

Healing Through Remembering

International Study Visit to the Basque Country

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NEWSLETTER



Study visit group members at the Gernika Peace Museum in the Basque Country



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International Study Visit to Basque Country

HTR hosted an international study visit to the Basque Country/Spain in May 2013. The visit was in conjunction with the Everyday Objects panel exhibition while it was installed at the Gernika Peace Museum. This study visit was the first of two international study visits funded by PEACE III as part of the Voyager Project to be hosted by HTR with the aim of stimulating learning and mutual support around identified issues in different locales.

The group of 17 participants travelled to the Basque Country in northern Spain from 21-25 May 2013 and was comprised of individuals working in a wide variety of organisations and community groups throughout Northern Ireland and the Border region. Participants had been recruited through an application process and competition for the limited number of places was high. Applicants were chosen based on their reach to local groups with whom they would share their learning from the visit. As a result, the 2013 study visit set a precedent for high-quality, content-rich and capacity-building learning initiatives for local groups to think further on issues related to dealing with the legacy of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

While in the Basque Country, the group was hosted by the Gernika Peace Museum and, in particular, two of its staff, Director Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia and Education Officer Idoia Orbe Narbaiza. While in the town of Gernika, the group took part in a workshop, looking at the work of both the Gernika Peace Museum and Gernika Gogoratuz, who seek to address issues of collective memory, commemoration, and transformational education around issues of the past.

The group also traveled to Bilbao, Vitoria-Gasteiz, and San Sebastian, visiting several sites and organisations committed to working on issues related to dealing with the past in the context of the Spanish Civil War and the more recent conflict in relation to the Basque Country.

Among the different organisations and representatives met was the Forum of Education on Peace and Human Rights, which serves as an umbrella group of over thirty peace and human rights groups working in the Basque region. The Forum includes groups dealing with the legacy of the Basque conflict such as Bakeaz, Lokarri, and Bakeola. At the meeting, representatives of eight of those organisations took part in a frank and productive discussion with group members on the realities of post-conflict Spain and the Basque Country and the hurdles they continue to face as a result of the decades of violence.

The group also met with official representatives of the Basque government in Vitoria-Gasteiz whose remit is to deal with policies that address what they call “victims’ issues, human rights, and living together.” At that meeting, the group heard about both Basque and Spanish government approaches to dealing with issues related to victims, prisoners, ceasefires and cessation of violence, and commemoration. It was clear that efforts to address the conflict in and about Northern Ireland have been used in the Basque context as they seek to deal with the legacy of their own history and divided society.

While in San Sebastian, the group was invited to meet Juan Carlos Izagirre, the mayor of San Sebastian, and others involved in developing the city’s European City of Culture celebrations in 2016, wherein the city would emphasise building a legacy of strong relationships and a commitment to human rights over the building or restoration of physical structures. The group also visited the Peace House of Aiete, which is a peace centre established by the San Sebastian city council in what had previously been Franco’s summer home. In the autumn of 2013, the Peace House would also become host to the Everyday Objects panel exhibition.

Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict panel exhibition in Basque Country at the Gernika Peace Museum in the Basque Country/Spain

As part of the Living Memorial Museum pilot for the Voyager Project, sets of panels of each of the Everyday Objects artefacts were developed to help enable the exhibition to go to venues that were limited either by space or funding for the full artefacts-based exhibition. One of the panel display exhibitions was hosted at the Gernika Peace Museum in the Basque Country/Spain from March to mid-September 2013. The panel exhibition therefore provided a connection between the Gernika Peace Museum and the international study visit.

Director of the Gernika Peace Museum, Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia, said: “The Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict exhibition is a great example of something we might be able to do here to tell the stories related to the Basque conflict. We’re happy to host it in order to hopefully get others here thinking about how to address our own past.”

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” This quote from the American author and poet, Maya



Study visit group members in a meeting with the Mayor of San Sebastian, Juan Carlos Izagirre, and city representatives involved with the European City of Culture 2016 initiative.



Study visit group members visiting Picasso's "Guernica" exhibition at the Gernika Peace Museum with the Museum's Director, Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia.



Study visit group members visiting the Peace House of Aieta, Franco's former summer home and now a centre funded by San Sebastian/Donostia City Council for peace-related work.



Study visit group members in Bilbao at the Basque Museum.



Study visit group members' final discussion and debrief before heading home.



Study visit group members Alex & Linda Bunting and Oliver Wilkinson visiting the Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict panel exhibition at the Gernika Peace Museum with the Museum's Director, Iratxe Momoitio Astorkia.



Study visit group members meeting with Txema Urkijo, Jonan Fernandez, and Monica Hernando, appointees of the Basque government responsible for victims' issues, human rights and peace.



Study visit group members visiting the Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict panel exhibition at the Gernika Peace Museum.



Study visit group members visiting the permanent exhibition of the Gernika Peace Museum, detailing the bombing of Gernika in 1937.

Facing the Past with Courage by Ruairi Rowan, ISV participant

Angelou, is often used by Healing Through Remembering in reference to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland. However, these words are equally relevant to various societies and conflict areas throughout the world.

Facing the past with courage can sound like a daunting task, but it is a process that can begin by talking with, and listening to others by sharing our experiences and our 'truths'. This is what happened in various locations during the International Study Visit to the Basque Country.

There were formal structured meetings with Basque delegations. While meeting with the individuals responsible for victims, human rights and peace, the group was told the word 'reconciliation' isn't used as it is seen as a term too closely associated with religion. Rather, the phrase 'social encounter' is utilised.

In another meeting at the Guernica Peace Museum, it was mentioned that teachers don't want to discuss the recent Basque conflict in schools. Opinions are divided

within families and it is something they don't talk about.

There were also discussions among participants in informal settings, such as restaurants, hotels and pubs. All of these discussions were beneficial. There is no perfect environment for them. The important thing is that they take place.

We shouldn't be afraid to talk about our past. We should discuss it with our friends and colleagues, within our own communities, with other communities, and also in our schools. These social encounters will help lay the foundations for a better future. They introduce us to alternative mindsets and differing points of view. We learn about each other and from each other and we also learn about ourselves.

The author and academic Vamik Volkan has spent much of his working life exploring the notion that a large group can be traumatised by an act or acts of

Dealing with Pain of Gernika by Hedley Abernethy, ISV participant

violence inflicted upon it or indeed acts of violence carried out in its name. Coining two phrases – “chosen glories” and “chosen traumas” – he suggests that there are incidents in the life of a community when it tasted victory over an enemy or felt the pain of violence against it. Throughout history, we have many reminders of both chosen glories and, indeed, chosen traumas. It is no surprise that one person’s chosen glory may be another’s chosen trauma.

I was reminded of the latter when we visited the Basque region. To many outside of the region, the name Guernica (or Gernika to give the town its Basque spelling) is synonymous with a single act, namely the aerial bombardment of the town during the terrible days of the Spanish Civil War. On 26 April 1937, German and Italian planes dropped bombs on the town. The horror of this night is captured as visitors sit in ‘Begoña’s House’ a mock up of a family home at that time, which is part of the permanent exhibition at the Gernika Peace Museum.

That night lives long and lives hard in the memories of Basques. Perhaps what was most galling was the denial by Franco of his regime’s involvement in the bombardment of the town, choosing instead to blame Republican forces who were fleeing the city.



Study visit group members in a workshop at the Gernika Peace Museum with Maria Oianguren Idigoras and Andreas Schaefer from Gernika Gogoratzuz.



Study visit group members Hedley Abernethy & Michael Wilkinson visiting the Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict panel exhibition at the Gernika Peace Museum.

How that plays into modern day Gernika-Lumo, as it is now known, is difficult to pin down. There is a sense that this trauma resonates deeply with Basques and hardens their resolve in their quest for self-determination. However, the attendant violence that marked the campaign of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) sits uncomfortably with many who may struggle with the apparent contradiction of remembering violence inflicted upon Basques, while concurrently acknowledging and even justifying violence inflicted by Basques.

Of course this is not new nor is it unusual. What we have learned in the context of the violence that has marked the conflict in and about Northern Ireland is that trauma inflicted upon a community runs deep through its psyche. What we also know is that trauma that is never spoken of is rarely resolved.

To make comparisons with the Irish conflict and the struggle of the Basque separatist movement can be unhelpful. But perhaps there is a sense that people from both regions can walk together to heal their respective traumas.



Study visit group members together in Gernika with Maria Oianguren Idigoras and Andreas Schaefer of Gernika Gogoratzuz.



Study visit group members Ruairi Rowan and Jacqueline Monahan experiencing an underground bomb shelter which currently houses an exhibition related to the bombing of Gernika.



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