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## A hope for public memory in Cuba

by [Anne Applebaum](#)



*Then-Cuban President Fidel Castro looks at a news ticker flashing on the front windows of the U.S. diplomatic mission while visiting the construction site outside the mission in Havana in 2006. (REUTERS/Claudia Daut)*

Thanksgiving weekend brought my geographically scattered family together for a few days, and we decided to spend one of them at the 9/11 museum in New York. Our group contained several generations and a range of opinions. But as we walked through the exhibits, the most notable divide was between the adults who remembered that strange day in excruciating detail, and the children who did not remember it at all.

For those who remembered, the museum displayed familiar things: audio of the telephone answering machine messages left that day, video of the morning talk shows interrupted by sudden announcements, grim photographs of the firefighters running up the stairs. At a certain point in the meticulously organized exhibition, I felt almost frustrated by the relentlessness of the images — I know all of this already, why remind me? — and the narrowness of the focus — there are other tragedies happening elsewhere now, too. But for those in our group who didn't remember, the information was fresh. The timeline, the charred hunks of steel, the descriptions of Osama bin Laden: All of that was new and had to be absorbed from scratch, and everybody argued about it on the subway ride home.

Curated displays of public memory are like that: frustratingly simplistic to those who remember a more complex reality — they can't explain what happened afterward, or reflect all of the arguments that started on that day and continue into the present — but revelatory for those who do not. If nothing else, they are a starting place for a debate about events in the past that continue to shape events in the present. Every 15-year-old now lives in a world that was partly created by 9/11, an event that happened before they were born, so it's important to begin to understand what it was.

Not every culture is fortunate enough to have that kind of opportunity. Fidel Castro, when he [died Nov. 25](#), left behind him a nation that does not, in any public space, mourn or even acknowledge the 5,600 Cubans who died in front of Castro's firing squads, or the 1,200 murdered in "[extrajudicial assassinations](#)," or any of those who were jailed, tortured or died escaping his regime. No Cuban has been allowed to publish, in Cuba, a true history of his populist revolution, one that repressed and murdered the existing elite in order to put an even more vicious and more incompetent elite in its place. Because Cubans have limited Internet access, they can't access [the Cuba Archive](#), an online record of the Cubans murdered by the Castro regime, or any of the books and articles written about the country overseas. There is no hall of memory for the victims, as there is at Ground Zero, and their names are not carved into any stones.

Until recently, the same was true many other communist tragedies. In 1937, Joseph Stalin ordered census-takers to conceal statistics that revealed just how many Ukrainians had died in a man-made famine, created by his policies, as well as a mass arrest of the Ukrainian cultural "elite" that took place at exactly the same time. For many decades, it was illegal even to mention either those mass arrests or the Holodomor — the word means "death famine" — and its approximately 4 million victims. Those who did so were at risk of arrest themselves. Only now that Ukraine is an independent country, striving toward democracy, is public memory possible. By odd coincidence, the day that Castro's death was announced, Nov. 26, is also Ukraine's annual Holodomor commemoration day. More than 80 years after that tragedy, public debate and

discussion, monuments and mourning force people to think about terrible events that continue to shape the politics and the demography of Ukraine even today.

Not all of the Kiev ceremonies will satisfy everybody, and not everybody will like the Ground Zero museum. Nevertheless, if I could wish something for Cubans after Castro's death, it would be that they have the same opportunity as Ukrainians, and the same opportunity as Americans, to remember past tragedies and to contemplate their significance. Soon, I hope that Cubans will be given the freedom to understand their past, to commemorate their dead, to begin to undo the damage wrought by decades of silence. I hope that they, too, will be able to create public memorials, to teach their children the history and to understand the impact of a revolution that froze itself into a sullen, lifeless dictatorship, long ago.

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