

INTRODUCTION

Memorials as Silent Extras or Scripted Actors?



One man killed, 153 people injured and over 800 people arrested – this was the price paid in the name of memory a few years back in Tallinn, Estonia’s capital, during two nights of clashes over a Soviet war monument. The bloody controversy arose after the Estonian government passed a bill that allowed the removal of a bronze statue of a Soviet soldier that had stood in the centre of the capital since 1947. Estonian nationalists – who regarded the statue as a symbol of the nearly fifty years of Soviet occupation of the country – clashed with ethnic-Russian Estonians who, in contrast, saw the statue as a symbol of the liberation of the country from the Nazis by the Red Army during the Second World War. Calm was restored after two days of rioting, looting and vandalism, with the authorities being forced to move the statue to a secret location, ultimately placing it at the military cemetery in Tallinn. The ‘Bronze Night’ – as it is commonly remembered – was the worst episode of civil unrest in Estonia since the Soviet reoccupation in 1944, and one of the lowest points in diplomatic relations between Estonia and Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the country’s independence in 1991 (‘Tallinn Tense after Deadly Riots’ 2007). The Estonian government allocated 4.6 million euros from its federal reserve to cover the damage caused by the riots to public properties, vehicles and private businesses, in addition to the costs for the police operation, the reburial of the bodies and the guarding of the diplomatic missions in Moscow and St Petersburg (‘The “Bronze Night” Cost Estonia over 4mn Euro’ 2007).

Controversies over the past, such as the Estonian case, are nothing new and many examples can be found in widely differing geographical and historical contexts throughout the world and the centuries. Rather, the interesting question is: why would governments and public authorities put their ever-shrinking budgets at memory's service, as in the case of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York which has been estimated at U.S.\$710 million (Cohen 2012)? Why would people be willing to incur incarceration or hospital bills, or even to lay down their lives in the name of the ephemeral concept of 'collective memory'? The answer is because memory is seldom about the past: as Nora puts it, 'through the past, we venerate above all ourselves' (Nora 1989: 16).

Firstly, what is 'collective memory'?¹ From Maurice Halbwachs's seminal work *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* in 1925, an extensive literature on the topic has been produced, in particular since the 1980s, of which Chapter 1 presents an overview of key developments, figures and academic works. For the purpose of this book, this author accepts the definition of collective memory as 'shared social frameworks of individual recollections' of a group's past (Halbwachs 1950, in Misztal 2003: 4). A social group's collective memory is structured and articulated in a collective 'narrative', that is, 'an account, or narration, of events, stories or tales' (Misztal 2003: 160), 'a basic "story line" that is culturally constructed and provides the group members with a general notion of their shared past' (Y. Zerubavel 1995: 6). This narrative is usually constructed through a selective use of a group's past. Collective memory and the narrative(s) through which collective memory finds expression underpin a social group's identity, sense of continuity and cohesion. While we, as individuals, remember by means of an independent cognitive process, this process always takes place in the social world and it is, therefore, influenced and constrained by the social frameworks about the past shared by the group we belong to. The social nature of memory is, however, not only limited to the fact that members of the same social group share a common collective past, but it also manifests itself in the fact that this past is remembered and represented through shared cultural forms, in particular commemorative activity. In today's societies, cultural artefacts (such as monuments, statues, souvenirs and films) and cultural practices (such as commemorations, ceremonies and rituals) provide the means through which collective memory is objectified, projected and transmitted. Collective memory can, therefore, be interpreted as 'a group's representation of its past, both the past that is commonly shared and the past that is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to that group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future' (Misztal 2003: 158).

Since the emergence of 'nation states' in the Western world in the late eighteenth century, ruling authorities and political elites have employed memory as a 'political asset' to shape the collective identity, symbolic continuity and social cohesion of the nation's 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983). Among other forms of ritualized or commemorative activity, such as the institution of national anthems, flags, official memorial days and state/national holidays, war commemoration and memorialization, in particular, have become essential weapons in the 'symbolic arsenal' that a state can deploy to foster a nation's collective memory and to project a dominant narrative of its shared past. This hegemonic role in the process of memory making is asserted into the civic space by means of state-sponsored memorials such as cenotaphs, 'Tombs of the Unknown Soldier', and state-organized commemorations, which act not merely as historical markers, but more importantly as ideology conveyors. While generally the state or ruling authorities establish the canon of official memory in a given society, this does not exclude the possibility for parallel narratives of the collective past to be publicly articulated by other societal agencies or groups, such as war veterans, women's groups, opposing political parties, and ethnic minorities (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000: 20–32). These narratives constitute what Foucault (1977) has termed 'counter-memory', that is, 'an alternative view of the past which challenges the dominant representation of the past' (Misztal 2003: 158); they can be 'sectional' or 'oppositional', depending on the degree of challenge they pose to the official state narrative in terms of public recognition and sociopolitical mobilization (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000: 20–32). In the Estonian case that opens this book, both 'versions' of history remembered and supported by Estonian nationalists on one side and ethnic-Russian Estonians on the other are parallel narratives of the same collective past – coexisting or, in the case of the Bronze Night, clashing for public recognition, not only among themselves, but also oppositionally against the state-sanctioned version of that past.

In situations of civil war or ethnic conflict, narratives of the past often underpin the opposing ontological and ideological claims of the different 'battle lines' and help to sustain each group's identity and cohesion. This book investigates a fascinating scenario where the prerogative of memory making and nation building, usually reserved for the state, has been taken on by non-state organizations that, in some cases, operate on the border of legality. It uses as a case study the landscape of permanent memorialization that came about in Northern Ireland to commemorate the casualties of the Northern Irish conflict, also commonly referred to as 'the Troubles'. This conflict was a period of ethno-political violence between

sections of the Unionist/Loyalist (mainly Protestant) and Nationalist/Republican (mainly Catholic) population of Northern Ireland, conventionally dating from 1969 until the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which resulted in the death of over 3,700 individuals.² Although Unionists have always been a highly fragmented group, deriving from a wide range of social, economic, political backgrounds and religious denominations within Protestantism, at the core of Unionism is the determination that Northern Ireland must remain part of the union with Great Britain, because Unionists see themselves as historically, politically and culturally British – not Irish. The term ‘Loyalist’ refers, in a general sense, to a person who is loyal to the British Crown, but in a Northern Irish context it has come to signify that section of the Protestant/Unionist population which gives tacit or actual support to the use of force to defend the union with Great Britain. On the other hand, Nationalists can be seen as a more united group as they are members of one church, the Roman Catholic. The majority of Nationalists see themselves as historically, politically and culturally Irish, and believe that the partition of Ireland was unjust and that the thirty-two counties of Ireland should constitute a unified, independent political entity. Under the wider ideological umbrella of Nationalism, a major distinction has to be made between constitutional Nationalism and Republicanism: while constitutional Nationalists advocate a united Ireland being achieved through political means, Republicans see (or, at least, have seen in the past) the use of armed force as legitimate.³

In relation to public memorialization of the past, Northern Ireland represents an unusual, fascinating scenario. As a consequence of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which marked the end of the Irish War of Independence, the Irish Free State was established as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, comprising twenty-six out of the thirty-two counties of the island of Ireland. The six northern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Derry/Londonderry, Down, Fermanagh and Tyrone – whose population consisted of two-thirds Protestants and one-third Catholics – had the previous year opted out of this political solution to become Northern Ireland, one of the four states that constitute the United Kingdom. From 1921 to 1972, Northern Ireland was ruled by a series of Unionist governments, which exercised a certain degree of political, social, economic and cultural discrimination towards the Catholic population of Northern Ireland.

Since the inception of the Northern Irish state in 1921, the Unionist establishment exercised its memory-making function in relation to the two world wars and conflicts fought on foreign soil, and translated its official narrative into civic space with the erection of cenotaphs, war

memorials and statues in city or town main squares and streets. In addition, state-sponsored commemorations, for instance Remembrance Sunday, were regularly held, and the Twelfth of July celebrations, organized by the Protestant Orange Order to commemorate the victory of Protestant King William III of Orange over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, were de facto state commemorations, at least until the late 1960s (see Chapter 2).⁴ With the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 and the introduction of Direct Rule over Northern Ireland in 1972, thirty years of unstable governmental settlement ensued with the result that no official narrative of the Troubles has been promoted due to the lack of a clear political elite. To this day, the state and its organs are noticeable for their absence on civic space in Northern Ireland in relation to the memorialization of the Troubles, to the extent that an abdication of the right to ‘manufacture’ official memory has occurred. This public vacuum has, in fact, been promptly filled by non-state agencies that played an active role during the conflict – namely, the four main paramilitary groups and, in some cases, their respective political parties; as a result, four partisan narratives of the same past can be observed in the public arena in contemporary Northern Ireland.

Book Outline

Based on an analysis of more than 150 permanent memorials to the casualties of the Troubles on public soil in the city of Belfast, this book interrogates the spatial and temporal occurrence of forms of memorialization, the iconography and symbolism used at memorial sites and their practical and symbolic reasons to shed light on how collective memory in divided societies is used to: (a) project in the public arena ‘versions’ of the past that foster the national identification, symbolic continuity and social cohesion of opposing ‘imagined communities’; (b) construct opposing narratives of ontological, historical and ideological legitimation, and narratives of victimhood and moral justification for the use of violence; (c) subsume individual memories within shared mnemonic frameworks due to the asymmetry of power in the production of public memory; and finally, (d) mediate new political messages and shield political leaderships from criticism in times of political transformation or ideological takeover. It aims to illustrate how memorials, although inanimate artefacts, are not mute, solidified reifications of collective memory. Memorials are not just a backdrop for the ritual action during which collective memory is moulded and transmitted, nor do they simply define its spatial boundaries, but they actively contribute to the process of creation, articulation and

transmission of collective memory through their physical configuration, symbols, language and location.

The first chapter provides an overview of the book's theoretical background, briefly outlining the key developments, figures and trends in the conceptual fields of collective/social memory, material culture and the politics of memory. It will help the readers to familiarize themselves with concepts such as collective memory versus individual memory, cultural and material memory, collective narrative of the past, ritual and commemoration, war memorialization and politicized memory. A comparative dimension exists, whereby examples from other historical and geographical contexts, such as post-First World War Great Britain or contemporary Cyprus, are presented. The chapter concludes with a brief outline of the research methodology for this book.

Chapter 2 sets the historical background of this work. It gives a brief outline of the recent political history of Northern Ireland (mainly from the late 1960s) for readers who might not be familiar with it already, and introduces the main 'protagonists' of the book. It also looks at different forms of memorialization that have been used in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s, including funerary rituals, commemorations, mural painting, commemorative banners and memorial bands, memorial publications and pamphlets, oral history projects, and memorial prizes and awards. Finally, it classifies different types of permanent memorials (to paramilitary combatants, civilian casualties, security forces, and memorials in governmental buildings, party offices, workplaces, churches).

Drawing mainly on a database of over 150 memorials compiled by this author over four years – also available online (Viggiani 2013) – Chapter 3 is an exploration of permanent memorialization in relation to the spatial and temporal dimensions. Borrowing theoretical concepts and categorizations from cultural geography and sociology, what is investigated here is the impact of collective memory on the geography of urban territory and its direct relationship with patterns of residential segregation, social segmentation and sectarian division in the creation of an ethnicized space. In relation to space, it is also examined if and why memorials can act as territorial markers, can be considered sacred space and can be used as memory aids. In relation to the temporal dimension, the year 1998 (when the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was signed, and officially considered as the end date of the conflict) is taken as a historical watershed to investigate if permanent memorialization can be deemed a sign that a conflict is over, or if it is a continuation of it through symbolic means. The hypothesis that memorials can be used as identity crutches by social groups in times of social, cultural and historical transformation and as a benchmark to measure a society's

progress in its post-conflict path is also investigated in the latter part of this chapter.

Chapter 4 examines how ‘memory makers’ – a definition the author coined to signify agents that have a degree of control over the creation of public mnemonic artefacts due to their social, cultural, economic or political predominance in a given society – employ memorialization to construct collective narratives of ontological, historical and ideological legitimation by means of a selective use of the past. The chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first part, the interrelationship between individual memory and collective memory of an event is investigated, while proposing a theoretical framework that explains how individual ‘stories’ are subsumed within a collective ‘history’ of the past. Employing both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the second part of the chapter analyses the key symbolism, iconography and inscriptions found at memorial sites to understand how opposing public narratives of national identification, ontological, historical and ideological legitimation, victimhood, moral justification for the use of violence and stigmatization of the adversary are projected by means of careful use of imagery, symbols, language and a process of selective remembering and social amnesia. This chapter also introduces examples of how memory is used by political leaders and public figures to serve present purposes of political and ideological legitimation.

Based on 145 structured and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (political party representatives, paramilitary ex-combatants/ex-prisoners, community and local authority representatives, members of the clergy, etc.) and local residents, chapters 5–8 present four case studies, one for each main paramilitary group – and, in some cases, their respective political parties – in Northern Ireland. When considered collectively, the four case studies follow the ‘lifespan’ of a memorial, from the formation of the memorial committee that oversees its building to the diachronic use of memorial sites during annual commemorations.

Chapter 5 is centred on the memorial activity of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and Sinn Féin from the late 1990s. Following the lifespan and memorial programme of the PIRA-aligned Greater Clonard Ex-Prisoners’ Association, this chapter first investigates the reasons for the formation of ex-prisoners’ groups in a post-conflict setting, their role in society and the importance of oral history and community-led memorial programmes. Based on interviews with ex-prisoners, local residents and access to the association’s bulletins and memorial pamphlets, this chapter analyses how processes of memorialization and commemoration can act as a linchpin between the microlevel, represented both by single individuals and the local community, and the macrolevel

of the social ‘mnemonic collectivity’ and the national imagined community. Using as a case study the memorial garden in the Republican area of Clonard in Belfast, the symbolism, iconography and language used at this site are interrogated to understand how the Provisional IRA – once one of the most violent proscribed paramilitary organizations – has succeeded in projecting a dominant narrative of historical and ideological legitimacy in the public arena. Practical aspects of memorialization – in particular, issues relating to planning permission, funding and the building process – are also documented.

Chapter 6 investigates the emergence of alternative views of the past or ‘counter-memories’ that challenge the dominant representation of the past. Having been granted unprecedented access to the IRSP/INLA Teach Na Fáilte Memorial Committee Belfast’s minutes, members’ recollections and archive, this author explores how sectional – and at times oppositional – narratives of the past are articulated and gain public recognition in coexistence and relation to dominant narratives of that past which are concurrently present in the public arena. Using the example of the 1981 Republican hunger strike, the difficult task faced by any group who wants to promote a counter-memory in society is illustrated: how to retain elements of the dominant narrative, while at the same time having to differentiate itself in terms of ontological and ideological legitimacy. Also in this chapter, the key elements, symbols and purposes of the periodic commemorations that take place in and around memorial sites are analysed.

Drawing from Smith’s (1997) definition of ‘Golden Age’ and its significance in shaping a group’s collective memory, the first half of Chapter 7 examines how a proscribed organization such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) has succeeded in ‘borrowing’ the myth of the Somme and appropriating its ‘commemorative density’ to project a narrative of historical and ideological legitimation, both as a specification of and in opposition to the history and symbolism of the First World War and the Battle of the Somme in the wider society. Using the annual paramilitary commemorations at three UVF murals in the Woodvale district of Belfast as a case study, the second half of the chapter shows how memory is used for present political and ideological purposes. Memorial orations given by the leadership and other public figures at these memorial sites from the early 1990s to the present day are analysed to show how the ritual action, with its immutable and traditional form, allows for claims of ontological legitimacy and a sense of continuity with the past to remain constant, while accounting for the adaptation of political and ideological messages to shifting historico-political contexts by means of the ritual’s ever-changing meaning.

Chapter 8 focuses on the symbolic struggles that memory makers can face in the process of constructing credible narratives of historical legitimacy: using the example of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the first part of this chapter investigates different forms of symbolic conflict that can be detected in a society where different groups compete for the appropriation of so-called 'symbolic capital' and sift through the confusion of the past to establish original genealogies, credible myths of origin and golden ages that differentiate them from their competitors in the public arena of memory making. The second part of the chapter uses as a case study the Remembrance Sunday service held at the UDA memorial garden in the area of Sandy Row in Belfast to illustrate how both micro- and macropolitics are played out during commemorative services. In particular, it is investigated how memorials can act as a gateway to a symbolic, ideological national identity and the macrolevel of state politics, while still pertaining to a microlevel form of memorialization and being inextricably linked to the dimension of local or community politics.

Based upon a door-to-door survey and interviews conducted with local residents in Belfast, Chapter 9 sheds light on the other end of the spectrum of collective narratives about the past: those 'communities' who periodically witness memorials being built a few yards away from their homes, and parades passing through their streets, and who are therefore 'memory receivers' – a term this author coined to signify those individuals or groups who do not exert any degree of decisional power over what is commemorated in the public arena but are the intended recipients or 'end users' of these constructed narrations of the past. Using the analytical distinction posited by Scott (1990) between 'public' and 'hidden transcript', the aim of this chapter is to investigate the complex relationship between 'memory makers' and 'memory receivers', and to uncover the 'hidden transcript' of power relations over memory, focusing on the extent to which the 'memory receivers' accept and 'buy into' the memory makers' collective narratives about the past. Here, local communities' attitudes towards memory and memorialization are analysed, while exposing the varied and internal tensions, idiosyncratic differences and interpretative discrepancies that are 'glossed over' by power holders when presenting a consistent and uniformed collective view of a group's past to the outside world.

Chapter 10 draws conclusions on how collective memory and war memorialization are used in contemporary society to promote present political and ideological strategies. In relation to post-conflict settings, in particular, it advances an interesting hypothesis whereby bottom-up partisan narratives of the past can be considered perhaps more effective in the process of seeking a common ground between opposing groups than

top-down cross-community, inclusive narratives of the past lowered onto society by governments and conflict-resolution bodies.

Notes

1. Although the terms 'collective memory' and 'social memory' were theorized by different scholars and present some conceptual differences (see Chapter 1), they are often used as synonymous in the literature and will be so used in this book.
2. In the course of this book, the term 'post-conflict' is used to refer to any event, social trend, political development, etc. that occurred after 1998. It is important to note here that there are still significant speculations within contemporary Northern Irish society as to whether the conflict has really come to an end – perhaps refuelled in recent years by the violent events in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry during the 2010 marching season and the most recent Union flag dispute in late 2012/early 2013. Since the people interviewed seemed to be divided on this issue, both positions have been accounted for throughout the course of this book, without taking a personal stance. The term 'post-conflict' is, nonetheless, used to indicate the indisputable societal move that occurred in Northern Ireland since the mid-1990s, from violence as the dominant mechanism of engagement to the sphere of politics.
3. On the Northern Irish conflict and the difference between Unionism, Loyalism, Nationalism and Republicanism, see Tonge (2002).
4. Founded in 1796, the Orange Order is a Protestant fraternal organization that acts as a wider umbrella for the Protestant tradition, drawing its members from a variety of social, political and economic backgrounds. Historically, it has had close links to the Unionist political establishment in Northern Ireland.