Memory, Identity and a Painful Past: Contesting the Former Dachau Concentration Camp

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When former prisoner Nico Rost came to visit Dachau concentration camp in the 1950s, he expressed his utter disbelief that so little had been done to ensure and foster remembrance in a place where so many people had suffered so much. On the contrary, steps seemed to have been taken to eradicate most traces of the past (Rost 1956). The prisoner barracks had been turned into habitations for German refugees and expellees; a primary school, a post office, and various shops provided for the daily needs of the new inhabitants; the disinfection barracks had been rebuilt into a restaurant. No official memorial paid tribute to those who had suffered and died on the same grounds only a few years earlier. With the exception of the crematorium area, which was surrounded by a wall, there was almost nothing that recalled the concentration camp and its horrors.

Nico Rost's experience closely mirrors the societal reality in Germany during the 1950s. In the immediate postwar years, there was as good as no public interest in the time period from 1933 to 1945. Attempts to officially commemorate the victims of the Nazi regime were limited at best. This reflected the general wish of the German population to quickly forget the past and look toward the future. There seemed to be a general consensus to render neither guilt nor the experience of suffering public. For some, this communicative silence was the necessary condition that ensured the transformation of Germany into a democratic society (Lübke 1983). Others argued that the wish to silence the past was initially inherent in the concept
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Contesting the Former Dachau Concentration Camp of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past) (Fritzsche 2006; but see Sierp 2014). It is therefore not surprising that the first initiatives to erect an official memorial on the grounds of the former Dachau concentration camp did not come from within civil society but were ordered by the Allied Military Government in charge of Dachau. At the same time, the fact that the Dachau memorial did not grow out of the wish by citizens to create a place of remembrance might account for its successive failures.

The transformation of Dachau concentration camp from a place of suffering to an official site of remembrance has been characterized by contestations of memory. Having been a concentration camp mainly for political prisoners rather than Jews, and boasting a very active committee of former detainees, Dachau has always constituted one of the focal points of political struggles surrounding the remembrance of the Nazi Holocaust. When it comes to the public confrontation of past crimes, the discussion concerning the setup of an International Memorial at Dachau is only one example of how public remembrance, questions of identity, and political power struggles are intertwined. This chapter traces the political debates preceding the construction of the memorial, and it analyzes the controversies surrounding the question of who should be represented by it. Foregrounding an understanding of memory as politically meaningful practice that links the past with the present and the future, I also critically examine the repercussions that the exclusion of certain victim groups has for commemorative practices in Germany today. In doing so, I seek to enrich the interdisciplinary debate surrounding the question of how memory is formed on the individual as well as the group level.

In the debates surrounding the Dachau memorial, three types of memory play a crucial role—individual, social, and cultural (Assmann 2007). Witnesses and their individual memories of World War II as an event they experienced personally contributed considerably to the definition of the aims of the Dachau memorial and its realization. Social memory, as a way of recalling events one has not personally experienced but which are collectively elaborated upon by members of the social group one belongs to, such as the family, came into play as soon as individual memories were conveyed via communicative exchange. Memorials are often focal points triggering this form of transmission, and the Dachau memorial was no exception in this. But memorials work as primary media of diffusion for
cultural memory as well. Like social memory, this refers to a past that has not been experienced directly. However, in the case of cultural memory the shared experiences and knowledge have been disconnected from their human carriers and are instead transferred to material transmitters. Like other types of “inscribed” memories (Connerton 1989), memorials bundle, interpret, and redirect social memories through their very material presence. Indeed, it is the objectification—and in some cases also the fetishization or commodification (Finkelstein 2000)—of memory in memorials that allows social and individual memories to meet (Wertsch 2007).

The analysis of the Dachau memorial serves as a heuristic tool to investigate broader questions of the transmission and transformation of memory, thereby highlighting the various ways in which the individual, social, and cultural dimensions of memory intersect. This can also shed light on the consequences that remembrance has both for historical interpretation and for the self-knowledge of a society. More important, the contestations of remembrance at Dachau require us to approach the issue of social exclusion through a careful consideration of the question of who should be remembered with the memorial.

Contextualizing Memorials

There is a growing body of literature on memorials, dealing particularly with those erected in honor of the victims of the First World War. Most research, however, has limited itself to typological categorizations (e.g., American Jewish Congress 1969; Rieth 1969). Formal interpretations are usually organized along national lines, interpreting them as artistic expressions of a specific nation dealing with its past (Milton and Nowinski 1991; Young 1993).

Focusing on WWI memorials, existing studies tend to overlook developments that took place after the 1960s, when new forms of commemorative art emerged. These new forms can be distinguished from earlier memorializations of war in that they address transnational audiences. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (built in 2005 by Peter Eisenman) or the Monument against Fascism in Hamburg (built in 1986 by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz), for example, use a new repertoire of symbolic forms and materials, and they explicitly represent multiple meanings. Although the transnational scope of the experiences of WWII and the Ho-
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The Holocaust remain difficult to represent, the diversification of commemorative forms since the 1960s reflects the fact that a variety of interest groups and stakeholders warrant the representation of multiple meanings connected to the experience of the Holocaust.

Existing research often also neglects the overall context within which memorials are positioned, that is, its various memory agents and intended audiences. Memorials are not mere objects, but elements in a highly selective and contested political process. This is why it is fundamental to consider not only the events represented by a particular memorial but also the intentions behind its erection. During the planning and the erection phase of a memorial, the different agents constantly make choices about what to remember and what to forget. This highlights that memorials are products of social and political struggles and that memory practices are strategies of power. In other words, memorials are not merely markers of a specific experience. They are also cultural tools that influence the way the past is interpreted, offering signs for orientation and guidance (Valsiner 2007). As such, they shape individual and collective identities and encode, express, and reify values of a given society.

At the same time, as social products, memorials are also very much expressions of the current attitudes, values, and expectations within a given society (see Prescott, this volume). Given that societal attitudes change over time, the meaning initially ascribed to a memorial will eventually not correspond to it anymore. In addition, different social groups read memorials differently, so that “no memorial is ever-lasting” (Young 1993: 154). This has wide-reaching social and political consequences for both the individual and society, and it is the reason why memorials so often turn into bones of contention. Indeed, the very attempt to unite dissimilar groups through the articulation of “shared memories” in the form of memorials often results in the opposite. In other words, the pressure exerted by symbolic objects, such as memorials, on individuals or collectives for how to interpret the past has the potential to result in refusal or denial of this past. This is particularly the case if the socially mediated readings of the past that a memorial offers do not correspond to widely accepted versions of existing interpretations (Beckstead et al. 2011). What is more, when a memorial perpetuates social divisions between “us” and “them,” it can block the path to necessary processes of reconciliation and reparative justice.

Of course, the objective of memorials is not usually reconciliation but re-
membrane of a collective or personal trauma, instruction, and the attempt to keep the past alive in the consciousness of future generations. These goals of memory politics are clearly articulated in the case of memorials for the Nazi Holocaust, where survivors and their descendants are committed to keeping the past alive, often with the aim of receiving official recognition for their suffering. Indeed, the redemptive quality of war or Holocaust memorials tries to give some sort of meaning to the loss of life, and they preserve an incommunicable experience that would otherwise disappear along with those who share it. They do so by guiding citizens’ affective responses and by opening up “reflective space” (Young 1989: 74) within us. More than any other expression of public commemoration, memorials can provoke feelings and emotional responses in visitors through their very materiality (Boivin 2008).

The problem arising from this approach to memorials is, however, that content and form get confused easily. The result is that the monumentalized vision of past events is often mistaken for unmediated history. In other words, the monument is understood as truthful representation of certain experiences and not as their mediated elaboration and interpretation. This happens frequently if the memorial is erected in authentic places, like former concentration camps, where the lines between authenticity and “truthiness,” on the one hand, and posthumous interpretation, on the other, are often blurred.

The Dachau International Memorial

Visitors entering the memorial site of the former concentration camp of Dachau through the main entrance almost immediately encounter the International Memorial. A black wall blocks the view of the otherwise empty roll-call square. The text engraved in four languages (French, English, German, and Russian) reads: “May the example of those who were exterminated here between 1933–1945 because they resisted Nazism help to unite the living for the defense of peace and freedom and in respect for their fellow men.” Behind the wall a jagged path, covered with large granite slabs, leads down into a hollow. Looking up, the visitor is confronted with a huge bronze sculpture (fig. 14.1). Gaunt human figures are entangled in barbed wire, their spindly limbs merging with the metal of the wire forming a crown of thorns. The only elements to emerge out of this tangle of
heaped corpses are splayed out hands and oversized heads with mouths wide open. Concrete fence posts frame the sculpture, giving it the form of a triptych.

Turning to the right, diagonally opposite the sculpture, the visitor sees another installation (fig. 14.2). Three black oval rings intersect, each covered with colorful triangular patches, which recall the different identifiers that every prisoner received after 1937 upon arrival in the camp. On the left, the granite path slowly leads back up to a block-shaped, altar-like monument with an urn containing the ashes of an unknown prisoner. The inscription on the slate plates framed by two concrete blocks behind the altar reads “Never again” in Yiddish, French, English, German, and Russian.

Artistic interpretations of the memorial have been numerous (Hoffmann-Curtius 1998). Most of them concentrate on the symbolic language of the memorial that takes on well-known iconographic images of the Holocaust—the barbed wire, the urn, humans in positions of mourning—and integrates them into a new experimental space. The bronze sculpture makes clear reference to the brutality of the murderers and the helplessness of the victims by focusing on the deadly border of the concentration camp. Barbed wire was part of the figurative language that was already widely used in WWI memorials for soldiers. In the context of the Dachau memorial, it became a symbol for murder as well as suicide in the concentration camps.

The altar-like monument to the left of the bronze sculpture displays human remains and ashes of unknown victims (usually soldiers), thus similarly drawing on symbolism that has been part of memorials since WWI (fig. 14.3). Their spread to Holocaust memorials indicates that victims were often unknown and that the crimes took place in a huge geographical area (Marcuse 2010). But the fact that personal biographies and the accounts of persecution of individuals were deliberately avoided at the Dachau Memorial site also has to do with the conviction of the survivors that this had to be a collective monument—one that was to serve remembrance of the victims of the camp while informing the following generations what had taken place (Distel 2005).

The path away from the black wall that symbolizes the abyss of death to resurrection recalls the Catholic way of the cross (Via Dolorosa), or the secular path of reformation/instruction. A similar use of iconic features, sacralizing the elevation of martyrdom and transforming suffering into
Figure 14.1. Bronze installation at the Dachau International Memorial. Photo by author.

Figure 14.2. Oval rings with triangular patches at the Dachau International Memorial. Photo by author.
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sacrifice, can also be found at the memorial sites in Buchenwald, Majdanek, and Mauthausen. Unusual is the portrayal of skeletal human forms that recall associations connected to the pictures taken by Allied forces right after the liberation of the camps. The shock effect of these images triggers fewer feelings of identification and empathy than does the portrayal of humans in mourning pose or showing strength, solidarity, and resistance. At Dachau, references to acts of resistance appear only indirectly, however, in the second installation with the rings forming a chain, which symbolizes the kind of solidarity among the prisoners that made survival possible. That this is an embellished vision of the day-to-day experiences in the camp becomes evident when looking at eyewitness accounts (Bernard 1962; Ferber 1993; Ganor 1997; Haulot 1985). The prisoners of the Dachau concentration camp were not a homogeneous group, and they very quickly developed an internal hierarchy that reproduced the categories artificially set by the SS during the Third Reich. A prisoner
was seen not as an individual by his fellow prisoners but as a member of a category and was thus perceived as having its stereotypical qualities and behavior. Prisoners marked with a black (asocials), green (professional criminals), or pink (homosexuals) patch were subject to hostility from the outset, while the political prisoners occupied the highest position within the hierarchy and were treated better. Nationality played a role as well. Generally speaking, Italians and Russians had a much lower status among the prisoners than French or Germans. Solidarity and the development of a sense of identity as a community were thus effectively prevented. Recognizing this is important, as it not only sheds a more differentiated light on the composition of the prisoners’ community but it also demonstrates that binary categorization such as victims/perpetrators do not adequately reflect historical reality. In light of this, it is noteworthy that the current permanent exhibition at Dachau has chosen an opposite approach than the memorial discussed in this chapter: it concentrates on individual fates in order to break the image of the “inhumane mass of prisoners” that had been cultivated by the SS during the Third Reich.

What is surprising is that the stigmatization connected to these categorizations continued even after the end of the war as the colors of the patches determined whether survivors were entitled to compensation. Those stigmatized with the black, green, or pink patches were ruled to have no valid claims for compensation of either a moral or financial kind (Eberle 2005). This had an immediate effect on the setup of the International Memorial, where prejudices concerning certain victim groups were directly translated into the exclusion of their representation within the memorial. Neither the patches that had to be worn by homosexuals, nor the ones identifying asocials or professional criminals, appear in the second installation with the black solidarity rings. This underscores once more that the commemoration of painful memories is also an expression of power and identity, which in the case of the memorial at Dachau turned into a struggle for dominance of some victim groups over others.

Contesting the International Memorial

The path from the first plans for a memorial to its final erection was long. It took more than twenty years and was fraught with numerous clashes over the question of what should be represented and how, who should finance
it, and where the memorial should be set up. The juxtaposition of different politically charged interests, on the one hand, and the symbolic meaning of a memorial that is supposed to put aside ideological differences, on the other, created fertile ground for public contestation. In Dachau more than anywhere else, the discussion about the set-up of a memorial turned into a struggle over the power of definition. This was partly due to the fact that Dachau’s survivors were a heterogeneous group, ranging from high-ranking foreign politicians to members of the clergy, from party functionaries to members of different resistance movements, from Jews to Jehovah’s Witnesses. During the planning phase, but also once the memorial was built, it proved to be almost impossible for the survivors to converge on one way to represent the experience of the camp and its lessons for the future. The Dachau case is a good example of a situation where, as Harold Marcuse put it, a memorial “reveals more about the groups that create it than about the history it purports to represent” (2001: 187).

The history of the contestations surrounding the International Memorial started shortly after Dachau’s liberation on April 29, 1945. On May 3, Catholic Polish survivors erected a provisional memorial on the roll-call square of the concentration camp. It consisted of a wooden altar and a tall wooden cross and stood until 1946. In June 1945, orders to erect a more permanent memorial were given by the Allied Military Government. Plans were supposed to be carried out by local civilians. The official proposal foresaw the erection of two tall stone columns topped by a cross and a Star of David on the nearby Leitenberg, where many camp prisoners had been buried. This plan was never carried out, however, after it became known that the German designer Buchner had been a member of the Nazi Party.

In November of the same year a second proposal was presented to the public. It consisted of a huge pylon with a sun rendered in golden mosaic rising above a semicircular base. The dimensions of the so-called liberation memorial were impressive: the sun’s diameter was supposed to be 6 meters, the semicircular base 20 meters tall and 35 meters wide. The proposal was rejected because of the memorial’s grandiose size and its evident reference to the megalomaniacal architectural style of the Nazis, but also because it neither incorporated religious symbols nor made reference to the camp prisoners. Subsequently, an open competition inviting proposals for a new memorial was conducted between April and September 1946.
Twenty-one proposals were submitted, but none received anonymous support (Hoffmann-Curtius 1998).

After that, the idea of an official memorial was set aside for the time being. Local authorities and civilians clearly had no interest in creating an official place of remembrance for events they had actively or passively supported. Closely connected to this was a widespread feeling of being victimized by Allied demands. When foreign newspapers reported on the apathy and obstruction on the part of German officials, as well as on the neglected condition of the former concentration camp, this was met by outrage and defensive reactions in the local press (“Auerbach schuldlos” 1949; “Landrat und Bürgermeister haben keine Schuld” 1949; “Leitenberg bleibt KZ-Gedenkstätte” 1950). This changed only when the discovery of several skeletons close to the Leitenberg caused an international scandal (Schwenke 2011). The local authorities were accused of not adequately preserving the gravesites where thousands of concentration camp victims had been buried. Local authorities felt compelled to react immediately by calling for another competition inviting proposals for a memorial. The new memorial was supposed to symbolize “the religious and national idea of sacrifice on behalf of peace” (Ehard 1950: n.p.), but was not to make reference to the experience of suffering and exploitation on behalf of nationalism. Out of the 175 proposals that reached Dachau’s town hall, one for an octagonal memorial hall was selected. Planning and building took more than two years. It was completed in 1952, but never formally dedicated.

The Role of the CID

With the local authorities having failed to come up with a satisfactory solution, former prisoners, who had organized themselves in the Comité International de Dachau (CID), started a new initiative in 1955. Having found active supporters among the next generation of Germans, concentration camp survivors moved out of the marginalization that German society had confined them to right after the war. The renewed media attention to Nazi crimes and the changed political situation (Germany had joined NATO in 1954 and Cold War tensions had eased after Stalin’s death) contributed to an atmosphere of greater openness toward victims’ requests. At the same time, public awareness of neo-Nazi and military right-wing organizations increased sharply after a wave of anti-Semitic vandalism had swept across West Germany and the different Nazi trials
had started in Germany and Israel. With the publication of the paperback version of Anne Frank’s diary in 1955 and the screening of Alain Resnais’s documentary *Nuit et Brouillard* the same year, public attention shifted for the first time to concentration camps as places of violence and suffering rather than justified means of punishment. As a result, the camps became focal points of commemoration rituals, which had until then taken place in local cemeteries or crematoria.

The CID held its constitutive assembly in Brussels in November 1955. During the meeting, the former prisoners formulated a number of objectives in order to secure the creation of a worthy place of remembrance at the former concentration camp. For them, such a place would imply that the “entire camp of Dachau should be cleared; around the roll-call square a closed complex should be restored to its original form and in the roll-call square itself a monument should be erected” (“Wichtige Tagung in Brüssel” 1955: n.p., my translation). All relics from the time of the camp, but also everything attributed to the period after 1945, were to be removed before the creation of a memorial. Paradoxically, the CID thus followed almost the same trajectory as the Bavarian authorities, who had not shown any interest in preserving what was left of the camp. After the former concentration camp had been turned into an internment camp run by the American Military Administration between 1945 and 1948, and then into a refugee camp for East German expellees until 1965, the camp had been completely transformed, and little remained that could have recalled its initial use. Only the entrance gate, the administrative offices, and the prison (all three occupied by the American Military Administration) as well as the crematorium and six watchtowers remained. This poses important questions regarding authenticity and its effects on the way visitors perceive the current memorial site (Theune 2013). Thus it is significant that the demolition of the crematorium, which was planned by the Bavarian State Parliament in 1955, had been prevented only at the last moment by a supplementary agreement to the Paris Treaties mandating the preservation and care of graves of victims of the Nazi regime.

While the CID was interested in “cleaning” the symbolic place in order to make space for public commemoration, the Bavarian government had other goals. As former prisoner Oskar Müller (1959) wrote, “We aren’t making any progress in the creation of a warning and memorial site in Dachau. It is quite obvious: The motivation for this stance is the intention
to spread the cloak of silence and oblivion over the last period of German history.” It is therefore not surprising that the first steps toward a memorial were limited to the organization of a rally on the roll-call square in September 1956 and the laying of a foundation stone in order to pressure the Bavarian regional government to further support the building of a central memorial.

Ideas of what the future memorial should look like, and what kind of message it was supposed to transmit, however, varied considerably among its supporters. While Curate Leonard Roth in his sermon during the laying of the foundations stressed “the brotherhood of mutual acceptance and mutual help as it existed in the concentration camp” (Roth 1956, my translation), the CID in one of its official statements underlined that the monument “should express not only the remembrance and loyalty to our dead, but also the spirit of resistance and the struggle for freedom, and be a warning to current and future generations” (Comité International de Dachau 1989: 11, my translation). This careful formulation was the result of a compromise. Even within the community of former prisoners, there was stark disagreement about the adequate way of addressing and commemorating the experiences of prisoners in concentration camps. Diverging opinions could be found particularly between German and non-German survivors. While the German survivors wanted their solidarity, resistance, and heroism in the struggle against Nazism to be represented, survivors of other nationalities were more in favor of illustrating the brutal horrors of the camp. This difference had to do with the different status in society that survivors possessed in their respective home countries. Former West German detainees were still marginalized and did not want to provoke German society by erecting a memorial that would remind everybody of the crimes committed in the name of many of its members. In France and the Benelux states, whence many members of the CID came, the situation looked quite different. By the 1950s, survivors were well recognized here and enjoyed a comparably high level of recognition as fighters against an oppressive regime (Marcuse 2001).

These internal differences might explain why the CID initially invited only artists who had been interned in Dachau to submit a proposal. It was assumed that the shared experience of suffering would feed into a project that could be related to and accepted by all. The response to this first call was very limited, however. Only two proposals were submitted and
prompted the CID to open a second call to “artistes et artisans déportés de tous le pays” in January 1959 (Comité International de Dachau 1989: 11). Through May, 72 artists from 18 countries asked for the application forms, and 46 actually sent in proposals. The jury, made up of representatives of the CID, the Bavarian state government, and international artists associations, short-listed six proposals. All of these were highly abstract, indicating a new trend in memorials moving away from the traditional forms of pillars, towers, and realistic statues to more expansive, avant-garde forms (Marcuse 2010). None of the proposals, however, received unanimous support by the jury members, because most suggestions were either not specific enough or could, according to the jury, easily lead to misinterpretations. There was also a prevalent feeling that the terror of the concentration camp defied artistic rendering in an honorable monument.

The fact that the Bavarian state government was not hastening the evacuation of the refugee settlement (the last residents did not move out until April 1965), paired with a lack of financial support and insecurity about the future layout of the camp, further complicated the decision-making process. Opposition came also from another, rather unexpected side. The episcopal diocesan authorities refused to support the International Memorial, which was seen as standing in contrast and in competition to the Todesangst Christi chapel that had been erected opposite the roll-call square in 1960. Competition between the different memory agents was unspoken, but fierce (Hoffmann-Curtius 1998). In 1965, the CID called for another competition, this time limited to four of the previously short-listed candidates. After lengthy discussions, Nandor Glić, a Jewish Yugoslav sculptor who had been persecuted by the Nazis and had joined the resistance in 1944, won the first prize.

Interpretation and Representation

Discussions continued even after the jury had made its choice, further delaying the start of the construction. Many former prisoners complained that Nandor Glić’s proposal placed too much emphasis on suffering while not paying enough attention to acts of solidarity and resistance in the camp. This criticism resonated with references to a spirit of camaraderie among the concentration camp inmates, which had become an important element of the collective memory of the survivors. The different elements that make
up the final layout of the memorial as it stands today try to satisfy the divergent requests that came from within the community of survivors. The bronze sculpture and the jagged path symbolize death and destruction, violence and victimhood. The two walls with the inscription and the altar dedicated to the unknown prisoner represent martyrdom, but also hope and a clear message (“Never again!”) for the future. The installation with the chains and the patches then makes reference to the utopian quality of international camp solidarity in times of distress.

It is almost ironic then that this last element in particular is anything but inclusive when it comes to the representation of the different groups of victims. When comparing the colors of the triangles on the oval chains to the list of identifiers that had been used in the Dachau concentration camp, it becomes immediately evident that three patches are missing. There are no green, pink, or black triangles, thus excluding those who had been designated “professional criminals,” “asocials,” and homosexuals from representation in the monument. The select focus on certain victim groups, and the intentional exclusion of others, clearly reflects the prevailing power imbalances within the prisoners’ community as well as between prisoners and wider society. The CID represented mainly political prisoners and decided to include only those patches in the final monument whose wearers were recognized as persecuted victim groups in 1945. The rights, emotional needs, and legalistic demands of other victims were simply ignored. This is partly due to the fact that not all victim groups had a lobby at the time of the erection of the memorial and probably would have refused to be labeled asocial or criminal after 1945. Moreover, homosexuality was still a criminal offence until 1969. Nevertheless, it is rather astonishing that the same mechanisms of exclusion, silencing, and marginalization reemerged within a group, which had been subject to persecution and segregation for years. This shows how social distinctions imposed by the Nazis can resonate in the present and affect the ability of those groups to shape memories of the violence they have sustained. This also proves, in a sad way, how profound and long-lasting the effects of the Nazi ideology are on both victims and perpetrators and to what extent this has an impact on present-day practices of remembering and memory politics. The fate of the “forgotten victims,” excluded from official recognition, began to reattract public attention only in the 1980s, long after the memorial had been built. In 1995, on the initiative of several Munich gay groups, a pink marble triangle was added to the
prayer room of the memorial site, though other two victim groups are still waiting for official recognition.

The multilingual inscription on the headwall similarly bears witness to the conflicting conceptions and goals present among members of the CID. The exact meaning and connotation of the inscriptions in the different languages vary. Whereas the German text suggests a fateful inevitability of death with the formulation “die . . . ihr Leben liessen” (those who gave/lost their lives), the English version reads, “who were exterminated here,” thus emphasizing the brutality of the crimes committed in the camp. The tenor of the French and the Russian inscriptions matches that of the English, again demonstrating how entrenched divisions within the prisoners’ society directly translated into the messages carried by the memorial site. This is also a vivid example of the mechanisms that underlie both the inscription and incorporation of memories through representation or lack of representation in a specific memorial.

The struggles over interpretation did not stop after the memorial was finally dedicated; on the contrary, their impact on the wider political and social context became even more evident. The unveiling ceremony on September 8, 1968, was accompanied by heavy protests, and violent altercations broke out between students and camp survivors. One factor leading to this incident was the invitation of military bands. While for most former prisoners the presence of the army was a normal element in a ritual honoring their countries’ dead, for others the fact that only bands from Western European countries had been invited caused ambivalent feelings and led to the suspicion that this was more than anything else a NATO display.

Further, the ceremony had been prepared primarily by the French and Belgian members of the CID, for whom celebrating the military might that had ultimately helped to defeat Nazism was more ideologically acceptable than for the German survivors. The Germans saw Hitler’s militarism as the source of evil and preferred to emphasize the idea of pacifism. The young generation refused both approaches and saw the dedication ceremony as a perfect stage for criticizing German memory politics. This implied not only a condemnation of the militarism of their parents’ generation but also of West German politics of dealing publicly with the National Socialist past as well as of Germany’s remilitarization. The student protest movement was at its peak in 1968 and took the Dachau ceremony as a suitable outlet for its
antiestablishment politics and the confrontation with top-level representatives they considered fascist. Confrontations thus took place on two fronts, that is, between different nationalities on the one hand and between the generations on the other (Marcuse 2001).

As the most active members of the CID, the primarily francophone Dachau survivors present at the ceremony completely misunderstood the German banners and slogans with which the students tried to interrupt the service, and a physical struggle ensued between former prisoners and demonstrators. Even if it was quickly understood that the protests were targeting West German politics, survivors perceived the disruption of the ceremony as an attempt to dishonor the commemoration of the dead as well as of the living—that is, of the survivors, their experiences, and their memories (Hoffmann 1997–98). It would take several years before the impact of these social and political contradictions would diminish and peaceful celebrations could take place that were less characterized by discussions about the “right” interpretation of past and present events.

Conclusion

The struggles over interpretation and representation that surrounded the design, erection, and interpretation of the Dachau International Memorial well into the 1990s illustrates how memory can function as an apt vehicle for the articulation of power. Like historical sources and oral histories, memorials do, however, not merely recall the past in the present. Indeed, rather than the past itself, they reflect present conceptions of the past. That these conceptions—and hence the memories they represent—are not static becomes evident when tracing the various moments in which power operated at Dachau. Throughout the history of the memorial, power has shifted from the Allied Military Government to local authorities and to survivor organizations. The analysis of their interactions demonstrates that the emergence of new identifications and the consolidation of hegemonic rules are particularly pronounced at “authentic” sites of past violence and conflict, where survivor organizations and the state are forced to collaborate.

That this does not always lead to the desired results, however, becomes particularly evident when looking at the conflicts that emerged during the planning phase of the International Memorial. The presence of a heterogeneous group of survivors forced the supporters of the memorial to find a
compromise between the existing different positions. The fact that discussions about the right form and interpretation of the memorial were so fierce among the different memory agents can only be explained by the particular dynamics surrounding Holocaust memorials. The risk of renewal of political conflict and the reliving of traumatic memories by victims and survivors are ever-present. In addition, there is the difficulty of finding a universal language that is both dignified and able to express the different experiences of individual prisoners. Unlike the commemoration of World War I, which had followed a clear template of heroism and martyrdom, memories of the Holocaust are located “at the limits of representation” (Friedländer 1992: 3). The relationship between artistic form and a painful past thus points us to the impossibility of reaching a meta-level that allows us to adequately deal with the horrors experienced during the Third Reich (Adorno 1963; Agamben 1999).

The reasons for the contested nature of the Dachau memorial go beyond mere issues of representation, however, and are closely connected to questions of power and identity. It is the direct or indirect social guidance that provides “scaffolding for a moral framework, an attempt at social control” (Viejo-Rose 2011: 469), which makes memorials prone to power struggles. Deciding over the form a memorial takes means influencing the understanding that future generations will have of past events. However, as memory work is fluid and dynamic, different groups continue to push for new representations as soon as they gain the power to do so. The Dachau memorial is a case in point.

Significantly, in the course of setting up the Dachau International Memorial, empowerment and disenfranchisement of victims and survivors of the Nazi regime went hand in hand. While those whose stories had been silenced for a long time were finally represented by a memorial, others continued to suffer exclusion, as they were not recognized in such official forms of representation; at Dachau, these were the victim groups that had suffered most under National Socialism. As mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion get reproduced over time, we come to see that commemoration is just as much about remembrance as it is about forgetting (cf. Trouillot 1995). This purported contradiction between remembrance and oblivion is still felt in Dachau today, and discussions about the right interpretation of past events continue. Decisions regarding who and what we remember, but also who and what we force into the realm of oblivion,
motivate much of the public discourse in contemporary Germany even if they might have lost their immediate political impact.

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