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Remembering Terrorism: The Case of Norway

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn

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As terrorism scholars, we are intrigued by those who engage in violence. We study their motivations, tactics, ideology, organisational structures, and pathways to (de-)mobilisation, hoping to better understand terrorism and how we can counter it. Far less attention is paid to what happens after an attack has taken place. Terrorist attacks are means to an end; the responses to terrorism determine the impact attacks might have on societies. One way to better understand the impact of terrorism is by studying how societies deal with memories of terrorist attacks. This Perspective looks into the case of Norway following the attacks by Anders Behring Breivik on July 22, 2011. What can we learn about the societal responses to terrorism from how Norway commemorates the attacks and deals with the locations where these attacks have taken place? This perspective discusses the memorialisation process in Norway and then zooms in on a visit of the author to the island of Utøya in June 2019 in order to provide a more close-up look of how the members of the Workers' Youth League (AUF) have found their own ways to deal with the attacks.

The attacks

On July 22, 2011, just before 15:30, Breivik parked a van outside the office of Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in the governmental quarter of Oslo. Minutes after he had walked away, the van exploded, killing 8 people in its vicinity. Breivik then drove 35 km to the quay facing the small island of Utøya. Dressed as a policeman, he boarded the ferry, claiming to be there to protect the Workers' Youth League (AUF) which had gathered on the island for their annual Summer camp. In the 72 minutes that followed, Breivik killed 69 of the 564 people on the island, 33 of them younger than 18 years old. The case of commemorating the attacks in Norway is extraordinary as it includes a location that is very public, situated in the heart of Oslo, and a location that is privately owned and literally disconnected from the mainland. The nature of the locations determines the range of possible and desirable commemoration modes.

Finding (the) “right” modes of commemoration

It has become somewhat of an unwritten cultural norm that countries construct memorials to commemorate terrorist attacks. The [National September 11 Memorial & Museum](#) in New York is perhaps the largest and most well-known example, but other recent monuments include the [Atocha station memorial](#) in Madrid and the [7 July Memorial](#) in Hyde Park in London. The process of deciding on whether to establish a permanent memorial and subsequently on its design often leads to political and sensitive discussions.

This has also been the case in Norway. Months after the attack, the Norwegian government [decided](#) that three national memorial sites would be established: one at Utøya and two in Oslo which included one temporary and one permanent memorial. The government launched an international competition for the design of those sites which was won by Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg in 2014. Dahlberg’s proposal included a physical cut through the mainland, in the village of Sørbråten, facing Utøya and a permanent memorial site, an amphitheater, in the city of Oslo. It was the first proposal of cutting the land and making a 3.5 meter gap that predominantly [attracted attention](#). Dahlberg [explained](#) that it was meant to symbolise a “poetic rupture”. The jury of the competition [stated](#) that “the void that is created evokes the sense of sudden loss combined with the long-term missing and remembrance of those who perished. The proposal is radical and brave, and evokes the tragic events in a physical and direct manner”. The memorials were planned to be unveiled a year later, on July 22, 2015.



[Design](#) by Jonas Dahlberg Studio/KORO

Contestation about the memorials

Soon after the announcement of the winner, [opposition](#) to the plan started to mount. The criticism mostly came from the local residents in Sørbråten who felt they had not

been involved in the decision-making process while they would be the ones “confronted” with the monument on a daily basis. Many of the local residents had played an important role during the attack as they had saved many children from the cold waters surrounding Utøya. The original [formulation of the competition](#) emphasised that the memorial should also honour those who came to help. A second point of criticism related to the purpose of the memorial and was also shared by some of the relatives of the victims: the symbolism of the cut could induce the most painful memories. Here, a more fundamental question emerged: what should be the goal of a national memorial? Is it to accurately capture and invoke the trauma and emotions experienced by those who were attacked, to honour the victims, to display a sense of resilience, to show national values, or something else?

The discussion was not resolved by the Norwegian government. More than two years after the planned launch of the monument, no consensus had been reached. A group of local residents had even [sued the state](#) for harming the local community and landscape with this “invasive” memorial. In June 2017, three years after Dahlberg’s design had been chosen, the Norwegian government decided to abandon the plan entirely and to cancel Dahlberg’s design for both Utøya as well as the government quarter in Oslo. Six years after the attack, Norway had not managed to reach agreement over a permanent memorial.

22 July Centre in Oslo

In the meantime, a temporary visitors’ information site had been established in the governmental quarter of Oslo run by the Norwegian Government Security and Service Organisation. Exactly four years after the attack, this [22 July Centre](#) was opened, located in the high-rise building that had housed the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Justice and the Police. The building was seriously damaged by the bomb blast in 2011 and had not been repaired after the attack. In the booklet provided to visitors at the entrance, it reads that “the 22 July Centre is a learning centre dedicated to the conservation and mediation of memory and knowledge about the terror attack in Oslo and on Utøya on the 22nd of July 2011”. It was initially opened as a temporary information centre but was later granted permanent status and is now often used for school visits.

The visitors centre is divided in different rooms: a room of remembrance displaying pictures of the victims, a prologue room where video footage of Breivik parking the van next to the building is shown, the 22 July 2011 room with a timeline of the events and in the middle the melted remains of the van used to carry the explosive device, a video room which shows testimonies of the witnesses and a room focusing on the aftermath.

All across the centre, the damaged structures of the building are visible and have been integrated into the design. The texts used have been drawn from the verdict of the Oslo District Court in August 2012.



Photo taken by Bart Schuurman in Oslo on June 23, 2019

After Dalhberg's plan for a memorial in the city of Oslo was cancelled, a group of architects called 3RW [was tasked](#) with establishing a temporary memorial in the city. In July 2018, the end-result was unveiled in front of the bomb site. It contains a [glass wall](#) with the names and the age of the victims, with below it a floor of broken glass, symbolising the glass found in the area after the explosion.



Photo taken by author in Oslo on June 23, 2019

The Workers' Youth League initiatives on Utøya

While on a national level the debates were ongoing about a national memorial, similar discussions were held by the survivors, families, and leadership of the AUF. The AUF had owned the island Utøya since the 1950s; according to former Prime Minister Jens

Stoltenberg it has been one of the [most influential](#) places in Norwegian political history because of the annual youth camps. In the years after the attack, survivors, relatives and the AUF leadership have put tremendous effort in trying to answer questions about the future of the island. For instance, should the buildings where Breivik shot people, such as the main cafeteria, be demolished or kept for families to visit? Should the AUF return to Utøya for the Summer camps or should it not do so out of respect for the victims? When we visited the island on June 21 as part of an [academic conference on terrorism research](#), the director of the island, Jørgen Frydnes, told us how difficult it was to find answers to such questions. Directly after the attack the AUF [decided not to change](#) or do anything with the island for the next four years in order to take sufficient time to reflect on these topics.

After years of sensitive and delicate talks with dozens of family members of those killed, the AUF decided to return to the island in 2015 for the annual Summer camp. New buildings, such as the visitors centre, were erected to facilitate meetings of educational groups and tell the stories about the island and its important place in Norwegian democracy. Around the cafeteria, the Hegnhuset (“safeguard house”) was built, with 69 pillars supporting the roof, representing the victims and 495 “safeguarding planks”, representing those who survived. Once you enter, you can still see the windows of the cafeteria from which many youngsters jumped in order to escape from the shooting.



Hegnhuset – Photo taken by author on Utøya on June 22, 2019

A memorial was made on one of the more distant places on this very small island where no people were killed, representing a more neutral place for families to mourn their loved ones. The head of the architectural committee, 3RW, responsible for

developing this memorial called “The Clearing”, [reflected](#) upon the differences between building a monument on the island compared to the one on land: “we saw these two memorials as fulfilling each other, covering different functions and needs in the aftermath of the terrorist attack of July 22”. This memorial was considered apolitical, “placed *where the attack happened*, accessible to everyone but built on private land on the island”.



The Clearing – Photo taken by author on Utøya on June 22, 2019

After we had visited the buildings and the memorial, one of the survivors held a talk reflecting on how he and others had dealt with the aftermath of the attack. He tried to raise awareness for his view that Norway had failed to address and fight the political views behind July 22. Shockingly, he told us that many survivors have been threatened by right-wing extremists in Norway. So fiercely, that some of them have decided to leave politics altogether, also because they felt police protection was lacking. On 22 July 2019, news emerged that one of the small memorials, located in the municipalities where the victims came from, was [defaced with a swastika](#), demonstrating the contestation that can arise around memorials.

Remembering terrorism: a sensitive and political issue

These examples of state-sponsored and private memorials show that commemorating attacks is a sensitive and political issue. One of the challenges is that memorials need to resonate with widely different audiences: the survivors and relatives of the victims, the wider population and those “confronted” with the memorial sites in their daily lives. The stories of the AUF and the discussion about Dahlberg’s design of the cut in the land show that there can be a tension between the desire to show or mark trauma and showing resilience. While some might want to physically mark a place, others might want it to look as normal as possible in order not to credit the terrorist by making

damage the most visible element. There are no unambiguous ways of addressing such questions, but they need to be carefully and sensitively approached. On the national level, the different views were not effectively discussed and managed: not involving the local residents when the planned memorial design would have such large impact on the surroundings led to long, unresolved discussions. Those dragged on for years and dominated the national discussion on commemorating the attacks. This cannot be seen as beneficial to a process of national grieving and healing.

The AUF provided a more positive example: they held numerous conversations with families, relatives and AUF members over long periods of time to eventually find consensus. If consensus could not be reached, they instead looked for possibilities for people to opt-out. This was for instance the case with memorial The Clearing on the island: Frydnes told us that not all families wished to have the name of their deceased family member written into the memorial. The designers then built the memorial in such a way that names could be added at a later stage. Not long after the memorial was installed, the families who had wished not to participate asked if the names of their relatives could still be added, which was then easily accommodated.

What Frydnes and his colleagues showed us on the island is that they had managed to find their own tailored ways to answer the question of how to remember such horrific and tragic events as the terrorist attacks on July 22, 2011. Now, on the walls of a very small museum on the island, visitors can read that they “arrive at a place with an unyielding spirit, which keeps the memories of those we lost on July 22nd in its heart, a place that never forgets, and a place where new generations can carry forward the ideals that were attacked. Utøya did not go dark. Utøya stood strong”. For many of the survivors and relatives, showing such resilience was a key part of how they wished to react to the attacks. Finding ways to accommodate such a process on a national level while acknowledging and respecting different views is needed if countries wish to deal with terrorist attacks in a constructive matter. As shown on Utøya, getting support from different audiences is key and this involves finding a balance between grief, remembrance and resilience.

About the Author

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn is a Research Fellow at ICCT, and a Researcher at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) of Leiden University. Since 2013, she has been conducting research on the phenomenon of foreign fighters. De Roy van Zuijdewijn has looked at a number of historical cases of foreign fighting, namely Afghanistan (1980s), Bosnia (1990s) and Somalia (2000s). She is also interested in how European societies respond to the current foreign fighter phenomenon in Syria and Iraq, particularly focusing on policies, threat assessments, and public reactions (e.g. fear levels). She is teaching a course on foreign fighters at Leiden University.