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The Second Stage of Violence:
An Excerpt from the Introduction to
Violence and Public Memory



MARTIN HENRY BLATT

[Ed. note: In this excerpt from his introduction to *Violence and Public Memory*, editor Martin Blatt discusses his family history connected to the Holocaust and how this history propelled him to a lifelong commitment to social justice through the telling of history in public contexts. He then identifies how the relationship of violence to public memory has been a central theme throughout his professional career as a public historian. Blatt proceeds to define how he employs the terms “violence” and “public memory” in this book. He examines contemporary literature and the public history arena to highlight exemplary works focused on violence and public memory. Subsequently, he highlights a range of publications that examine this connection. Blatt explores the contents of this edited volume regarding geography, types of memorialization, and historical timeframe. He stresses his belief that the measure of the integrity of a nation or culture is the degree to which there is an unflinching examination of the violent past and its meaning for contemporary society. He has organized the book into five thematic sections—genocide; slavery; racial and sexual hatred in the United States; apartheid; and fascism and war. Each section includes multiple chapters tied to the specific theme. Blatt concludes the introduction by summarizing each section and chapter (these summaries are not included here).]

The memory of my uncle Henry Freund impacted me profoundly, propelling me to a lifelong commitment to social justice through the telling of history in public contexts. He died aboard an American troop transport sunk by a mine; his ship was carrying reinforcements to the Battle of the Bulge. As a young boy, I had nightmares of drowning on board with Henry or watching him die and being powerless to help. Heidelberg, Germany, was my mother Molly’s home and Henry was her brother. Her family were prosperous upper middle class Jews. She managed to flee in the summer of 1938; Henry and my

overleaf • The fallen Christopher Columbus statue outside the Minnesota State Capitol after a group led by American Indian Movement members tore it down in St. Paul, Minnesota, on June 10, 2020.

TONY WEBSTER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Each participant carried the name of a dead American soldier around their neck on cardboard and carried a candle in a silent march from Arlington National Cemetery to the Capitol Building, where the placard with the name was laid to rest in a mock coffin. The name of the soldier I carried was Benjamin Kissling of Texas.

grandmother Clara departed in January, 1940. The Nazis imprisoned my grandfather Adolf in Dachau for a month in the fall of 1938 and took him to the prison camp Gurs in fall, 1940, where he died of dysentery. They murdered many in my family.

The spirit of Henry Freund influenced me during my participation in the March Against Death, a 1969 protest against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC. Each participant carried the name of a dead American soldier around their neck on cardboard and carried a candle in a silent march from Arlington National Cemetery to the Capitol Building, where the placard with the name was laid to rest in a mock coffin. The name of the soldier I carried was Benjamin Kissling of Texas. I imagined a conversation which seemed and felt real. The participants were my uncle Henry, Kissling, and myself and our focus was on the lunacy of war and the need to struggle against war and for social justice. The experience and lessons from that march remain with me to this day.

In the fall of 2001, my mother Molly and I traveled to Heidelberg. The city had invited the “former Jewish citizens of Heidelberg,” those Jews who fled the Nazi regime between 1938 and 1945, to visit for a week-long, all-expenses-paid program with a companion of their choice. Scheduled at five-year intervals, the first gathering had been in 1996. In 2011, I attended another program, this time with my younger daughter. Such gatherings were not peculiar

An excerpt from *Violence and Public Memory*, edited by Martin Henry Blatt • Routledge, 2023 • <https://www.routledge.com/Violence-and-Public-Memory/Blatt/p/book/9781032109473>

to Heidelberg. German cities and towns have been organizing programs for former Jewish citizens for decades. Such events function both as an apology and as a demonstration of the strength of Germany's contemporary democracy. Heidelberg and many other German communities no longer organize these events as the great majority of Jews with lived experience of the Nazis have passed away.¹

Throughout my professional career as a public historian, the relationship of violence to public memory has been a central recurring theme. When I worked at Lowell National Historical Park in the early 1990s, I tried, with mixed success, to get the park to foreground the issue of slavery. It had seemed clear to me then, and still does, that the labor of enslaved Africans in the South to produce the raw material cotton was crucial to the success of Lowell and the industrial North. I urged this interconnection be highlighted in tours, exhibits, and programming; this issue remains problematic in some ways still today at the park.² After moving to Boston National Historical Park, I was a key organizer of the 1997 centennial celebration of the Augustus Saint-Gaudens memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment. One of the greatest pieces of public art in the United States, this memorial celebrates the white commander and the first Black regiment comprised of primarily free Blacks in the Union army. The regiment, which suffered great losses in an unsuccessful effort to capture Fort Wagner in South Carolina, paved the way for the significant increase of Black troops which was critical in leading to the defeat of the Confederacy. With our centennial program, which featured the largest gathering ever of Black Civil War reenactors, a public outdoor ceremony, and a symposium, we sought to reframe the memorial so that attention would be focused on the Black troops and not narrowly on their white commanding officer.³

In 2003, I joined with my National Park Service (NPS) colleague Louis Hutchins to begin planning the first traveling exhibit on the history of the Soviet Gulag in the United States. This project grew out of a working relationship the NPS had initiated with the International Historic Site Museums of Conscience. We brought together a unique collaboration to produce the exhibit. Partners included the NPS, the Gulag Museum of Perm Russia; the International Memorial Society; and Amnesty International. The

exhibit, "GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom," told a sharply critical story of the Gulag without allowing the traditional American Cold War anti-Communist narrative to predominate. The traveling exhibit was displayed in a variety of NPS sites, including Ellis Island and Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site. The NPS also sent a team of curators to Perm to work with the museum on a variety of public history issues.⁴ In 2014, with Putin controlling Russia and a change in the governor of the Perm region, our collaborators at the Gulag Museum were removed. The museum was repurposed; no longer is it a historic site devoted to the actual history of the Gulag but in a bizarre, sick twist, it now presents a narrative that represents the Gulag as a vital component of the Soviet victory in World War II. Further, in late 2021, Russia's Supreme Court, doing Putin's bidding, ordered the closure of the International Memorial Society.

Boston National Historical Park marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 2013 with a series of programs. Most notable was "Roots of Liberty: The Haitian Revolution and the American Civil War," organized by the National Park Service along with Central Square Theater, the Museum of African American History [Boston], Harvard University, and others. This historical pageant focused on the significant impact of the Haitian Revolution on Black and white abolitionists and Black Union troops as well as the fear the revolution sparked among white slave owners in the South. The performance attracted a capacity crowd of 1,700 to Tremont Temple, the site where the Proclamation was first read in Boston in 1863. The pageant featured a large, diverse cast of actors and actresses, dancers, music, a choir, and an enormous puppet figure of the iconic Haitian leader Touissant L'Ouverture. The Haitian American writer Edwidge

The exhibit, "GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom," told a sharply critical story of the Gulag without allowing the traditional American Cold War anti-Communist narrative to predominate.

Danticat authored parts of the script and the actor Danny Glover portrayed Touissant.⁵

A few years later in 2015, I retired from the National Park Service in order to become professor of the practice and director of the public history program at Northeastern University. I focused a significant part of my work on my ongoing commitment to the exploration of the relationship between violence and public memory. I worked with my students to develop a module on Malcolm X and his participation on the debate team at Norfolk Prison for the national traveling exhibit, “States of Incarceration,” organized by the Humanities Action Lab. My courses included public history of slavery; public history of incarceration; history and memory of King Philip’s War; and violence and public memory. On the basis of the latter course, Routledge approached me to produce a book and this volume is the result.



With the focus of this volume on violence and public memory, it is important to provide some basic definitions of terms for an overview. I approach violence in this volume in a capacious manner. Governments ranging from authoritarian regimes like Nazi Germany in the Holocaust to autocracies like fascist Argentina to democracies like the United States in Vietnam have perpetrated vast death and destruction. Settler colonial societies, including South Africa and Israel, have displaced indigenous populations. Slave owners brutalized and dehumanized the enslaved in many ways. The legacies of slavery have included virulent racism which is a pernicious form of violence. Whites in the Jim Crow South in the United States enforced segregation and strict racial hierarchy by many means with the most horrible being lynching. Homophobic and racial hatred inspired the mass murder attack on the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Kenneth Foote, writing about sites of violence and tragedy in the United States, has identified four useful categories that fall along a continuum: “sanctification, designation, rectification, and obliteration. All four outcomes can result in major modifications of the landscape, but of very different sorts.”⁶

There is the violence of murder, displacement, humiliation, or lynching and then there is another kind of violence which constitutes a second wave or stage. The perpetrators of violence and subsequent

I worked with my students to develop a module on Malcolm X and his participation on the debate team at Norfolk Prison for the national traveling exhibit, “States of Incarceration,” organized by the Humanities Action Lab.

generations seek to celebrate their legacies and to distort, lie, or obliterate the historical truth of what happened to their victims. Bryan Stevenson worked for years to free Blacks from the death sentence in the American South who were wrongly convicted of murder. It became clear to him that in order to truly understand the racism of the justice system, it was essential to comprehend the history of slavery, racism, Jim Crow violence, convict labor, and mass incarceration. Stevenson and his organization, Equal Justice Initiative, made this concrete through their establishment of a museum and national lynching memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.⁷ British colonists and later American citizens dispossessed Indigenous Americans. Subsequently, they continued their violence by portraying Indians as largely disappeared and actively sought to eradicate their cultural identities through forcing indigenous children to leave their homes and attend boarding schools where they were compelled to cut their hair, dress in American attire, and repudiate their native languages.⁸ Zionist settlers and subsequently Israeli citizens dispossessed large numbers of Palestinians and then literally erased them from historical maps. Whites in the American South may have lost the Civil War but largely won the peace with their assertion of the Lost Cause argument. According to David Blight, the Lost Cause promoted the notion of an Old South rooted in the “chivalry and romance of antebellum plantation life.” This totally false but wildly popular picture included Black “servants,” and a “happy, loyal slave culture, remembered as a source of laughter, music, and contentment.” Blight relates that the Civil War according to the Lost Cause became “essentially a conflict between white men; both sides fought well, Americans against Americans, and there was glory enough to go around. Celebrating the soldiers’ experience buttressed the nonideological memory of the war.” To most southerners, David Blight argues, the Lost Cause came to represent a “... crucial double

meaning: reunion and respect.” And this Lost Cause ideology flourished and helped to nurture the terrible violence of the Jim Crow South.⁹

So we can define violence in multiple ways that play out over time. It is interesting to examine the image on the cover of this book [*ed.*: reproduced above] which portrays a toppled statue of Christopher Columbus in Minnesota. Also, in chapter 5 of this volume, we see the pedestal of a statue of a slave trader in Bristol, Great Britain, that was forcibly removed by protesters. Protesters attacked both statues in reaction to the police murder of George Floyd. Are these legitimate forms of dissenting action or are they acts of vandalism for which the perpetrators should be punished? Does removal of such statues constitute a bold effort to reframe what constitutes history or a forceful, crude action to remove history from public view? I would argue that these actions are appropriate steps by protesters seeking to redefine history in the public domain which is always a contested space. In her important study, *Memorial Mania*, Erika Doss relates that in 1946, Allied forces in Germany issued Directive No. 30, “The Liquidation of German Military and Nazi Memorials and Museums,” and ordered that they be “completed destroyed and liquidated” within eighteen months. She reports that in 2003, U.S. soldiers in Iraq “pulled down multiple monuments to Saddam Hussein.” And yet, she asks us to consider the contradiction that the U.S. on its own soil “allows—or more accurately ignores—memorials to the defeated states and underlying white supremacist politics of the secessionist Southern Confederacy.” It is hypocritical to argue that only official military organizations can properly tamper with public memory but unofficial players have no right to do so.¹⁰ The BBC reported on January 6, 2022, that the “Bristol Four” were acquitted on charges of criminal damage after tearing down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston. Historian David Olusoga, who supported the defendants and provided expert testimony on slavery at the trial, told the BBC: “An English jury ... has come to the conclusion that the real offence was that a statue to a mass murderer was able to stand for 125 years, not that that statue was toppled in the summer of 2020.” He argued: “That is enormously significant and we are on this very long and difficult journey in this country of acknowledging all of our history, the bad as well as the good and I think this is a landmark in that difficult, tortuous journey.”¹¹

Let me turn now to a definition of public memory. This memory consists of tangible expressions of history—preservation and/or marking of historic sites; museum exhibitions; memorials; documentary film; and more. One of the leading scholars who has addressed public memory is historian Edward Linenthal. He has identified the crucial, “inevitable” tension that exists between a commemorative voice versus a historical one which addresses nuance and complication. The commemorative voice, Linenthal argues, completely triumphed over the historical approach in the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in the 1990s. This had disastrous consequences at the time with the triumphalist, celebratory exhibit marking the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the exhibit’s impact reverberates to this day. There is still a way that the resolution of this exhibit can chill contemporary efforts to tell critical narratives. At the time, historian Alfred Young argued that museum curators deserved the same protections of academic freedom afforded to scholars with tenure. Many argued, including Democrats and Republicans in Congress, that an exhibit should be objective and only convey facts, not opinions. Of course, just as there is no objectivity in scholarly publications, the same can be said for history exhibits. Linenthal cites museum critic Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who argues that every exhibit takes a position, takes a “point of view.” Exhibits, she argues, are “full of points of view, full of messages—full of interpretation.”¹²

As I am writing this introduction, the best contemporary exploration of violence and public memory

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is Raoul Peck's searing, challenging, multi-part documentary, "Exterminate All the Brutes." Peck, who created the outstanding film, "I Am Not Your Negro," centered around James Baldwin and an examination of racism in the United States, produced the four-part "Exterminate All the Brutes" in 2021 for HBO. Peck took the series name from Sven Lundqvist's book by the same name, a phrase he took from Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*.¹³ The Haitian Peck skillfully interweaves his own life narrative, which includes living in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Europe, and the United States, into the larger framework of the documentary. Through a combination of documentary and dramatization techniques, Peck's series provides an unrelenting, necessary, indeed welcome, examination of colonization, genocides, imperialism, and white supremacy. Besides Lundqvist, Peck relies substantially on two other historians, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot.¹⁴

The study of memory is currently a vast territory. Several scholarly journals either focus on this field or feature it regularly. These include the *Journal of Memory Studies*, *History and Memory—Studies in the Representation of the Past*, *The Public Historian*, *International Public History*, the *Journal of American History*, the *American Historical Review*, and others. Some of these journals have devoted special sections to violence and public memory.¹⁵ Many scholars have organized memory-related seminars and conference sessions and entire gatherings focused on an inquiry into the meaning and nature of memory.

Two important recent books examine how the memory of slavery has changed in the United States and how many challenges remain. Clint Smith provides a provocative, wide ranging series of case studies of how slavery is remembered or misremembered, mostly in the South but he also includes New York City. He declares: "The history of slavery is the history of the United States. It was not peripheral to our founding; it was central to it. This history is in our soil, it is in our policies, and it must, too, be in our memories."¹⁶ Not a native German, Susan Neiman relates in her book that one of the first words she added to her German vocabulary when she moved to Germany was *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, which she translates as "working-off-the past." The contrast between how Germany works off the past of the Holocaust versus how the United States works

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off the past of slavery is the central focus of her book. Of course, in both countries, the present tense is appropriate. Neither nation will ever "complete" this process. That is neither desirable nor possible. Neiman concludes that America has failed to face its past while "German efforts to confront its own crimes have made it a better country."¹⁷

Several recent edited collections have explored such topics as global viewpoints on genocide; sites of traumatic memory; violence and memory in a digital context; and contested commemoration. Editors Ajlina Karamelic-Muratovic and Laura Kromjak relate that the focus of their volume is an interdisciplinary inquiry into what they characterize as the science of remembrance and forgiveness in global episodes of genocide and mass violence.¹⁸ The editors of the volume addressing sites of traumatic memory assert that trauma results "when violence cannot be accommodated, happens suddenly, and is re-experienced in unexpected and uncontrolled ways." The memorials discussed in their book refer to places "dedicated to the commemoration of traumatic memories." Memorials, they argue, aim to "recognize the human right to memories which are often denied to persecuted people" and they serve to symbolically compensate victims and survivors.¹⁹ Focusing on the digital treatment of violence and remembrance, editors Eve Monique Zucker and David Simon make an interesting case for "memorialization unmoored" with the proliferation of digital memory projects. They observe two linked phenomena – "an expansion of non-state memorialization efforts" and "a turn to memorialization in the digital realm." The essays they have curated focus on four areas – more traditional forms of digital media; social media; online databases and archives; and the employment of artificial intelligence. Regarding the latter, they pose the important ethical question of whether hologrammatic depictions of Holocaust survivors are "richer versions of single dimensional testimony

or dehumanizing technological displays.”²⁰ Melissa Bender and Klara Stephanie Szlezak have compiled an eclectic collection of essays that explore contested commemoration in United States history. The central questions that underlie the writings they have assembled include: “Who has the right to interpret and memorialize particular historical events? What is at stake for various constituencies in acts of commemoration?”²¹



This edited volume assesses the relationship between violence and public memory in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries by examining this interconnection in case studies from the United States, Germany, Rwanda, Great Britain, South Africa, Israel/Palestine, and Argentina. Besides a wide geographic range, the book also covers many types of memorialization – museums, historic sites, memorials, public art, and popular culture. The collection should find wide use among professors teaching in the fields of public history, public humanities, museum studies, and the examination of memory. It should also be of interest to anyone teaching about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprising worldwide in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 as some authors consider how Floyd’s murder prompted reconsideration of public memorials. A point of emphasis in this collection is how memory of violence might advance ethical concerns and the promotion of social justice.

Those responsible for the violence addressed in these essays are quite varied. The political ideologies and governmental structures range from apartheid to fascism to homophobia and from democracies to military dictatorships. Racism and state terrorism play central roles in many of the case studies.

Every nation has painful, brutal chapters in its past. Across the world there are historic sites, memorials, and museums that mark places of significant violence and human rights abuses. Of course, much of this history is either deliberately overlooked, distorted, or twisted to serve the interests of those in power. Some organizations and advocates specifically work not only to preserve the memory of past abuses but also to provide a sacred place of remembrance and to frame their examination of the past in a manner

that confronts the ongoing, continuing legacy of the violent past. Many societies would rather preserve sites that serve to venerate and glorify the past by celebrating triumphs of war, technological advances, royalty, or great statesmen. It is a difficult choice to honestly examine the sites and history of repression. In many cases, the preservation of these sites and this memory are highly controversial. I believe that the measure of the integrity of a nation or culture is the degree to which there is an open, wide-ranging, and unflinching examination of the violent past and its meanings for contemporary society.

Endnotes

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6. Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, revised and

- updated (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 7.
7. See Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).
 8. See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).
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 11. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-59892211>. For details on Olusoga, see Desiree Ibekwe, "Wanting Britain to Face Its Past. All of It." *New York Times*, February 8, 2022.
 12. Edward Linenthal, "Anatomy of a controversy," in Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), pp. 9, 26. Linenthal has written several outstanding contributions to the consideration of violence and public memory, including *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Penguin, 1995); *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
 13. Sven Lundqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes": *One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: The New Press, 2007), first published in English, 1992.
 14. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
 15. For example, "Universities Studying Slavery Roundtable," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 42, Number 4, November 2020; "Where are the Bodies? A Transnational Examination of State Violence and Its Consequences," *The Public Historian*, Vol.32, Number 1, February 2010; "Sites of Conscience: Opening Historic Sites for Civic Dialogue," *The Public Historian*, Vol. 30, Number 1, February 2008; "Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory," *Radical History Review*, Issue 97, Winter 2007.
 16. Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021), p. 289.
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 21. Melissa Bender and Klara Stephanie Szlezak, editors, *Contested Commemoration in U.S. History: Diverging Public Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 8.



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On the cover of this issue

This viewpoint of a Union soldier facing Pickett's Charge reveals a pivotal moment at Gettysburg, foreshadowing the Civil War's outcome.

GARY E. DAVIS