



Memorialisation of grave international crimes

Debate April 22nd 2010

INBOX Utrecht

Report

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Monuments: What is in it for me?

A debate on the relationship between war crimes monuments and future generations.

Utrecht, 22 April 2010.

An important part of the rationale for erecting monuments that honour victims of grave human rights abuses is to warn against the commission of similar crimes in the future. In this sense, such monuments are aimed at generations that did not witness the acts they refer to. A formidable challenge therefore faces those who design and manage such memorials to engage the attention and interest of people that have no personal memory of, and may feel little connection to, the events or victims they are concerned with, and then to find a way to convey convincingly to them a distinct narrative about the past.

This debate, one of a series on the role of memorialisation in the combat of impunity for war crimes being held by Impunity Watch¹ and the Anne Frank House², sought to explore the role and meaning of memory initiatives (monuments, memorials and museums) for future generations, discuss approaches used by diverse monuments in this regard, and identify some best practices for engaging them effectively. In particular, the aim was to learn and develop a deeper understanding of how such initiatives relate to future generations, and thus determine ways in which they can best serve to educate young people about painful historical events and help create a broader narrative in which human rights abuses, and impunity for them, are condemned.

The event was organised jointly with Critical Mass³, a youth organisation with expertise in developing attractive methods to engage young people in reflection and discussion on integration, diversity, identity, inclusion and acceptance through case studies dealing with conflicts, be these at neighborhood, classroom or international level. It was held in an interactive exhibition, INBOX, recently opened by the organisation, whose educational tools and methods were employed in this debate to stimulate discussion and learning among the participants, a selection of experts working on memory initiatives and young people.



The tools of Critical Mass encourage debate

¹ www.impunitywatch.org

² www.annefrank.org

³ www.criticalmass.nu

The experts participating were:

1. Aspha Bijnaar, a researcher at the National Institute for the Study of Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee) in Amsterdam. She also works on several exhibitions, including "Breaking the Silence" in Amsterdam, which provides an overview of the history of transatlantic slavery, specifically the role of The Netherlands.
2. Niels Weitkamp, an historian who works in the field of memory, monuments and research for the National Committee 4 & 5 May, which organises the annual events marking World War II Remembrance and Liberation Days.
3. Barbara Boender, an historian who coordinates the Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation in Amsterdam. She organises events where the question of how to involve people in these issues is always present.
4. Mariela Chyrikina, a sociologist who works as Latin America project coordinator at the Anne Frank House. In her work, she links the history of Anne Frank with recent histories of violence in the countries of Latin America, involving youth actively as ambassadors of the project.
5. Dineke Stam, an historian specialised in cultural diversity. She is an initiator of exhibitions, writer, and advisor to museums and the heritage sector. Her recent work has focused on intangible heritage, memory of World War II and gender.

Pelle Berting, an anthropologist and member of Critical Mass, facilitated the discussion.

The debate

Three central questions were posed in this debate and discussed in small groups.

- What is the purpose of memory initiatives?
- Are memory initiatives inclusive? How diverse can they be?
- What makes memory initiatives relevant to younger generations?

To provide context to these discussions, the participants first heard presentations from five young people from diverse backgrounds on monuments that have special relevance to them:

- Javier's family fled the internal armed confrontation in Guatemala (1960-1996) for the Netherlands. Members of his family were actively involved in the guerilla, and some of his relatives were victims of the violence. The monument erected on the Pillars of Guatemala City Cathedral has special significance for him, as it acknowledges the suffering of 4600 victims of massacres, disappearances and torture. On the other hand, the eternal flame commemorating the Peace Accords that ended the conflict has little meaning for him, as he believes that the agreement did not bring peace to the Guatemalan people.
- John was born in Curacao, a former Dutch colony that was important in the slave trade. He chose the Tula and Carpatha monument erected there in 1963 to commemorate the slave uprising of 1795. He finds this monument impressive because it depicts the bravery of the slaves. On the other hand, John identifies

less with World War II monuments because he has no personal relation to that conflict.

- Pieter said that he was impressed by the monument in South Africa that commemorates *Plaasmoorde* - the murder of white farmers in the post-apartheid period. While he interpreted this monument as a depiction of the consequences of apartheid, many of the other participants reacted strongly to his choice, as the monument in question is generally considered racist towards the black community in South Africa.
- Yan chose two monuments in Amsterdam that relate to World War II – the Dockworker Statue and the Jewish Gratitude Monument. Whereas he can identify with the brave appearance of the former, which marks the February Strike of 1941, when Amsterdam dockworkers protested against the deportation of Jewish residents, he finds the meaning of the latter, erected by the Jewish community as a sign of gratitude to the people of Amsterdam who helped Jews to evade persecution, difficult to understand, since the Netherlands lost 75% of its Jewish population.
- Maria also chose a war monument in Amsterdam – the recently erected statue commemorating the resistance fighter Anton de Kom. The design of this monument caused much debate, as De Kom, a descendant of slaves from Suriname, is depicted bare-chested and as though arising from stone, an image considered by some as racist. Although Maria is aware of this debate, she chose this monument as she finds it aesthetically attractive.

Four discussion groups were formed, led by the experts, to consider different aspects of the debate topic. The highlights of these discussions can be summarised thus:

1. What is the purpose of monuments that refer to human rights abuses?

Monuments related to gross violations of human rights can have different purposes, including the denouncement of past or current policies, the commemoration of victims, the expression of gratitude for help provided to them, or the provision of a permanent warning that such crimes or conflict should not be repeated.

Two groups considered aspects of this question:

This first, led by Niels Weitkamp, explored it through a discussion of personal identity, national identity and the identity of monuments, with reference to World War II memorials in the Netherlands, of which there are more than 3500. Even before the meaning of these monuments is examined, their very existence and the manner in which they are used tell a story about the dynamic process of commemoration. In other words, the large number of World War II-related monuments demonstrates the plurality of perspectives and memories that exists in relation to that conflict, while the fact that local people are actively involved in organising commemorations at them shows their role in creating a sense of community. For this reason, the group felt that no monument, however controversial, should be destroyed.

In the second group, led by Aspha Bijnaar, the characteristics of monuments were discussed in terms of what makes a monument 'successful'. Participants suggested that monuments should encourage debate and open discussion, with their potential

to unite diverse groups an indicator of their success. To achieve this, the affected communities must be actively involved in both the creation and maintenance of a monument, thus creating a sense of ownership of it. In some cases, there is a close relationship between a monument and research into the abuses to which they relate, such as that between the Slavery Monument in Amsterdam and the NiNsee. This adds dynamism to monuments, which otherwise tend to appear static⁴.

2. Are monuments inclusive?

When used appropriately, a monument can unite different groups of people, even those who have no personal relationship to the crimes or groups it refers to. However, monuments can also be divisive - when one victim group is commemorated, for example, others can feel ignored, neglected or that their experience is denied.

The group led by Barbara Boender and Mariela Chyrikina discussed a range of examples relevant to the issue of inclusion of victims groups in memory initiatives, and how people with no relation to their experience can be involved. The group also reflected on how to combat polarising effects of monuments, or their abuse to this effect - the staging by Neo-Nazi or nationalist groups of demonstrations at memorial sites, for example - by providing adequate information alongside monuments.

Several interesting examples were quoted to illustrate this discussion: '*Plan de Sanchez*'⁵ in Guatemala was presented as a striking example of a monument that provides acknowledgment to victims; the 'Valley of the Fallen'⁶ in Spain as an example of a monument that has a polarising effect; the monument in the Iraqi town of Halabja⁷ to show how the meaning of a monument can change; and the very recent, controversial idea to create a new name-wall⁸ as a monument for all victims from the Netherlands who died in German concentration camps, including not only Jewish victims, but also members of the resistance and political opposition, to show how difficult it is to make memorials inclusive.

In the case of the Halabja memorial, the changing context surrounding it transformed its meaning for the community from one which was positive to one which represented government inaction, complacency and corruption⁹. The Dutch

⁴ www.ninsee.nl/nationaal-slavernijmonument.nl

⁵ The Chapel in Baja Verapaz portrays the massacre of *Plan de Sanchez*, where 250 people (mostly women and children, and almost exclusively ethnic Maya) were killed by the Guatemalan army and paramilitary groups. In 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued two judgments, in which it established the Guatemalan state's liability in the case and ordered monetary and symbolic forms of compensation. At the place where the main mass grave was identified, a chapel to honour and remember the victims was built.

⁶ "The Valley of the Fallen" in Spain was created as a tribute to victims of nationalist supporters of Franco's rebellion and civil war campaign. See Aguilar Fernandez P. (2008) in *Políticas de la Memoria y Memorias de la Política*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid

⁷ The Monument of Halabja Martyrs was created to honour the thousands of civilians killed in 1988 when Saddam Hussein's army attacked the town with poison gas.

⁸ www.auschwitz.nl/nac/actueel/namenwand

⁹ After its opening, the memorial became controversial because the consequences of the attacks it related to were not addressed, such as the destroyed roads and buildings. On the 18th anniversary of the gas attack, townspeople showed their frustration by staging a demonstration at the site of the memorial, which escalated, resulting in the monument being stormed and set on fire. A 17 year-old girl was killed and many people were wounded.

example shows how difficult, even 60 years after a conflict has ended, to provide representation of all victims.

3. What makes monuments relevant to future generations?

If used effectively, memory sites can be an important educational tool not only for combating intolerance, but also for strengthening democratic values and respect for human rights among new generations. Dineke Stam therefore led her group in a discussion of possible methodologies for making memory sites relevant to younger generations, and techniques for using monuments in educational settings.

The group considered how to involve young people in memory activities, and agreed that a sense of ownership of the monument in question should be promoted. They noted that pupils are often more willing to listen to their classmates than to their teacher, meaning that peer education can be an effective way of creating identification with a monument.

In this sense, it is quite possible that different meanings are accorded to memorials by those who create them, those who relate directly to them, and by later generations. Here, the example of the monument to Annick van Hardeveld, a member of the Dutch resistance during World War II killed in 1945, the day before liberation, was cited. Having been a bicycle courier, she is now honoured every year by present-day bicycle couriers in an annual alley cat race. The group found such ways of 'making a monument meaningful' valuable.

Nevertheless, the visitor of today should understand what these different meanings are, even if s/he interprets this differently. In this regard, the group concluded that the history and symbolism of the monument should be explained at the site itself, so that this is clear to visitors.



Dineke Stam and her group thought of practical ways for making memory sites relevant to young people

Conclusions

In a final plenary session, the participants drew some conclusions from the presentations and their discussions.

In terms of the purpose of a monument, consensus was reached that this must primarily be to dignify victims by acknowledging both the individuals/ groups who suffered and the nature of the conflict that took place. In this way, monuments combat revisionism.

The way in which victims' organisations are involved in the creation and ongoing use of a memorial is key to fulfilling the aim of dignifying a particular group. Communities affected by the conflict should therefore feel part of the process of memorialisation. To achieve this sense of ownership, they should ideally be involved in the creation of monuments relevant to them, taking thus a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top down' approach.

A sense of ownership is also very important if the memory initiative is to make a connection with future generations. If it aims explicitly at educating younger generations and helping to create a broader narrative about the events it acknowledges, the opinion and voice of this demographic should be taken into account during its development. More generally, any visitor, no matter his or her prior knowledge of, or connection to, the subject of the memorial, should be able to identify with it and understand its history. Here, it is helpful if the monument is aesthetically attractive, but, more importantly, it should be designed in a way that stimulates thoughts and emotions about its subject among visitors. The meaning and purpose of the monument should therefore be clear, for example, by putting an historical explanation next to it.

A monument can achieve inclusiveness when used in the right way, but it can also be divisive. To enhance inclusiveness and combat polarisation, people of local communities should be actively involved in commemorations or remembrance activities. Commemorations are often organised by local people, an activity that has the further benefit of creating a sense of community.

In some cases, there is linkage between monuments and research institutes, such as the Slavery Monument and the NiNsee. Research institutes can contribute to a growing sense of inclusiveness by providing new information and insight into the events in question, including, for example, on victim communities that may too easily have been ignored or marginalised in the past. In this sense, they are more dynamic than a monument is able to be. The challenge, therefore, is to identify best practices in terms of the interaction of new research with public monuments so as to encourage the latter to become more dynamic pieces of memory.

Further considerations

Monuments have the potential to be powerful educational tools, enabling students to become not only passive receptors of historical knowledge, but rather active participants in the process of learning. Engaging young people in this way helps to develop critical thinking ability, which is essential to instilling democratic values. This approach to education could have a significant effect on post-conflict societies, by empowering younger generations to critically reflect on their painful history, learn to question what happened and, insodoing, shape the future.

There is a need, therefore, to develop educational programmes that connect memory sites to school curricula. This requires further exploration of ways in which to attract younger generations to memorials, and, by inference, ways in which to support teachers in promoting such initiatives. Already in the Netherlands, programmes that involve peer education (education by and for peers) and 'adoption of a monument'¹⁰ have shown they can significantly enhance the link between memory initiatives and future generations. Investigation of the potential for adapting such initiatives for other contexts should be pursued.

For more information about this project, and the organisations involved, as well as upcoming debates, visit www.impunitywatch.org, or contact Annet van Offenbeek at annet.vanoffenbeek@impunitywatch.org.

¹⁰ In the Netherlands, school classes can adopt a monument. They are responsible for its well being. The *Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei* supports this by giving information, coupons for flowers and 'medals'.



Impunity Watch

't Goylaan 15

3525 AA Utrecht

The Netherlands

e-mail: info@impunitywatch.org

phone: + 31 30 272 03 13

impunity 
watch