

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."