

Closing remarks

Our two-day International Colloquium “Contemporary Memorialisation of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern European Countries”, organized by the “Elie Wiesel” National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania in the framework of the research project “Holocaust Memoryscapes”, financed by a grant of Ministry of Research and Innovation, CNCS - UEFISCDI (project number PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0811, within PNCDI III), served as a forum for addressing “the Holocaust issue” as a multi-layered process.

Our aim was to gather proposals that examine the ways in which public authorities (state and municipal representatives, heritage professionals), but also other social agents (from private organizations and local communities to individual actors) have re-enacted the Jewish and Roma history on home ground through memorial development and enhancement, heritage-work, cultural practices and educational resources.

More particularly, the studies selected for the conference analysed both: (1) theoretical frameworks that explained current developments in the Holocaust memorialisation; and (2) cross-territorial comparisons or case-studies that focused on symbolic forms of “memoryscapes” of the Second World War, such as performative and commemorative practices aimed at directly engaging the audience with Jewish history through an immersive experience, as well as material ones, such as heritage-making projects and museum installations.

To understand Holocaust memory-making means investigating the strategies of various agents embarking on such processes, their proactive cultural and symbolic activities of memorializing WWII in more and more circulating and changing European post-communist societies, as well as their ethical and societal implications. Yet, by weaving together complex understandings and experiences from a wide range of disciplines, including political science, history, sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, and Holocaust studies, this interdisciplinary blend of approaches helped us shed lights on, but also critically examine, various agencies towards acknowledging the Second World War’s atrocities, on the symbolic value (to be) attached to Jewish history and on the socio-cultural implications of these processes.

The speakers having attended this international colloquium examined various modes of “relationship to the past” (Tornatore, 2010, 5) at work in Holocaust memory processes from (1) the authorized agencies of (re)configuring public memory through national socio-cultural policies to (2) local communities’ practices of transmitting their memory related to the Holocaust. More precisely, considering that such multi-layered mechanism entails both inclusion and exclusion, having a changing and dynamic nature, the speakers particularly scrutinized the role of power in shaping the memory of the Holocaust in countries from Central and Eastern Europe from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, in an attempt to understand the extent to which national authorities make use of their power to frame the Holocaust as “public memory”, and thus to build common historical narratives. On the other hand, it sought to mirror the manners through which various social agents, from individuals and communities to NGOs representing the civil society, engage with the past in the local processes of Holocaust memory-making, thus contributing to the processes of shaping the memory of the Holocaust, by relying on their traumatic past experiences in contexts of social responsibility. In addition to top-down approaches to the Holocaust memory, the speakers stressed the importance of bottom-up and other forms of democratic participation in memory-work “to locate and commemorate the bones”, as Professor Janet Ward stated.

The speakers also addressed the question of “historical truth”, along with “the absence of memory”, “deliberate oblivion”, “denial” and “revisionist approaches” in relationship with the Holocaust memorialization. Although the field of the Holocaust memory has been dramatically reconfigured, the speakers stressed the need to “tackle, challenge, debate, discuss, expose and teach about the Holocaust” in order to combat various forms of Holocaust denial and negation, a sophisticated enfolded phenomenon, still widespread across democratic countries, currently confronted with an increase in anti-Semitic attitudes and Xenophobic hate speech. In this respect, the speakers raised the difficulty of internalizing difficult pasts and they agreed on the role of museums as “spatial storytelling tools for remembering the Holocaust and creating shared representations on the past”, along with education, one of the most important tools in combating Holocaust denial and negation, able to inspire critical thought and personal growth.

The speakers stressed that Holocaust remembrance is above all a political and ethical obligation. To strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and

research worldwide, it is important to have international bodies, such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Association, that along with national governmental institutions, such as the “Elie Wiesel” National Institute for the Studies of the Holocaust in Romania, create meaningful discussion about the Second World War in order to combat Holocaust distortion and act as a medium that links the past and the future.

In addition to state-sponsored institutions charged with tackling, challenging, debating, discussing, exposing and teaching about the Holocaust, and political representatives focused on “countering Holocaust distortion and safeguarding the historical record”, the speakers stressed the role of civil society organizations and other justice champions to advocate for Holocaust knowledge and human rights, as a work that complements the role of policymakers, experts and practitioners. For instance, Peninah Zilberman stressed the role of “young ambassadors”, as a way we have to think for the future, equipped with the reflective and practical tools to build sustainable change in Holocaust remembrance, and take an active role in transforming prejudicial social perceptions in society and raise awareness of the dangers of perpetuating stereotypes and racial hatred.

We are closing off this themed international colloquium by expressing our great appreciation to our speakers, renowned researchers working on topics related to Holocaust memory and heritage politics and practices in Central and Eastern European Post-communist Countries, whose presence helped make this event a productive and valuable scientific exchange. I am particularly grateful for the ideas put forward by them.

I also want to express my gratitude to Roxana Popa who has worked with me so hard to bring us to this point.

I thank our financing institution, the UEFISCDI, the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation, who allowed organizing an engaging, thought-provoking two-day event on the Holocaust issue.

I now declare our international colloquium adjourned.

Thank you.

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