



PERSPECTIVES

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Are There Now Memory Communities in Holocaust Discourse?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The controversy around the identity of Yad Vashem's directorate chairman seems to suggest that Holocaust discourse is now deteriorating into polemical argument. For decades, the Israeli collective memory in the military and security domain has been fraught with disagreement over language, narrative, and interpretation of the past. It is to be hoped that the State of Israel, which is supposed to play a key role in preventing the politicization of the memory of the Holocaust, will not instead participate in that trend.

The controversy over the identity of the directorate chairman of Yad Vashem, when viewed from a broad perspective, is quite worrying, as it might represent a new stage in the politicization of Israeli collective memory (that is, its *de facto* disintegration into "memory communities"). Such a process has already occurred regarding the Israeli collective memory in the military and security domain (including the contribution of the respective pre-state underground movements to the establishment of the state of Israel) and it could occur regarding the memory of the Holocaust as well.

In the early years of statehood, the leadership hoped that generations of Israelis would turn into a unified memory community with a consistent narrative on the issues of sacrifice and loss. That would have entailed a relatively homogeneous attitude running in parallel to political and cultural controversies. There had to be, in other words, agreement about the meaning of the sacrifice required of Israeli soldiers and the pain of families of the fallen—but also about the need to engage in wars at all. That agreement had to be based on a common awareness that, notwithstanding errors and failures

in the way specific wars were conducted, those wars needed to be fought to ensure the state's continued existence in a hostile region.

However heated the controversies, which dated back as far as the pre-state period, there was no dispute over the different groups' common commitment to the national-Zionist ultimate goal of statehood. The disagreement concerned the nature and characteristics of that goal (e.g., a socialist vs. a liberal state) and the best means for its attainment. Remembrance Day ceremonies, Independence Day assemblies, and the aesthetic and rhetoric of monuments to the fallen were woven together organically into an almost uniform memory discourse. All the elements shared the same symbols, messages, and psycho-political components, which recurred year after year and were of great importance to the families of the fallen, to soldiers, and to all of Israeli society. Through these commemorations, the culture was fortified by the common sense of meaning and solidarity that underpinned the huge sacrifice demanded by the Zionist national endeavor.

During the first Rabin government (1974-77), an initiative was launched to establish, alongside Mount Herzl (a site that commemorates the founders of the nation) and Yad Vashem (a site that commemorates the Holocaust and heroism), a third site, the Mount Eitan Museum, devoted to Israeli military history and containing exhibits commemorating each of Israel's wars. The museum was to include an educational center highlighting the Hebrew renaissance; a division containing exhibits on Jewish military prowess from the biblical era; a gallery on the War of Independence; a wing focusing on settlement as part of the Zionist concept of security and on the IDF's changing concepts of security; special exhibits about specific units, military leaders, and operations; and a department designed to produce textbooks, albums, and *hasbara* (public diplomacy) brochures, hold activities for schoolchildren, and host tourists and delegations from abroad—and which would also, of course, offer a personal commemoration of each fallen soldier with an account of the circumstances of his death. The initiative had a budget of many millions of shekels, and government after government added to that budget as architects, sociologists, educators, and historians were recruited to take part.

But it never got off the ground. In Israel there are already many museums and institutes that commemorate specific memory communities, such as the Jabotinsky Institute, the Begin Heritage Center, the Hagana Museum, and the Rabin Center. Each has its own way of relating events of history, be it military, Zionist, or settlement-related. The Mount Eitan Museum was the first—and last—attempt to establish an official site that would provide an overarching view of Israeli military history that weaves all the narratives together.

In the 1990s, however—particularly after the Oslo Accords, when the project was supposed to begin—disagreements began to surface among memory communities on how the country's military history should be presented. "Liberal" groups refused to accept language like "the Land of the Bible" as a part of everyday Israeli vocabulary. Left-wing groups demanded a gallery that focused on peace, but how was the struggle against the intifada (1987-92) and Arafat's terror war (known euphemistically as the Al-Aqsa Intifada) to be presented? Was that struggle necessary, or was it a "war of choice" that resulted from the Israeli government's failure to achieve peace?

And what about the Yom Kippur War? One memory community demanded that it be presented as a corollary of the Israeli government's failure to respond to the Egyptian peace offers that preceded the war. Another saw it as a failure that stemmed from Israel's not having launched a preemptive strike. And what was to be written on the plaques of those who had fallen in Lebanon—the Lebanon War, or Operation Peace for Galilee?

Because of these disputes, the project ground to a halt and was effectively canceled. Instead, a site was built that commemorates fallen soldiers in a minimalistic fashion that omits any detail that could conceivably stoke controversy: the name of the operation or war in which the soldier fell is left out, and only the soldier's name and date of death are given.

In twenty-first-century Israel, it is no longer possible to reach a consensus on the country's military history—not even by dint of an effort by the defense establishment. That is because today's IDF is composed of "military communities" that are recruited from different social networks, ideological backgrounds, and notions of collective memory. Every one of their soldiers has an ideologically based exemption from one or another kind of military service—a notion that was once seen as insubordination or as a flouting of the basic obligation to accept military authority. And so the project to commemorate the IDF's fallen soldiers steered clear of any narrative at all. The paltry form of commemoration ultimately given—nothing more than names and dates—probably explains why the site has not attracted the public.

The Yad Vashem dispute might be the next stage in this unfortunate process. The perception of the Holocaust might no longer be common to different groups in Israeli society, but might, like the state's military history, become colonized by separate communities. Hopefully the appointment of Brig.-Gen. (res.) Effie Eitam as Yad Vashem's directorate chairman will not spur members of the neoliberal community to shun the materials the institution produces under his leadership. If that scenario does unfold, it will be a new stage in the communitization of the Israeli memory—a trend that the state of

Israel, which is supposed to play a key role in keeping that memory outside the politics of memory, is meant to oppose.

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