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Witnesses and the Changing Goals of Memorialization

Abstract

Violence is experienced by many people first hand. While some of these people are later allowed to serve as witnesses through memorialization, many are not. Often, those excluded encompass whole categories of people: victims, perpetrators, soldiers, women, etc. Who is allowed to serve as a witness during memorialization often depends on a range of factors, such as timing and context. But the very definition of a witness also shapes what outcomes are possible from memorialization. This article looks at three members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience from three different contexts (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Italy), and examines how their varying definitions of what a witness is are not only rooted in the needs of their societies, but also shape their memorialization and its impact on those societies.

Keywords

Witness, memorialization, peace, museum, education

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Author Biography

Braden Paynter is the Associate for Methodology and Practice of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience working to share best practices among the Coalition and with the field at large. Previously Braden worked with the National Park Service in education, public programing, and training, and also as the Exhibit Developer at Old Sturbridge Village. Mofidul Hoque is a co-founder and one of eight Trustees of the Liberation War Museum. As Director of the museum's education program, he has planned and executed its oral history project whereby students collect eye-witness accounts of the events of 1971. He was deeply involved with the national democratic struggle since his student days and took active part in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. He is also the Director of the museums new Centre for Studies on Genocide and Peace. He has written twelve books on society, culture and history. Hadi Marifat is a co-founder and director of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization He has also worked as a country analyst with the Center for Civilians in Conflict, a researcher with Human Rights Watch, and a human rights officer with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. He studied politics and international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He earned his master's degree in peace and conflict studies at the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam, in the Netherlands. Elena Monicelli is a coordinator at the Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole. She has overseen their international relations and worked with the Peace in Four Voices Summer Camp and other education programs.

Mass violence leaves in its wake perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and survivors, each experiencing the period of violence in their own way. The testimony of these witnesses possesses a rich and personal quality unlike any other historical source. However, during memorialization, not all witnesses are allowed to speak on all topics or even recognized as “witnesses.” Depending on the power structures after conflict or the time between the violence and the present, victims, perpetrators, or other groups may be silenced or excluded from acting as witnesses. Those accepted as witnesses may continue to speak their own truth, but the exclusion of others presents a tilted narrative of the violence. Who is accepted as a witness and the kind of narrative that definition produces shapes what is possible through memorialization.

This article explores how three organizations memorializing legacies of violence define witnesses and how those definitions influence their impact. The organizations are: Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization [AHRDO], an independent not-for-profit established in early 2009 with a mandate to promote human rights and democratic principles in Kabul, Afghanistan; the Liberation War Museum [LWM] in Dhaka, Bangladesh established to disseminate a non-partisan history of the War of Independence; and the Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole [PSF] in Bologna, Italy, the site of a World War II massacre. All three organizations are members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a worldwide network of more than 200 Sites – historic museums, memorials, and initiatives dedicated to remembering past struggles and addressing their contemporary legacies. All three Sites recount incidents of horrific violence toward civilians enabled by ideologies of divisiveness and hate. The Sites differ in a number of ways, most markedly in the length of time between the cessation of violence and the present, as well as the impact the Sites seek to have on their communities.

Desperate to stop the endless violence in today’s Afghanistan, AHRDO works to bridge sectarian divides through the recognition of victims on all sides of the conflict. In Bangladesh, LWM develops a more complicated and complete narrative of the past by pairing post conflict generations with witnesses typically excluded from historical narratives. In turn, PSF expands the definition of witness to include perpetrators as they seek to build a future free of the violence of the past. Balancing the needs of their societies with the immediacy of the violence, each Site finds its own definition of witness that enables it to contribute to peace and justice in their communities.

Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (Hadi Marifat, Co-Founder)

Violence is the dominant theme of recent Afghan history. Since the 1970s violence has taken many forms: anti-colonial resistance, pacification, ethnic cleansing and suppression, tribal uprising, coup d'états, *jihad*, and most recently an escalating insurgency. However, trustworthy history of the violence is rarely available to most Afghans. This creates a cycle where the absence of historical memory facilitates the replication of catastrophic events. Historical memory and monuments from all time periods have been destroyed, manipulated, and intentionally erased from the narrative. The Buddha statues in Bamiyan have been erased just as the past three decades of conflict are omitted from school text books. Similarly, the stories of those affected by the hundreds of thousands of deaths are not shared across sectors of Afghan society.

In 2006, following the end of Taliban rule, a transitional justice plan was put forward to address the appalling atrocities committed under different regimes since the Communist coup in 1978. Transitional justice is a set of judicial and non-judicial processes that societies use to address legacies of mass human rights abuse. Due to resistance from multiple parties and a lack of will from the Afghan government to enforce it, the plan failed thereby perpetuating a culture of impunity where the actions of the powerful go unquestioned and the suffering of ordinary Afghans, living amongst the rubble of war, goes unrecognized.

In the absence of a formal transitional justice program Afghan civil society groups have tried to fill the void of peace building. Limited initiatives have been attempted to address Afghanistan's painful past and to remember the innocent victims, all of which have been opposed by those likely to be identified through the initiative as perpetrators.

In the polarized environment of Afghanistan, where suspicions run deep and mistrust prevails, memorialization as a potentially more neutral and apolitical process has a chance for success where other approaches have failed. As opposed to past transitional justice efforts that attempted documentation, with an emphasis on verifying human rights violations and legal action, memorialization can be victim centric and draw upon the past to facilitate a grassroots movement for peace.

To this end, AHRDO initiated a memorialization program in 2011 called *Memory Boxes*. *Memory Boxes* are small, portable, wooden boxes where survivors store and display objects of loved ones lost during the conflict. *Memory*

Boxes allow for the collection, protection, and public exhibition of the personal narratives of victims. They are also a way to show respect, affection, and reverence for loved ones. The central objective of the *Boxes* is to break the cycle of violence and build an enduring peace by sharing these stories.



Image 1 – Memory Box

Non-divisive memorialization is difficult in modern Afghanistan where facing past atrocities is an unavoidably political act. *Memory Boxes* play an important role because they are one of the most neutral instruments of memorialization available. The people memorialized come from all eras of the conflict and from all aspects of society and the *Boxes* are intentionally displayed to not draw lines between those remembered. There are no explanations attached to the *Boxes* about the ethnic, political, and ideological affiliation of the victims. The only information given is the time and whereabouts of their death. The focus of the project is on their humanity and loss rather than their cultural identities. *Memory Boxes* visualize victimhood as the most common, enduring, and persistent aspect of the conflict.



Image 2 – [Video](#) of Memory Box Exhibition

Memory Boxes reinforce this message by being both physical and personal. The physical nature of the memories gives permanence to the stories they tell. The personalized nature of the exhibits makes the cost, severity, and history of the conflict intimate and nuanced. Together, the *Boxes* construct a larger narrative of the victimization of civilians during the conflict. They provide an alternative to the “official” and distorted narratives of the era.

Since 2011, men and women from five provinces and a wide range of backgrounds have created more than 100 *Memory Boxes*, holding more than one thousand personal items and objects. The objects, including portraits, letters, and clothing, both recreate the victim and reflect a genuine picture of the social condition in Afghanistan from 1978 through 2001. These objects are powerful reminiscences of war, destruction, loss, and the sufferings of civilians.



Image 3 – Hadi Marifat [TEDx talk](#)

The creation of a *Memory Box* is both a profoundly personal act for a victim's family and friends and the process by which those memories are transformed into wider community and national consciousness. AHRDO has worked to create this national consciousness by convening a series of *Memory Box* exhibitions for the diplomatic community, media, civil society, and Afghan public. These events introduced the objectives and significance of memorialization to a wider audience. Most importantly, these events help survivors share their stories and messages with a broad range of actors.

The goal of memorialization should be to generate a communal consciousness that the collateral damage and destruction of conflict produces no winner. Every party to a conflict loses regardless of momentary triumphs along the way. *Memory Boxes* provide Afghan citizens, media, civil society, and the academic community with original material that speaks, without manipulation, of the horrors of war and conflict. *Memory Boxes* provide the stories and space for people to critically reflect on their past, evaluating the mistakes committed and the horrors perpetrated. They can bridge the past and present, raising the public consciousness about the innocent lives lost and collateral destruction caused by the conflict. Because the *Boxes* focus on the losses people have suffered more than their potentially divisive identities, they have the potential to be a unifying

force across Afghan society. Recognizing victimhood as a universal Afghan experience of the past half century can help build a national movement for peace.



Image 4 – Memory Box Exhibition

Liberation War Museum (Mofidul Hoque, Trustee)

The Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh was established in 1996, twenty-five years after the mass atrocities unleashed by the Pakistani military junta in the 1971 War of Independence. The trauma and triumph of that struggle left a deep scar on the public memory as the nation endured wanton destruction and widespread attacks against civilian populations. The scale of the violence made it one of the worst genocides in the post-World War II era. Following the war, the killing of national founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and the beginning of dictatorial rule by the army, stalled memorialization efforts. In their wake the ruling class propagated their own, distorted, history of the conflict.

It was against this backdrop that the Liberation War Museum was established by an eight-member Trustee Board in a two-story rented house near the center of

Dhaka. Presenting history through artifacts, documents, and memorabilia, LWM highlights the core values of the struggle to establish Bangladesh.

In 2004, LWM launched a Mobile Museum, a bus with displays mounted inside to take the museum to people far outside Dhaka. The primary audience for the Mobile Museum is students, and the bus spends up to a month in each district so all of the communities in an area can see it.

In response to the enthusiasm of the young students who visit the bus, LWM has given them the task of filling in the gaps in the Museum's historical narrative through oral history collection. During their visit an appeal for participation is made to the students and they are encouraged to interview an eyewitness about their experience of 1971. The process is simple and easily executed. There is no set of questions to ask or instruction manual to follow, just a leaflet distributed among the students explaining the process. The students are told not to worry about their handwriting or spelling; the important thing is to be as true to the witness as possible. Each student records his or her name, class, and institution and the name and age of the person interviewed. A teacher from each school collects the histories and sends them to LWM.



Image 6 – Students in the Mobile Museum

The Mobile Museum aims to reach all parts of the Bengali population, visiting urban and rural areas, public schools as well as those for small ethnic groups. This diversity is reflected in the histories collected by the students, which represent broad sections of the society. What remained private for so long can now become public.



Image 7 – Students leaving the Mobile Museum

While the histories are shared through the LWM, in most cases interviews are conducted in more intimate settings – a home perhaps – which engenders a feeling of spontaneity in the histories. In a formal oral interview process, people often become stiff when faced with a microphone or other recording instrument, not to mention an interviewer with a set of well-prepared questions. In the LWM program, the interviewer and interviewee know each other well. When a member of the third generation hears about the experience of 1971 from someone in their family or community, it makes for a special encounter.

LWM promises that all who submit histories will receive personal letters of thanks, reflecting that their submissions were read by someone at the museum. LWM also publishes a quarterly booklet with the basic information about each

interview that is sent to the schools so the students can see their names in print, maybe for the first time in their lives. The museum pledges that each and every history will be preserved in the museum, thereby creating an “Archives of Memory.” If the students come to the museum years later, they will be able to see their write-ups from years earlier.



Image 8 – Students at the museum

As Bangladesh expands its educational system an increasing number of girls are enrolling in schools. As a result, more than fifty percent of the interviewers are now female, and the oral histories received from them contain testimonies from more women than men.

In many cases, the students are the first generation in their families to go to school, and their parents or grandparents are mostly illiterate. As such, the adults never had a chance to register their voices or write down their own experiences. This initiative is often the first time someone has asked about their past and recorded what they witnessed.

The collection of such histories has significance in many ways beyond their historical value. The process of collecting them serves an educational role by helping students develop their writing skills, creativity, and confidence.



Image 9 – The Mobile Museum welcoming a school

At the time of this writing, the Mobile Museum has covered almost 95% of Bangladesh and students have contributed more than 30,000 accounts of the days of 1971. This treasure trove of histories has opened possibilities for new research and study. Taken as a whole, the histories draw the topography of a community affected by atrocity. The process of collection of histories by the members of the new generation from elderly members of their family or community helps to make the memory inter-generational. This is a low-cost oral history program which is also hassle-free as the eye-witness accounts are submitted in written form, eliminating the labor-intensive process of transcribing the recorded text. Most importantly the process has made it possible to record the voices of a large number of the unheard, each with a rich and diverse human tale. Collectively these voices represent the journey of the nation and memorialize the peoples' struggle.

Peace School Foundation of Monte Sole (Elena Monicelli, Coordinator)

Monte Sole is a large, mountainous area in the southern part of the Bologna province of Italy. During the Second World War, an Italian partisan brigade called Stella Rossa (Red Star) threatened Nazi supply and transportation routes in the area. The partisan's activities were regarded as "banditry" by the Nazi army and units were sent to destroy Stella Rosa. After defeating the partisans, the Nazis conducted mass killings throughout the area. Almost all of the nearly 800 casualties were Italian civilians including 216 children, 142 over the age of sixty, and 316 women. The massacre of civilians was planned in advance and no distinction was made between civilians and partisans. This attitude was a consequence of the contempt instilled in the Nazi troops for the partisans, whom they considered bandits and Bolsheviks; and for the community among which the partisans operated. It was a "war on civilians"¹.

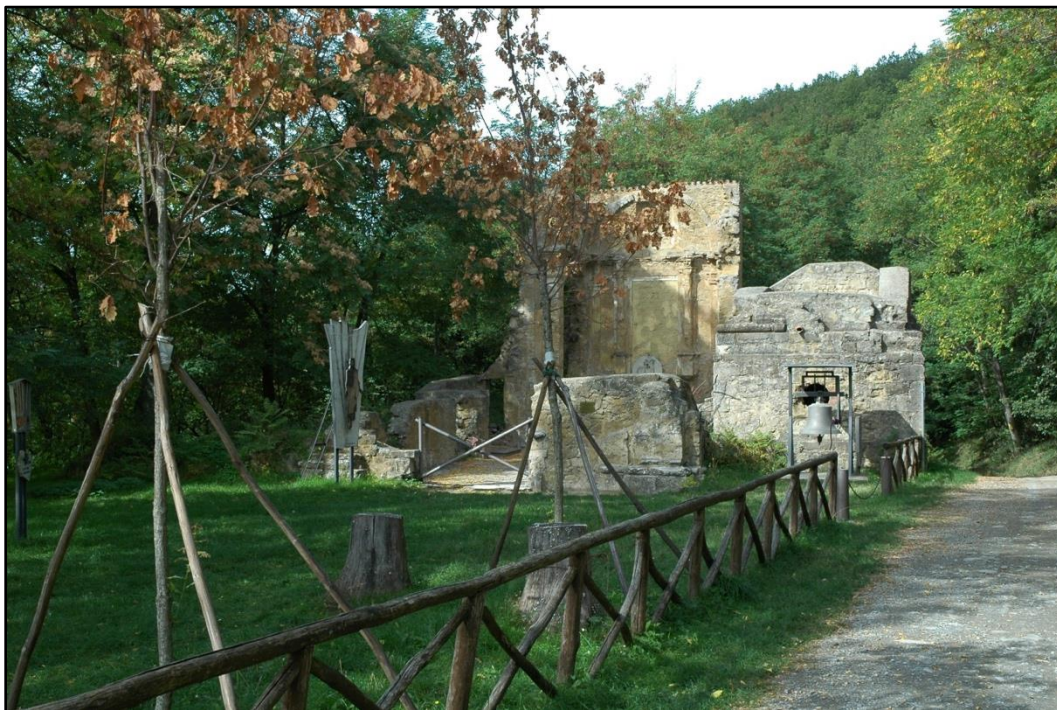


Image 10 – Monte Sole

More than 70 years after the end of World War II, what is the role of places of memory like Monte Sole?

¹Luca Baldissara and Paolo Pezzino, *Il Massacro. Guerra ai Civili a Monte Sole* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009)

Tzvetan Todorov said “If you don't want the past to come back, it's not enough to re-evoke it superficially.”² A common attempt to avoid superficiality is to have a witness share their personal experience of the past with a modern audience. The common weakness in this is that not all who experienced an event are allowed to be “witnesses.” In the telling of Monte Sole’s story outside of PSF “witnesses” are most typically either survivors or relatives of the victims or partisans, ignoring the large number of soldiers who participated in the events.

To qualify as a witness also requires a person to perform an appointed role. Witnesses are expected to emphasise how important remembering is to avoiding repetition of the horror. They are asked to moralize the younger generation against evil and prevent future atrocities based on their story. However, as described in Annette Wieviorka’s essay³, “The Era of the Witness,” this narrow definition of a witness is unable to produce an educational effect capable of preventing a recurrence of events. As we have all too often seen, the narration of horror is not enough to prevent it from happening again. For example, the horrors of the Holocaust were well known and often described, but that did not prevent later massacres in the very heart of Europe, for example in the former Yugoslavia.

Confining the role of witness to victims who emphasize the need to remember transforms the witness from a person into a monument themselves. The common effect of the witness’s story is that the listener is comforted by it, assured that they are on the side of the witness, which because of who is allowed to be a witness, means the side of the victim and good. This saves them from recognizing their ability to be complicit in evil. The listener becomes a “witness to the witness,” able to spread the witness’s story, but unable to consider their own complicity in other evil.

Programming at PSF counteracts this by challenging the notion of who can be a witness. Here, perpetrators (for example a Nazi or Fascist soldier) are also witnesses. The site is rightly eager to condemn perpetrators, but refuses to define them as inhuman. Defining perpetrators as inhuman allows visitors to build an impassable wall between themselves and evil, to set themselves apart from it.

The Monte Sole massacre, as with every other great and planned violence, was not the result of demonic possession or monsters acting on a whim, but of human beings choosing to act in a specific environment of which they were part.

²Tzvetan Todorov, *Memoria del Male. Tentazione del Bene* (Milano: Garzanti, 2004) [see the English translation “*Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century*”]

³Annette Wieviorka, *L'era del testimone* (Milano: Cortina Raffaello, 1999) [see the English translation “The Era of the Witness” (2006)]

Perpetrators cannot be divorced from their environment or the historic sequence of events that they lived through.



Image 11 – Monte Sole leave a flower

In analysing how it was possible for soldiers, to do what they did, it is possible to draw out the universal mechanisms that lead to grand expressions of evil. The analysis of history from the perpetrator's perspective shows that the dehumanization expressed in propaganda, media, and education helps to create an “us” and “them” way of approaching the world which enables violence⁴. In this world, “us” is the place for the good, the right, the innocent, the victim. “Them” is the place for the evil, the wrong, the guilty, the perpetrator.

It is easy to understand why we only allow particular people to become witnesses, speak publicly or even to record their own version of what happened. We

⁴See among the others Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101* (Harper Perennial, 1998); Philip Zimbardo and Greg White, “Stanford Prison Experiment Slide-Tape Show” (Stanford University, 1972); Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009)

are too scared to listen. We are afraid that our values are too fragile to realize that good and evil begin from the same source, the human being. Evil is not outside us in a faraway place; it is part of us.

The Peace School Foundation was created to reduce the division between “us” and “them.” Workshops begin with a slow walk on the places of the massacres to feel the places, both emotionally and cognitively, their power, and their histories. During stops in the space visitors sit in circles and the educator speaks in a low tone of voice, letting the participants listen to the places and preparing them to actively listen to each other.



Image 12 – Discussion group at Monte Sole

The historical context is built by the participants themselves, as they share the information they have, creating a collective memory of what happened. Testimonies of survivors are read to stimulate empathy towards the victims. At the same time the educator introduces the roles of the perpetrator and the passive spectator. “What kind of person could do such a thing?” “Were they human? How could they be human?” “Was there the possibility of disobedience?” “Where's the border between personal responsibility and the influence of others?” “Does war change the rules?”

“How can someone not intervene”? This approach allows for doubts, questions and ideas to be raised during the walk.

The site visit is a journey in and of itself, but visitors are left with a need for discussion that requires additional time and space. In order to become a meaningful educational experience, the visit must be supplemented by additional educational practices, during which visitors have more than one chance to express themselves actively and to participate through interactive and experiential methodology.



Image 13 – Students talking at Monte Sole

Visitors who up until that moment have related to the educator as learners can now play active roles, while the educator becomes a facilitator of the Socratic method. The facilitator maintains expert authority, but focuses more on listening to, observing and enhancing personal and group dynamics. Managing these dynamics becomes the facilitator’s principal task and, the facilitator’s principal purpose is to create a setting where all can feel comfortable taking risks. Introductory activities help facilitators understand the different individuals and how they interact. Groups are generally small, with discussions involving a maximum of fifteen participants. This allows everyone the possibility, time and space to make a contribution. Results

cannot be evaluated in absolute terms, but must be considered relative to the starting point for individuals and groups.

Not all times and places are equally appropriate to have perpetrators as witnesses. It is hard to have an effective educational approach to memory and memorialization in societies with recent or on-going conflicts. The pain and the suffering are still too raw. Everyone can see themselves as the victim either because they were the target of violence or they are a former perpetrator, but present loser of the conflict. And every individual, no matter what their story is, is entitled to enough time and space to relieve and to heal his/her wounds.

Monte Sole victims are dying. Almost all of the perpetrators have died too. Yet we continue to accept as normal that people can be reduced to the other: the inmate, the convict, the undocumented immigrant, to people less worthy than us. This “othering” gives us the power to decide when a life stops being worthy, when it can be abandoned to suicide, to a violent death in prison or in a detention centre, to a stunted death in the Libyan desert, to a drowned death in the Strait of Sicily or under a bomb’s rain. They are witnesses too.

Every generation does not have freedom handed to it, every generation must create it for itself (...) because when there is no individual or collective political subjectivity the space is created to form “definitive” identities, “definitive” diversities that clash with each other that are by definition potentially violent and reciprocally murderous - Rada Ivekovic⁵

The experience of the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization, the Liberation War Museum, and the Monte Sole Peace School suggest that a society’s definition of witness cannot be static. The recognition of widespread victimhood can be a part of stopping violence, but may not help later generations admit the source of violence and prevent its recurrence. Simultaneously, the ways that witnesses share their stories needs to evolve. As generations without any direct experience of an event become the majority, room must be made for those generations to bring their own understandings and experiences to the evaluation of the past.

Over time, witness testimony provides multiple entry points for grappling with the complex legacies of mass violence. However, when including witness testimony as a part of memorialization memorializers must be aware not just of the power of individual stories, but also the collective effect of who is telling them. Who is accepted as a witness often excludes groups who experienced an event. While this

⁵Rada Ivekovic, *Il cerchio del ricordo* [The Circle of Memory], Documentary by Andrea Rossini (2007; Osservatorio sui Balcani [Observatory on the Balkans]), Film

may be necessary for immediate needs, long term goals – such as reconciliation or the prevention of violence – require more expansive definitions.

Who is allowed to speak as a witness can be a fraught issue, and the temptation for memorializers is to leave contentious definitions unexamined. However, they must recognize that those definitions shape, enhance, and limit what they can accomplish. The responsibility for defining witnesses does not reside with memorializers alone, and communities need time after the cessation of violence before they are ready to welcome all voices as witnesses to the past. But it is the responsibility of memorializers to continually question who is excluded from speaking and to ask if the current definitions of witness help or hurt society.