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# How major European cities memorialize mass terror attacks? Paris, Madrid and London facing the same memorial challenge

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The terrorist attacks that struck Paris on November 13, 2015, killing 130 people and wounding more than 400, had international repercussions, particularly in the United States, where the watchword “Pray for Paris” was sent out on Twitter<sup>1</sup> and where the event made the front page of The New Yorker, among others. An American tourist traveling to Paris today might then rather naturally expect to find a memorial outside the Bataclan concert hall where 90 people lost their lives that evening, or somewhere else in the Eleventh arrondissement, the epicenter of these attacks, already struck by the Charlie Hebdo slayings in January 2015.<sup>2</sup> When you walk by the Place de la République, where in January, then in November 2015, so many people rallied together in protest and solidarity with the victims, there is nevertheless little chance that you would yourself notice the oak tree that has been planted there, at the northern most point on the square in January 2016 “in memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks of January and November 2015,” as indicated on the plaque at the foot of the tree.

## Place Figure 1 Here, Please

This oak tree was planted just a month and a half after the terrorist attacks of November 13. Official memorials are seldom created so soon after an act of terrorism. The exception in this case was due to the fact that in late September 2015, the city of Paris mayor’s office had

announced its intention to plant not an oak, but rather seventeen olive trees as a tribute to the seventeen people killed by the terrorist attacks at the office of the weekly satirical paper Charlie Hebdo, in the Parisian suburb of Montrouge and at the Hyper Cacher supermarket in the Eleventh arrondissement. The November 13 terrorist attacks nullified the project: planting seventeen trees was impossible now that there were 130 more victims to commemorate. It was also not possible to transform the entire Place de la République into an olive grove by planting 147 trees there. The Paris mayor's office accordingly opted for a single tree with heavy symbolism: an oak, then, destined to one day become a majestic, imposing presence, even though for the time being it was still a puny little tree that passersby took no notice of.<sup>3</sup>

As rapid as it was, this act of public memorialization was doubtless not enough for what constitutes the worst terrorist attack that France had ever experienced on its own soil since the end of the Algerian war. Two other memorial projects have thus taken shape since. First, a “memory garden” that the Paris mayor’s office wishes to inaugurate at the Place Saint-Gervais in 2025: while having no direct connection with the site of the November 13 attacks, it is situated in the heart of Paris, just behind the City Hall. Second, a memorial museum, in view of honoring the memory not only of the victims of the 2015 terrorist attacks, but also of all the victims of terrorist attacks perpetrated in France along with all French victims of terrorist attacks in other countries subsequent to 1974: this memorial museum is to open its doors in the nearby Parisian suburb of Suresnes in 2027. How and why did this plurality of memorial sites and projects come into being? In order to understand that, my proposal here is to make a detour through two other European capital cities that in the relatively recent past, had to confront a similar challenge of memorialization, which consisted of creating a memorial to publicly honor the memory of the victims of the worst acts of mass terrorism that they had even experienced on their own soil, and

which had also been perpetrated by Islamist terrorists: the attacks of March 11, 2004, in Madrid (killing 191 people and wounding more than 1,800) and of July 7, 2005, in London (killing 52 and wounding almost 800). Once we have learned what questions were raised and what choices were made in response to this challenge, we will better grasp why, in Paris, planting a tree seemed at first to be an obvious necessity before other memorials were envisaged, and why these other memorials took the form they did.

### **Madrid: Trees, Then A Monument**

The project that the Paris mayor's office initially made public following the terrorist attacks of January 2015, consisted of planting on the Place de la République square as many trees as there were people killed on that day, was a bit reminiscent of a memorial created in Madrid for the victims of the terrorist attacks of March 11, 2004. Two months after the attack, a little commemorative grove composed of 192 cypress and olive trees (for the 191 people killed by the bombs placed in the trains and the police officer who died in the raid on the terrorists' apartment a few days later) had indeed been planted across from the Atocha train station on the occasion of the crown prince of Spain's marriage, since the procession was going to pass right in front of the station. It was first called Bosque de los Ausentes (grove of the absent), then later renamed Bosque del Recuerdo (grove of memory) at the request of the chief association of the victims of the terrorist attacks, 11-M Afectados des Terrorismo. In the fall of 2004, it was moved to the southern end of the biggest park in Madrid, the Retiro park, a few hundred meters away from the Atocha train station. It was there that the most important commemorative ceremony was held on March 11, 2005, marking the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks. In attendance were the King and Queen of Spain, but also, among other dignitaries, the King of

Morocco and Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations): they inaugurated this grove as the official memorial of March 11, 2004 in the Spanish capital.

**Place Figure 2 Here, Please**

Planting trees in memory of the victims of a terrorist attack has become common practice in Western societies.<sup>4</sup> We might almost see it as an obligatory part of the commemorative process, or of the “reconstruction” of the social body shaken by the attack. Whoever visits the former site of the Twin Towers in New York today will find first and foremost a park composed of oak trees enclosing the September 11 memorial. Michael Arad, who provided the conception for the memorial, nevertheless had not included trees in his initial project, which consisted of reproducing the “footprint” of the Twin Towers by pools of cascading water: it was only after his conception was chosen that he had to work with the landscape architect Peter Walker to add this vegetal dimension, at the specific request of the sponsors.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the memorials that can now be found at other September 11 sites such as the Pentagon and the place where United Flight 93 went down at Shanksville, Pennsylvania, include trees: 85 Indian lilacs at the Pentagon, over 1,500 maple, oak, and elm trees at Shanksville. That follows the example of the memorial created in 1997 at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing. This omnipresence of trees at the memorials created in the aftermath of terrorist attacks does not simply stem from the fact that their shade has always been conducive to contemplation,<sup>6</sup> but also because of the symbolic value that they are supposed to have in this context: they are intended to embody the resilience of victims and society having suffered the ordeal of terrorism. The trees that have themselves survived destruction caused by the attack are in this way generally given a special status: such is the case in Oklahoma City as at Ground Zero in New York.<sup>7</sup>

Trees by themselves, however, seldom publicly mark the memory of a terrorist attack. At each of the September 11 sites as in Oklahoma City, they are always accompanied by architectural elements that make up the memorial as such (two pools of water in New York; benches at the Pentagon; chairs, monumental doors, and a reflecting pool in Oklahoma City) or even a museum. That is also what we find in Madrid following the terrorist attacks of March 11, 2004: the commemorative grove planted in front of the Atocha train station was almost immediately paired with an area inside the station walls called Espacio de Palabras (space for words). It consisted of two large video screens, playing in a constant loop images of the people rallying in memory of the victims, along with computer terminals that make it possible to send a message of support and solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Conceived in view of freeing the stations from the imposing temporary memorials that were created there in the immediate aftermath of March 11, 2004,<sup>9</sup> as has always been the case after each mass terror attack in the West,<sup>10</sup> this memorial device remained there for three years until another memorial for the victims of March 11, now monumental, was built. Today, this “monument in memory of the victims of March 11” is the best-known memorial of the terrorist attacks of March 11, 2004, more than the grove of memory in the Retiro park.

At first glance, it looks like nothing other than a large glass cylinder placed in the middle of a roundabout across from the entrance to the Atocha train station: one can easily walk right by without understanding that it represents a monument in homage to the victims of the deadliest terrorist attack that up until now Spain has ever experienced. The most important part of the monument is in fact found elsewhere, namely below, where a vast room with blue walls has been carved out. The entry is located inside the station, and from there one can read a selection of messages of solidarity gathered in the station after the attacks: they have been printed on a

transparent membrane placed inside the glass cylinder. In the minds of those who designed the memorial, this large room filled with natural light and silence in contrast to the din and shadows brightened by the glare of the station's neon lights constitutes the memorial itself: more than the part that emerges in the middle of the roundabout, this room materializes the emptiness left by the persons whose lives were taken by the terrorist attacks and whose names are listed in the entrance.

**Place Figures 3 and 4 Here, Please.**

In retrospect, even if the Bosque del Recuerdo housed the first official commemorative ceremonies of March 11, it seems impossible that there would not one day have been such a monument at Atocha. This station was indeed immediately perceived both nationally and internationally as the epicenter of the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks. All the trains bombed by the terrorists that morning were heading there, and one of them blew up within its walls. Atocha is also where the inhabitants of Madrid headed in the days after in order to express their support for the victims and their refusal of terrorism. Such was the case in the evening of March 12, 2004, when a historic demonstration brought together two million people in the streets of Madrid.<sup>11</sup> But another reason why this monumental memorial was created at the Atocha station was that, quite prosaically, there was enough room there to build it, with a large area in the middle of a huge roundabout and below, vacant (because unprofitable) commercial buildings. Its status accordingly remains fundamentally ambivalent. As a place of memory, it is there for all who may come to the Atocha station with the memory of Madrid bombings in mind, and wish to think of the victims. But since it is situated both in the middle of a roundabout amid constant traffic and in a little corner of the station, without any signage to point out its location and significance such that daily commuters can go by without noticing, it is also a place of oblivion.

That is what the Spanish managed to realize in the aftermath of November 13, 2015: the terrorist attacks occurring in Paris suddenly revived the memory of those that Madrid had mourned eleven years earlier. Spanish media then reported that for lack of proper maintenance the Atocha memorial had not been open to the public for several weeks, which up until then had not shocked anyone.

### **London: A Monument Amid Trees**

The terrorist attacks that took place in London on July 7, 2005 seem at first glance very similar to those suffered in Madrid on March 11, 2004: simultaneous bombings perpetrated in the morning rush hour in the mass transit system, striking one bus and some lines of the underground in London, commuter trains from the suburbs in Madrid. However, they did not produce the same memorial focus in a site of the British capital that would have been perceived as “the epicenter” of the attack as at the Atocha station in Madrid. King’s Cross Station in the north of London could have been designated as such, as makeshift memorials were placed there right after the attacks. But they were on a much smaller scale than those seen at the Atocha station in the spring of 2004, because most of the explosions on that morning of July 7, 2005 actually occurred below the surface in the tunnels of the underground and between several stations, particularly between the King’s Cross Station and another. Nobody died at the King’s Cross Station strictly speaking on that day, whereas 34 of the 191 victims of the terrorist attacks of March 11 had indeed lost their lives under the roof of the Atocha station.

More importantly, all the trains bombed in Madrid were heading toward the Atocha station, and just about all of them could have been blown up there. The London terrorists, however, had not targeted King’s Cross: the station was rather their point of departure. From



there they separated, with each taking a different mass transit line to explode their bomb. The result was an attack spread out in several directions at once, severely disrupting emergency services. In that way, it was similar to the terrorist attacks of November 13 in Paris: while the attack on the Bataclan concert hall claimed the most lives and thus focused most of the attention (as had the double attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001), the other attacks on the sidewalk cafés and the Stade de France did not “converge” toward the Bataclan, such that there may have been a bit of reticence, particularly on the part of the victims, to perceive that concert hall as the “epicenter” of the event. The sites where people gathered to pay tribute to the victims in the wake of the attacks are also significant in this respect. As we have noted, the people of Madrid crowded around the Atocha station on the evening of March 12, 2004. People in London and in Paris, however, gathered following the July 7 and November 13 attacks in places that had not been struck by the terrorists: around Trafalgar Square and Place de la République, respectively, and not in front of the King’s Cross Station and the Bataclan concert hall.

In both of those cases, the first public political memorial gesture thus consisted of placing commemorative plaques at all of the numerous sites that had been hit: they were unveiled on the first anniversary of the attacks. If you look hard enough, they can be seen today in London at the entrance to each of the underground stations hit on July 7: those at King’s Cross, Russell Square, Edgware Road and Aldgate, and at Tavistock Square near the former stop for line 20, where a bus exploded. Similarly in Paris, they can be found by each of the sidewalk cafés attacked on the evening of November 13, in the area surround the Stade de France, and in front of the Bataclan.<sup>12</sup> But given the importance of July 7, which to this day, as noted, remains the worst terrorist attack perpetrated in Great Britain, as is March 11 in Spain (two countries severely afflicted by

terrorism), mere plaques could not suffice for a public marker of memory. There also, as in Madrid and Paris since 2015, there doubtless had to be a memorial. But given the multicentered character of these terrorist attacks, where to place it? The reason why the memorial that we now find honoring the victims of the July 7 attacks in London has not incorporated trees into its design is that it was in the end built among the trees: it was indeed finally decided that it should be located in the center of London in Hyde Park, a “neutral” site with respect to the July 7 terror attacks, where one also finds a memorial dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust, and another in memory of Lady Diana.

**Place Figures 5 and 6 Here, Please.**

This July 7 memorial consists of 52 stainless steel pillars, one for each person killed by the attacks, each standing three meters high on a base of about 15 cm square. They are arranged in four distinct groups, representing the different sites of the attacks, with the location and time of each explosion inscribed on them. The names of the 52 victims killed are listed on a plaque placed flat on the ground behind these pillars. What we have in essence, then, is a grove of steel integrated among the park’s trees. Seen from afar, its meaning is not particularly evident, especially since, here again, there is no sign signaling passersby that this is a monument in memory of the victims of the July 7 attacks. There are certainly a few discrete indications spread out here and there in the park that guide those who seek to know which direction to take in order to find it. But it is completely possible to visit the park without finding out about it, or walk right past it without realizing what it is for, particularly since the British remain largely unaware of it. It was inaugurated with pomp and circumstance by Prince Charles, which should have made the headlines of the July 7, 2009 news. The event was totally overshadowed, however, by the funeral of Michael Jackson, broadcast live over most television channels throughout the world.

While it has since become the site of official ceremonies commemorating the terrorist attacks of July 7, and thus the most important place of memory for those tragic events (Allen and Brown, 2006),<sup>13</sup> it like the other sites previously described constitutes a place of oblivion in a way, doubtless even more than the March 11 memorial at Atocha.

The “memory garden” that is to open at the Place Saint-Gervais in Paris for the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015 involved a similar choice: a “neutral” site not directly related to the locations targeted by the terrorists, but also a central site, situated right behind the Paris city hall, moreover suitable for hosting future commemorative ceremonies while remaining unnoticed by most passersby and tourists who would have no special reason to seek out a November 13 memorial. The victims’ loved ones are likely going to appropriate the site, coming here for silent reflection and mourning, however, since the memorial was designed by the mayor of Paris’s office in close collaboration with two associations of the victims of November 13, Life for Paris and 13 Onze 15. Indeed, the creation of an ad hoc place of memory having no direct relation with the places where the commemorated events actually took place always runs the risk that the persons (victims, nearby residents, mere “concerned” citizens) keen on memorializing those events for whatever reason, because of a lack of involvement in the creation process, might not take ownership of the memorial, not recognizing it as “their memorial,” but just an “institutional” memorial, in which case they may mobilize in view of having another memorial built somewhere else, on one of the original sites of the events in question.<sup>14</sup>

Such was the case in London: brought to fruition by a group of nearby residents who went to the trouble raising the necessary funds, a second monumental memorial was in the end inaugurated at Tavistock Square in 2018. That is hardly surprising when we realize that the

image of the bus that exploded at this location is the one that over time finally proved to be the most memorable one from the terrorist attacks of July 7, 2005, even though it in fact constitutes a poor synecdoche of the event since, as noted, most of the explosions that morning happened in the underground, not in buses, and it was not at Tavistock Square that there were the most victims.<sup>15</sup> But of the four sites of these terrorist attacks, Tavistock Square was, unlike the tunnels of the underground, the only one in open air and easily accessible to the public, such that it is today also the only one where one can meditate and mourn, being certain that one is in the exact place where people lost their lives that day. And once again here, the idea of the possibility of a memorial at that location stemmed from a more prosaic factor: directly across from it is Tavistock Square Garden, wholly dedicated to peace, already having a monument to conscientious objectors, a tree planted in memory of Hiroshima, and a statue of Gandhi. Designed by the same cabinet of architects as the Hyde Park memorial (Carmody Groarke), the memorial to the victims of July 7 only added to the ones already there, finding its place naturally, as it were, amid the trees (and bushes).<sup>16</sup>

### **Back to Paris: What Memorial After November 13, 2015?**

The mobilization that led to the creation of this new memorial at Tavistock Square almost 15 years after the terrorist attacks in London is of the same type as the mobilization of the “Génération Bataclan” association, which was formed after the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015 with the goal of having a monument to the victims created right across from the Bataclan concert hall. There is in fact a public garden at the intersection of Boulevard Voltaire and Avenue Richard Lenoir in Paris that could also have served as the site for a commemorative monument. One can now find there a plaque listing the names of the 80 persons killed in the

Bataclan concert hall, but not a more ambitious memorial as had been planned by the “Génération Bataclan,” for the simple reason that the various associations of victims were determined not to concentrate memorialization efforts on the Bataclan to the detriment of the other sites that were struck by terrorism that evening: they firmly opposed such a narrow focus, favoring instead the future “memory garden” co-designed with the mayor of Paris’s office on a neutral site.

Ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, and in the general context of the “war on terror,” one finds in Western societies an increasingly systematic tendency to mark the memory of mass terror by erecting monumental memorials. This had not always been the case before.<sup>17</sup> When the time comes to remove the makeshift memorials from the site of these terror attacks or from a public place, municipal authorities henceforth almost always announce that they will replace them in short order with a permanent memorial, leaving the form of that memorial to be announced later. However, the victims still have to desire such a memorial: that is what the mayor of Boston in effect replied to a reporter from the local press who, two years after the attacks hitting the marathon organized every year there, questioned him about the fact that, contrary to what had been announced after the attacks, no memorial had actually been created up until then, nor was one being planned.<sup>18</sup> Such then is the other strong tendency in Western societies with respect to memorialization: to do nothing without or against the victims’ will. That supposes, however, that the victims are in agreement among themselves as to the form to be given to the memorial and the place where it is to be built, and that is never a simple matter.

As we have seen, the memorials for the victims of the terrorist bombings of March 11, 2004 in Madrid and the July 7, 2005 in London constitute to a certain extent places of oblivion as much as places of memory. That is because the victims associations have for various reasons felt

that they had not, or had not sufficiently, been involved in designing the monuments, such that they often continued to organize their own memorial activities elsewhere. The opposite is true in New York, where the September 11 memorial now seems to have enjoyed a great success, because the victims' families played an important role in the processes of reconstructing and institutionalizing Ground Zero as a place of memory.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to the Ground Zero memorial in New York, however, the next two memorials that will soon be created in Paris, the "memory garden" at the Place Saint-Gervais and the memorial museum in the Parisian suburb of Suresnes, will not be based on the memory of places struck by the terrorists: their "success," so to speak, will then above all depend on their relations with the victims associations.

That the victims associations want a memorial is not enough, however, to ensure that it will make sense to the rest of society. For a memorial to institute a public memory of one or several terrorist attacks, its design must include a reflection on what is in fact considered to be the "public" of these acts of terror, and on the message intended to be delivered to that public via the memorial. In other words, one must know not only for whom the memorial is being created, but also to whom it is addressed, and to what end. As Reinhart Koselleck points out, commemorative monuments never serve merely to perpetuate the memory of the dead themselves, but above all affirm the identity of a social group of survivors, giving the victims' death a special meaning.<sup>20</sup> There must therefore be a social group: for example, one finds in the former Soviet bloc countries and in the former Yugoslavia monuments presently abandoned, since the social groups for which they were erected have disappeared. Now the social group concerned by the memorialization of Islamist terror attacks in Europe seldom prove to be unproblematic: was it the city, the nation all together, or, given the international repercussions of these events, something greater yet that was struck?<sup>21</sup> And there must also be a meaning: that

generally constitutes the chief difficulty for public powers in the West when planning to create a memorial for the victims of Islamist terrorism that would be more than a mere tree.

The memorial museum of terrorism to be opened in 2027 in Suresnes boldly aims thus to meet an unusual challenge. It is about associating a memorial honoring the memory not only of the victims of November 13, 2015 attacks but of all the victims of terrorist attacks that have occurred in France since 1974, and all French victims of attacks abroad, with a museum of history and society conceived as an open space that, instead of arbitrarily settle these two issues – social group and meaning – once and for all, invites visitors to reflect on these questions themselves by providing them elements of perspective and understanding as to what terrorist attacks do to societies. But here again, without having a direct link to the memory of a particular terrorist attack, the place seems well suited to this ambitious project: the memorial museum will be located on the Mont Valérien across from another memorial, that of La France Combattante, which pays tribute to those who fought and resisted during the Second World War. And there also will be trees, already more than a hundred years old, these.

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