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Ambushed by Memory: Postconflict Popular Memorialization in Northern Ireland – A Right to Memory?

Bill Rolston*

ABSTRACT[∞]

The purpose of this article is to examine the issue of public memorialization from the position of victimized and often marginalized groups who struggle from below for the acknowledgement of their experiences and the right to articulate them publicly. Initially, it critiques the state's top-down role in the creation and propagation of collective memory and its consequent role in memorialization. It then considers a range of public memorials which are organized on a more bottom-up basis, including countermemorials, stumble stones and shrines. Finally, it considers one case study in depth, the phenomenon of memorial plaques in working-class areas of Belfast in memory of victims of the 30-year-long political conflict.

KEYWORDS: collective memory, victims, dignity, Northern Ireland

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Is there a right to memory? In one sense, the answer to the question seems self-evident; living involves remembering no less than breathing, so how could it not be a right? But, just as international law recognizes the right to life, then perhaps there should be a right to memory. The question becomes more significant when we ask about traumatic memories. Leaving aside the aspect of 'unspeakability' – 'the difficulty of narrating, from the context of normality now, the nature of the abnormality then'¹ – when it comes to trauma, what right have people to remember victimization? This is a question which relates not simply to people as individuals; what right have victimized groups and populations to remember and memorialize? Memory, as Maurice Halbwachs asserts, is not simply a private, unarticulated phenomenon.² So, the issue of a right to memory comes down to this: Is there a right to public memory, to memorialization? Do collectives have the right to articulate and share their memories? Do they have the right to memorialize in public space? Does the state have any obligation to support the memory work of such collectives?

The international literature on human rights contains no direct reference to a right to memory; however, there are some strong hints in existing international conventions and protocols.³ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) speaks of various rights: nationality, freedom of conscience and religion, education, and participation in cultural life. Although not directly addressed, it is clear that, as memory is at the core of these processes, then by extension the Declaration supports memory rights. There is a cluster of conventions which relates to a wide range of rights in terms of development and politics, as well as protection from genocide, which implicitly relates to memory. Genocide leaves its traumatic legacy in collective memory, and even the more prosaic rights to political, economic and cultural development aspire to benefits in situations where collectives have experience of living

¹ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 22.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ Philip Lee, 'Towards a Right to Memory,' *Media Development* 57(2) (2010): 3–10; Anna Reading, 'Identity, Memory and Cosmopolitanism: The Otherness of the Past and a Right to Memory?' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14(4) (2011): 379–394.

without those benefits.⁴ Another cluster of conventions relates to cultural heritage and its protection, especially in times of war. Although these conventions focus mainly on the preservation of significant sites and artefacts, it is obvious that collective memory is a relevant component of the process whereby these sites and artefacts became culturally significant.⁵

By far the most direct focus on victims' right to remember is the final report submitted by UN special rapporteur Louis Joinet in 1996.⁶ In paragraph 42, he speaks of the state's role in symbolic measures on behalf of victims, maintaining that the state has a duty to help restore victims' dignity, that it has a duty of remembrance. This point is elaborated in Annex II, entitled 'Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity.' Principle 2, 'Duty to Remember,' reads as follows:

A people's knowledge of the history of their oppression is part of their heritage and, as such, shall be preserved by appropriate measures in fulfilment of the State's duty to remember. Such measures shall be aimed at preserving the collective memory from extinction and, in particular, at guarding against the development of revisionist and negationist arguments.⁷

Principle 13 would impose on the state a duty to preserve archives so that truth can be pursued and memory supported. Principle 44, 'Measures of Satisfaction,' would require the state to engage in a number of symbolic measures, including 'official declarations rehabilitating victims,' 'commemorative ceremonies, naming of public thoroughfares, monuments, etc.,'

⁴ These include the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Declaration on Social Progress and Development (1969) and the Declaration on the Right to Development (1986).

⁵ These include the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954), the Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2003), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), the Recommendation Concerning the Protection, at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) and the Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas (1976).

⁶ Louis Joinet, 'Question of Impunity of Perpetrators of Human Rights Violations (Civil and Political),' UN Doc. E/CN.4/SUB.2/1997/20 (26 June 1997).

⁷ This paragraph was included verbatim in UN Economic and Social Council, 'Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity,' UN Doc. E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1 (8 February 2005).

'periodic tribute to the victims' and 'acknowledgement in history textbooks and human rights training manuals of a faithful account of exceptionally serious violations.'

In addition, the issue of memory runs through the range of mechanisms of transitional justice, most obviously in those truth commissions which have encouraged victim testimony. Likewise, reparations in a number of societies, such as in Colombia currently, include symbolic reparation which explicitly acknowledges and memorializes the experiences of victims of political violence.

Despite these instances, in terms of collective rights to memory and memorialization, international legal literature and practice provides little by way of a blueprint. The purpose of this article is therefore to look at this question from the other end, from the position of victimized and often marginalized groups who struggle from below for the acknowledgement of their experiences and the right to articulate them publicly through memorialization. Initially, it critiques the state's top-down role in the creation and propagation of collective memory and its consequent role in memorialization. It then considers a range of public memorials which are organized on a more bottom-up basis, including countermemorials, stumble stones and shrines. Finally, it considers one case study in depth, the phenomenon of memorial plaques in working-class areas of Belfast in memory of victims of the political conflict.

THE STATE AND MEMORIALIZATION

Joinet's proposals provide a comprehensive account of what might be involved in a right to memory. However, they represent merely guidelines, or, to put it even more minimally, aspirations. Even international conventions on human rights require a robust system of monitoring and reporting if implementation is to have any hope of realization, but aspirations do not even have this architecture of implementation.

Even if a right to memory came to be established in international human rights law, it would face a number of obstacles in relation to implementation. The issue can be summed up in a superficially simple question: Whose memory? Placing the responsibility for sponsoring or supporting memory on the state, as would be the case, risks the emergence of a partial

representation of the past. The nation state has a prominent role in constructing the imagined community that is the state. As such, it is a crucial driver in the process of inventing the traditions that are said to characterize the legitimacy and importance of the nation. Specifically in relation to memory, the state has a key – if not *the* key – role in official memory entrepreneurship.

In this scenario, memory is power. The nation is an abstraction and therefore is built on simplification. The process of imagining the nation requires a definition of who is a member of the nation. Deliberately or otherwise, this leads not only to an identification of non-members, but also to a hierarchy of membership. Defining the nation involves marginalizing minorities and erasing enemies within; in short, it involves ‘symbolic annihilation of marginalized social groups and their historical identities.’⁸ Entrepreneurs of official memory forge a collective story, but it is a partial one and can entail the suppression of the collective memory of less powerful groups.⁹ Articulating the national heritage constructs a sense of belonging, but only for those who are invited to belong. Other collective memories can be nipped in the bud, downplayed, forgotten, suppressed, especially if they are the memories of groups which have been engaged in conflict with the state. As the state was not neutral in the political struggle, it is not even-handed in the creation of a collective memory post struggle. Thus, every form of official remembering is also a form of partial forgetting; ‘repressive erasure’ and ‘prescriptive forgetting’ are built into every construction of a generalized formal narrative.¹⁰

It is accepted that the state’s legitimacy is founded on the monopolization of force and that the often long process of the emergence of the nation state is the struggle of one group to achieve that monopoly over others. It is not too far-fetched to conclude that the domination of official memory is equally a central constituent of the state’s legitimacy.

⁸ Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, ‘Memorial Landscapes: Analytic Questions and Metaphors,’ *GeoJournal* 73(3) (2008): 169.

⁹ Chris Weedon and Glenn Jordan, ‘Collective Memory: Theory and Politics,’ *Social Semiotics* 22(2) (2012): 143–153.

¹⁰ Paul Connerton, ‘Seven Types of Forgetting,’ *Memory Studies* 1(1) (2008): 59–71.

All of this contributes to the outcomes when the state turns its attention to memorialization: 'Memorials are important symbolic conduits not only for expressing a version of history but casting legitimacy upon it as well.'¹¹ Paradoxically, official memorials, though clearly representations of memory, also contribute to forgetting. They primarily exist to awe and inspire, but in doing so they 'often replace the individual obligation to remember.'¹² By articulating and formalizing memory, the state steals agency from its citizens. Instead of emotion and engagement, the official memorial can create 'a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in place of raw memory and growing at its expense.'¹³ The phenomenon is most obvious at the level of the monument: 'at the same moment in which the society raises a monument it is released from the obligation to remember.'¹⁴

The sheer larger-than-life scale of the monument serves to remove it from everyday life in which individual memory exists. In addition, landscaping and other formal spatial devices remove the monument from the vernacular.¹⁵ State monuments 'reduce the public to passive spectators.'¹⁶ Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of war memorials. They do not act as 'interactive mourning sites ... do not invite remembrance of the individual soldier. Rather, they stand for the permanency of the empire or nation-state.'¹⁷ In short, 'state-sponsored "national" places of memory may conceal the past as much as they reveal it.'¹⁸

¹¹ Dwyer and Alderman, supra n 8 at 167.

¹² Dahlia Azran, 'Stolpersteine: Challenges of Remembrance from Berlin to Ground Zero' (BA Hons. thesis, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, 2013), 32, https://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/etd_hon_theses/1094/ (accessed 12 January 2020).

¹³ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1986), 24.

¹⁴ James Young, 'Cuando las piedras hablan,' *Revista Puentes* 1(1) (2000): 80–93, quoted in Elissa Rosenberg, 'Walking in the City: Memory and Place,' *Journal of Architecture* 17(1) (2001): 133.

¹⁵ Paul Stangl, 'The Vernacular and the Monumental: Memory and Landscape in Post-War Berlin,' *GeoJournal* 73(3) (2008): 245–253.

¹⁶ Diane E. Goldstein and Diane Tye, "'The Call of the Ice": Tragedy and Vernacular Responses of Resistance, Heroic Reconstruction, and Reclamation,' in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 274.

¹⁷ Kay Turner, 'September 11 Memorials: Tracing the Traces of Their History' (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Council, 2008), 7, http://www.brooklynartscouncil.org/files/downloads/BAC_Sept_11_Essay_Dr_Kay_Turner_2008.pdf (accessed 6 January 2020), 7.

¹⁸ Matthew Cook and Micheline van Riemsdijk, 'Agents of Memorialization: Gunter Demnig's *Stolpersteine* and the Individual (Re-)Creation of a Holocaust Landscape in Berlin,' *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014): 140.

They do so by excluding representation of the memories of marginalized and subaltern groups as defined in the national project. At the same time, the 'memories of ordinary people are appropriated by elites and pressed into the service of conquest and domination.'¹⁹

Even if there is no deliberate maliciousness involved, nation states tend to opt for 'thin' rather than 'thick' memorialization, thereby obliterating part of the past.²⁰ Commemorative narratives consist of three analytical elements: the person or persons being commemorated, the event being commemorated and the wider context of the event. Focusing on the first two elements produces a 'thin' narrative, while bringing in the third leads to a 'thick' narrative.

The thinner the message (often a consensual message), the larger the audience that can identify with it. The risk is that the makeup of the narrative can be reduced so much that it will repel those collectives for whom the paucity of content is tantamount to erasing the past ... the wider the narrative ... the harder it is to construct a commemoration without contests and tensions to which a large collective can relate.²¹ Thinner narratives work well in terms of consensus, state consolidation and nation building. For subaltern groups, however, especially in societies or situations of contested legitimacy, there is likely to be a desire to hold on tight to thick narratives.

If official memory is about power, then monuments are one of the main means of realizing power; they are 'material devices for social control.'²²

COUNTERMONUMENTS

It is because of criticisms such as these that there has emerged the phenomenon of countermonuments. The term was first used by artists Esther and Jochen Gerz in the design of their Monument against Fascism in Hamburg, Germany.²³ Installed in 1986, it was

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, 'Commemorating a Difficult Past: Yitzhak Rabin's Memorials,' *American Sociological Review* 67(1) (2002): 30–51.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Natalia Krzyżanowska, 'The Discourse of Counter-Monuments: Semiotics of Material Commemoration in Contemporary Urban Spaces,' *Social Semiotics* 26(5) (2016): 465–485.

²³ Rosenberg, *supra* n 14 at 133.

a 12-metre-high obelisk of aluminium coated in lead on which citizens were invited to write names and inscriptions. As each low-level section was filled in, the monument was lowered into the ground. Eventually, it disappeared completely in 1993, taking the names and inscriptions with it. For all that its imposing height hinted at its being a monument, in fact it was a statement against monumentalism. It fulfilled this role in a number of ways and, in doing so, set the agenda for other countermemorials.

Unlike the monument, it is claimed, the countermemorial is quotidian. It is part of everyday life; 'whereas the monumental memorial is frequently built in a space designated and sectioned off for the memorial, the countermemorial is designed to exist within and among the "thicks and thins" of the city.'²⁴ As such, it is often designed to be physically accessible, even inviting, in ways the monument is not intended to be. The Gerz's countermemorial in Hamburg demanded public interaction, touching and even what would be judged as vandalism if inflicted in more formal memorials.

The accessibility of countermemorials is also intended to be emotional; they exist to articulate terrible loss rather than to shy away from that loss or mask it in a subdued consensual narrative. At the same time, they do not offer easy and instant consolation.²⁵ They do not seek 'closure' but rather leave the question of loss open for interrogation by those who encounter them. This is particularly relevant when it comes to injustices which do not easily, if ever, lend themselves to 'closure,' such as the Holocaust, which, as Natalia Krzyżanowska argues, makes monumental commemoration impossible.²⁶ Countermemorials 'express the breach in their faith of civilization without mending it.'²⁷ They offer no easy answers.²⁸ Instead they invite the onlooker to think, to question, to be concerned.

²⁴ Mary Rachel Gould and Rachel E. Silverman, 'Stumbling upon History: Collective Memory and the Urban Landscape,' *GeoJournal* 78(5) (2013): 793.

²⁵ Azran, *supra* n 12 at 39.

²⁶ Krzyżanowska, *supra* n 22 at 473.

²⁷ Azran, *supra* n 12 at 46.

²⁸ Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazakerley, 'Counter-Monuments: The Anti-Monumental and the Dialogic,' *Journal of Architecture* 17(6) (2012): 961.

Finally, the Monument against Fascism notwithstanding, countermemorials frequently challenge the accepted rubric of monumentalism in terms of form. They can be abstract, involving 'voids instead of solids, absence instead of presence.' Often, they are 'sunken rather than elevated.'²⁹ They do not dominate either the landscape or the attention of the passer-by but in their unusualness or unpretentiousness draw the viewer in for a closer examination. 'Rather than being obvious destination sites,' frequently they 'are to be encountered by chance during everyday travels through the city.'³⁰

Clearly countermemorials differ at almost every level from state-sponsored monuments. They seek 'to disrupt and contest official histories by offering counter histories of sacrifice and death.'³¹ Unlike war memorials, for example, they do not focus on heroes but rather 'recognise victims of conflict or persecution and admonish the perpetrators.'³² In short, 'counter-memory is the memory that challenges the interest at stake in collective memory.'³³ More precisely, it challenges the official collective memory as promulgated by the state in order to allow for the collective memory of other underrepresented or silenced groups to have their public say. A countermemorial can be, in the words of Dorfman, 'one modest, unpretentious image speaking louder than all the machinery of state.'³⁴

POPULAR MEMORY: SHRINES

At the other end of the spectrum for official state memorialization are the artefacts in public space relating to popular, grassroots memory. Among these are the shrines that appear

²⁹ Ibid., 956.

³⁰ Ibid., 960.

³¹ Margaret Gibson, 'Death and Grief in the Landscape: Private Memorials in Public Space,' *Cultural Studies Review* 17(1) (2011): 155.

³² Stevens, Frank and Fazakerley, supra n 28 at 955.

³³ Weedon and Jordan, supra n 9 at 150.

³⁴ Ariel Dorfman, 'The Missing and Photography: The Uses and Misuses of Globalization,' in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 257.

spontaneously at sites of road traffic accidents or, on a much larger scale, on occasions of tragedy such as the 9/11 attacks³⁵ or the death of Princess Diana.³⁶

At one level, it is easy to condemn this proliferation as a form of ‘memorial mania,’³⁷ a ‘contemporary obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent, excessive desire to express, or claim, those issues in visibly public contexts.’³⁸ More sympathetically, it is possible to see such shrines as a method for bringing death back from the repressed, making it part of ordinary life at the actual sites where it occurred. Throughout the 20th century, there was an increasing compartmentalization whereby death and mourning were removed from the everyday world. Grief became increasingly privatized; gravesites were spaces separated off from the quotidian world and were visited by family and friends rather than the public. As a result, even deaths which occurred amid the hustle and bustle of the city became invisible; there were no signs to indicate the sites of sorrow. Elissa Rosenberg bemoans

the shocking dissonance between the serene beauty of the landscape and the atrocities that occurred there, between the banal normality of the present and the traumas of the past ... The site does not ‘explain’—it remains silent. Horrific events took place and the landscape did not cry out: its beauty remained unchanged.³⁹

What spontaneous shrines do is bring ‘deceased individuals back into the fabric of society,’⁴⁰ into the middle of everyday public life. For the bereaved, shrines become a statement about loss or about the injustice of the death commemorated. But they are also a celebration of the life of the deceased. As one relative said of a memorial mural in Philadelphia, ‘The grave is

³⁵ Turner, *supra* n 17.

³⁶ Jeannie Banks Thomas, ‘Communicative Commemoration and Graveside Shrines: Princess Diana, Jim Morrison, My “Bro” Max, and Boogs the Cat,’ *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁷ Elaine Campbell, ‘Public Sphere as Assemblage: The Cultural Politics of Roadside Memorialization,’ *British Journal of Sociology* 64(3) (2013): 531.

³⁸ Erika Doss, *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials: Towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁹ Rosenberg, *supra* n 14 at 132.

⁴⁰ Jack Santino, ‘Performative Commemorative Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death,’ *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

about death ... This mural is about life!⁴¹ In displacing death from what has come to be seen as 'its properly bounded locations,'⁴² shrines also extend 'the boundaries of who is allowed or expected to participate in the mourning process.'⁴³ They are for public consumption as much as they exist to comfort the bereaved. For victimized groups, shrines function as a means of solidarity:⁴⁴ 'they are foremost about solidarity and connection with other humans, not with the divine.'⁴⁵

Overall, spontaneous shrines 'articulate pain, make the rest of us take notice of the death, consecrate a site of loss, and mark untimely deaths.'⁴⁶

STUMBLE STONES

Explicitly or otherwise, shrines frequently articulate a sense of injustice: the horror of a violent attack, the premature death of someone in a traffic accident. But there is a particular form of memorialization that combines popular expression, artistic intervention and a clearly expressed message of injustice: stumble stones, in German, *Stolpersteine*. The phenomenon began in Cologne in 1995 when artist Gunter Demnig decided to commemorate local Sinti and Roma people who had been deported and killed by the Nazis.⁴⁷ The task later broadened to commemorating all victims of the Holocaust, to the point where, by 2019, Demnig had personally laid over 70,000 stumble stones throughout Europe and Russia, a task that keeps him on the road 300 days a year.⁴⁸ The process of memorialization is relatively simple. A cobblestone or piece of pavement is removed and a brass plate, about 10 cm square, is cemented into the pavement. On it is a minimum of information – the name of someone who

⁴¹ Jonathan Lohman, 'A Memorial Wall in Philadelphia,' *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 196.

⁴² Gibson, *supra* n 31 at 151.

⁴³ Goldstein and Tye, *supra* n 16 at 237.

⁴⁴ Ralph Hartley, 'Signifying Places of Atrocity,' in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 286.

⁴⁵ Turner, *supra* n 17 at 4.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *supra* n 36 at 19.

⁴⁷ Linde Apel, 'Stumbling Blocks in Germany,' *Rethinking History* 18(2) (2014): 187.

⁴⁸ Kaushik Patowary, 'Stolpersteine: The "Stumbling Stones" of Holocaust Victims,' *Amusing Planet*, March 2019, <https://www.amusingplanet.com/2019/03/stolpersteine-stumbling-stones-of.html> (accessed 7 January 2020).

had lived in the adjacent building, the date in which they were arrested by the Nazis and the date they died in a concentration camp. The purpose is obvious and yet profound; these dead have no grave, no headstone. As Demnig himself stated, 'we have to restore their names. In the concentration camp they were numbers.'⁴⁹ The plate itself, as well as the ceremony accompanying its placement, serves to individualize the story of the Holocaust and to acknowledge the actual names of formerly anonymous victims in the heart of the very community where the crime occurred.

That is not to say that there is an absence of controversy in relation to the interventions. Sinti and Roma people objected to the first plates partly because they did not want people walking on the names of the dead. As a result, 'the first 100 or so Stolpersteine ever installed do not carry a name, but instead bear the inscription "Romm", "Rommni", "Sinto" or "Sintezza".'⁵⁰ Although the authorities in Munich, Villingen-Schwenningen and Pullheim prohibited stumble stones on the basis that people should not walk on the names of the dead,⁵¹ the Roma and Sinti objection points to a deeper significance: public memorialization which does not involve the consent and support of the community that has been victimized can become an added form of victimization.

A further criticism is that the downside of the minimalism of the intervention is that little if any light is shone on the fascist system which produced the victims. For example, the stumble stones say nothing of the

non-Jewish neighbours who looked on as Jewish residents were picked up or had to go to assembly points ... Nor do they make reference to those who attended the auctions, which occasionally took place in people's homes after their deportation, in the hope of finding a bargain.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cook and van Riemsdijk, *supra* n 18 at 145.

⁵⁰ Apel, *supra* n 47 at 187.

⁵¹ Fern Schumer Chapman, *Stumbling on History: An Art Project Compels a Small German Town to Face Its Past* (Lake Bluff, IL: Gussie Rose Press, 2016), 14.

⁵² Apel, *supra* n 47 at 190.

This is why, in a separate intervention in the Bavarian Quarter, Schöneberg, Berlin, in 1992, artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock elected to place banners on lamp posts. Unlike the stumble stones, they were text-heavy. For example, one banner reproduced the following account by a Jewish victim.

We had a parakeet. When we received the decree stating that Jews were forbidden to have house pets, my husband just couldn't part with the animal ... Perhaps someone denounced him, for one day my husband received a subpoena to appear before the Gestapo ... After many fearful weeks I received a postcard from the police, stating that upon payment of a fee of three Reichsmarks I could pick up the urn containing my husband.⁵³

Without such a wider context, it is argued, stumble stones run the risk of appearing to seek absolution of guilt through the buying of indulgences ... [they] have little to do with historical justice; they do not redress historic wrongs, but rather allow the descendants of perpetrators and bystanders to be less troubled by their history.⁵⁴

This could be said of memorials in general, but it is a more fundamental criticism if the memorial concerned is specifically designed with a view to historical redress.

On the positive side, however, the stumble stones are powerful signifiers. A pedestrian in a street which no longer bears any of the scars of war or genocide is suddenly ambushed by the memory of those events. As Cook and van Riemsdijk put it, 'You may not intend to visit the memorial, yet this one will visit you!'⁵⁵ People of the time were frequently prone to argue that they knew nothing about the atrocities that were happening. Thanks to stumble stones, that is less likely to be a statement which contemporary pedestrians can utter. Moreover, 'the memorial stones do more than remind us of the past. The *Stolpersteine* are also the material outcomes of recent struggles over the right to memorialize.'⁵⁶ Likewise, *baldozas*, tiles naming victims placed on pavements or walls near sites of torture in Argentina, 'are not strictly traces

⁵³ Rosenberg, *supra* n 14 at 143.

⁵⁴ Apel, *supra* n 47 at 191.

⁵⁵ Cook and van Riemsdijk, *supra* n 18 at 143.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

of the militants, but traces of a process of research and reconstruction carried out by the members of the group,⁵⁷ a process which also involves countering the opposition of those groups which are against such memorialization. In other words, what is involved in the process of memorializing is not static memory, but active politics. The memory of victims is kept alive in the political debates, discussions and indeed conflicts from which the *baldosas* emerge.

BELFAST: MEMORIES OF CONFLICT

The most violent years of the recent conflict in Northern Ireland lasted from 1969 to 1994 and witnessed 3,600 conflict-related deaths. Tourism was one of the casualties of the conflict. The tourist board's preference was to direct visitors away from the working-class areas where the conflict was most intense, even though there were interesting attractions there, not least political murals. One such area, West Belfast, was in many ways, the cockpit of the conflict. It took in the republican Falls Road, with the largest concentration of nationalists/Catholics in Northern Ireland, and the adjacent Shankill Road, a staunch unionist/Protestant area.

Post conflict, tourism has taken off as an important part of the economy. Along with the old favourites, such as the Giant's Causeway, are new tourist 'products' such as Titanic Belfast, the site of the construction of the ship of that name, and tours of sites which feature in HBO's *Game of Thrones*. In addition, West Belfast is no longer out of bounds and during the summer numerous tour company coaches, hop-on-hop-off tourist buses and countless taxis bring thousands into the area to view the murals. There is undoubtedly a certain exoticism and frisson about visiting these areas once deemed to be no-go. In contrast, Belfast city centre is uninteresting. Although the centre witnessed an estimated 70-plus conflict-related deaths, no permanent memorials have been erected that refer to the conflict.⁵⁸ Belfast

⁵⁷ Manuel Tufró and Luis Sanjurjo, 'Descentralizar la memoria. Dos lógicas de intervención sobre el espacio urbano en la ciudad de Buenos Aires [Decentralizing Memory. Two Logics of Urban Space Intervention in the City of Buenos Aires],' *Universitas Humanística* 70 (2010): 128 (author's translation). See also Cristina Inés Bettanin, 'Iniciativas comunitarias: las Baldosas por la Memoria en la ciudad de Buenos Aires,' *Trabajo Social* 16(16) (2014): 65–78.

⁵⁸ Catherine Switzer and Sara McDowell, 'Redrawing Cognitive Maps of Conflict: Lost Spaces and Forgetting in the Centre of Belfast,' *Memory Studies* 2(3) (2009): 344.

city centre is a desert in terms of 'troubles memory.'⁵⁹ This fits with a wider strategy of providing 'shared space' for all citizens, which is operationalized as a commitment to consumerism, where shopping is said to be a driver not just of economic development, but also of conflict transformation.⁶⁰

At the same time, there are levels of disclosure when it comes to conflict memory in West Belfast. The buses stick to the main roads, while the taxis take tourists to a number of side streets. But to engage in something that approaches full disclosure, one needs to walk.⁶¹ Doing so, one can encounter West Belfast's equivalents of stumble stones. There are memorial plaques, most of them site specific, which allow a rich insight into what conflict has meant in the area. To convey this, let us take a virtual walking tour up the nationalist Falls Road and down the unionist Shankill Road.

We start at Belfast City Hall and walk west to Divis Street, which then becomes the Falls Road (see map where each numbered location below is indicated). It takes about 11 minutes to reach the first plaque.

1. At Divis Flats, there is a plaque to Patrick Rooney and Hugh McCabe.⁶² On 14 August 1969, unionist crowds from the Shankill area invaded the Falls area, burning hundreds of houses as they did. The police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), patrolled the areas in Shoreland armoured cars. They fired bullets from Browning machine guns into the nationalist Divis Flats, killing nine-year old Patrick Rooney as he lay in bed. He was

⁵⁹ Not to be thwarted, one tour company, Dead Centre Tours, brings visitors to view the places where violence occurred but of which no marks remain. Instead, the story is conveyed through the guide's words and the viewing of old photographs on an iPad. 'This is not a sightseeing tour in the strictest sense ... There is no physical reminder or legacy of the incidents involved.' See, <https://deadcentretours.com/the-tour/a-history-of-terror-the-tour/> (accessed 4 January 2020).

⁶⁰ Bree T. Hocking, *The Great Reimagining: Public Art, Urban Space and the Symbolic Landscapes of a 'New' Northern Ireland* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

⁶¹ An organization of Irish Republican Army (IRA) ex-prisoners, Coiste na nIarchímí, offers walking tours of the Falls Road, while EPIC, an organization of Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) ex-prisoners, offers walking tours of the Shankill Road. It is also possible to book joint walking tours of both areas.

⁶² As the restoration of victims' dignity is central to memorialization as a mechanism of justice, the names, ages and details of death of the victims are provided in full in what follows. The details of each incident can be found in David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2007).

the first child killed in the conflict. Twenty-year-old Hugh McCabe was a British soldier. He was home on holiday in Divis Flats when he was shot dead by the RUC. The police claimed he was armed, but family and neighbours said he was helping an injured man.

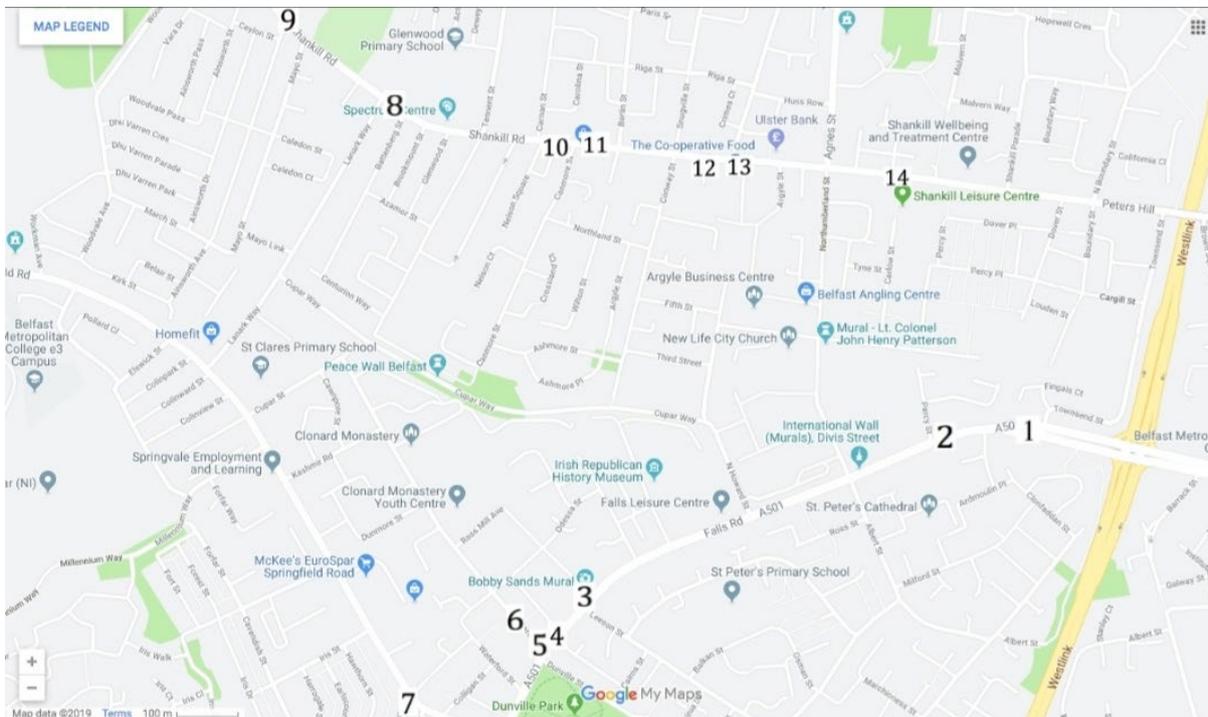


Figure 1: Locations of 14 memorial plaques in West Belfast

2. Nearby, on the right-hand side of the Falls Road, is a plaque noting that this is the site of ‘the Divis Street Resistance, 28th September 1964.’ This refers to the forceable removal by the RUC of the Irish national flag, the tricolour, from the window of the offices of the republican political party Sinn Féin, an action which led to widespread rioting.
3. Further up the Falls Road, at the corner of Sevastopol Street, a large mural of republican hunger striker Bobby Sands sits on the gable wall of the Sinn Féin office building. At the front of the building are three plaques. One refers to Pat McGeown, a former republican hunger striker, who died in October 1996 ‘as a direct result of being on the 1981 hunger strike in the H Blocks.’ A second plaque commemorates Máire

Drumm, aged 57, murdered on 28 October 1976 by the Ulster Defence Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters, a loyalist paramilitary group, as she recovered from surgery in hospital. She was vice-president of Sinn Féin. The third plaque relates to the murder of Paddy Loughran, Pat McBride and Michael O'Dwyer on 4 February 1992. Loughran (aged 61) and McBride (aged 40) were Sinn Féin members. Loughran was the doorman at the party's offices and advice centre on the Falls Road. O'Dwyer (aged 21) was a local man apparently seeking advice at the centre. Loughran admitted another man, Allen Moore, who turned out to be an RUC constable who seemingly was having mental health issues. He shot the three dead, then drove to Lough Neagh and killed himself.

4. A short distance away is Waterford Street. A plaque commemorates three local people who died in the middle of the contentious period of the republican prisoner hunger strike in 1981. Matt McLarnon (aged 21), a member of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), was shot dead during rioting at Divis Flats on 12 May 1981. Nora McCabe (aged 33) was killed at the corner of Linden Street and the Falls Road on 9 July 1981 by a plastic bullet fired by the RUC. The RUC claimed they had been firing at petrol bombers. Peter Doherty (aged 33) died on 31 July 1981, a week after having been struck by a plastic bullet fired by the British army as he sat in his living room in Divis Flats. The claim was that he had thrown a petrol bomb at the army, a claim denied by his partner, who had been with him at the time.
5. Turn back and 50 yards away at the corner of Clonard Street, there is a plaque 'dedicated to the memory of all those from the Falls and Clonard areas who lost their lives as a result of the conflict in our country.'
6. Further up Clonard Street on the left, a site-specific plaque commemorates IRA Volunteers Gerard Crossan (aged 19), Tom McCann (aged 20), Tony Lewis (aged 20) and John Johnston (aged 19), who died when a 30-pound bomb they were preparing went off prematurely.

7. Turn back to the Falls Road, then right into Springfield Road. Turn right again and shortly on your left is Crocus Street. A plaque there commemorates IRA Volunteer Finbarr McKenna (aged 33), who died on 2 May 1987 when a blast bomb he was preparing to throw at an RUC Station went off prematurely.
8. Walk up Springfield Road and turn right onto Lanark Way. At this point, we cross from the nationalist Falls area to the unionist Shankill area. A short walk takes us to Woodvale Road. The wall at the corner boasts a display of poppies in the shape of a cross and a plaque commemorating two men killed in a no-warning IRA bomb attack on the Four Step Inn public house on 29 September 1971 as they watched a football match on television. They were Alexander Andrews (aged 60) and Ernest Bates (aged 38).
9. Two hundred yards mountain-wards, on the right-hand side of Woodvale Road, is the Mountainview Tavern, which was blown up by the IRA on 5 April 1976 while patrons watched the Grand National on television. A plaque names the dead: Joseph Bell (aged 52), Alan Madden (aged 18), Nathaniel Shaw Adams (aged 29), William Andrews (aged 33) and Albert Fletcher (aged 32). Sixty-one people were injured.
10. Turning back down Woodvale and Shankill roads, past the site of the Four Step Inn, we come to Sugarfield Street on the right. There, a 'poppy cross' and plaque stand 'as a memorial to those locals from the Greater Shankill area who lost their lives at the hands of merciless Irish Republican murder gangs.'
11. Across the road, a 'poppy cross' and plaque mark the former site of Frizzell's fish shop. The flat above the shop was the headquarters of the West Belfast Brigade of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). On Saturday 23 October 1993, two young IRA men walked into the crowded shop; one, Thomas Begley, was carrying a bomb. The intention seems to have been to plant the bomb in the shop, which, when it exploded, would kill the UDA members believed to be in the offices above. They weren't. The bomb exploded prematurely in IRA man Thomas Begley's hands. Besides Begley, nine other people in the shop were also killed: John Frizzell, the owner (aged 63), Sharon

McBride, his daughter (aged 29), George Williamson (aged 63) and his wife Gillian (aged 49), Michael Morrison (aged 27), his partner Evelyn Baird (aged 27) and her daughter Michelle Baird (aged 7), Leanne Murray (aged 13) and Wilma McKee (aged 38). In addition, 57 people were injured. Begley (aged 23) is not included in any memorialization here, in the Memorial Garden across the road or in a large mural about this and other republican bombings on the Shankill Road about 100 yards away.

12. Further down the Shankill Road on the right, at Spiers Place, there is a mural depicting three Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) members alongside a plaque to commemorate them: Trevor King (aged 41), who was shot by the INLA a month previously and died on 9 July 1994; Davy Hamilton (aged 43), shot along with King, and who died the next day; and William Marchant (aged 49), shot dead by the IRA on 28 April 1987.

13. One hundred yards away, on the right side of the Shankill Road, there is a major memorial to victims of the IRA bombing of the Bayardo Bar on 13 August 1975. An accompanying plaque notes the victims' names: William John Gracey (aged 63), Samuel Gunning (aged 55), Joanne McDowell (aged 29), Hugh Alexander Harris (aged 21) and Linda Boyle (aged 17).

14. Another 200 yards down the Shankill Road, on the right, is a plaque where the Balmoral Furniture Showroom stood. On Saturday 11 December 1971, a no-warning bomb exploded there. A plaque notes the names of the victims: Hugh Bruce (aged 70), Harold King (aged 29), Tracey Munn (aged 2) and Colin Nicholl (aged 17 months). Responsibility was not claimed, but the action was believed to be the work of the IRA.

From there, it is a 15-minute walk back to the starting point at Belfast City Hall. Even with stops to read each of the plaques and to view murals along the way, the journey takes no more than two hours.

MEMORY AND METACONFLICT

It is a cliché that if walls could speak, they would have a tale to tell. Every wall in every working-class street in Belfast would have its own tale, relating either to the recent conflict, or the one

before that or any of the others which occurred since Belfast took off as an industrial town in the 18th century. These stories would be ‘thick,’ not only naming the victims but also explaining the circumstances of each incident as well as providing an interpretation of the reasons for the incident. The stories would, in this and in many other ways, starkly outline many of the questions considered earlier.

One such question would be about the ‘value’ of the stories being related. During the conflict in Northern Ireland, there was a ‘hierarchy of victims,’ evident, for example, in media coverage of killings.

In the first rank – getting the most prominent coverage – were British people killed in Britain; in the second, members of the security forces, whether army or RUC; in the third, civilian victims of republicans, including prison officers; in the fourth, members of the IRA or Sinn Féin, killed either by the security forces or loyalist paramilitaries; and in the fifth rank, garnering least coverage, were the innocent victims of loyalist paramilitaries.⁶³

The media coverage pointed to a wider hegemony where the state and swathes of public opinion also reproduced these views.

As memory theorists in Latin America in particular have written, there is, in societies in conflict, a constant struggle over what will be preserved as historical memory, official memory, history. That struggle becomes most pronounced at times of transition.

Political openings, thaws, liberalizations, and transitions give a boost to activities in the public sphere, so that previously censored narratives and stories can be incorporated and new ones can be generated. Such openings create a setting for new struggles

⁶³ Roy Greenslade, ‘Out of the Spotlight,’ *Guardian*, 1 July 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/jul/01/northernireland.comment> (accessed 6 January 2020).

over the meaning of the past, with a plurality of actors and agents who express a multiplicity of demands and claims.⁶⁴

For victims and survivors in Northern Ireland, that struggle has taken a particular form. In one sense, things are clear: there is a very specific definition of victims in law, the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which includes the bereaved, the injured and those who care for them.⁶⁵ However, this definition is not universally accepted in practice. The leading unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), seeks to distinguish 'innocent victims' from others. Member of Parliament Geoffrey Donaldson has stated their position:

In every conflict there are two sides, but in the case of Northern Ireland the previous Government determined that anyone affected by the troubles, either through the loss of a loved one or through psychological trauma or physical injury, would be defined as a victim and survivor. In effect, that means that innocent victims are equated with those who joined illegal terrorist organisations and went out to commit murder and destruction in Northern Ireland.⁶⁶

This position has direct consequences. A pension for the most seriously injured victims, although supported by almost every other party, has been blocked by the DUP on the grounds that a miniscule number of those eligible are republicans injured while involved in military actions.

There are many other examples not only of how interpretations of the past differ between different groups, but also of how that difference has become one more reason for ongoing political disagreement and conflict a quarter of a century after the historic peace agreement of 1998. Such issues include: proposals by the British government to introduce a

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (London: Latin America Bureau, 2003), 29.

⁶⁵ Northern Ireland Orders in Council, 2006 No. 2953 (N.I. 17), Introductory, art. 3, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2006/2953/article/3> (accessed 6 January 2020).

⁶⁶ UK Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons (16 July 2013), vol. 566, part 37, col. 954, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm130716/debtext/130716-0002.htm> (accessed 6 January 2020).

statute of limitations to ensure than no British soldiers can be prosecuted for actions during the conflict; the collapse of an attempt to construct a peace museum on the site of a former prison; objections by unionist politicians when republican elected representatives attend annual commemorations for IRA members killed during the conflict; the naming of sports grounds and, in one case, a children's playground, after dead republican militants. As is obvious from this partial list, most of these disputes centre on the memory work of republicans. Families of republican victims recount the ways in which they were disbelieved, marginalized and persecuted by state forces and the media while the conflict raged, with the inference being that they were merely apologists for terrorists. The peace process has not eradicated this prejudice. Instead, what has emerged is a metaconflict, that is, a conflict about what the conflict was about. 'Every contestation in the reform process tends to become a surrogate continuation of the conflict, producing in turn an endless replay of the meta-conflict.'⁶⁷

For such victims, the hegemonic position on the past involves 'repressive erasure' and 'prescriptive forgetting.'⁶⁸ The task that victims and their supporters set themselves consequently is that of counter-hegemony. They are involved in a 'struggle of memory against forgetting.'⁶⁹

Hegemonically, unionist victims of republican attacks are on surer ideological ground. At the same time, the peace process has been troubling for many in the unionist community. Nationalists are seen to have benefitted disproportionately from the peace process. This is particularly galling for unionists given the levels of support from nationalists for republican militarism during the conflict. Most disturbing for unionists is the phenomenon of 'terrorists in government' despite that previous support. The most high-profile instance was that of Martin McGuinness, former IRA commander, minister of education and, from 2007 to 2017, deputy

⁶⁷ Christine Bell, Colm Campbell and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Justice Discourses in Transition,' *Social and Legal Studies* 13(3) (2004): 316.

⁶⁸ Connerton, *supra* n 10 at 60–61.

⁶⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), part 1, chap. 2.

first minister. For many unionist victims, the peace process appeared to sideline their trauma in the interest of political expediency.

WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITY, MEMORY AND MEMORIALIZATION

While Belfast city centre is 'death-neutral,'⁷⁰ the same cannot be said of the surrounding working-class areas, such as those in West Belfast. On the contrary, there is a proliferation of memorialization of conflict-related death. There are murals, many depicting local victims. There are memorial gardens: some small, some ornate, some commemorating only activists from the respective non-state military groups, some also including the names of civilian victims. These large memory displays are unmissable on the bus and taxi tours. But the focus in this article has been on less obtrusive displays – small commemorative plaques which are easy to miss unless one is a pedestrian. Our walk took in a kind of Stations of the Cross in relation to the Irish conflict, 14 markers where people had fallen. For the most part, the pedestrians in these areas are not on walking tours, but are locals, going about their everyday business. Memory is therefore imbricated into 'the middle of areas of commerce and travel, into everyday life.'⁷¹ The deaths occurred in these streets, and so the memory of the dead lives on in these streets. One does not have to visit memorial sites; the streets are the sites, the plaques the reminders.

In one sense, the plaques are like shrines. They are site-specific reminders of sudden death. Rather than memory being relegated to a burial site, it is brought into everyday life. The dead are remembered and celebrated, neither out of sight nor mind. So, it can be expected that the plaques act as some sort of comfort for the bereaved, even if, given the sense of injustice involved, they fall short of bringing 'closure.' However, there is more involved. Obviously, those who lived through the conflict remember the events that have been memorialized. The message of injustice is for public consumption within the community. There

⁷⁰ Gibson, *supra* n 31 at 147.

⁷¹ Santino, *supra* n 40 at 13.

is thus a key intergenerational purpose in the memorialization, passing on the memory of injustice so that the community can continue to believe in and strive for justice.

In this sense, the plaques resemble stumble stones more than shrines; unlike the murals and memorial gardens, they are unobtrusive. They can be easy to miss; they blend into the street architecture. However, they differ significantly from stumble stones. They do not result from an artistic intervention into politics. There is no West Belfast equivalent of Gunter Demnig seeking to retrieve the forgotten names of atrocity victims and to commemorate them in a countermemorial manner. Rather, this is an intervention by local people, recording names of victims who have not been forgotten. The names are not those of long-dead strangers but of family, friends and neighbours who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or are seen to have died as they lived, true to a political cause. Many of the plaques have been erected by organizations connected to the political rivals in the conflict rather than, say, family members. Thus, they often follow a type of script. Republican victims, combatants or civilians, are said to have been 'murdered' 'by the RUC' or 'British state forces.' Republican combatants died 'on active service.' For their part, the loyalist combatants were killed 'by the enemies of Ulster.' These are familiar textual forms used by groups active in the conflict. Not everyone in an area will have agreed with the politics or actions of their respective military groups. At the same time, there is evidence, not least from the dedication ceremonies for a new plaque, that family members approve. It would be easy to dismiss the plaques as propaganda by illegal armed groups, even terrorists. Yet, it must be remembered that the armed men were also members of the community; they were, for better or worse, family, friends and neighbours.

Although some of the plaques in the nationalist area relate to civilians, the bulk of those in the unionist area memorialize civilian deaths. They were 'murdered at this spot by a no-warning sectarian IRA bomb attack' (Mountainview Tavern, Four Step Inn), 'slaughtered by a republican murder gang' (Bayardo Bar) or 'lost their lives in the indiscriminate bombing ... by the IRA' (Balmoral Showroom). In this sense, the memory entrepreneurs on the unionist side have an easier representational task. The nationalists and republicans were victims of the

state, while the unionists were victims of republican forces. Yet, especially in relation to the republican activists memorialized, they are clearly presented as activists who suffered for their actions. This cannot be said of the way in which the three UVF combatants memorialized on the Shankill Road are presented. In line with the loyalist paramilitary trope of seeing themselves as an extension of the British army, one (King) is referred to as a Lieutenant Colonel, another (Marchant) as a Captain. However, it is not spelt out against whom their military activism might have been directed. Moreover, the plaques overall run the risk of negating a central component of the loyalist groups' self-definition as defenders of unionist communities such as the Shankill. If there are so many victims to be memorialized, it could be asked if the military groups failed to defend the community.

The scripts, the interpretation of the deaths, indicate that what is involved is 'thick' rather than 'thin' memorialization. The plaques do not shy away from presenting a political interpretation of the deaths involved. They seek not simply to mark a spot, but to reveal an injustice. As such, the plaques on both sides make a strong statement against hegemonic explanations that were rife in Northern Ireland during, and indeed after, the conflict. In this view, loyalist military activists were criminals mimicking the regular and legitimate army, and IRA members were not on active service but were rioters or terrorists. The plaques unreservedly valorize activist victims. Even 'innocent victims' do not have a free pass. Public opinion during the conflict could be brutal, leading to doubts over the legitimacy of victims qua victims. Thus, Nora McCabe was not just going to a shop for cigarettes but must have been caught up in the rioting which the police alleged (erroneously, as became apparent at her inquest) was raging at the time. In this jaundiced view, the fact that the UDA had its headquarters above Frizzell's shop can lessen sympathy for the customers who died. The plaques serve to counter these slurs; victims are valorized, their reputations retrieved.

In addition, the plaques offer a form of counter-hegemonic resistance, although it is markedly different in each community. For republicans, it is a continuation of resistance against an illegitimate state which killed local people and against whom some of those local people were militarily active, and a critique of a peace process which cannot easily deal with

acknowledging the injustice involved in many of the deaths. For loyalists, the resistance is not just against the republican military groups, but also in part a critique of a peace process which enabled activists connected to these groups to gain political power, and which thereby threatens to downplay the enormity of their past actions.

CONCLUSION

At one level, the plaques of West Belfast do no more than the stumble stones of Berlin; they enable ‘under-represented or silenced groups to have their public say.’⁷² And, as countermemorials, they ambush passers-by, not only to provide ‘counter histories of sacrifice and death,’⁷³ but also to ‘return the burden of memory to visitors themselves by forcing visitors into an active role.’⁷⁴ But there is more involved. We referred earlier to the central role of the state in the creation and propagation of collective memory, noting that this often involved the marginalization of the alternative collective memory of subaltern groups. The added obstacle to the inclusion of some subaltern groups in the collective story in the Northern Ireland case is that the state was a central actor in a three-way armed conflict. At the core of the conflict was a deep dispute, remaining to this day, about the legitimacy of the state. Northern Ireland, a substate within the UK, is less than a century old. During that time, the unionists have been robustly, often violently, committed to maintaining the link with Britain, while nationalists have been equally committed to breaking that link in favour of a united Ireland. The ‘constructive ambiguity’⁷⁵ of the 1998 peace agreement did not close the gap between the two positions, but simply sought to ensure that no side would employ violent means to achieve its political end.

⁷² Santino, *supra* n 40 at 13.

⁷³ Gibson, *supra* n 31 at 155.

⁷⁴ Azran, *supra* n 12 at 41.

⁷⁵ Christine Bell and Kathleen Cavanaugh, “‘Constructive Ambiguity’ or Internal Self-Determination? Self-Determination, Group Accommodation, and the Belfast Agreement,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 22 (1998): 1345–1371.

While the conflict raged, the state played a key role in the propaganda war by producing a state-friendly narrative to explain the conflict and legitimize its actions.⁷⁶ That habit is not easily broken post conflict, where the role of the state is to produce a collective memory which continues to legitimize its actions.⁷⁷ Thus, in many ways, the metaconflict is merely a name for a continuing propaganda war. In that scenario, the plaques of west Belfast, especially those in the nationalist community, are counter-hegemonic. They are 'the material outcomes of recent struggles over the right to memorialize.'⁷⁸ Given the antistate violence in nationalist communities, the struggle for recognition and respect is obviously much greater there. But this is not to say that there is not a struggle for recognition and 'thick' memorialization in unionist communities also.

We saw earlier that Joinet envisaged the right to memory as a means to restore victims' dignity, and proposed that the state had a central role in that task. He urged commemorative ceremonies and monuments, the naming of streets after victims, public tributes to victims and acknowledgement of their stories in history textbooks which would presumably then be used in schools. There is a question about how adequately many states could live up to these ideals if a statutory right to memory did exist, but it is beyond dispute that in Northern Ireland, where the existence and legitimacy of the state is at the core of political conflict, the state is unlikely to be the best vehicle for implementing those aspirations.

As a consequence, communities are thrown back on their own agency. For them, no less than for the state, memorialization is not only 'a product of social power but also a tool or resource for achieving it.'⁷⁹ In a situation where their collective memory is unlikely to be represented in public space, or not represented in the way they would wish, they can resort to self-help and mutual aid. They can arrange ceremonies and public tributes, erect memorials, name some public spaces after victims or heroes. They will frequently face official reprobation

⁷⁶ Liz Curtis, *Ireland, The Propaganda War: The Media and the 'Battle for the Hearts and Minds'* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

⁷⁷ Greg McLaughlin and Steve Baker, *The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of the Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010).

⁷⁸ Cook and van Riemsdijk, *supra* n 18 at 144.

⁷⁹ Dwyer and Alderman, *supra* n 8 at 171.

when they do so. But as local memory entrepreneurs, they will, in as far as they can, actualize their right to memory from below, retain their story of their conflict experiences and remember those family, friends and neighbours who lost their lives.