Statement for Charli Veale

The United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial and Learning Center Public Enquiry

The Planning Inspectorate

11 November 2020

I’m Charli Veale. I’m a recent graduate from the University of Bristol, having finished my BA in History earlier this year. I’m currently pursuing a career in arts management, and I’ve been volunteering at the Imperial War Museum in recent months whilst looking for a job. At university my specialism became the relationship between history and memory, specifically looking at Holocaust history and how the world’s understanding of it has changed over the post-war period. I’ve always been interested in Holocaust history, as well as public history, and so chose third year modules that combined these two. I also had the pleasure of knowing a Holocaust survivor last year and it was really an accumulation of all these things that led me to my dissertation topic, which was called: *Shaping Memory: London’s new national Holocaust memorial.*

So, my evidence for the Inspectorate today is my dissertation. I centered my thesis around this proposed Holocaust memorial, and I effectively asked *why* is the British government creating this new memorial, and why *now?* I’m hoping that my research findings can offer a new perspective on why Victoria Tower Gardens is an unsuitable location for this proposal.

To be clear, I am in full support of having a new national memorial to the Holocaust in Britain, and in London. I think this is a gap in Britain’s memorial culture, and that the aims of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation – namely:

1. to build a memorial & learning center that will ‘address the complexities of Britain’s ambiguous responses to the Holocaust’
2. and invite visitors to critically reflect on those responses[[1]](#footnote-1)

are completely necessary. What concerns me, and this is the crux of my dissertation argument, is that I don’t believe this memorial, being built next to Parliament, is as single-mindedly focused on Holocaust memorialization as it really ought to be. It’s clear that there are political imperatives at work here as well, and that these, more than anything else, are behind the insistence on a location next to the Palace of Westminster. After all, as many people have already noted at this inquiry, it is hard to see how the really important educational aims of this proposal can best be achieved on this very small site, with no scope for expansion.

The 2015 Commission Report, *Britain’s Promise to Remember,* makes clear that one aim of the memorial project was to ‘build a nation of empathetic citizens’,[[2]](#footnote-2) so to encourage integration by reducing prejudice and improving tolerance. We know this was an overall government goal at the time, because it was repeated in the Counter-Extremism Strategy released in the same year.[[3]](#footnote-3) Now, by this time Holocaust memory has become a kind of universalized framework for people to use and impart their own messages through, and it’s clear from the 2015 Commission Report that that is what the government was doing. They attached this notion of ‘British values’, which is, in reality, a set of widely accepted, and not nation-specific, good values, to our British memory of the Holocaust. The idea being, that we can turn around and say, ‘this period defines what it means to be British.’ But this is problematic, because it risks being ultimately self-serving and congratulatory. Even though the report acknowledges Britain’s story is ‘not wholly positive’, it tends to tell the story as if it is.

So, now we’ve got the recommendation to build a new national memorial from this report, which is encouraging Holocaust commemoration but off the back of that, promoting ‘British values.’ National memorials do give us this sense of shared memory, they are shared spaces, and so attaching these values to a monument is intended to give us the sense that we share these values as a nation. This is particularly effective through Holocaust commemoration because of the juxtaposition: that was bad, we are good.

But all of this is distracting from the true purpose of the memorial. We’re in danger of promoting a self-serving narrative against the memory of an event which was horrifying and complex, and in which Britain’s involvement was very significant, but not in all ways exemplary. I think this is incredibly damaging, it not only signals the instrumentalization of Holocaust memory, but it threatens actual historical understanding of the event. History needs critical perspectives, and we can’t be critical, or invite criticism, if we’re encouraging the nation to complacency.

And so, this is where the location becomes a problem. We know it hasn’t been democratically chosen, it was not originally considered as a site choice, and yet it’s been pushed forward because – I would contend - it corroborates this idea of ‘British values.’

The UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation’s search brief said that the memorial will be ‘both a focal point for national commemoration of the Holocaust’, but also that it will be a ‘permanent affirmation’ of these ‘British values.’ I don’t think these two things are mutually inclusive. It’s the same juxtaposition of Britain good, Holocaust bad. Having the memorial next to Parliament created this physical association that encourages this symbolism. Ed Balls has literally said that having the two next to one another means that children can come and learn about ‘the history of our great democracy’ whilst remembering what happens when racism and antisemitism is ‘left unchecked.’ The implication being that democracy should be celebrated, against Holocaust memory. Again, pushing forward this self-serving (and potentially misleading, given that 1930s Germany was a democracy) narrative, and using Holocaust memory to do so.

The UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation is made up of people who clearly care passionately about Holocaust memory and education, and have put enormous effort into getting this proposal to such an advanced stage. That said, it is worth noting that all members of the UKHMF are Government appointees, so they cannot be said to be independent in the way that they might be, had they been recruited through a more conventional process. To reiterate. I think a memorial is so important, and that encouraging Holocaust history and memory is such a worthwhile endeavor. I just don’t think it should be used to advance whatever domestic aims the government has at the time, even if these aims are also worthwhile. Holocaust history and subsequent genocides, the educational topics of this proposal, are quite huge and complicated enough, without introducing contemporary preoccupations to the mix.

Not allowing the memorial to be built next to Westminster would hopefully force the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation to rethink this dual ambition and focus solely on the task at hand, which should be, as they outline on their website:

 ‘Facing history honestly’, which ‘requires us to question the role of our own Parliament, government and society in the history of the Holocaust’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Because I don’t think this is something that can be done solely inside the Learning Centre. And it’s important that it’s not, because of the projected figures. If over half of the visitors aren’t even going to go inside, surely the incentive should be, how can we encourage this honest interaction with history from the outside? And if it’s next to the Houses of Parliament, we can’t, because what we’re actually encouraging is this unspoken symbolism of Holocaust bad, Parliament good. And that, to me, is the most harmful thing of all – to history, to Holocaust memory, and to ourselves.

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-holocaust-memorial-foundation/about> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398645/Holocaust_Commission_Report_Britains_promise_to_remember.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-holocaust-memorial-foundation/about#our-mission-statement> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)