

Globalized Memorial Museums

Exhibiting Atrocities in the Era of Claims for Moral Universals (2019-2024)

The 'universalization of the Holocaust' has established the Shoah as an historical reference point legitimizing a global moral imperative to respect human rights. Much has been written about the ostensible 'globalization of memory', but as yet no genuinely global comparative study systematically confronting this hypothesis with the actual representations of atrocities exists. GMM breaks new ground by examining memorial museums on four continents, arguing that what is called 'globalization' in fact comprises three to some degree *contradictory* trends:

- 1) The *US Holocaust Memorial Museum* and *Yad Vashem* are role models for a universal moral orientation that focuses on the individual victim and generates aesthetic 'standards' for musealization.
- 2) The German concept of negative memory, self-critically confronting the crimes committed by her own population, has inspired museums to tackle the question of one's own complicity in order to challenge collective self-victimization and the externalization of responsibility.
- 3) The genocides of the 1990s led to a 'forensic turn': the investigation of bones & other material evidence of atrocities has changed the way *in situ* memorial museums deal with material traces of violence. This shift has also impacted 'old' memorial sites like Sobibor, which has become a site of archaeological research after 70 years.

GMM examines 50 memorial museums dealing with

- a) the WWII period in the US, Israel, Europe, China, and Japan;
- b) recent genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Scholars claim that 'globalized' memorial museums reflect new moral standards and a new language of commemoration, but what is the price of the attendant de-contextualization in the name of moral universals? GMM's wholly original global typology of memorial museums has the potential to act as a genuine game changer that challenges the concept of 'universal memory' and the notion that memorial museums constitute a globalized space of communication and negotiation.



Ljiljana Radonić's research on memorial museums started with her PhD on one country, Croatia, and one museum, Jasenovac.



Her postdoctoral thesis then dealt with ten post-communist memorial museums and the way how they changed in the course of EU accession talks.



The new project deals with 50 museums dealing with the World War II period and the genocides in the 1990s in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia.



When it comes to “globalization or universalization of Holocaust memory” scholars use fuzzy terminology – thus conflating moral and spacial issues. They claim that the ‘universalization of the Holocaust’ has established it as a historical reference point legitimizing a global moral imperative to respect human rights. But is that really the case & what is the price of this de-contextualization in the name of moral universals?

Hypothesis

We argue that what is called ‘globalization of memory’ is in fact three parallel, partially contrary trends:

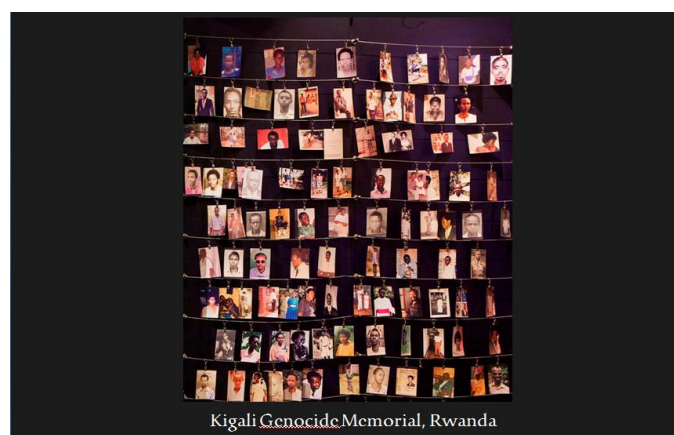
1 | The US Holocaust museum and Yad Vashem are perceived as role models for a universal moral orientation, a focus on the individual victim and aesthetic ‘standards’ for musealization. But this does not tell us much about the narrative of the exhibition yet.



2 | Here the second trend comes to the fore, the German concept of “negative memory” – self-critically confronting the crimes committed by its own community. It inspired other museums to tackle collaboration, collective self-victimization & externalization of responsibility. An impressive example is the Holocaust memorial center in Budapest that shows photographs of Hungarian population, even women, as perpetrators.



The first and second trend unsurprisingly “travel” also beyond Europe as we can see in this example from Rwanda with the already familiar aesthetics of individualized victims.



But there is also another trend visible here – indicated by these exhibited skulls and the fact that this Rwandan museum incorporated the site of forensic examination of the mass graves into its permanent exhibition.



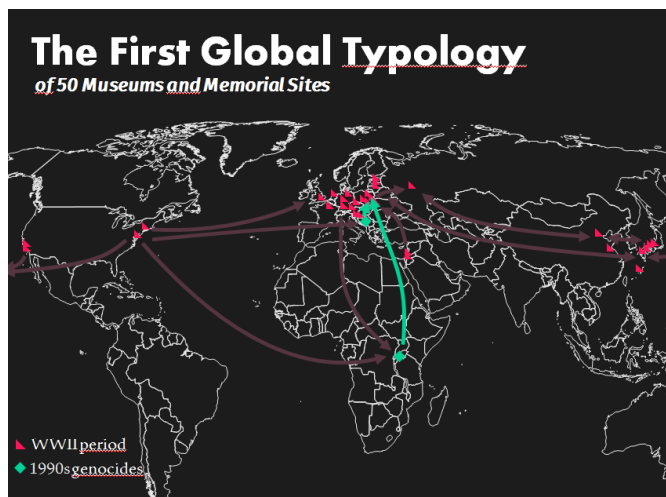
Murambi Genocide Memorial, Rwanda

3 | This third trend is the forensic turn – the investigation of bones & other material evidence of atrocities. We argue that the first genocides which aroused global attention after 1945, Rwanda & former Yugoslavia changed the way memorial museums deal with material traces of violence. This has had an impact on the “old” memorial sites, transforming them into sites of archaeological research after 70 years. Imagine communist authorities putting concrete on top of an extermination site in 1945. And this is how Sobibor for example looks today:



Sobibor after the gas chamber was discovered in 2014

This will be the first systematical global typology of 50 museums. We do not only look at how concepts travel from US and Israeli memorial museums to *in situ* World War II museums, but also to the sites of the 1990s genocides. And the most innovative part of our project is to analyze how those sites of recent genocides have influenced the “old” sites.



Methodology

We will conduct research on three methodological levels at each of the museums: 3 levels per museum

- Role of the site, space and its codification
Materiality of the site, museum publications & website
- Core narrative and storyline
Permanent exhibitions & guidebooks
- Surface and aesthetics
Objects, photographs, multimedia & texts

We will combine site analysis, hybrid media studies, visual history and discourse analysis, which will finally allow a systematical comparison of the museums.

<p>This first systematic global typology of museums dealing with WWII & the 1990s genocides will challenge the idea of memorial museums as a globalized space of communication and negotiation, while at the same time determining their potential for fighting authoritarianism today.</p>
