

Memorial stone – stumbling block?

The German word for memorial, Denkmal, which translates literally as “think about it,” says a lot about the subject and its purpose: A memorial can be an edifice, a commemorative tablet, an apartment building, a factory, a park, or the name of a street or building. A memorial should be a reminder – of people or historical events. In the view of those responsible for them, memorials have a special meaning for the present and future. That is why it is interesting to explore the concepts of remembrance that lie behind the establishment of a memorial.

Often, memorials (or those who support their creation) are pursuing a political agenda: The beholder should identify with that which is presented (e.g., in the case of 19th-century national memorials), or emulate the figures honoured (e.g. with war memorials created during and after World War I). Sometimes memorials are also meant to remind or warn the beholder (e.g., Holocaust memorials).

When investigating a memorial, you must take the following into consideration: A memorial’s “content” relates to the past. Its mission relates to the people who were living when it was created. Its effect can change drastically in the course of time if political conditions have altered: For example, many tsarist memorials were destroyed in 1917 during the Russian Revolution; the same occurred in the early 1990s – after the fall of the Soviet Union – to statues of Lenin and other Soviet leaders. But the national or global political processes are not the only influences that can alter the “significance” of a memorial: For example, many memorials have to “move,” either because they, or those who created them, no longer fit with the (politically desirable) image of a city or because construction work makes their location “untenable.”

Here is what you should take into consideration when investigating a memorial for a research project:

1. Description

Describe the memorial as closely as possible:

- Where is the memorial (e.g., the centre of town, on a plaza, in a park or cemetery)?
- What materials were used to build it?
- What does the memorial depict (e.g., a person, a column, a wall, a building)?

**Describing
the memorial**



- Are symbols or allegorical figures used (e.g., a cross, a helmet, an eagle, an angel, a death's head)?
- If applicable, how are the figures organised and depicted; what positions are they in, what are they wearing, etc.?
- Are there any inscriptions (such as texts, sayings, names)?
- Are there any traces of changes (weathering, vandalism, restoration, additions)?
- What effect does the memorial have on you?

2. Gathering details

Find out:

- When, where and for what purpose the memorial was established.
- Who commissioned and paid for the memorial?
- Who created the memorial?
- How did contemporaries react to the establishment of the memorial? Are there documents about the dedication, about its "history," about later debates?
- Who is responsible today for the memorial and its care?

**Background
information about
the memorial**

3. Enquiring about and evaluating a memorial's topicality

Ask passers-by and staff of the responsible authorities (e.g, City Hall, Antiquities and Monuments Office, Cemetery Authority) and evaluate their answers:

- How do observers perceive and appraise the memorial today?
- How do (political) authorities view its significance?
- What measures are needed for the protection and preservation of the memorial, and which of these measures have been taken?

**Topicality
of the memorial**