

Distorting history in a human rights museum

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Two songs keep coming to mind. The first is by Buffalo Springfield, “For What It’s Worth.” I’ve always liked its haunting refrain: “There’s something happening here. What it is ain’t exactly clear.” That ditty describes precisely my take on what’s happening with the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

In the beginning it was all about Israel Asper. He wanted a public space for a Holocaust gallery in the nation’s capital, specifically in the Canadian War Museum. Since CanWest’s conductor once enjoyed the ear of Prime Minister Jean Chretien the trade seemed certain. But after Canadian veterans objected, and Liberal fortunes fell, those best-laid plans of the mice and the men were prostrated.

Showing chutzpah, the project’s boosters regrouped, launching a well-financed campaign promoting a museum for Winnipeg, not un-coincidentally the home of the Asper Foundation. Since CanWest outlets obligingly tooted a pro-Conservative lullaby, and we all know that he who pays the piper calls the tune, this artifice worked. Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s team rewarded their fealty by funding this Canadian Museum for Human Rights, permanently attached to the public teat.

If this national museum was really committed to telling human rights stories, particularly Canadian ones or those less well known, it might be worth it. But it’s not. The final report of its Content Advisory Committee confirms that a disproportionate share of the museum’s permanent exhibit space will emphasize Jewish suffering in the Second World War, elevating that horror above all other crimes against humanity. That partiality is demonstrated by 48 references to the Holocaust compared to 1 on the genocidal Great Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine. Adding insult to injury Holodomor is misspelled as Holodomar. Just a typo? Perhaps.

There is no principled reason for opposing a human rights museum. But why not create something truly unique and Canadian by allocating an entire floor to internment operations? They harmed Ukrainians and other Europeans in 1914-1920, Japanese, Italian, and German Canadians in the Second World War, then Quebecois in 1970. Explaining how The War Measures Act allowed such injustices to happen to several different Canadian communities several times over the course of the 20th century would alert us all to the need for vigilance in defence of civil liberties in periods of domestic and international crisis. As matters stand Canada’s first national internment operations get just one minor reference, placing the state-sanctioned indignities suffered by thousands of men, women and children on par with “the alleged slaughter of Inuit sled dogs in the High Arctic” even while hoaxes like accounts of “thousands of Nazi war criminals hiding in Canada” will be regurgitated as part of this museum’s staple fare.

A major gallery comparing the many genocides that befouled human history, not just in Europe but in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and not only in the 20th century but before and since, would have genuine pedagogical value. Placing the Shoah in the context of other crimes against humanity would remind us that while the word “genocide” may have been crafted just after the Second World War, the act itself is neither modern nor, sadly, unlikely to reoccur. And how to explain that victims of Communist states are not mentioned? Stalin’s name never appears even though he and his satraps murdered millions more than Hitler managed. Nor are Mao Tse Tung’s atrocities included, peculiar given that his regime slaughtered about the same number as Hitler and Stalin did, combined. And what about Imperial Japanese barbarities, like the infamous “Rape of Nanjing”? It’s left out, as it is in most Japanese textbooks, even as the Holodomor is now being edited out of Ukrainian ones. Should a Canadian museum, even indirectly, succour deniers?

Being inclusive and equitable takes nothing away from hallowing the Shoah. As over two dozen well-supported museums and educational programs dedicated exclusively to Jewish losses in the Second World War already exist in Canada it is obvious that what happened to those innocents is a tale already told, often and well, in no danger of being forgotten. But the catastrophe that befell many millions of non-Jews enslaved or murdered by the Nazis – including the Roma, Catholics, the disabled, Poles, Ukrainians, Soviet POWs, homosexuals and others – will be obfuscated in the proposed museum. That’s ahistorical, actually quite unCanadian.

Remedying this boondoggle is easy. First the Content Advisory report should be blue boxed. Then truly inclusive and fair-minded consultations should be held. Those who say this can’t be done, who insist current management should be allowed to develop whatever exhibits its want, need to be reminded that this is a publicly supported institution, just like the Canadian War Museum. An egregious exhibit there about Bomber Command so infuriated veterans that it was undone. Unless this government wants more of the same it has to intervene. As for that second song I keep humming it’s by The Who. What is clear and is happening here is that we “Won’t Be Fooled Again.”

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