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Europe Across Borders

Blog on European History, c. 1500 to the Present

Following the Fugitive: Reflections on the Concept of Memorial Routes and the Possibilities of Representing Escape

Posted on **2019-10-27** by **anneieg**

Anne Friedrichs & Bettina Severin-Barboutie



- Multilingual remembrance of the escape situation in Portbou, Spain (photo: Anne Friedrichs)

As recently as 2015, travellers to Turin and eight other south and west European cities (Milan, Genoa, Florence and Rome, Paris and Marseille, Valencia as well as Lisbon) could take advantage of a special offer: a [city tour provided by migrant residents](#). This initiative, co-funded by the European Union, aimed to allow visitors to experience the city “through different eyes.” The tourists took on the role of migrants whereas the latter functioned as locals. Thus, different forms of mobility – such as migration and travel – and their appendant overlaps and effects could be explored conjointly.

But the question arises: Can we indeed trace the historical experiences of heterogeneous migrants through such participatory tourist practices? Can we apply the public enactments and shared personal experiences of guided tours likewise to forms of mobility such as escape, which are associated with existential threat and which have been controversially discussed and managed, for instance since 2015? What can historians contribute in view of recent disputes in Europe and elsewhere, particularly given the necessity of balancing different historical experiences, interpretations and memories?

Following a frequently used refugee route

In some regions, refugee movements form part of public commemorative culture. Among numerous other memories, histories of flight and escape are thus immediately visible there. As part of a curricular excursion, we travelled to such a region, namely the French-Spanish Pyrenees, along with students of the [Justus Liebig University Giessen](#) in the summer term of 2019. Our focus was a 15 km trail that cuts through the mountains. This trail follows the refugee route taken by [Walter Benjamin](#) in his attempted escape from French Banyuls-sur-Mer to Portbou in Spain.

Initially, Spanish civilians and soldiers used this hidden path to flee from the fascist Franco-Regime in Spain towards Southern France in the winter of 1938-39. After the occupation of France by Nazi Germany, however, many intellectuals took the path in the opposite direction, with the aim of ultimately fleeing to North and South America to escape the Nazis. Among those who fled was Benjamin, whose eponymous pathway we



— Signs along the Chemin Walter Benjamin (photo: Anne Friedrichs)

followed. [This pathway](#) is marked at intervals by information boards that tell of his escape. Our main objective was to examine how this escape story is remembered and to critically reflect on it.

The students also explored a memorial site as a classical form of publicly commemorating flight. They visited the “[Camp de Gurs](#)” near Pau. This French collection camp was provisionally established in 1939 in order to detain Spanish civil war refugees, but was later used mainly as an internment camp for Jewish deportees from France and Germany. Nowadays, it serves as a memorial site for the different groups that were interned there between 1939 and 1945.

Memorial routes instead of realms of memory

The historian Pierre Nora set a precedent with his concept of “lieux de mémoire” ([realms of memory](#)) in the 1980s. According to him, “lieux de mémoire” are material and immaterial ciphers (codes) in collective memory that serve in the constitution of national sentiment and community. Nevertheless, Nora’s concept was and remains disputed mainly because of its national-pedagogical content. Alternative approaches for analyzing memories of entities other than those of a “nation” have been introduced since, as indicated for instance in the concept of European “spaces of memory.”

Drawing on these methodological discussions, we propose the concept of *memorial routes* (chemins de mémoire) for analysing public remembrance. This concept allows us to include mobility and relationality, and thus helps us to overcome still effective ideas of a national past in favour of connections of different layers of meaning across political, social or cultural borders. Based on the migration and flight routes of historical agents, at least two reference values come into view: the publicly commemorated and the forgotten or omitted. This enables historians to reconstruct the relation between what is represented on a certain stage (be it at a physical site or on the internet) and other life stories and forms of reminiscence (e.g., in the shape of monuments, but also hiking trails, digital depictions and oral



— Different forms of remembering the past: monument and cemetery (photo: Anne Friedrichs)

narration). By doing this, we can differentiate and balance between contemporary interpretations and subsequently emerging possibilities to remember. Instead of illuminating various producers, forms and conditions of public memory, as other concepts do, different scales, degrees of institutionalization, consequences and shifts in remembrance, memory and forgetting can also be analyzed. Finally, we may also consider digital formats of remembering past escape routes and further forms of mobility and immobility, even though or precisely because the digital media is possibly fleeting but extends beyond and across borders.

Blog-series “Following the Fugitive”

The blog-series “Following the Fugitive” enables those students who participated in the excursion to present different fugitive and only partly institutionalized histories that unfolded along a European border and contact zone. Furthermore, they ponder the importance of flight and escape assistance in and out of Europe as a topic of transborder but differentiated commemorative culture. In seven articles, they present their knowledge about the escape story of Benjamin and other refugees, and simultaneously critically reflect on the ways in which those stories are conveyed in the present.

Phil Kühltau begins the series with his deliberations on “A view from the past of the flight over the Mediterranean Sea: Walking the *Chemin Walter Benjamin*.” Sarah Noske’s blog posts, which follow, address “The *Chemin Walter Benjamin* in the competition of remembrance,” as well as “Memory under construction? Collective memory in the internment camp in Gurs.” Filip Schuffert deals with “Escape assistance: An enterprise with varying risks;” Julian Kaiser and Marieke Wist discuss “Escape assistance in the course of time: From Lisa Fittko to Carola Rackete;” Alexander Milešević addresses the question of “Pursuing the past on the spot as a historiographical method?” Phil Kühltau concludes our blog-series with his reflections on “The path of escape in the age of touristic reproduction.”

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This blog post is part of the series “Following the Fugitive.” It is the result of the Master’s seminar “Der Chemin Walter Benjamin – oder: Auf dem Weg zu einer digitalen Fluchtgeschichte” (The Chemin Walter Benjamin, or: Towards a Digital History of Escape) at the Justus Liebig University Gießen, organized by [Anne Friedrichs](#) (Mainz) and [Bettina Severin-Barboutie](#) (Gießen) in Summer 2019. It was funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities and the Arts. We thank Fatin Abbas and Larissa Sebastian for linguistic support.



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