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## Jason Chalmers

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# “CANADIANISING THE HOLOCAUST: DEBATING CANADA’S NATIONAL HOLOCAUST MONUMENT”

### Introduction

Jason Chalmers' article explores the creation of Canada's National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa. The monument was built in 2017 and Chalmers argues it plays a significant role in the Canadian memory of the Holocaust, which was the systematic persecution and genocide of six million Jewish individuals by Nazi Germany during World War II. Chalmers' article centralizes on the idea of how the monument's purpose reflects Canada's efforts to "Canadianise" the Holocaust. This attempt to "Canadianise" the Holocaust is meant to integrate it into a national narrative, despite the implication of Canada's antisemitic discourse and actions during and after the Second World War, such as the admittance of only 5,000 Jewish individuals into the country between 1933 and 1945.

### Making the Holocaust Canadian

- Chalmers argues that the National Holocaust Monument is not just a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, but also a means of integrating this history into Canada's self-image as a tolerant, inclusive, and multicultural nation.
- The monument consists of six triangular concrete walls that create a star-like shape, representing the six million Jewish lives that were lost and millions of other victims affected by the Holocaust.
- Chalmers states the monument emphasizes the Holocaust as a universal symbol of human rights violations, rather than focusing on its specific cultural context as a genocide targeting Jewish people.
- The monument does this by its design and placement, taking visitors on a redemptive journey before placing them in front of the Parliament's Peace Tower at the exit. This downplays the Holocaust's unique antisemitic ideology in favor of a generalized moral narrative against oppression that aligns with Canada's needs of the present.
- By universalizing the Holocaust, Chalmers argues that the monument works to align the Holocaust with Canada's broader narrative of promoting human rights and multiculturalism, allowing Canada to present itself as an inclusive nation, despite its historical failures.
- The monument simultaneously works to bring the Holocaust into Canadian consciousness while also trying to 'redeem' these past historic failures.
- For example, Chalmers discusses how the Holocaust already has a place in Canadian memory by "the visible trials of Holocaust deniers and its subsequent inclusion in some provincial school curricula" (154). These were homegrown Canadian Holocaust deniers that are central to Canada's identity when remembering the Holocaust.
- The monument works to 'overwrite' these historic failures and antisemitic behaviours in Canadian society, and distance Canada from its past exclusionary policies and present itself as a nation that has learned from history and is committed to preventing future atrocities.
- Chalmers' analysis is important because it challenges us to think critically about how history is remembered and whose stories are prioritized in public memory.

### Wartime Hero or Villain?

- As stated above, Canada has a history of failures regarding inclusivity, whether it be racist policies or overall hateful behaviour towards Jewish settlers within Canadian society.
- However, Canada is also framed as a heroic nation for fighting on the side of the Allies and liberating Europe from Nazi control during the Second World War. Canada also ultimately became home to thousands of Holocaust survivors after the war, with 40,000 Jewish refugees coming to Canada after 1945.
- This makes Canada the third largest nation to accept Holocaust survivors after the war. Chalmers argues this statistic is used to demonstrate Canada's 'concern' for persecuted Jewish peoples, and frame Canada as a heroic nation despite closing the doors to these refugees during the war.
- Chalmers argues this narrative of Canada as a hero also places more emphasis on the survivors of the Holocaust rather than the victims, as Canada closing its doors during the war led to the deaths of thousands of Jewish people. Chalmers discusses the conflicting narratives and debates regarding the Holocaust in Canada, where Canada plays the part of a 'haven' for some World War II survivors but also an exclusive, antisemitic nation during the war.

## Canada's Dual Narrative

Whereas many other countries work to resolve conflicting narratives revolving around the Holocaust, Chalmers claims: "Canadians involved in the debate seem content to remember their nation as both a hero and a villain in the Holocaust." (161). By examining these positive and negative narratives of Canada's wartime efforts, Chalmers reveals the tensions and contradictions in Canada's efforts to commemorate the Holocaust through the national monument in Ottawa.

## The Politics of Memorialization

- Monuments are not just static objects in a nation, but instead have multiple meanings that society projects onto them.
- Chalmers discusses how monuments tell a story and are a social process that are integral to nationalising historical memories.
- He writes: "A national monument is a rhetorical device that stimulates discourse about an event, generating a variety of interpretations and symbolic associations which shape how that event is perceived by the public" (152).
- Chalmers argues how monuments, such as Holocaust monuments, stimulate the intersection of public discourses, weaving the Holocaust into the narrative and public memory of a nation.
- However, regarding Canada, critics argue that the Holocaust has nothing to do with Canadian memory. Chalmers points out how in the mid-1990s Canadian war veterans spoke out against the idea of a Holocaust gallery in the Canadian War Museum, stating Canada didn't go to war to stop the Holocaust so it shouldn't represent itself like it did.
- Chalmers' article is a powerful critique of the politics of memorialization surrounding monuments, as he challenges us to think deeply about the purpose of memories and the complexities of national identity.

## Hierarchy of Suffering

Chalmers also discusses that Canadianising the Holocaust can threaten to marginalise other genocides of oppressed groups, such as Indigenous populations in Canada, as these oppressed groups 'compete' for recognition. Chalmers states how the Canadian Museum for Human Rights can cause dominant memories to overshadow, and even have the potential to erase, marginal memories, creating a 'hierarchy of suffering' in the Canadian narrative. He emphasizes: "Suppressing discussion of Aboriginal genocide reinscribes Aboriginal peoples as a 'vanishing race'" (153). Chalmers does an excellent job in summarising the consequences of prioritizing certain historical narratives over others, ultimately undermining the museum's goal of creating an inclusive understanding of human rights violations in Canada.

## Not just Survivors

Furthermore, scholars Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki explore the experiences of child Holocaust survivors who resettled in Montreal after World War II. Their work provides valuable supplemental information to Chalmers' analysis of Canada's National Holocaust Monument, particularly in terms of how Jewish Canadians are defined by their survival of the Holocaust and how survivor agency is promoted. Both articles reveal the tension between how Jewish Canadians are defined by external narratives, such as national memorials and public memories, and how they define themselves through their own experiences and agency. Both of these articles demonstrate the need for a more inclusive and survivor-centered approach to Holocaust memory, one that honors the specific experiences of survivors while acknowledging the broader implications of their stories in the Canadian narrative.

## Moving Forward

Jason Chalmers challenges us as Canadians to think critically about how history is remembered and whose stories are prioritized in public memory. Chalmers highlights how national monuments can shape collective identity in a nation. The National Holocaust Monument tries to tell the story that Canada has overcome its troubling past, but we as Canadians cannot forget that these troubles are not just in the distant past, and still affect people to this day. Moving forward, Chalmers calls for a more inclusive and honest approach to Holocaust memory, one that centers on survivor voices and acknowledges historical complicity to address issues like racism. Chalmers reminds us that how we remember history is always changing, and the lessons we learn from the past will not only affect our present, but also our future.

## Bibliography

Chalmers, Jason. "Canadianising the Holocaust: Debating Canada's National Holocaust Monument." *Canadian Jewish Studies* 24, (2016): 149-165. doi:10.25071/1916-0925.39964.

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