

Memory Studies Coursework

Case Study on Historic Memorials

Topic: Choose TWO Memorials of your choice to compare and contrast.

Answer the Question: How effective are memorials in remembering the past?

Word Count: 1,190.

This discussion presents how Memorials capture memory and how by studying them an audience can interpret the past. It will consider whether memorials are a useful creation for remembering the past or whether they can be seen as potentially problematic as they can be seen to replace the past with a visualisation of what people believe the past was. This argument will focus on two very different memorials to convey whether memorials are useful for remembering the past or not. The first being the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. which remembers the American President Abraham Lincoln and the second, The Kindertransport Memorial in Berlin which commemorates the children who were saved from the Holocaust.

Firstly, this debate will explore the significance of The Berlin Monument for the Kindertransport Children during World War II. The Kindertransport was a system organised to provide aid for children who faced persecution during the years 1938-9. It has been argued that over 10,000 children were saved from Germany, Austria, and other surrounding countries. This memorial commemorates both those effected by the Nazi persecution but also recognises the efforts of those who saved them. This is also acknowledged on the memorial itself inscribed “Trains to life – Trains to death”, portraying those who were deported from Germany as part of the Kindertransport movement: the trains to life, and those who were packed onto trains going out of Germany to concentration camps – trains to death. This memorial, therefore, represents those who lost their lives because of Germany’s actions during the period, demonstrating that the Kindertransport memorial is an effective memorial for remembering the past by acknowledging the full history - good and bad.

Similarly, in a discussion on Holocaust Memorial Day 2020, Rabbi Sacks stated “Memory of the evils of the past is the best way of avoiding evils in the future. We cannot bring the dead back to life, but we can ensure that they did not die in vain. Those who forget may repeat. Those who remember know that we have to find another way.”¹ From this viewpoint, the memorial can be interpreted as an important reminder of Germany’s role in the war. The memorial demonstrates a sense of regret for the actions committed but also a warning that such actions should never be repeated. Indeed, the monument reminds humanity of the dangers of not preventing injustice and inhumanity in society. This demonstrates that the Kindertransport Memorial in Berlin is an effective memorial for remembering the past and, crucially, informing the future.

In contrast, the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. can be seen to not represent the full picture of the history. The memorial was built in commemoration to Abraham Lincoln the 16th President of the USA long after his assassination. During Lincoln’s Presidency America went through the American Civil War, a war which saw huge casualties and great moral,

¹ Rabbi Sacks, ‘Memory of the evils of the past is the best way of avoiding evils in the future (Holocaust Memorial Day 2020’, The Office of Rabbi Sacks, 22nd January 2020, (Accessed 07/02/2020).

political and constitutional crises. Viejo-Rose argues that “A main question is the role of memorials in post-conflict reconciliation: do memorials foster reconciliation, or do they prolong divisions and resentment?... memorials are not primarily about reconciliation although, after time they can be used for that purpose...”² Using Viejo-Rose’s comment, the Lincoln memorial can be perceived to be an attempt to reconcile the mistakes of the past like the American Civil War and attempt to unify the country torn apart by a war during Lincoln’s time in office. In 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation ‘freeing’ the slaves in American Society during the time. However, the execution of the Proclamation and the actuality of the change in social relations between whites and blacks during the time was not changed in a dramatic sense. It can be argued that the slaves were still not ‘freed’ 100 years after Lincoln’s Proclamation presenting that although Lincoln’s memorial was erected in 1922, the issues to which he advocated for were still not resolved.

As well as the Lincoln memorial’s faults in glorifying a history that was only partially complete through its elevation of Lincoln’s position and efforts, the memorial can be seen to only recollect the efforts of Lincoln himself and not of American society at the time. It has been argued that “Memorials in America date nearly to the founding of the nation. Throughout American history, memorials have been established in honour of great American political leaders and events.”³ This argument suggests that American history has a tendency to raise up and reward its leaders for a great effort such as a war victory, change in unjust constitution and social change. In this way, a memorial like the Lincoln memorial can be seen to isolate itself to a history of the person rather than a collaborative effort of a society: “Monuments and memorials are built forms with commemorative as well as political functions. They can articulate selective historical narratives focusing attention on convenient events and individuals, while obliterating what is discomforting for an elite...”⁴ The Lincoln memorial is true to this statement. By commemorating Lincoln in a statue in such a large format, praises Lincoln’s efforts on the efforts of the Civil Rights early movements. In this way it glorifies Lincoln and his power and position as President, whilst it eradicates the history of those in American society who suffered through Lincoln’s Civil war. Therefore, the Lincoln memorial can be argued to not be the most effective way of recollecting memory and remembering the past as it only appears to tell part of a story.

To conclude, the arguments within this study present that memorials can be an effective way of remembering the past if they are constructed and presented in the right way. The Kindertransport Memorial in Berlin is a good example of an effective memorial for remembering the past as it acknowledges the full picture of the past during the persecutions of people during World War II. The Memorial presents that history needs be remembered, both good and bad, in order to teach humanity for the future. The Lincoln Memorial on the other hand presents a negative way of recollecting the past as it presents only a positive past for the political purpose and glorifying of that nation’s history rather than remembers the past as it was with negative issues that affected American society. These memorials show how

² Dr. Dacia Viejo-Rose, ‘Do Memorials Matter’, *University of Cambridge*, (21st October 2011)

³ Mona Doreen Greenberg and Robert P. Watson, ‘Public Memorials in American Life’, *Liverpool John Moors University*, (2011)

⁴ Frederico Bellentani, ‘Monuments and Memorials in Changing Societies: A Semiotic and Geographical Approach’, *Semiotix A Global Magazine*, (Accessed 07/02/2020)

important memorials can be to the national memory of historical events and how the events need to be captured in the correct way to teach history.

References:

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