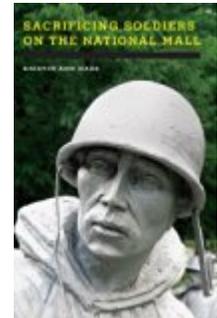




Kristin Ann Hass. *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 280 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-27411-2.



Reviewed by Gabriela Welch

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Kristin Ann Hass's objectives in her book *Sacrificing Soldiers on the National Mall* are ambitious. Inspired by what many have labeled a memory boom, Hass examines five monument-building projects around the National Mall in Washington, DC. They are the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial, the Women in Military Service for America Memorial, the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II, and the National World War II Memorial.

Although Hass does not explain why she chose these five memorial projects, her aims are to show how war commemorations in the United States have changed since the Vietnam War, and what impact this has had on debates about national identity at the National Mall. Hass focuses on three themes—nationalism, race, and gender—and “asks if we have made good on our enormous responsibility to [the war dead]” (p. 2).

Hass begins by acknowledging that the “Cold War and post-Cold War conflicts have proved

challenging to a consistent understanding of American wars as virtuous, and [that] this has complicated the revered social position of the soldier” (p. 3). She argues that, following the Vietnam War, there has been a “crisis of patriotism,” which has led to “a need to reassert U.S. nationalism in particular terms”; she claims further that “honouring the memory of American soldiers who served in Vietnam inspired a desire to produce more memory of more soldiers” (p. 3).

The theoretical framework of the book draws on discussions of the nation and the cult of the dead (see Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm); the nexus between memory and history (see Jay Winter, David Blight); and the democratization of memory. Hass engages with the representational problems of memorials (such as race); the act of witnessing is a methodological imperative for this book. This is an impressive foundation, although little reference is made to these works throughout the book itself.

Using an extensive collection of archival governmental documents, mass-media reports, and witness accounts, Hass examines the origin of each project, its design, its site, and the dedication of its final monument. This gives a clear structure to each chapter, although at times the narrative is slightly descriptive and repetitive.

In discussing the Korean War Veterans Memorial (chapter 1), Hass gives an extremely informative overview of the debates that took place around the representations of the soldiers and their sacrifice. She decries the “stunningly generic” (p. 26) language of the memorial, and the fact that details of the war are absent from the design of the memorial. She argues that this commemorative oversimplification is “linked to difficulties in reconciling old ideas about the nation and the new kinds of wars it was waging” (p. 29), and that this became more evident after the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. While this is a thought-provoking critical examination of the memorial, at times Hass’s argumentation is unconvincing. Surely memorials cannot comprehensively represent all the aspects of a war. Their role is precisely to simplify and make accessible the remembrance in the way their authors—government, veterans’ organizations, or others—intend. How this message is passed on to those who visit the memorial is a matter altogether different, however, and this is little remarked upon in Hass’s book.

Chapters 2 (on the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial) and 3 (on the Women in Military Service for America Memorial) bring in discussions about race and gender, and therefore debates about national inclusiveness and how the military is represented. Hass is rather pessimistic about the impact of these two projects, with the Black Revolutionary War Patriots Memorial not yet built (some progress has since been made, with the final approval of a site[1]), and the Women in Military Service for America Memorial not having made the contributions of women in the

military “visible.” In these chapters, Hass’s language analysis of the debates around these memorials and their symbolic implications is thought-provoking and thorough.

The last two chapters discuss the building of the National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism during World War II (chapter 4) and the National World War Two Memorial (chapter 5). While the former engages with the idea of redemption and has powerful symbolism, reflecting the “blind devotion in the hot, klieg-lit glare of injustice” (p. 123), the latter deals with the status of veterans in contemporary American society and the place that World War II has in its imaginary. Particularly in these two chapters, comparisons with the experiences of other nations would have strengthened the author’s arguments.

The book concludes with a brief epilogue in which Hass gives an interesting explanation of sacrifice—both that made by soldiers, and the sacrificing of soldiers. This dichotomy is powerful; developing the discussion further might have made for a stronger conclusion to the book. At the same time, the reception of the built memorials and the National Mall is crucial in answering the questions Hass sets out; for example, how they are used in their commemorative role? Finally, the Mall is a tourist attraction; what might these monuments symbolize beyond their intended meaning? Is their intended audience limited to those within the “national boundaries”?

Overall, this is a thought-provoking book which opens up space for more discussion and research, more comparisons and inquiries. Such work will be equally interesting to students of nationalism and memory studies and to the general public interested in the meaning of the United States’ national ideas and military symbolism.

Note

[1]. Tom Jackman, “Memorial for Black Revolutionary War Soldiers finds spot on Mall after 30 years,” *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2014.

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