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Memory Activism between Values and Interests: Monuments, Museums and Institutions

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Local, national, and even international politics are strongly influenced by the circulation of historical narratives, of stories about who "we" are. The shaping of such narratives is thus a significant arena of political contestation, manifest in the erection (or removal) of monuments, the curation of museums and the practice of educational and historical institutions, among other forms of activity.

A growing community of practice is advancing the concept of public history as a means engaging citizens in the co-production and communication of the past. This approach is marked by a normative intent to maintain ethical and methodological standards and is aimed at strengthening social cohesion, resilience, and democracy in the digital age. Originating in grass-roots projects to collect of oral history, public history was popularized in the United States in the 1970s and has spread internationally ever since (*The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, 2017, p. 4).

But as the articles in this special issue reveal, during periods of international tension and conflict, normative considerations will often be overcome by interest or identity-based approaches to the past. Memory activism, undertaken by “committed individuals and groups devoted to their own version of the historical past” (*The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 2023, p. 5) would appear to have the upper hand.

Defined by Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg as “strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside of state channels” (*The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 2023, p. 5), memory activism has become a global phenomenon, with significant influence on state policies, transnational cooperation, public practices of commemoration and other types of social and political practices.

The goal of this special issue is to examine how memory activists have used and abused museums and institutions to shape and communicate historical narratives. To what extent can the “memory activism” approach help to reconcile history and memory, as individual and collective memories become part of public projects? Is the approach loaded with assumptions about the identity, intentions, and methods of “memory activists”? Are the normative concerns of public participation and citizen engagement, professional standards, and the strengthening of democracy relevant to the case studies in question?

The five articles of this special issue address these questions in the European context from a number of different perspectives.

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik examines the reaction of Russian speaking communities to the recent wave of anti-Soviet iconoclasm that has swept the Baltic states in the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. She examines the transformation of the national historical narrative toward the Soviet monuments and the processes of the adapting of Russian-speaking community to the official memory discourse. More specifically, she notes how the concept of resistance was applied in order to explore and synthesize the outcomes of the interviews carried out among Russian-speaking communities in Latvia and Estonia. Arguably, the reconstruction of the public space by shifting the most visual symbol of the victory of the Red Army in the WWII has not induced hot feelings among the Russian-speaking society, and thus, it has not motivated community to take part in the open protest against the removal. Most of the minority representatives stayed passive and silent adapting to the new reality.

For her part, Natalia Golysheva dives deeper into the history of Russia's mnemonic amplification of foreign threats to its security, tracing its origins to the narratives that developed around the Allied intervention into North Russia during the civil war in 1918–1920. She applies a regional lens to the issue, noting how during Soviet times multiple memorials were created in the North to the victims of intervention in support of this narrative. Central to it was the Mudyug 'concentration camp' museum, established to demonstrate the atrocities of the intervention forces. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union this museum was branded as propaganda and eventually got decommissioned. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent war with Ukraine, the old intervention narratives saw a comeback. Backed by the state, the local memory activists in Arkhangelsk in North Russia took to restoring the Mudyug camp museum as a forepost of patriotic tourism in the region.

Jennifer Ostojski shifts the focus of our attention from the periphery of European values to its very heart, in the establishment of the House of European History by the President of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering. Here, the normative framework of EU public history initiatives is read against the pragmatic influence exercised by Pöttering's ideas on the narrative of European history espoused by the museum today. Pöttering wanted to democratize the process of European history making by articulating a belief that the creation of European identity should be inclusive, with people engaged in this process. The museum had to become a site of "shared dialogue," a place where a "mutually constitutive (European) identity making" would take place. Although Pöttering's vision of the museum as a place for a "shared dialogue" between the EU and the public did not materialize, the museum remains a "narrative making tool" to (re)create European identity, and an instrument to "sell" the EU's values to the people who visit it and may not know about the EU's mission and achievements.

The tension between normative approaches to public history and the naked exercise of political power through historical discourse is analyzed most directly in Petr Eckhardt's autopsy of the erection of a monument in Piłsudski Square in Warsaw by the then ruling Law and Justice party to the victims of the crash of a Polish government airplane in Smoleńsk on April 10, 2010. Although the municipal authorities were strongly opposed to the monument, the national government used and abused institutions of administrative law to move ahead with the project and to impose their will on the cityscape and to prevent any future decommissioning of the monument.

Finally, Norkūnaitė introduces us to the contested public history and memory landscape in Lithuania by analyzing a historical film called *Isaac*. Her analysis sheds light on probably the most heated historical debates in Lithuania on the role of Lithuanians in World War II and their collaboration with the Nazis. Norkūnaitė's analysis demonstrates how the film makers became unwilling memory activists, engaged in what she calls "a two-sided memory of trauma." By portraying the traumas of the Holocaust and the Soviet occupation as a continuous experience, the film makers failed to "distinguish the role of perpetrator and victims, diminishing the memory of the victims and the responsibility of the perpetrators." Despite government-led initiatives to integrate European mnemonic norms related to the Holocaust into Lithuania's public history landscape, "a two-sided memory of trauma" persists and from time to time erupts into memory conflicts.