Susanne Buckley-Zistel & Stefanie Schäfer.
Memorials in Times of Transition

Cambridge: Intersentia, 2014

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REFERENCES

Buckley-Zistel, Susanne & Stefanie Schäfer. *Memorials in Times of Transition*, Cambridge: Intersentia, 2014, 245 p.

- 1 *Memorials in Times of Transition* represents an important and timely contribution to an emerging field of research that seeks to bring together concepts of (transitional) justice with social and cultural understandings of memory. As the editors note in their introduction to the volume, these fields share numerous common interests, yet there has been a curious lack of productive exchange between them. The book aims to fill this gap through combining analysis of form and function of memorials in a range of case studies situated in diverse national contexts. The collection is divided into three principal parts: the potential of memorials to promote transitional justice; the political use and abuse of memorialization; representational strategies and spatiality. Nonetheless, these three areas feature to varying extents in each of the nine empirical chapters, lending coherence to the volume overall.
- 2 Particularly impressive is the geographical spread of the case studies, which include: post-conflict societies in Africa (Naidu); Rwanda (Viebach); Germany (Buckley-Zistel); Australia (Strakosch); Northern Ireland (Brown); Bosnia and Herzegovina (Braun); Chile (Klep); and Ukraine (Zhurzhenko). This also means that the volume incorporates discussion of diverse post-conflict situations, from societies struggling towards reconciliation after war through post-socialism and post-colonialism. Read together, the essays build up a picture of a global movement, in which the desire to

commemorate victims of mass violence is inextricably bound up with diverse political imperatives. For example, Christian Braun demonstrates the “deeply divided memories” (185) that surround the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial, at which – Braun argues – the visitor is presented with a dominant account of clear-cut victims and perpetrators that excludes alternative narratives. Tatiana Zhurzhenko demonstrates the use of Holodomor memorials in contemporary Ukraine as the site of “symbolic battles” (223) between opposing political forces with different memories and understandings of Stalinism and the Ukrainian famine. In both examples, the use of the term “genocide” becomes a political weapon designed to claim particular status for one’s own victimhood, often with direct reference to the Holocaust.

- 3 The authors of the individual chapters approach the topic through a range of theoretical and methodological frames, which offer original perspectives on this phenomenon. Several of these are particularly productive in terms of their relevance for a broad range of contexts. Judy Barsalou, for example, offers a practitioner’s view on the potential of memorials as transitional justice mechanisms and the role of “outsiders”. “Outsiders” are, in Barsalou’s terms, both international actors located outside of the national context in which the violence took place, and “local outsiders”, who are compatriots, but not members of the groups affected. Barsalou argues that, while outsiders can fulfil many vital functions and provide expertise in areas such as memorialization, legal accountability and truth-telling, to avoid conflict with and between local communities, they should focus on enabling and supporting local actors in their efforts towards transitional justice.
- 4 Julia Viebach, on the other hand, draws on trauma theory and the concepts of “making the world” (Elaine Scarry) – reconstructing life after the destruction of torture and violence – and “*alétheia*”, which she understands to mean “‘truth’ in terms of the ‘unforgotten’” (71). In this important contribution, Viebach demonstrates the dual role of memorials in Rwanda for both inner healing and “memory justice” (77). The display of human remains, Viebach argues, constitutes “a collective artefact that allows survivors to (re)make their world and to give the past a new meaning in the present” (79), as well as functioning as public proof of the crimes committed and therefore a form of symbolic restorative justice. Susanne Buckley-Zistel’s use of Foucault’s theory of heterotopias to analyse the Stasi prison memorial Berlin-Hohenschönhausen offers a fresh perspective on the political position of this controversial site in contemporary German memory debates. While it is debatable whether the focus on victims does in fact run “counter to the reality that lies outside” the memorial (the German political landscape would seem more complex than this suggests), Buckley-Zistel’s analysis of this site as producing a condensed authoritative narrative, that leaves little space for individual meaning making, is an important contribution to our understanding of how this site might (not) function in terms of promoting democratic renewal.
- 5 Elizabeth Strakosch’s exploration of the complexity of transitional justice in the context of “settler colonialism” in Australia uses the lens of temporality to show how even abstract memorials can close down political spaces. Strakosch demonstrates the complex position of the “settlers”, who in a post-colonial world still occupy colonized space. Official memorials are therefore designed in a context of continuity, rather than rupture, and often function to assert (prematurely) an end to the conflict. She shows that, for example, Australia’s Reconciliation Place asserts the end of settler colonialism “in ways that silence Aboriginal voices” (144). The significant (and often under-

researched) issue of gender is examined in Kristian Brown's discussion of Republican memorials in Northern Ireland. Brown shows how women feature unusually prominently in memorialization of the Troubles from a Republican perspective. In this context, they are represented in a series of symbolic roles (from women as fighter to women as mother), yet memories are still marginalized when they "disrupt linear narratives of Republican purpose and activity" (164).

- 6 Overall, I found the volume coherent, well put-together and significant in its aims to move forward our understanding of how memorialization might contribute to the objectives of transitional justice, as well as the risks inherent in the politicization of memorials and the exacerbation of social conflict. This is by necessity an interdisciplinary ambition, as both areas of research intertwine the political, social and cultural. Nonetheless, some of the chapters are more successful than others in achieving this challenging goal and several remain rooted within the paradigms of the author's disciplinary home. Thus, while the reader learns a great deal about struggles surrounding memorials in a variety of contexts, it is not always clear how this relates to the concept of "justice". The editors' introduction brings together these aspects very convincingly, as do – in particular – the chapters by Barsalou and Viebach, as well as Naidu's contribution on the multiple (positive and negative) outcomes of memorialization in Africa; however, it is not always borne out in the remaining empirical studies.
- 7 A further criticism – or perhaps suggestion for further research – is that the "memory studies" approaches the authors use tend to view memorials as storage technologies. Indeed, the volume editors describe memorials as fixing and storing memories (4), whilst acknowledging that memory is always fluid and subject to interpretation. In this regard, engagement with some of the state-of-the-art memory studies theory, which considers the dynamics of memory, as well as the crucial role of mediation, might have revealed the complex interplay between social context, site managers, victims, perpetrators, visitors and the form of the site itself. For example, the production, construction and interweaving of different forms of memory has been considered by Jeffrey Olick in *The Politics of Regret* (London: Routledge, 2007); the dynamics of memory in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney's *The Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009); and the importance of memory narratives in Francesca Lessa's *Memory and Transitional Justice in Argentina and Uruguay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013). Of course, no volume or individual essay could be expected to incorporate all of the many and diverse approaches to memory currently in circulation; however, I feel it would have been useful in several cases to move beyond (although certainly not to exclude) some of the traditional approaches to the study of memorials.
- 8 A second issue that the volume highlights and which would warrant further empirical and theoretical research is the interweaving of different forms of transitional justice, that is, how memorials connect and respond to other attempts to deal with the past at a local or state level. Naidu suggests this as a potential research agenda in the conclusion to her contribution; however, it is largely absent from the remaining chapters. One notable exception is Klep's insightful study of memorialization in Chile and its relationship to state-level initiatives. Buckley-Zistel also considers Hohenschönhausen in the context of the Sabrow commission, which was a state-mandated initiative charged with finding productive ways to network sites and institutions dealing with the East German past. Nonetheless, further exploration of this question would enable

us to view how memorials might function not in isolation, but as part of the transitional justice “toolkit”. Such an analysis could also further our understanding of the interaction between different levels of memory as political, social and cultural approaches towards remembrance and reconciliation intersect, conflict and shape one another.

- 9 Finally, I would not usually address questions of style in a review of this type; however, there were a distracting number of typographical, grammatical, lexical and syntactical errors in a number of the chapters (and particularly the introduction), which might have been improved by better proof-reading in the publication process.
- 10 In sum, these criticisms amount principally to suggestions for further collaborative work. This important volume is a significant step towards understanding the drive towards memorialization in diverse post-conflict contexts, the political impact of memorials and how memorialization intersects with other efforts towards coming to terms with difficult pasts.

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