

[July 26, 2015](#)

## The 22nd of July

Ellie Lapp

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There are a million things about which I could write this blog post. Since I wrote my last post, I took a cruise to Copenhagen for \$15, spent my birthday weekend in Stockholm, made exciting headway on my research project, and visited several museums and organizations that have my mind racing with ideas for my future. Now we are hunkering down for finals week, writing essays, preparing presentations, and reading over our notes in the hopes of surviving these Norwegian-style finals.

But instead of talking about those things, I feel compelled to write about something a bit more serious: the 22nd of July. This date carries as much connotation for Norwegians as 9/11 does for the United States; in 2011, Anders Breivik set off a car bomb in a government building and then proceeded to a small island, home of a summer camp for the Youth branch of the Labor Party, and shot 69 campers, most of whom were teenagers. Breivik is a Norwegian right-wing extremist, who targeted current and future members of the labor party because of their immigration-friendly policies.

I spent July 22nd like I spend many of my days here in Oslo: going to class, exploring the city, finding an event to attend or a museum to visit. On that afternoon, as I walked out of the National Gallery where I got a free tour of some of the most iconic painters ever, including Edvard Munch and Claude Monet, I decided to enjoy the nice weather and stroll around an area of town where I had not been before. I started walking down Akers Gate, knowing that the government building that was bombed was somewhere along this street. Half on purpose, half by chance, I came upon the building. A wreath and a few roses sat next to the entrance, and a very long line of people were waiting to enter a memorial that opened that day. I got in line and stood in silence for approximately a half an hour. When it was my turn to enter, the group I was with gathered around a guide who gave a 5-minute introduction to the exhibit, all in Norwegian. Worried about identifying myself as a foreigner or somehow seeming disrespectful, at the end of her talk I followed the group without asking what she had said. We began to file into a small room on our right, separate from the main exhibition, and I assumed it was a coat room or a place to put my purse. I walked through the door and was instead confronted with 69 young, smiling faces in photographs around this small room: the teenagers and adults who had lost their lives on the island. We walked slowly around the room, and I watched people point out photographs to their family, smile sadly, or look quickly away from the faces of people I presume they had known.

I continued my walk through the memorial. In the middle of a large room was a black, charred car frame: the car that Breivik had used for his bomb. On the walls was a timeline of the events of that day. We walked slowly by this timeline, taking in each detail. On the back wall was a huge picture of the island taken that night, and in front of that was a box of cameras and cell

phones that contained evidence of the horrific afternoon. Another room had a continuous video playing, of the survivors of the island telling their story.

After about 45 minutes, the group meandered to the last room of the memorial, a room of hope with a display of streets and fences of Oslo covered in flowers in solidarity with the victims, their families, their friends. The walls were covered with photos of memorial services, of reunions, of demonstrations against extremism. I came to the exhibition in silence and left in silence, spending the half hour or so walk and metro ride back to campus in contemplation of what that experience meant to me.

A couple of days before, we discussed the topic of memorialization in our Peace Scholars class. How we choose to remember these atrocities is important. Tragedies can be used for political reasons, manipulated into a justification for more violence or reactionary policies, cultivating fear and mistrust instead of societal unity. And the audience of these memorials is also important to consider. I still don't know if it was "my place" to attend this exhibit. Of course I did not act disrespectfully, and remained very much under the radar, but it felt weird to participate in what seemed like atrocity tourism. It prompted me to ask myself why memorials such as Auschwitz receive so many foreign visitors each year, why visitors go to sites of national tragedy even if they are not connected to the tragedies. Is it acceptable to co-opt such tragedy as a tourist?

I don't really know how to answer these questions. I know that my experience on the 22 of July was valuable for me: I was able to see firsthand different types of memorials that we had discussed in class, and saw an example of a very effective one that provided a place for catharsis, for telling the uninhibited truth, for remembering every detail and making sure that these stories are not forgotten. But most importantly, it was a memorial that ended with hope for the future, showing Norway coming together with a strong sense of unity against the forces of extremism. I know that I can learn from this memorial, compare it with my own country's response to 9/11, and use it to inform my beliefs about terrorism, atrocities, memorialization, and more. I also know that the memorial meant something different for me than it did for my Norwegian counterparts, and that's ok.

Going forward, I will always be more mindful of the memorials I visit, if they have a political agenda, if they are promoting moving forward or entrenching a former conflict. I think I will compare them to this memorial, which was so moving, so honest, and ultimately quite hopeful. And I will always think about my role in attending such sites, doing my best to be respectful and make the experience constructive and meaningful.

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