The nature of collective photographic memory

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The Greek Cypriot "Struggle Museum" and the Turkish Cypriot "National Struggle Museum" both present official narratives of the recent turbulent history of the island of Cyprus. Despite the similar names, the two museums present different, often conflicting, narratives from two very different points of view. This presentation focuses on photography to discuss the relationship between photographs, museum narratives, collective memory, death, truth and ethno-national identity.

To discuss the role of photography in history/war museums, one photograph that is exhibited in both "struggle" museums is used as a case study. We examine Robert Egby’s 1956 photograph of two dead soldiers to show that these two museums, as is the case in many other museums, do not really use photography as a document (with the strengths and limitations that entails) but rather as an emotional proof of a one-sided narrative. Photographs are not used to represent facts but mainly to activate an imagined memory. Communities are interested in promoting certain collective memories because these memories can influence the present. As a matter of fact, photographic representations can provide a history, which will help communities make sense of their world, provide beliefs and opinions and serve as a basis for future decisions.

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