“Using Memorials to Prevent Conflict and Promote Peace”
France and Germany • Amherst College • Natalie Braun (USA, Amherst College)
memorialsforpeace.org

Section I: Narrative

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project: Through the study of World War II (WWII) memorials in France and Germany, my project aimed to develop a guide to enhance the commemorative function of memorials by designing them to also promote peace. This guide identifies ways in which memorials can help combat the current fading memory of the Holocaust by having visitors engage more meaningfully with the memorial as well as how memorials can contribute to peace by inviting visitors to simultaneously learn about and from the factors that gave rise to WWII, so that history does not repeat itself.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they? My project did not receive external funding.

How did you come up with the idea for your project? My college senior honors thesis, which focused on the memorial at a French WWII internment camp called Le Camp des Milles, inspired my Project for Peace. In my thesis, I examined how the memorial uniquely approaches memorialization by going beyond remembering and honoring. It approaches memorialization through a reflective perspective that helps visitors understand the individual and collective processes that give rise to racism and genocide. Through my collaboration with the memorial at Le Camp des Milles and my thesis research, I came to understand that a memorial can be more than just a snapshot of a time in history; it can also serve as a tool to promote active resistance, understanding and tolerance, thus engendering a more peaceful society.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists? It is important for current and future generations to remember and understand the causes, facts and consequences of the Holocaust in order to help prevent future such atrocities. Other genocides such as those in Rwanda and Darfur, for example, resulted from many of the same factors that gave rise to the Holocaust. Moreover, WWII ended 74 years ago; the number of Holocaust survivors and people who lived through the war is decreasing every day. The memory of WWII and the Holocaust may be fading because people today feel more detached and less connected to the event. Additionally, as time progresses, we are losing first-hand testimony—a powerful pedagogic tool—of the atrocities that occurred.

Why did you choose your host site to work in? A 2018 CNN poll alarmingly found that the memory of the Holocaust is fading across Europe and particularly in France: the poll reported that more than 20% of France’s population between the ages of 18 and 34 have never heard of the Holocaust.¹ In addition to the unnerving findings of this poll, France is currently experiencing a rise in nationalist tendencies against a sociopolitical backdrop that has alarming similarities to those that preceded WWII. The combination of the fading memory of the Holocaust in France, the country’s sociopolitical environment and its involvement in WWII increases the importance of France’s WWII memorials to serve as tools to educate visitors on the past and on how WWII can inform the present. I decided to study Germany’s WWII memorials as well as those in France at the suggestion of several French curators who worked at the memorials that I visited. The curators believe that France’s memorials could benefit from the reflective strategies implemented in Germany’s memorials and that study of German WWII memorials would provide an important and more nuanced perspective to my project.

What was it like to work in your host site? I followed a similar process when visiting each memorial. I started by examining its physical design and visiting the permanent and temporary exhibit(s). While in the exhibit(s), I noted the ways in which the memorial presented information, paying particular attention to the ways in which they could contribute to the promotion of peace or places where presentation could be enhanced to that end. Next, when possible, I spoke with curator(s) to understand the memorial’s goals, learn about its other initiatives, ask about obstacles the memorial confronted and to discuss the importance and potential for memorials to contribute to the promotion of peace in contemporary society. The curators with whom I met were extremely interested and generous, eager to share their expertise and receptive to discussing how certain elements of their memorial could be improved. I also interacted with the memorial’s visitors to learn what part of the memorial they found particularly effective and impactful. Visitors were generally open

to speaking with me. At certain memorials, I also had the opportunity to attend commemorative and educative events.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways? Relatively early on in my project, I discovered that the decision of what information is included within exhibits, what is excluded and how the information is presented is highly political; often changes must go through the memorial’s board, its funding source(s) and sometimes even municipal representatives. The political nature of deciding what information is included and how this information is presented means that such decisions are not solely at the discretion of a memorial’s curator(s). As a result, it is more difficult than I had originally perceived to make enhancements to a memorial.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people? Almost all the curators that I contacted were very generous with their time and were willing to meet with me. In addition to meeting with me, many also put me in contact with other memorials, organizations and resources. Although I did not face communication challenges in France, I did in Germany where I did not speak the language. I was able to utilize my proficiency in English and French to communicate with curators at German memorials.

How do you define peace? I define peace as the tolerance towards and the respect of others; when in a state of peace, individuals share equal rights and have the liberty to form and pursue their own lives.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term? Based on my study of WWII memorials in France and Germany, I developed a guide to encourage memorials to create an experience where visitors are inspired to actively remember, to better understand and to address the root causes of the tragedy being memorialized. Visitors can then extend these learnings to the modern-day context and use their knowledge of a particular history to ask: how did this happen, what should we do differently, what are we doing now which could lead to similar events and how can individuals play a role in promoting peace? I hope that a more meaningful engagement with memorials will translate into vigilance and resistance against racism, anti-Semitism and injustice in the visitor’s society. I have developed a website for my guide, memorialsforpeace.org. I have sent the guide to the memorials that I worked with during my Project for Peace as well as to memorials that are currently reconstructing their exhibits, such as the Centre Jean Moulin and the Musée de la résistance et de la déportation de la Haute-Garonne.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you? The numerous WWII memorials in France and Germany are a positive reflection of a societal desire to take responsibility for the actions of the French and German governments, and some of the countries’ citizens during WWII. I complete my project with a newfound appreciation for the complexity, nuances and details that go into the delivery of information about these events. Visiting memorials—many of which are located at the site where horrific atrocities took place—has confirmed for me the importance of not only transmitting the memory of WWII but also of learning from it.

• Please provide a 1-2 personal statement sentence, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result. Memorials should have the capacity to both serve as commemorative symbols of historical events and as pedagogic tools to promote peace and tolerance. My in-depth study of WWII memorials in France and Germany has confirmed for me that memorials that are designed to educate and encourage self-reflection can positively impact individual engagement in the promotion of peace. My project has also showed me that there are many motivated individuals who are actively combatting the alarming fading memory of the Holocaust and to using our shared history to create a better future.
Section II: Photographs

Photo credits: Natalie Braun