

Red Army Graffiti: Reconstructing a lieu de mémoire.

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Abstract

Without a doubt, the Reichstag Building in Berlin qualifies as a lieu de mémoire, a place vested with historical significance in popular collective memory. What is not clear, however, is how such »sites of memory« form: Does an evolutionary process slowly add layers of meaning or do sudden sparks of history ignite mass imagination? Is the development orchestrated by a central power or by spontaneous collective actions? In order to work out these questions, this article draws attention to the year 1945, when Red Army soldiers covered the interior of the Reichstag, already in ruins, with layers of graffiti. During this brief historical episode, individual acts of self-inscription merged into a collective appropriative happening where participation was more significant than leaving an attributable legible mark. Hence, the graffiti still preserved today are leftover traces of a rare performative event that endows this lieu de mémoire with new historical meaning.



Figure 1: The party is over – cleaning the debris from the Reichstag ruins in Berlin in 1948. The walls are covered with several layers of graffiti left by Russian soldiers. Individual inscriptions are barely legible (right hand side). Photo by Keystone/Getty Images.