

Commemorating the Holocaust in the 'Post-Witness' Era: Counter-Monuments and Collective Dynamics of Memory-Making

As the last witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust pass into history, there is a necessity to find new practices and modes of connecting “contemporary generations” with lived experiences and memories of the victims and survivors of the Shoah as well as to develop new ways of remembering the Holocaust going beyond the ‘traditional’ approaches to its commemoration of the 20th and early 21st century. But the calls for new ways of Holocaust commemoration are also necessitated by the fact that, as the voice of the survivors and witnesses of the Shoah disappears, the public discourse of Holocaust commemoration often becomes a target for the nativist and populist politics and of even silencing or outright denying and distorting the memory of Shoah. Hence, there is an urgent need to develop new ways and modes of commemorating the Shoah in order to respond to the growing lack of its witnesses or to the opportunistic politics of strategic misinterpreting and rewriting of the past.

Responding to the above, this project focuses on the commemorative installations of ‘counter-monuments’ while offering their critical analysis as new modes of polyvocal Holocaust commemoration. Counter-monuments are, thereby, examined here as the central, late-modern forms of urban commemoration that question many of the limitations of traditional incl. monumental spatial and other remembrance but also focus on voicing collective as well as individual experiences of the Shoah. Looking how, set in contemporary Polish and European major urban spaces, the ‘counter monuments’ aim to create new dynamics of social memory of the Holocaust, the project aims to study both local and global, public discourse about their social reception and role, as well as combine the latter with examination of their social-semiotic (aesthetic) and material features and patterns of visitor and community engagement and response. Juxtaposing the results of those analyses, and providing a nationally-specific and cross-national comparison, the project explores Polish and international cases of counter-monumental Holocaust commemoration while assessing their public reception, impact, and, at a wider level, their general ability to foster new social discourses and practices of remembering the Shoah.

The project will take 36 months and be conducted within three guided by the following research questions: (1) Study 1: What are the key public tendencies in reception and interpretation of counter-monuments as socially, political and otherwise significant and novel strategies of Holocaust memory-making in both the analysed city spaces and in the wider context of the studied countries and their discursive traditions of commemorating the Shoah? (2) Study 2: What is the polyvocal and interactive potential of counter-monuments inculcated in their semiotic and material forms requiring various patterns of visitor/spectator and community engagement and response? (3) Study 3: What are the cross-national similarities and differences as well as advantages and disadvantages of counter-monumental Holocaust commemoration and what is their de facto ability to foster new, national and cross-national social discourses and practices of remembering the Shoah?

Looking at European capital city spaces – in Poland as well as in Austria and Sweden – the project will explore and compare urban counter-monuments of the Holocaust that have often been debated and contested, whether for political reasons or because of their often-complex form. The project aims to show that many counter-monumental realisations rely various types of visitor engagement as well as transgress the frontiers of public and private commemoration whose combination is particularly necessary in remembering the Shoah and communicating its experience. At the same time, counter-monuments often not only contest the wider discourses of how commemoration of the Holocaust should be taking place but also reveal the often forgotten or actively silenced elements of the Holocaust commemoration of foundational importance for European past and future.