principle of maximum awareness" (Jones, 2004) with respect to the survivor's testimony.

DANIELA MEHLER (Frankfurt) and FRIEDEMANN PESTEL (Freiburg) presented a theoretical paper that derived from collaboration with Gregor Feindt, Félix Krawatzek, and Rieke Trimçev. Drawing on current debates emphasizing a transcultural turn in memory studies, the paper sketched "the three waves" in memory scholarship. The current third wave of memory studies "faces the challenge of post-national constellations of memory." However, the paper argued, these attempts remain in the framework of the nation-state. In addition, "a first flaw in current scholarship accentuates unity and homogeneity of memory, " and "a prevailing number of empirical studies depart from artefactual embodiment of memory." In light of these problems, the paper proposed three responses, a framework, and methodological tools to analyze the synchronic as well as diachronic features of (transnational) memory: Above all, research should depart from an inductive approach, focus on moments of conflict, take into account the mnemonic practices and the own involvement of its time.

(Re)Mediations: Post-Memory and Media

The diachronic dimension of memory was addressed in several papers that explored (re)mediations of Holocaust memory in the second and third generation of Holocaust survivors.



Building on Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" (2008), JENNA ANN ALTOMONTE (Ohio) discussed the work of artist Christian Boltanski, the son of Holocaust-survivors, in terms of "postmemory archive". She was arguing that "Boltanski's position as a second-generation survivor working within postmemory results in the creation of archival-themed works." To Altomonte, "his work serves to fill the mnemonic voids or memory gaps within his personal history, manifesting in mixed-media installations that focus on photographic images." The paper examined selected pieces from Boltanski's photographic series *Monuments* (1985-86) and *Archives* (1987), which seek to emphasize postmemory discourse. The archive serves as a space for collecting memories, as a "monument of the past" of the second and third generation.

TANJA SCHULT (Uppsala) explored a radically different form of post-memory and generational change. The paper reflected on how the meaning of the tattooed identification numbers changed over the course of time into a sign of survival and even prestige. The presentation was based upon an extract of the documentary *Numbered* (2012) by Dana Doron and Uriel Sinai, who interviewed 50 survivors who had had a number tattooed on their arms upon arrival in Auschwitz. The documentary portrays several children and grand children who chose to get a tattoo of their grandparents' or parents' number, and it showed the different generations

comparing their tattooed numbers. As Schult pointed out, these performative activities reflect the wish to connect the young generation to the life experiences of their (grand)parents. Her paper reflected on the question whether and how these tattoos could reference the Holocaust and create an association with Holocaust survivors. It emphasized that the symbol refers to a rather exceptional case that was not representative for the majority who died in the Holocaust.



In his paper "Hashtag Auschwitz. Semiotics and Politics of the Self(ie)", OLEKSANDR KOBRYNSKY (Nürnberg-Erlangen) explored another phenomenon of mediatized reappropriations, namely the case of Auschwitz 'selfies', posted on Twitter by an American teenager in summer 2014. The paper contrasted this image with the photograph taken of the German president Christian Wulff, who was invited to give a speech at a ceremony commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz, in January 2011. Analyzing the semiological and cultural aspects of the selfie, Kobrynsky argued convincingly that both images do have a similar inventory and reactivate similar knowledge. However, they suggest very different readings due to their framings. In an insightful "(de)construction of appropriateness", he emphasized that the photograph of the politician relied on "traditional aesthetics of commemoration ceremony" and was thus read as a "respecting dispositive of 'proper behaviors'". The Auschwitz selfie by the American teenager was based on a "naïve embedding in aesthetics of popular culture" and therefore read as "willful violation of 'proper behavior'". While both could be defined as selfies, these juxtaposed dispositives suggest that Christian Wulff's image represents a community while the "Selfie does not – it represents the Self".

National Narratives and strategies of dealing with Holocaust memory in cinema and television

The synchronic dimension of Holocaust remembrance was addressed in a range of papers that explored distinct national memory cultures and strategies of dealing with the traumatic experiences.

HILLA LAVIE (Jerusalem), in her paper "Revenge and Self-Reconciliation: Israeli Avenging Nazis in Israeli Cinema", addressed the revenge topos as a main subject in several Israeli films before Tarantino's internationally acclaimed *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Lavie suggested reading these films "as a critical representation of the complicated Israeli conception of Jewish revenge after the Holocaust, as opposed to acts of revenge against Nazis performed by Israeli security forces". The exploration of the three Israeli feature films *Made in Israel* (Ari Folman, 2001), *Walk on Water* (2004), and *The Debt* (2007) demonstrated that for the second and third generation, revenge acts of Jews against Nazis function as an important strategy to cope with the post-trauma of Holocaust inherited from their (grand)parents. However, the paper argued, these films' protagonists represent human characters suffering from post-trauma.



In his paper with the striking title "'Ketchup is the Auschwitz of Tomatoes': Humor and Collective Memory of Traumatic Events", EYAL ZANDBERG (Netanya, Israel) dove into popular media culture productions and analysed skits related to Holocaust memory that were broadcast on Israeli television. The study presented a typology of these skits and suggested an evolutionary development in four phases: "From using humor in order to criticize Holocaust remembrance to using Holocaust memory for creating humoristic effects." Exploring a selection of television productions, Zandberg argued that "although these skits are marginal in relation to the political or commemorative discourse, they present a subversive alternative to society's memory of traumatic events." Zandberg proposed an understanding of "'cultural trauma' as a socially mediated attribution, acting out / working through traumatic events". Meanwhile, the recent television skits, on the level of (popular culture) media memory, present "humorous texts as a way of working through memories of traumatic events."

MARKUS WEIGLEIN's (Salzburg) paper discussed the "multidirectional dimensions of Holocaust memory" and the issues of guilt or shame in recent cinema. The paper argued that both topoi in Holocaust memory mark a moral dilemma that remains rather marginalized in all three national contexts in Austria, Germany, and the US. Building on a vast sample of mainstream cinema productions, Weiglein explored the phenomenon of guilt: whether it was regarded as something negative that could be erased by silencing (in the case of Germany and Austria) or as a refusal to accept the role as bystanders (in the case of the USA). While he identified many films that deal with trauma, the aspects of guilt and/or shame are commonly marginalized. Films rather addressed "the 'high Nazis' and (victims') moral dilemma", but everyday sympathizers and bystanders remain unnoticed, marginalized. Also, US cinema addresses issues of resistance, rescue, and protection. As Weiglein suggests, "the question of guilt may be too obvious to be dealt with in the movies".

Entangled and Competing Memories in Memorials and Museums



The question of the transnational and transcultural entangledness of Holocaust memory was addressed in the keynote "The Arc of Memorial Vernacular: Between Berlin and New York", which was given by JAMES E. YOUNG (University of Massachusetts, Amherst). He authored seminal books in the field, e.g. *Writing and Rewriting Holocaust* (1988), *The Texture of Memory* (1993), and *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (2000). Furthermore he was an appointed member of the Findungskommission for Germany's national Memorial to Europe's murdered Jews and of the jury for the National 9/11 Memorial design competition. In his lecture he offered a detailed, insightful report on the process of creating the memorials (in Washington D.C., Berlin, and New York).

Young sketched the major considerations, hesitations, and concerns about appropriate forms of remembrance in the distinct contexts. He reminded the audience of the painful debates within the German public and the research conducted about appropriate forms of remembrance for the victims of 9/11.

In her paper on the "'Europeanization of the Holocaust' and Victim Hierarchies in Post-Communist Memorial Museums", LJILJANA RADONIC (Wien) focused on Eastern Europe. She examined how post-communist museums deal with the World War II period vis-à-vis the informal standards for engaging with the Holocaust as suggested by Western memory discourses. The paper distinguished between two ways in which memorial museums communicate with Western Europe: First, through an "invocation of Europe" and "Proof of Europeanness" and, second, through a demand from Europe that could be summarized as follows: "Equalization: Europe, accept our suffering!" Examining examples from the Jasenovac Memorial Museum in Croatia, the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising in Banská Bystrica, and House of Terror in Budapest, the paper demonstrated how these exhibitions adapt archetypical aesthetics and symbolism of Western Holocaust memory sites in order to gain recognition among a Western-dominated international public.

Conclusion



The juxtaposition of different case studies in various fields and national contexts opened up insightful new perspectives on the troubled (re-)mediation processes of Holocaust memory worldwide. Overall, the conference papers invited further research on transnational discourses and entanglements of Holocaust memories with a focus on generational change, transmission of postmemory and inherited trauma over time, as well as on the entanglements of similar cultures of remembrance; they were examined in a variety of distinct contexts, their cross-cultural references and instrumentalization. As Oliver Pessow emphasized, the phrase "this will never happen again" in face of the genocides in former Yugoslavia, Syria, or Iraq once again brought this concern "whether or not there is an imperative to intervene" to the fore in the discourse on transnational Holocaust memory. In light of entangled, competing, and multidirectional memories in a global age, scholars need to examine conflicts and ask why an interpretation of the past becomes dominant whereas other narratives remain marginalized. The conference might be a point of departure that encourages further research.

The organizers are planning a publication of the conference papers in 2015.