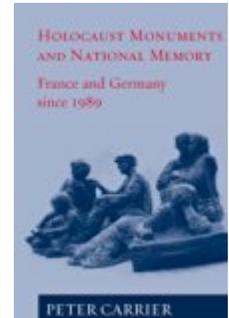


**Peter Carrier.** *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany since 1989: The Origins and Political Function of the Vél d'Hiv in Paris and the Holocaust Monument in Berlin.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2005. 267 S. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57181-904-8.



**Reviewed by** Franke Smith

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In *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures* Peter Carrier argues that contemporary monuments, more specifically the Holocaust Monument in Berlin and the Vél' d' Hiv in Paris, should not be read as "national" historical documents, with one distinct meaning, but should be understood as open to interpretation and considered in terms of the numerous debates that they inspired and the meanings assigned to them by various interest groups. Carrier's main goal is to assess the political ramifications and significance of contemporary monuments. The governments of both France and Germany intervened in the planning stages of these monuments to construct and define them in terms of "national" moral statements about actions taken during the Second World War. While this may be the official version of the meaning these monuments carry to the public, the monuments are in fact a great deal more open to interpretation than these claims admit. The desire in each country to create one monument which would stand for a single "national" interpretation of the past, necessarily resulted in the creation of ambiguous and abstract monuments which enable individuals to interpret

meaning openly and in terms of their own understanding and memories of the Second World War.

Carrier concisely examines and critiques the theoretical frameworks and arguments of a multitude of scholars who have dealt with "memory work" and the Vél d' Hiv and Holocaust monuments, including Pierre Nora, Henri Rousso, Jay Winter, and Jürgen Habermas. Most significant, in terms of his argument, is Carrier's critique of Pierre Nora's definition of "sites of memory." [1] Carrier argues that Nora's concept of national memory as unified and shared by the whole is inaccurate when describing the uses and interpretations of contemporary monuments. According to Carrier, a single monument could never encompass and express the memories of every member of a nation and should not be considered in these terms. The Vél' d' Hiv and the Holocaust Memorial, as open and to a degree abstract monuments, instead allow the public to reflect upon the events of the Second World War and come to their own understanding of their own and the country's relationship to the War. The debates that punctuated the conceptualization and creation of the Holo-

caust Monument and the Vél' d' Hiv, therefore, should be considered as "sites of memory" in and of themselves, regardless of the final form of the monuments. Understanding the many debates that surrounded these monuments in the 1990s is essential to understanding the multiple ways in which the French and German public, its leaders, and intellectuals remember and view the Second World War and its atrocities and the ways in which contemporary monuments cater to multiple view points. The ambiguous nature of the monuments allows the public as well as politicians of any party to interpret and redefine the meaning of the monuments.

In part 1 of the book, Carrier gives an overview of the history of monuments, and describes contemporary monuments in terms of the break between the tradition of glorifying heroes and victories during the nineteenth century and the seeming inappropriateness of this style of commemoration after the World Wars. In part 2, Carrier goes to great lengths to describe the aesthetic and political debates that surrounded both the Vél' d' Hiv and the Holocaust Memorial, describing the many different designs suggested for the monuments and the political rhetoric used by various officials and interest groups to describe the monuments. He discusses the ways in which the monuments came to stand for "reconciliation" and "consensus" in France and Germany respectively, and how "negative memories" of crime and atrocity can be positively memorialized. Officials of both nations rhetorically constructed the monuments as admissions of a failure on the part of the *nation*, but one that could be learned from if the countries reasserted their commitment to republican and democratic values. In part 3 Carrier discusses the transnational nature of memory cultures after the Second World War and the post national qualities of these supposedly "national" monuments, and on these grounds launches into his critique of Nora's "sites of memory." It is within this final section that he establishes his alternative definition of "dialogic sites of memory," a

term which he uses to describe the debates and rhetorical construction of the monuments as "sites of memory."

Carrier is primarily interested in the political function and significance of monuments in terms of their influence upon memory cultures. The political significance of contemporary monuments is defined in terms of their ability to serve "as non-prescriptive heuristic stimuli that enable individuals to encounter and understand both the past and their relation to the past via representations of it" (p. 230). The ability of these monuments to be openly interpreted and to act as catalysts of debate and reflection is their primary and most important function.

One obvious question about the context and content of Carrier's book involves the nature of his monograph as a transnational or comparative history. Is it fair to compare feelings of guilt and remorse about responsibility for the deportation of thousands as opposed to the murder of millions? One must take into account, however, that Carrier is largely interested in the new type of aesthetic style that these monuments represent, and a large part of his argument revolves around the similarly vague aesthetic forms of the memorials as they stand today. These monuments share an aesthetic background that Carrier attempts to understand in terms of their impact on memory. He does not argue that the 1942 deportations in Paris are comparable to the genocide of the Jews by the Germans, but he does draw parallels between the ways in which these two nations attempted to deal with their tainted pasts in the late twentieth century.

Carrier's interpretation of not only the form but also the meaning of the monuments in their varying states of completion is insightful. His interpretation of the open and ambiguous nature of contemporary monuments and the many varying opinions and memories associated with not only the Second World War, but also the monuments dedicated to it, is welcome. Carrier has, however,

critiqued and questioned the theories of several established experts in the field of memory studies, and this volume will probably spark a few debates of its own.

#### Notes

[1]. Pierre Nora, ed. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1993). For reviews of Nora's work see: John Bodnar, "Pierre Nora, National Memory, and Democracy: A Review," *Journal of American History* 87 (2000): pp. 951-963, and Stephen Englund, "Review: The Ghost of Nation Past," *Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1992): pp. 299-320.

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