

Shared Heritage and the impact of War Memorials:

Dialogic or monologic Remembering?

A case study by Sapir Barel and Vanessa Spindler

1. Introduction

War memories are one of the most common ways that nations share the past. They have been always considered important sites for collective memory. War monuments act as a material sign of the collective memory in public space. They are a symbolic representation of the political reading of history, as the two German cultural scientists Jan and Aleida Assmann put it (Assmann 1993, pp. 48-49). Looking at the way war memorials are designed and presented, they tell a lot of how a nation deals with its past, the image of the so called enemy and its own image in past and present. As war monuments are placed in the public space, they serve as national symbols and keystones of the national heritage. They can express a monoperspectival culture of memory, or, as it happens in some cases, also a bi- or multiperspectival culture of conflicts and war experiences. This depends on how communities interact with their own memories and the memories of the other, and if they are involved in powerful relations (cf. Osborne 2001).

In our case study, we present two war memorials: The Monument to the Negev Brigade near Be'er Sheva, Israel, and the Hartmannswillerkopf in Alsace, France. Both represent memories of a painful war, but they differ in the way they present, interpret, and communicate the event to future generations. While Europe has a rich history of wars between its neighbour countries until 1945, there has been no weaponized conflict in the last 75 years. Nowadays, the relations between those nations, united in the EU, are mostly on a friendly basis. Even the centuries-old enemies France and Germany have made great progress towards a close friendship. The situation in Israel differs from this: The nation is still involved in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is a territorial and ethnonationalist conflict with religious implications (cf. Asseburg and Busse 2020, pp. 2123). The ethnonationalist conflict stems from Israel being established by the Zionist movement to create a nation for the Jewish population. The Palestine Arabs were marginalized and "left outside the social boundaries of the nation controlling the new state in which they resided" (Haklai 2011, p.5). Both sides are irreconcilably opposed to each other and a change in position is seemingly not close.

For our research and our topic, a comparison of the two monuments was particularly important for us. Therefore, we decided to visit both memorial sites and doing exploratory observations. We filmed each of our excursions to have visual aids to help us say our findings. Apart from that, we wanted to see how the self-representation is being shown publicly and carry out a document analysis of the websites, the leaflets and literature about the

monuments. We compared our results to show the similarities and differences in the function of representation and narration of the two war memorials.

Working together as a research tandem, we had the possibility to compare two memorials in two continents which are 3.000 km apart from each other. Our case study is designed to be contrastive. By interweaving the textual depictions, we contrast commonalities and differences to answer the questions we raised in this introduction. Firstly, we try to find out reasons why the Israeli nation chooses a more monological narrative for public remembrance, while France, as a part of Europa, chooses a more dialogical one. As a result, we want to point out how monuments show the self-narrative of a nation or a community of nations. Secondly, we want to point out how monuments and memorials help to transmit history in a different way each case and what this means for the cultural mediation of further generations.

2. War Memorials and national culture of remembrance in France and in Israel

To contextualize our research, we first present the two memorials we discuss in our case study. We briefly outline the historical events commemorated by both memorials, describe both monuments and put them in relation to the national culture of remembrance.

2.1. 1948-1949: The Israeli-Palestinian War and the Negev Brigade

In 1947, the UN General Assembly approved the United Nations partition for Palestine that led to the outbreak of 1948 Arab – Israeli war (called the War of Independence among Jewish Citizens). The Negev Brigade was founded in March 1948 with three battalions as part of Palmach Battalions. In October of that year, the Brigade took part in Operation Yoav and in the conquest of Be'er Sheva. The purpose of the operation was to break through to the detached Negev, to fight off the Egyptian army, to conquer Be'er Sheva, and the whole Negev. The 324 brigade fighters who fell during the 1948 War are commemorated on the walls of the monument (cf. Cohen et al. 2011).

The *Monument to the Negev Brigade* near Be'er Sheva was designed by the architect and sculptor Danny Karavan and erected in 1968. The monument covers a large and high area overlooking Be'er Sheva to the west. It is made of exposed raw concrete and is made up of 18 different symbolic elements linked to the Palmach and the 1948 War such as the perforated tower alludes to a watchtower shelled with gunfire, a water pipe reminiscent of the battle to protect the water artery, and canals that simulate military communication canals. At the entrance to the monument, on a wall, its name and symbol appear next to the words: "Passer-by, you come through the gates of the synagogue of our love for the land of the Negev". The names of the martyrs, the symbol of the Palmach, the battle diary of the brigade, battle records, verses and songs are engraved in the concrete and copper plates in

which it is set. The buildings are breached in round holes and in straight sections that create windows to the landscape. Some of the walls have shoe prints, as in the desert soil. In the centre of the monument is the Dome of Remembrance, a structure on which round walls are written the names of the fallen according to periods. The structure is dark, rays of sunlight enter through holes and groove out the dome and caress the names of the fallen. As you walk in the structure of the dome, you can hear footsteps from the walls, an image of the soldiers' footsteps (cf. Welch 2013).

There are over a thousand monuments in Israel. The monuments to the fallen are tangible signs in Israel's memory landscapes and are 'memory sites' in its cultural heritage. They were established in memory of events and people that related to the history of Zionist settlement in the land of Israel and the heritage of the state of Israel. Most of the war monuments are stone tombstones and memorial pillars. A minority of them are sculptures and multi-purpose memorial sites, designed for cultural and pedagogical roles. The monuments that were built during the 1970s (as The Monument to the Negev Brigade) used the abstract language of modern sculpture. Yet, despite the differences in style, they do not necessarily have an alternative message, and new and old forms may present similar meanings. In most of the monuments, we witness two types of images: the display of heroism which indicates that wars have a noble and uplifting cause, and on the other hand - expressions of sadness, emphasizing that wars are tragic and dreadful events. The balance in the sea of images varies from place to place. The monuments are intended to serve a dual purpose: private and public one. To comfort the families of the fallen and help them cope with bereavement, while at the same time educating for to indoctrinate heroism and sacrifice (Levinger 2006).

2.2. 1914-18: World War I in Europe, Germany, and France

The First World War lasted from 1914 to 1918. It was triggered by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo. The so-called Central Powers, i. e. the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria were opposed to the Allies, i. e. France, Great Britain, and Russia, as well as other countries. During the First World War, the Vosges, a mountain range close to the present border between France and Germany in Alsace, formed a hard-fought border and the only part of the Western Front where mountain fighting took place.¹ The summit of Hartmannswillerkopf was one of the deadliest sites, and in 1915 the camp changed hands four times between the German and French soldiers. The mountain was called "man-eater" because of the countless soldiers who lost their lives there.² It is estimated that at least 15.000 men died on this site (cf. Tombi and Schwamberger 2009, p. 13).

¹ <https://de.france.fr/de/vogesen/artikel/1-weltkrieg-die-vogesenfront>

² *ibid.*

After the armistice on November 11, 1918, the French began to build a memorial on the Hartmannswillerkopf. It consists of the French national cemetery *Nécropole nationale du Silberloch – Hartmannswillerkopf* and a crypt with one Catholic, one Protestant and one Jewish altar each as well as a 29-metre-high cross, that stands on the top of the mountain. At the entrance of the crypt, there are two angels of victory who hold a vigil of honour for the unknown soldiers. Above it stands a golden altar with the Coffin of the Fatherland, on which are the coats of arms of the French cities from where the soldiers came. The cross stands on the top of the hill overlooking the crypt and the French National Cemetery with its 1.264 soldiers buried here (cf. Tombi 2004, p. 12). In 1941, when France was under German occupation, the crypt was to be blown up and a new monument in honour of the Germans should be erected here. But the mayor of the time reported in a statement that the bones of German soldiers also rested in the crypt. This comment was able to prevent the blasting. Even today there are still holes in the crypt which were intended for the explosives (cf. Tombi 2004, p. 13).

The second component is the battlefield. The fact that the battlefield is to be preserved was already addressed during the war. On February 2, 1921, it was decided that the site should also be inscribed on the list of historic monuments. Today the discovery trail through the wooded mountain is 4.5 km long. In 2014, 45 information panels in three languages (French, German, English) were installed to explain what happened³. The site of the battle is now designed like an open-air museum. Many shelters, bunkers and other traces intend to give an idea of what life in the war trenches might have looked like. The paths are framed by defensive structures such as barbed wire. Back then, the French built mainly with wood, which has now decayed, hence there are not many buildings left. On the German side the tunnel systems and stone bunkers are still well preserved, which were equipped with illumination, water and telephone lines (cf. Tombi 2004, p. 16). Some remnants of that time were installed only afterwards, such as a French observation post, which was reerected in 1985. This underlines the museological character of the discovery trail.

The third component of the Hartmannswillerkopf memorial is the *Historial of the First World War* that was opened on August 3, 2017. It was inaugurated on November 11, 2017, by both Presidents of France and Germany, Emmanuel Macron and Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The idea was to set up a joint memorial and an information centre. A scientific advisory board consisting of French and German specialists from the First World War, archivists, and heads of administration from the entire region helped to sift through materials and documents to process and present the past in a multi-perspective manner. By conveying the history of this place, visitors should be given a deeper understanding of what happened hundred years ago. The *Historial* is intended to help shape Franco-German remembrance culture by giving equal value to national memories (cf. Krumeich 2018). The visit to the *Historial* is

³ <https://www.memorial-hwk.eu/de/schlachtfeld>

concluded with an outlook on how Germany and France worked together to build a united Europe after the experience of two World Wars. With the *Historial*, the first bilateral memorial of the First World War was established in a united Europe, on the basis of an important French war memorial.

The Hartmannswillerkopf is one of four national memorials of the First World War in France and therefore holds a high significance to France. After the First World War, the fallen soldiers took a special place in the national remembrance. This is also demonstrated by the fact that 99% of French villages have a war memorial of the first world war (Knabel et al. 2005, p. 128). To summarize the timeline: The French Hartmannswillerkopf National Monument was solemnly inaugurated in 1932 by the President of the French Republic Albert Lebrun. Since 2003, a committee of French and German academics, researchers, and archivists⁴ has been working to keep the memorial alive, starting with the restoration of the summit cross. This was inaugurated with a Franco-German celebration. In 2009, the restoration of the entire site was started and completed in 2013, which was also financed with funds from the European Union and the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (VDK)⁵ cf. (Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2014, pp. 5–6). The inclusion of the German perspective happened gradually at first by naming in the crypt the German regiments involved in the battles for the first time and culminated in the opening of the *Historial* as a common place of remembrance and place of active exchange. In 2019, the *Historial* had almost 40.000 visitors, 64 % being French, 25 % being German and 6 % from Switzerland (cf. (cf. Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2020, p. 4).

3. Shared or contradictory heritage? The function of monument narratives

The way in which a nation presents, processes, and interprets its places of war has a great influence on how historical events are anchored in a national memory. Narratives chosen for memorials are often based on a monological remembrance that contrasts the togetherness of an ingroup with that of an outgroup. Furthermore, memory markers can be used for political messages (Liberio 2014, p. 249). Earlier politics of remembrance in Europe dealt exclusively with monological narratives that were based on a heroic self-image; those narratives are still alive, even if they are increasingly flanked by dialectical memory sites. In this chapter, we describe the intention of the two war memorials of our case study in the context of two different remembrance cultures. The Hartmannswillerkopf is a visible sign of Europe's brutal past and the development of the German-French friendship, while the monument in Israel glorifies the heroism of the warriors and pass on to future generations the system of beliefs and values on which the war took place.

⁴ <https://www.memorial-hwk.eu/de/wissenschaftlicher-beirat>

⁵ Engl: German War Graves Commission.

3.1 Monologic remembering: *The Monument to the Negev Brigade*

The *Monument to the Negev Brigade*, like other monuments of battle sites, is a mosaic stone of a complex narrative of war heritage and of the Israeli-Arab conflict, which unfortunately has not yet ended. The difficult and traumatic place near Be'er Sheva contains conflicting memories and contradictory meanings for Jews and Palestinians. The Nakba (Arabic: "the disaster") was the departure, escape, or deportation of approximately 700.000 Palestinians during the 1948 War and their transformation into refugees. With the end of the 1948 war, the law enforcement authorities in the Israel began to use legal mechanisms to dispossess the Bedouin Arabs from their lands and transfer them to the state. The actual loss of land, which was in their possession and the loss of land cultivation reshaped the identity of the Bedouin in the Negev and made them foreigners and exiles in their homeland.

The struggle on the landscape in Israel is a struggle which at its centre are sites that represent Jewish national history and its collective myths. The legacy is expressed through the construction of a national Zionist Jewish hegemony, which excludes and erases remnants of Palestinian history. In the case of the Negev, the conflict on the land drives from a clash between attitudes, discourses, and spatial practices of the Jewish population and those of the Bedouin-Arab population. From a Zionist point of view, the Negev is a ground for the fulfilment of Zionist goals and serves as a buffer to prevent a continuum of Palestinian settlement. For the Bedouin who define their status and personal and collective identity through their land, the attachment to the land is emotional and sacred to them.

The issue of the struggle for space is expressed through the construction of memory, which is on display at Negev monument. "I wanted the monument to be part of the landscape, and for people to be part of it when they are inside it", states Karavan in a documentary film produced by the Israel Film Service (cf. Israel Film Service 1976). To understand and share a particular memory and make it dominant, it requires control over public spaces. This control is held by the state and makes it possible to dominate official and popular memories with the weakening of the counter-history. Another way is to market tourist sites that attract visitors. Tourist sites play a crucial role in the ideological hegemony of states because they support and strengthen national identity. The struggle that the *Negev Monument* represents has not been resolved yet, both sides of the conflict still hold different opinions on who is right and who is wrong. When constructing the monument, the perspective of the enemy was disregarded, and no conversations happened about it. This exclusion of the other perspective makes the narrative of the monument contradictory to the narration of the other party involved.

3.2 Dialogic remembering? The monument of the Hartmannswillerkopf

The Hartmannswillerkopf is one of various visible signs of a material war heritage that pervades the entire continent of Europe. As a traumatic place of French and German sufferings, it is burdened with national memories and meanings (cf. Assmann 2006, p. 221). After the Second World War and especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the German reunification in 1990, there came a political turning point in which European nations moved closer together and began to construct the European Union. At the same time, the culture of memory shifted (cf. Assmann 2006, pp. 259–261): Until 1945 there was a constant conflict over borders and territories, especially between France and Germany. It is therefore like a miracle that the two archenemies were able to put an end to the conflicts and took over the role of a fundamental driving force behind a common Europe (cf. Germond and Türk 2008, p. 3). A big step towards this national friendship was taken by the renunciation of revenge on the part of winners of the Second World War. Even if no perfect peace was achieved after 1945, the cycle of vengeance was stopped. A European policy marked by reconciliation rituals began. German and French statesmen as Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle demonstrated through symbolic gestures that old enmities had been overcome (cf. Assmann 2018: 22–26). In this context, European nations were ready to open up their minds for a common dialogue about their painful and shameful past. This new dimension of remembrance also enabled new narratives of history as the one of the Hartmannswillerkopf *Historial*. Because of the growing German French friendship, the director of the Colmar Tourism Development Agency, Jean Klinkert, saw the need for a joint memorial (cf. Klinkert 2020, pp. 38–39). Klinkert was inspired by his grandfather, who was mayor of Colmar for 30 years. He describes the structure of the *Historial* as follows: “The concept of the *Historial*, beginning with an introductory film and impressive scenography in German and French, shows the life and suffering of ordinary soldiers on both sides of the front, culminating in a depiction of Franco-German relations.” (cf. Klinkert 2020, p. 39).

The name *Historial* is a combination of “Histoire” and “Mémoire”, of history and commemoration. This is the driving thought behind the idea of a dialogic commemoration (cf. Krumeich 2018). The *Historial*, which discreetly blends in with nature, thanks to its almond shape and the use of wood, is intended to make the battlefield comprehensible. For this purpose, the permanent exhibition was set up by a scientific committee from Germany and France (cf. Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2020, pp. 10–11). The website of the *Historial*, as well as the leaflet, states that its purpose is mainly educational, in addition to commemoration and tourism. The “duality and the Franco-German friendship”⁶ should be kept in addition to the local aspect. The exhibition spaces are communicated to the public through contemporary documents and objects, but above all through audio-visual presentations and interactive monitors. A large part of the *Historial* consists of information panels

⁶ <https://www.memorial-hwk.eu/de/historial>

and touchscreens, where visitors can learn about the details of the course of the war, but also more intimate details. Letters from soldiers, pictures of injuries and war propaganda can be seen, as well as an impressive film. In this film, fictitious diary entries of a French and a German soldier are read aloud and parallel to each other while a corresponding animation of the silhouettes of soldiers is played to visualize the war. Through the immersive experience the visitor can understand the fearful and miserable situation of soldiers, regardless on which side they fought. The emphasis of the exhibition is on the everyday life of the soldiers and their sufferings. At the end of the exhibition, the friendship between Germany and France is described to convey how valuable this peace is.

Middle and high school students in particular are the target groups of the exhibition, which is suitable for cooperation with educational projects. Through creative projects, the *Historial* wants to actively involve pupils and keep the memory of the war alive (cf. Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2020, p. 4). But the *Historial* is not only intended to educate schoolchildren, it is also designed for events and conferences, such as the 'Night of the Museums'. In all these events, the binational idea is always preserved (Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2020, p. 7).

However, the place is not intended to represent one common memory, but to give different perspectives on a common history. It tries to be a place of dialogue in order to create a shared memory (Comité du Monument National du Hartmannswillerkopf 2020, p. 13). This binational dialogue within a memorial site is made to be ground breaking for the future shaping of the Franco-German culture of remembrance and for the European Union (Krumeich 2018). This marks already a different approach to design in comparison to the Israeli monument of the Negev. Whereas the Hartmannswillerkopf Memorial takes a national French memorial and adds a binational *Historial* designed to create a place for dialogue, the Israeli memorial is designed as a monologue. The Israeli experiences are placed above those of the Arab opponent and is presented as heroic. The rapprochement between the two opponents seems and unwanted.

4 The Effect of the Monuments on today's Visitors – Explorative Approach

In this chapter we describe our own visits to the war memorial of Hartmannswillerkopf and the monument of the Negev *Brigade*. Subsequently, we contrast the intentions of the monuments with our experiences as visitors and make a final comparison.

4.1 Sapir Barel: *The Monument of the Negev Brigade*

My first visit to the Negev monument happened at night when my friends who live in Be'er Sheva invited me to hang out with them there. I had not known the monument before and knew nothing about the story it was seeking to tell. Despite this, the monument seemed to me to be a very impressive and special place and I was even quite excited. When we got there,

I felt a sense of discovery. I had to look for my way in the dark and I found myself alone in every part of the monument. I did not know how big the monument was, until I began to feel getting lost in it. Since then, I have returned to the monument several times.

When you visit the Negev monument, a very clear feeling is created that you are the visitor, and the place leads you inside. The sculptural elements move you further, creating an emotional feeling and a narrative. When you walk through the canal and read sentences from the soldiers' diaries or when you hear the whistles from the guard tower and the flag fluttering loudly in the wind, a bodily experience is created that envelops you into the story. "This is a sculpture which is an environment made of materials of nature and memories" wrote Karavan (Karavan 2014, p. 5). The visit creates a positive experience of a battlefield adventure but does not show, against whom the visitor is fighting as a soldier in this battle, what happened to the enemy and why we are enemies. In fact, there is a sense of pride and victory, and only one point of view is represented.

4.2 Vanessa Spindler: *Hartmannswillerkopf*

My first visit to the Hartmannswillerkopf was in 2018 with my class of the Bachelor of Art study. Already after the first visit I was extremely impressed by the grounds, the war trenches, the cemetery and the *Historial*. For my second visit of the site in order to do my research, I took some friends with me – and I went through a range of emotions. At the beginning, in the crypt and the cemetery, there was this overwhelming feeling of loss and tragedy. Reading the names of the fallen soldiers on the gravestones, seeing the countless white crosses on the grass and being in the spiritual crypt makes you realise how many people died in this place. Walking through the woods, climbing through barracks and spotting leftover wires felt more exciting than saddening. Since all these material witnesses on the trail are now more than 100 years old, the war seems further away. Pictures of the forest bombed and with no trees left standing show how tremendous the destruction was. But now the trees are back, moss is growing, and the wire is rusty. The place still has an authentic aura, but death and suffering are not all-consuming. While the information panels are remarkably interesting and give a lot of perspective, it is still hard to really have a grasp of what life in the trenches was like.

The *Historial* marked the end of the site for us and of our visit. It gave a lot more detailed information about the historical events. The information ranges from details about the history of the Hartmannswillerkopf to the history of the First and Second World Wars in general. By actively using multimedia and especially with the movie about the two soldiers the exhibition pulled us back in and showed what long lasting effect both wars had on Europe. The exhibition of the *Historial* ends with the peace between France and Germany, how both countries managed to overcome their long-lasting enmity and keep on working for a better

and peaceful future. This made me hopeful for the future, that by becoming closer Europe can avoid another traumatic experience like this.

The grounds of the Hartmannswillerkopf are very spacious and attractively designed. The wayfinding is easy and interesting thanks to the signposts. The path to the crypt is situated between two hills, which is reminiscent of a trench and makes the building look like a burial mound. The design inside emphasises the sacred character and makes one reverent. Unfortunately, the information panels of the crypt are written exclusively in French, which is somewhat disconcerting, as the flags in front of the crypt show German, French and European. The national grave on the crypt in gold is impressive and conveys the pride the nation feels for its fallen soldiers. The cemetery with its countless graves is overwhelming and illustrates the many sacrifices made during the war.

My friends found the trip very exciting and rewarding, climbing through the shelters was even adventurous at times. It was striking that all generations were on the trip, but mainly French people and families. Nevertheless, it was a pity that some of the information boards were only in French because we noticed that people were very curious about the information boards and read the signs attentively. The site is well suited for learning about European history and the First World War. The *Historial* can be visited either at the beginning of the discovery trail or at the end. I visited the *Historial* at the end of both visits, which allowed me to have a positive ending and to put what I had seen into context. However, as the walk takes some effort and the *Historial* is mainly text-based, this can be overwhelming and tiring. The audio-visual elements were all the better for absorbing information. By comparing the stories of the soldiers on both sides, the Hartmannswillerkopf Memorial does not glorify either side, but instead makes you feel empathy for both parties.

5. Conclusion: Remembrance, monuments, and the idea of a shared heritage

Visiting the two monuments and sharing what we had seen was remarkably interesting and thought-provoking. We found out that the similarities between the Negev Monument and the Hartmannswillerkopf Memorial are relatively few. Both monuments tell stories of war and educate their visitors about history, and this with a clear intention.

The Negev Monument is unique in the landscape of Israel. The site invites the visitor to wander around and to feel emotionally connected to the history of the Israeli fighting side. This is a story of a common legacy of the Jewish people. The focus is clearly set, the other party and their struggles erased. The point of view is that of the winner and there is no attempt to give a complex understanding of the events and from a broad perspective on both sides. It lacks a look that examines what each side loses in the war and not what one side has gained. The opposite could be said about the Hartmannswillerkopf. Reaching out to the former enemy and inviting him to share his memories is remarkable. It seems to be so natural nowadays to cross the border between Germany and France. But wandering through the mountain

and the graves makes you understand that many people paid the price of their life to get to this point of peace and freedom.

At the Hartmannswillerkopf, the experiences of both sides are valued and heard. At the Negev monument, maps are the only thing that matches reality and creates a connection between today and history. For the visitor, the maps draw the clear line between the winner and the loser, between friend and foe and between mine and yours – a line that is present in Israeli society to this day. The Hartmannswillerkopf shows the reality of a battlefield and a national cemetery but transforms it into a place of dialogue with the help of the narrative of the *Historial*. These different approaches to visualize the past as a national or binational history are palpable to the visitor. At Hartmannswillerkopf, however, the idea of a shared memory is strongly emphasised through an authentic cemetery, while the Negev Monument presents its monological narrative in an artistic way. To have a common place like the Hartmannswillerkopf *Historial* to share memories, to have a dialogue about the past and exchange experience is valuable and should be appreciated.

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