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*Interview with Rob van der Laarse*

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# Competing Memories | Interview with Rob van der Laarse



*By Rob van der Laarse*

*January 28, 2017*

*Since the early 2000s your research has been focusing on European conflict heritage, identities and memories. In your work you bring forward the idea of ‘competing memories’, as different memorialisation approaches toward Holocaust in Western and Eastern Europe. Your study on concentration and death camps is based on this concept as you interpret them as ‘terrascapes’ and ‘traumascapes’: layered contentious memory sites. Which is the relevance of this approach to difficult heritage, in view of contemporary social, political and economic issues affecting Europe and its inhabitants?*

I have long been interested in cultural communities and conflict, and trained as a historian and anthropologist working on European class, politics and religion from the early modern period to the present. This confronted me with the fact that there was little knowledge about cultural dynamics, thus I became fascinated by the possibility that societies were organised according to deeper rules of order and authority. In the 1990s I increasingly focused my research on narratives and paradigm changes, in particular with regard to the long canonised period of modernity from 1789 to 1989. In the footsteps of cultural historians like George Mosse, I was leading a Dutch interdisciplinary research group on the intellectual origin of the twentieth century rise of totalitarianism and the Holocaust. To our surprise, among nineteenth and early twentieth century positivists and avant-garde intellectuals considered as forerunners of postwar modernism and humanism, we kept detecting a strong longing for order and purity and a hygienic wish to cure society from degeneration and disorder. Since the totalitarian aspects of their *mindscape* were clearly kept out of modern art and science genealogies, I became fascinated by what David Lowenthal, after L.P. Hartley, defined 'the past as a foreign country'. To what extent was the past we lived 'fabricated'?

Facing the enormous transformation of Western culture after 1989, the 1990s Yugoslav Wars and the post-2001 War on Terror, I realised that the global heritage crusade since the 1980s was strongly related to a new era of identity politics. In contrast to the competing ideologies of modernity, the postmodern recognition of heritage communities and intangible heritage looked peaceful and nostalgic. Nevertheless, what could happen if such signs of identity became politicised? Throughout Europe regions were already starting to define themselves in terms of regional identity thanks to the support of the European Union (Europe of the regions), though competing against one another. This explains my interest in the paradoxes of European heritage politics since 2000. In my opinion, the return to the past as represented by a growing interest among people of my own age as well as younger generations in heritage tourism, food culture, historical monuments and landscapes, period music and film, vintage, oral history, Klezmer music, and also in painful histories, battlefields, and last but not least, the Holocaust memory boom, was not a temporary trend as many had predicted, but a paradigm change. Eventually, the commodification of the past—criticised by Marxists and welcomed by neoliberal promoters of the experience economy—would easily be articulated on a political level in our age of identities by a new kind of cultural nationalism according to the populist agendas of what today can be identified as Putanists and Orbanists, Euroscepticists, anti-Islamists, Brexit campaigners and the Trump Revolution.

The reason why this is still not widely recognised, might be explained by the long-staying power of former institutions based on outdated ideologies. However, new identity politics are not working in the same direction. Likewise, on a European scale, post-communist countries are dealing with a different past compared to old western democracies. These nations did not develop gradually into nations like those ones that underwent democratisation since 1789. Instead, each experienced its own *Sonderweg* under the Habsburgs, Napoleon, and during the world wars and Stalinism. After 1989 they had to re-invent themselves as nations with a common language, ethnicity, religion, history, map, and thus an identity. Citizens of several of these imagined communities currently live in divided cultures with different historical biographies and geographies. This phenomenon takes place in the midst of a strong competition with Russia and other neighbouring countries that often claim border regions and minorities in and outside the present EU territory. Let's take for example the Poles who lost territory to Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, while Polonising former Prussian territories after the defeat of Nazi-Germany. Whereas most Western-European nations became multicultural as the outcome of postwar decolonisation processes, Central and Eastern European countries that experienced ethnic cleansing and forced migrations became more culturally homogenised. Thus, the current nationalisations of history by means of national institutes, and memory, language and decommunisation laws (street renaming, monumental restorations, language politics, etc.) fabricate new national histories, essentialist continuities, and shared *Heimats* from medieval times to the present. The majority of people aim—and maybe need—such falsifications of history, though how to relate these current nationalisations of the past to the post-1989 process of European integration and the wish for shared, democratic values? And, speaking for ourselves as cultural scientists, how to move beyond methodological nationalism to develop a more inclusive, transnational perspective on these multiple essentialist and exclusivist trends?

My work on 'terrscapes' is mostly related to such issues. The aim of the Terrscapes Networking Project was to investigate the dynamics of memory related to past violence from a transnational and transdisciplinary perspective, which included forensics, semiotics, spatial and cultural sciences, conflictual histories, contested heritage and competing memories of Europe's 20th-century past in the context of its current financial, political and cultural crisis. Today, the continent still hosts traces of terror (in particular camps and killing fields) as remnants of both world wars, the Holocaust, civil wars and the Cold War. Nevertheless, we consider terrscapes not only as *places* where terror, political or state-perpetrated violence happened, but also as *sites* where the 'spacetimes' of terror are collectively remembered, or actively silenced. Traces of terror are from this perspective closely related to signs of trauma and as the official narratives of memory have become more and more a domain of struggle between competing ethnic and ideological communities, by understanding Europe's topography of memory-making, which includes forgetting and the negotiation of contested memories between different (ethnic) groups and nations, we actually entered the dark side of the European project.

Of course, the wars and mass terror that characterised the 'century of camps' (in the words of Zygmunt Bauman) was the defining experience that inspired a former generation of post-war statesmen to prepare the current European process of integration. Particularly after the 1990s Balkan wars the recognition of the Holocaust has become a moral entry ticket to 'Europeanism' both for new EU member states as for individual citizens. This has proved to be highly successful in integrating many other genocides in the Holocaust paradigm which at the same time was transnationally linked to cases of transitional justice in Latin America or Southern Africa. Nevertheless, I am afraid that for less and less Europeans the EU is still solidly rooted in the peaceful attraction of a common market and a cultural idea that proclaims uniquely European values of humanism, democracy and citizenship. Today these inclusive, shared values are being challenged not only by populist extremists, but also by a growing number of 'common' politicians defending national self-interest under the heading of identity politics. Notwithstanding the EU's unrivalled success awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize 2012 for seven decades of postwar peace and prosperity, post 1989 Europe has slowly moved from a future-oriented project to an internally divided, backward-looking defense alliance against the threat of foreign economies, cultures, migrants, refugees, or Islamic terrorists. Although I still believe in the integrating power of the European idea, if we don't succeed in countering this negative narrative of decline we might end up in a permanent fear of the other. What interests me is why the Holocaust paradigm has actually been far less successful in integrating minorities and new EU member states in the European community of values than commonly expected. In the West, postcolonial memory works seem hampered by the post 9/11 fear of the Islam and the current refugee crisis, while in the East, the historical center of the Holocaust, not Nazi but Soviet terror is mostly associated with terror and massacres. Many Central and Eastern European countries support the notion of a double genocide, and actually suppose that long denied communist 'genocides' during Soviet occupation, such as the Ukrainian 'hunger terror' or Holodomor, made a much deeper imprint on their national history and culture than the Nazi persecution of the Jews. As rediscovered symbols of national identity and victimhood they openly compete in national memory cultures with 'western' narratives of transitional justice. This is why it is so problematic to implement the Holocaust paradigm in Central and Eastern-European nations.

In some Eastern European countries this has evolved in a kind of state-supported Holocaust denying. What interests me at the moment are the resemblances and differences with earlier, postwar Holocaust denying, such as the one of the David Irving trial that is still strongly represented within Anglo-Saxon populist culture. But it would be wrong to simply link all these different policies and sentiments to an upsurge of antisemitism. Once again, these dynamics of memory are far from linear; they are full of complexities, and strongly related to processes of appropriation of national heritage, as well as the owning and disowning of memory sites, in particular those where the spatialisation of memory has created strong indexical links to past traumatic events. Today Europe is also shattered with contested sites located in other countries, such as Russian Katyń for Poland, Austrian Bleiburg for Croatia and Slovenia, the ruined Armenian churches in Kurdish Turkey, or the travelling exhibition of Crimean archaeological antiquities stranded in Amsterdam in 2014 after Crimea's annexation by the Russian Federation. The Crimean treasures, which will probably be 'returned' to Kiev instead of the original owner-museums in Crimea and Sevastopol, threatened to become a new shrine of contested identity. I am currently following this case with great attention since the University I work for currently safeguards the contested collection while the court trial happens to be strongly influenced by the anti-Russian sentiments following the MH17 air crash—the deadliest airliner shootdown in which 193 Dutch were killed by a Russian Buk surface-to-air missile, making the crime scene near Donetsk another terrandscape.

*Recently your research project 'Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage' has been funded by the HERA: Humanities in the European Research Area. Could you explain the focus and scope of your project? What do you expect the most relevant outcome of your project will be?*

Building upon the experience with our Terrascapes network 'Accessing Campscapes' (iC-ACCESS) looks at traces of twentieth century mass violence and terror as tangible reminders of the 'age of extremes' and their current use in (trans)national contexts. In most post-war European countries, former Nazi internment camps have become icons of antifascist resistance and the Holocaust, as they maintain a crucial role in postwar European memories of totalitarianism and genocide. In the Eastern European centre of the Holocaust and Communist terror, many former campscapes are still contested spaces where, by occupying powers and authoritarian regimes, consecutive internments of prisoners transformed the victims of one event into the persecutors of another. This entanglement of remembering and forgetting with the silencing of competing narratives (a commonplace in relation to completely unknown forms of historical injustice) show the strong connection between heritage, storytelling and the politics of identity. This poses a serious challenge to develop new and alternative narratives to make such spaces evermore relevant.

The project is a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Staffordshire University, the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Freie Universität Berlin and Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Starting from the issue of materiality, the project will relate forensic research, archaeological practices and historical truth-finding to memory works, narratives and museum display. Innovative pilots will use state-of-the-art, hybridised archaeological techniques (digital and non-invasive) in order to identify and visualise hidden material remains within the selected campscapes and at the same time 'produce' new meanings regarding unknown or hardly known sites and objects. Over the next three years (2016–2019) the UvA will carry out competing memory narrative analyses in the context of postconflict transformation and NTNU, SU, UWB will conduct fieldwork at key campscapes across Europe: Westerbork (The Netherlands), Treblinka (Poland), Falstad (Norway), Jasenovac/Donja Gradina (Croatia/Republika Srpska), Bergen-Belsen (Germany), the former Roma camp Lety (Czech Republic), and the former uranium Gulag Labor camps in the Jáchymov region (Czech Republic). FUB will assess the role of testimonies in increasing accessibility and visibility for visitors of such sites; UPF will explore the potential of new technologies of virtual reality to map and connect competing memories on campscapes. The project benefits from the support of eight associate partners relevant for the sites: the Bergen Belsen Memorial, the Lidice Memorial, Postbellum, The Westerbork Memorial Center, Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom in Treblinka, Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Museum, Jasenovac Memorial Museum, and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies.



The research innovation of iC-ACCESS stems from the complementarity of seldom related disciplines, such as heritage studies, material culture studies, conflict archaeology, memory studies and digital humanities, and it channels interdisciplinary research perspectives from the growing academic interest in conflicted heritage. Specialists explore what has become, in the European context, a dominant set of issues: the dynamics affecting the staging and presentation of some Holocaust camps into heritage, and the forgetting of others; the acknowledgement and presentation of Soviet camps in Eastern Europe; conflicted Holocausts, and simmering older ethnic/regional tensions exacerbated by the present EU crisis affecting the identity and future of the European integration project. Therefore, iC-ACCESS addresses the future role of the camps as monuments of the twentieth 'century of camps' in the dynamic context of the European process of integration and the current age of (financial, geopolitical and refugee) crisis.

In addition to the narrative focus of our TerrorScapes project, iC-ACCESS aims to explore novel ways in which new technologies and methods can help identify and provide access to buried physical traces and forensic evidence of (and within) campsites. The methodology will draw upon state-of-the-art techniques derived from archaeology, forensic investigation, geography and digital humanities in order to locate, record and digitally preserve landscapes of mass violence. Recent advances in non- and minimally invasive archaeological methods, when coupled with surveying technologies from other disciplines, offer the potential to account for sensitivities surrounding conflict sites; they also facilitate a much more detailed analysis of both the areas within the boundaries of camps and surrounding landscape. We use novel applications of satellite remote sensing, airborne and terrestrial laser scanning (LiDAR), drones (UAVs), terrestrial topographic and geophysical survey, and micro- and macro-methods of archaeological excavation. iC-ACCESS provides highly detailed, three dimensional landscape models that also incorporate aerial imagery, photographs and maps, as state-of-the-art educational tools. And the project uses and examines the potential of digital tools to offer new possibilities to connect local, national and global audiences to access conflicted heritage, without factual, time or location constraints. Virtual and Augmented Reality can be particularly useful at sites where no or few visible remains survive above the ground, as it can substitute traditional visitor experiences and provide an understanding of the campscape as a 'place'. The project team will create a digital network of 4D reconstructed sites through the assimilation of the 3D visualisations and the subsequent layering of documentary evidence (e.g. material traces, oral testimonies, photographs, media, narratives and memories) connected to landscapes, monuments, memorials and museums. Through Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality (VAMR) and other forms of digital media we hope to provide interactive, spatial tools that can be used online, within museums, campsites and in classrooms. The potential of digital tools in the re-visualisation of conflict has arguably not yet been fully realised and we aim to provide new ways of representing and raising awareness. In doing so, we are, however, critically aware of the shortcomings of digital and new media tools which often strengthen, rather than open, existing perspectives on the past and overstate particular authoritative narratives and voices. Therefore, our challenge is to avoid the obvious pitfalls of digitisation and visualisation, and use these techniques in a more critical way. If we succeed, we will be able to offer something important for other sites and other researchers to build upon as a standard for European access to difficult heritage and competing memories.

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Interview by Francesca Lanz, Christopher Whitehead and Michela Bassanelli

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