

*CEuS Working Paper No. 2011/2*

## **Public History in the Making: A New Methodological Approach to Study Memory-Building**

Anssi Halmesvirta

Jean Monnet Centre for European Studies (CEuS)  
University of Bremen  
SFG, Enrique-Schmidt-Straße 7  
D - 28359 Bremen  
Phone +49 - 421 - 218-67031  
Fax +49 - 421 - 218-9143





*CEuS Working Paper No. 2011/2*

**Public History in the Making: A New  
Methodological Approach to Study Memory-  
Building**

Anssi Halmesvirta

Anssi Halmesvirta is Professor of General History at the Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.



## Introduction

This working paper presents an analytical scheme how to proceed with the study of public history, in the sense of public memory-building, in particular. It is divided into two parts: first, I put forward six arguments concerning the study of public history and memory-building in general and give a few examples, mainly from Finland but also from elsewhere in Europe and the wider world, and secondly, I propose a methodology to examine a special field of memory studies, that of memorial or commemorative speeches.<sup>1</sup>

At first, it is appropriate to define the concept of public history. I understand by it non-academic history discourses or such discourses which use or abuse arguments and views on history in public for partisan, day-to-day political and ideological purposes.<sup>2</sup> Instances of this are, for example, everyday history debates and quarrels in the media and politicians' high-flown declarations on history (one authoritative representative of the genre from Finland is the Presidential New Year's address on TV to the nation in which past, present and future are always nicely and neatly combined in a 'success story' which transmits a positive message to the nation).

## Public history and contrasting memories

The argument concerning the analytical framework to study public history and memory-building is divided here into six intertwined points:

*The first point:* The rise of public history is bound up with the nation-building (-dismantling), and thus it is important to study the mechanisms through which such abstract ideas as nation can be creatively communicated. This should help us to tackle how different, collective identities are being created and new memories are being manufactured or old revived in public history debates. One important modern dimension of this

---

<sup>1</sup> This working paper in a revised version of the project plan for the Academy of Finland titled: 'The Cults of National Lights, Finland and Hungary c. 1750–2000' coauthored by Anssi Halmesvirta and Kustaa H.J. Vilkkuna. University of Jyväskylä, Dept. of History and Ethnology, September 2011, pp. 12 (manuscript).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jeremy Black, *Using History*. Hodder Arnold: London, 2005, "Introduction".

is nationalist myth-making. As we all know, leaders of a nation tell blatant lies or fabricate more or less fictional stories to their own people about their national past thus building false, collective public memory.

For example, they either deny that their nation has done things it has actually done – for instance, Russians who have a very patriotic collective memory, denied until very recently that the Red Army attacked Finland at the outbreak of the Winter War and claimed that it was Finland that provoked it – or they claim that it has done certain things it has not done (for example, Russians still cherish the very idea that the Red Army ‘freed’ Eastern Europe in 1944–45, irrespective how the ‘freed’ interpreted it and how short-lived the freedom’ was). On one hand, the purpose is to create powerful sense of group identity among the public – misleadingly called ‘nation’– because it is necessary for building and maintaining a nation-state. For example, in highlighting the significance of Winter War as a collective memory site for the Finns, some patriots are so convinced that it has made a permanent impact on Finnish identity that they demand a special Winter War monument to be erected on a central square in Helsinki. On the other hand, this identity-building by memory-mongers is aimed at portraying the nation-state in a favorable light by self-glorification and -whitewashing, and depicting rival or enemy states in a derogatory, dark light by other-maligning (for instance, the Finns developed not only Russophobia but a deep hatred of Russians in the 1920s–1930s).

Inventing these myths and stereotypes – ingrained and buried in memory – invariably requires lying about the historical record as well as contemporary political events.<sup>3</sup> As Ernst Renan already put it: “Historical error is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation”. For example, the French needed to accentuate the positive image of the nation’s past by passing a law (!) in 2005, which mandated that high school textbooks must

---

<sup>3</sup> For the relationship of memory and history, see Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2007, esp. part 1.

henceforth emphasize the glorious aspects of French colonialism, and it seems that French people hungered for this myth since they wanted to be told stories about 'cleansed' past. Although the French have confessed that their wartime Vichy government was responsible for deportations of Jews to concentration camps, they have found it difficult to confess the crimes the French colonial administration committed, for example in Congo. The same forgetfulness has haunted the Finns, too, as they seem to want to wash from their memories the concentration camps which the occupant Finnish forces established in Eastern Karelia during in 1941–1944 and in which ethnic cleansing was practiced.

To continue the first point: National elites also create national myths to gain international legitimacy. Their pay-offs may be small since it is difficult to hoodwink outsiders with stories that are at odds with a fair or realistic reading of the historical record. However, sometimes this succeeds remarkably well. Look at states with influential *diaspora* which export its myths to the countries where the *diaspora* is located. Perhaps the best example of this involves Israel and the American Jewish community. There is no way that the Zionists could create a Jewish state in Palestine without doing large-scale ethnic cleansing of the Arab population that had been living there for centuries. The opportunity to expel the Palestinians came in early 1948 when fighting broke out between the Palestinians and the Zionists in the wake of the United Nations' decision to partition Palestine into two states. The Zionists cleansed roughly 700,000 Palestinians from the land that became Israel, and adamantly refused to let them return to their homes once the fighting stopped. Not surprisingly, Israel and its American friends went to great lengths after 1948 to blame the expulsion of the Palestinians on the Palestinians themselves. According to the myth that was invented, the Palestinians were not cleansed by the Zionists; instead, they were said to have fled from their homes because the surrounding Arab countries told them to move out so that their armies could move in and drive the Jews into the Mediterranean. The Palestinians could then return home after the Jews had been cleansed from the land. This story was widely accepted not only in Israel but also in the United States for about four decades, and it played a key role in

convincing the international public to look favorably on Israel in its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. This is presently a contentious subject not just because the Palestinians have a growing voice in the discourse, but also because a handful of scholars have challenged Israel's founding myth. As one might expect, most Israelis and their supporters have not changed their thinking about it, but instead have redoubled their efforts to sell it to the wider public.

Myth-making of the origin of the nation has been very much in vogue also in Finland, though much more peacefully than in Israel. It is well-known that a place or an ancient community called *Kalevala*, the womb of the Finnish culture presumably located in Russian Karelia, never existed there, but many Finns seem to have memories relating to it passed on by oral tradition from generation to generation. There have also been staged public displays of *Kalevala*, for example, in singing the old runes of the Finns during folk music festivals and in 'reality' movies made of the adventures of the *Kalevala*'s heroes. All this is, of course, quite innocent but usually rather naïve cultural revival, and prone to disseminate 'memories' without much or any historical foundation. When the Finns were asked which pictures they best preserve in their memories, it was found out that quite a few of them are Akseli Gallén-Kallela's paintings inspired by *Kalevala*-themes. They form, as it were, an essential part of the national picture-album engraved in the collective memory of the Finns. And still nowadays, they can make a choice: one can either remember or forget *Kalevala*, but unknowingly every Finn takes part in negotiating its meaning.

Politically more serious than *Kalevala*-myths for the Finns has been the origin myth of the independent Finnish state. It was developed and officially formulated by President Urho Kekkonen who in a speech to the nation in the mid-1960s declared in the spirit of Finlandization – a term rooted in German political vocabulary – that it was Mr Lenin of the Soviet Russia who gave Finland its independence as a gift when he signed the recog-



dition of it in St. Petersburg in late December, 1917. This declaration was a guarantee of the continuation of Soviet and Finnish friendship and good neighborhood policy booked in the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance signed in 1948. It was as if Finland could not have become independent without the overthrow of the Tsarist regime by the ‘beneficent godfather’, Lenin. It took long for historians to challenge this politically-biased interpretation. It was only in 2008, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that it could be said with force to the public that Lenin’s nationality policy did not aim at creating independent border-states but at integrating them, including also Finland into the Soviet system in an opportune future moment. In spite of this refutation of Lenin’s role in a critical phase in Finnish history, Kekkonen’s memory in the Finnish minds remains very positive – he was the only man who could save Finland in the turmoil of the Cold War. Lenin was his hobby-horse to appeal sentiments of the Soviet leadership.

Another type of this mythologization of the past and devious memory-building is insistence on such memories that are highly contested or unverified by physical or historical evidence: for instance, there were in Lappeenranta, a Karelian town in Eastern Finland, widespread ‘memories’ concerning wartime executions of some 300 deserters from the Eastern front. Some people seemed to remember the site where their bodies had been buried and demanded their exhumation and decent burial in a cemetery. When local authorities were reluctant to take measures, they organized a newspaper campaign demanding financial support from the Government. They were able to gain some money and the supposed burial site was dug up. Nothing was found and official documents reveal nothing, but the ‘memory’ of the execution and of the secret burial place persistently lingers on.

*The second point:* Public history remains open to and usable in political struggles, and as such it appears to contain and promote particular (partisan) interests, and it concerns alignments and representations of power. For instance, to take again an example close to home, in the now ongoing campaigning of the Presidential elections in Finland, the con-

temporary history of Finland's accession to the European Union (1995) is shown in drastically different lights. The candidates of the pro-Union majority (intellectuals, urban bourgeoisie and the working class) see it in a positive light whereas the anti-Union candidates of the agrarian population and the so called 'true Finns' find every fault in it. The critical economic situation in Southern Europe has inflamed the issue, over which Finns are at the moment sharply divided. Thus the divided memories of Finland's accession to European Union reflect the political divide, and the man of the street is ready to remember either of these public history narrations depending on which political interest is closer to his own vision.

*My third point:* There are creative radical or oppositional representations of public history which challenge the state (or church) control for recollection, commemoration and publication. Here I take one example from my home village (Kiuruvesi) in Savo, in Central Finland, where the memory of the Civil War between the Reds (Socialists and Communists with crofters) and Whites (the bourgeoisie with great landowners) of the year 1918, to which also some German troops greatly contributed, is still very much alive. Following the defeat of the Reds in spring 1918, the so called White Terror started, and in my home village some Reds were summarily executed nearby the village cemetery. Their corpses were, however, buried in a far-off forest which later became the 'Red' cemetery. The 'Red' memories were awakened in the 1990s when local Socialists proposed in the village council that a monument should be erected in the memory of the Reds on the spot of their execution. The extreme right-wing parties in the council opposed this heavily as they sensed that a 'Reddish' monument too close to the cemetery of the Whites would 'insult' the memory of the White martyrs of the Civil War buried there. So sensitive the issue became that after some skirmish, the idea of the Red monument was dropped as the village council majority voted against it. Finally, the Reds decided to erect their own monument in the far-off cemetery of their own. In this way,

two contradictory interpretations of the memory of the Civil War still live in the village today irrespective of what the professional historians have already agreed on it.

*The fourth point:* Public history displays and representations more often than not deal with ‘winners’ (great men, heroes, sages, cultic figures) and ‘losers’ or ‘victims’ (anti-heroes, anti-cult figures) positing such moral polarities that incite controversies (e.g. controversies over the message of statues of heroes of all sorts). One recent example of this was the erection of a statue of ex-President Ronald Reagan at a central square (Szabadság tér) in Budapest in Hungary. Its promoters told to the public that it did not only symbolize the emancipation of the Hungarians from the ‘colonial’ tyranny of the Soviet system but that it signaled Reagan had freed all Europe from Communism. In contrast, the statues of the Communist ‘losers’ have been removed from the city to a far-off statue park, nowadays a cult-site for Socialist nostalgia-mongers. And for sure, one cannot find any statues of Gorbachev in Budapest squares. In this way, as the Finnish and Hungarian examples show, memories of personalities are either suppressed or revived, depending on which side of the political spectrum one happens to align oneself and on which sides happens to have the power.

Another example of the demise of Communist heroism was the Bronze-statue controversy in Tallinn, Estonia, where the Estonians demanded the removal of the statue of Soviet war-heroes from a central square as it ‘insulted’ the Estonian sense of independence. They no longer wanted to see these ‘liberators’ whom they now regarded as symbols of ‘suppression’ whereas the Estonian Russians still venerate them as their own heroes. After some violent outbursts the statue was removed to a less prominent place, but in Estonia history and contrasting memory cultures are still being purposely used to exacerbate discord between the Estonian majority and the Russian minority.

In Finland, the memory of revolutionary Socialism is well-preserved in the only Lenin-museum in the world. It is situated in Tampere, city of the traditional working-class, and visitors come from all over the world. Some local right-wingers criticize it for

forgetting the memory of the victims of Communism and cherishing the cult of Lenin, whom they regard as one of history's devils. The Director of the museum rightfully defends his position: in his view, pictures and other objects associated with Lenin just show him as a person who signed the document which recognized Finland's independence in 1917 and the museum is dedicated to this act – a kind of minimal gesture of reverence without a tint of Finlandization.

*The fifth point:* People evidently – as also the examples cited above tend to illustrate – creatively invest emotions to past events or persons, and TV and internet provide sensual immediacy to it. It would be worthwhile to study how this bears on public history and individualized views of about history and memory. It seems that memories created by public media are becoming more intimate so that some people are somehow cherishing their own memories privately (or within family circles) about important events in the national past, usually the shrine of collective memory. Is this a sign of skepticism or a silent protest against over-politicized public history? At least in Finland, popularity of local, village, or family history is quite high and many amateur historians run after memories of the elderly people which are about to be forgotten. For instance, the veterans of the Second World War are a target group of some 20.000 survivors, the memories of whom the interviewers regard as the 'conclusive evidence' of what the war emotionally really was.

*The last point:* The hypothesis that also public history is 'owned' and memory-building controlled and manipulated by some particular interest groups stands to test. Also in Finland, the so called consensual, positive interpretation of Finnish history dominated public history platforms at least until the turn of the millennium. Maybe it was Finland's Europeanization after 1995 that brought a change with it. The dominant interpretation highlighting 'success' of the nation and the state ('from a 'backward' agrarian province of Russia to an independent, 'progressive' and streamlined welfare society')

was challenged from many quarters and quite a few underdog views of history and downtrodden memories came to the fore. Let it suffice here to point to just four examples of them: (1) the history of gypsies in Finland who were forcefully Christianized in special educational camps until 1960s, (2) the stories of the about 70.000 war-orphans in Finland, (3) the narratives of the about 10.000 so called war-children transported to Sweden and (4) the life-histories of those women who fell in love with the German soldiers in Lapland in the end of the Second World War (the Lapland War) and who were stigmatized as non-persons in Finland. Gestures towards reconciliation and understanding, even forgiving have been made<sup>4</sup>, and the above mentioned groups of people have lately been given platform to speak for themselves. However, a question remains: If democratization has brought about an increase of demands to the effect that underdog (e.g. minority) voices should be heard and their memories should be recorded, how has it changed the image of history of a particular underdog or minority group? Or alternatively, do they want to lose that history and forget the bleak and dismal parts of their past? This would be an interesting field of study for oral and memo-history.

### **Memory-speeches as a field of memo-history**

The second part of this paper examines one neglected theme of public history studies, namely commemoration as expressed, preserved and reworked in memorial speeches. This thematic is at the moment one of the most up-to-date in the field of memory studies Finland, and there is a project of the Academy of Finland built around it and organized by the University of Jyväskylä.

To begin with, there was a commonly held belief in nationalism that if a nation does not have (collective) memories, it may not be revered and can be forgotten, even destroyed. The more beautiful the memories are, the better for the nation. Patriotism was (is) based on memories and they have to be cherished, and in this sense, notwithstanding all the deconstructive tendencies, its enchantment remains, at least in populist

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Transl. by Kathleen Blamey & David Pellaeur. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London 2004, passim.

and neo-nationalistic discourses. The firmer memories could be attached to a concrete object which made sacrifices for the nation, the better. The object could be a national institution or a celebrated person, a hero, 'light' or a sage who had educated the nation and been a model for all. That person surely is worth remembering and his memory is kept alive by regular memorial acts.

Consequently, it may not be amiss to study patriotic and national memories and concentrate on the memories fashioned around such personalities and institutions that were depicted as educators of a nation. Only after this, one can proceed to studying cult practices and systems built in public history (as defined above) to honor and adore these sublime institutions and persons in the process of pantheonization.<sup>5</sup>

One may say that this salient genre of national memory-building and culture embedded in memorial speeches (usually given to prominent people after their funeral) can be typified as communicative acts (latest example from Finland: in late Conservative PM Harri Holkeri's funeral, speeches were given with different patriotic/nationalist historiizing voice and tone by highest authorities, the present PM Jyrki Katainen and President Tarja Halonen). They are regarded as speech-acts that do not only express reverence for the 'great' (sages, statesmen, war-heroes, and other cult-figures of among artists, scientists etc.) and their virtues but present to the audience a wider vision of 'national', public mission fulfilled by them. Prominent is the speech-situation in which the speaker or orator:

- A) Interprets the (nationalistic, neo-nationalistic, patriotic) ethos of the times,
- B) Performs the speech-act itself,

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Porkoláb Tibor, "Közösségi emlékezet, ceremonialitás, panteonizáció. Szempontok az emlékebeszéd műfajának vizsgálatához". In: Zsuzsa Kalla, Takáts József, Tverdota György (Szerk.), Kultusz, Mű, Identitás. Kultusztörténeti tanulmányok 4 (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest, 2005), 56-88; "Editor's Introduction". In: Cultic Revelations. Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena. Ed. Anssi Halmesvirta. Spectrum Hungarologicum, vol. 4. (Jyväskylä – Pécs, 2010), 13-18.

- C) Shows eloquence,
- D) Aims at pleasing the audience,
- E) Praises the dead (laudation),
- F) Offers epideictic (show-off) amplification of feeling, and
- G) Sometimes assumes a poet's role.

It is all these aspects that should be taken into account in order to explain and understand the means by which, for example, memory of a person or a personality cult is being constructed and kept alive through generations. One also has to study the long-term continuum and the varying contexts of the memorial speeches dedicated to the 'a great person' since this is the means by which one can detect and analyze the changes of commemorative tone and voice in a specific political culture.

From the methodological point of view, a few hypotheses of what the memorial speech is can be put forward:

- 1) It is a document of the frame of mind of an age, and in this sense it can be studied by methods of intellectual history,
- 2) It shows how a person was significant to his times as evaluated by his fellow-men,
- 3) It does not only 'speak out' a personality cult but manifests a cultic meaning of a leading idea or ideology of an age.
- 4) It provides self-affirmation of identity to the audience,
- 5) It paints a publicly moralized portrait of the character of the 'great person',
- 6) It has an independent, pragmatic function in a political culture (as part of public history and memory culture),
- 7) It blurs the borderline between audience and the orator (I = We),
- 8) It tends to homogenize a society by abolishing hierarchies,
- 9) It re-creates continuity to personality cults by transmitting the tradition of commemoration to the future,

- 10) It can express bias from the part of the orator, and
- 11) It has many modes (lament, consolation, appeasement, reprimand, confession etc.) to express feeling.

This list leads to one more general point: that the memorial speeches are ceremonial acts which are performed at various levels of history-political culture ranging from every-day funeral speeches to memorial speeches delivered, e.g. at yearly meetings of scholarly and cultural societies, to such scientists, scholars and artists etc. who have made unforgettable contributions to ‘national progress’ or to similarly significant goals.

The starting-point in the long-term research of memorial speeches can be dated back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when patriotism in Europe turned into nationalism, a process which has continued until the present. We approach this process from the angle of cults – the end-products of series of memorial speeches, as it were. Human beings and institutions (idols), the authors, disseminators, supporters and transmitters as well as re-writers of traditions have been neglected while the concepts and structures of nationalism have been extensively studied. Cult-studies can be contextualized according to the three phases or types through which nationalism emerged in modernity: (1) the phase of nation-building when nationalism was transformed from cultural revivalism towards political nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; (2) the interwar (c. 1918–1939) phase of aggressive nationalism when nationalism assumed forms and ideas of dreading and/or maligning the ‘Other’, the potential enemy or neighbor threatening its existence and identity, and (3) the postwar (1945–) phase of reconstruction and re-building of the nation in the spirit of optimism and hope. The frame of mind of the three types of nationalism left its mark in the representations of cult giving them their distinctive expressions to be studied. This approach shall shed light on many factors that have influenced the development of nationalism in a concrete way and thus makes it possible to compare memory cultures



and politics in different European countries in order to create model of cult-making processes.

The method introduced here elevates the role of persons ('great men') and institutions (University, schools and societies for popular enlightenment) behind patriotism and nationalism into focus. Memorial speeches express devotion or reverential homage or praise to a particular person (or a thing) as paid by a body of professed adherents or admirers. Personality cult arises when they create a heroic or otherwise lofty image of the person (statesman, scholar/scientist, sage, well-known artist) through mass media, propaganda, or by other means, in this case by memorial speeches. This presupposes a (political) culture which enhances and promotes certain ideologies or political doctrines and uses popularity to advocate conformity of attitudes and mentality by education and socialization.

The memorial speeches may have remarkable consequences for culture of commemoration which also have to be outlined concomitantly with the study of speech-acts themselves. The building of monuments and the general phenomenon of pantheonization serve the revival and refreshing of memory. It enhances and makes the nationalist or neo-nationalist ideology 'move'; it is self-congratulation as an asset to strengthen national identity. It institutionalizes national memory in monumental, ceremonial manner. Thus: the orator acts as the 'master of the ceremony' (praising and representing a body) and the memorial speech becomes the tool or vehicle to conduct it.