

City To 'Add Context' To 'Heroes' Turned Nazi Collaborators

Canyon of Heroes plaques to get additional explanations; not everyone is happy.

BY STEWART AIN | January 17, 2018, 9:43 am |

As Southern cities like Richmond, Va., chart choppy moral waters in negotiating what to do with their monuments to Confederate generals, New York City has entered the debate about its own statues and plaques — mostly on the side of historical contextualization.

The city plans to add explanations to the plaques in its Canyon of Heroes that recognize two Frenchmen who were given ticker tape parades four days apart in October 1931 for their World War I exploits — even though both gained ignominy nine years later for helping the Nazis capture Jews and send them to death camps.

An 18-member Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers made the suggestion last Friday after five months of deliberations, five public hearings and an online survey with more than 3,000 responses. It called for the city to “add context” to the markers as well as to controversial statues in the city. Mayor Bill de Blasio concurred.

The commission focused its report on four specific sites: the Canyon of Heroes, a statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle, another of Theodore Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History and one of J. Marion Sims, who performed non-consensual medical experiments on black women. The commission recommended that only the Sims

statue in Upper Manhattan be moved. It is to be relocated to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn where Sims is buried. The other statues and the two plaques are to have markers and signage erected to add historical context to them.

Historians praised the decision, with Michele Bogart, a professor of art history at Stony Brook University, saying: "I've been asked: 'Why have monuments to bad men on our street?' I don't care if they are bad men. My concern is learning from them. ... I say use this as an occasion for education. Get school children out there and mold it into the curriculum."

Steven Fine, a professor of Jewish history at Yeshiva University, agreed.

"History is about learning from the past for the present and this is a good teaching moment," he said. "If we erase it [history], we lose texture and lose a teaching moment. ... I don't believe in taking things down."

But the World Jewish Congress and Assemblyman Dov Hikind (D-Brooklyn) criticized the move.

"It's a moral issue," said Betty Ehrenberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress-American Section. "History can easily be distorted if we leave people who were not heroes in the Canyon of Heroes. They were Nazi collaborators who were responsible for the deportation and ultimately the deaths of Jews. Listing them in the Canyon of Heroes easily leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation."

Hikind said in a statement: "Every day we are confronted with bigotry and divisiveness. New Yorkers have an obligation to say, 'Not in OUR city.' We have a moral obligation to educate the public, and especially young people, by removing markers that commemorate individuals who willingly participated in the systematic murder of innocent men, women and children."

Bogart, who was a member of the city's art commission from 1998 to 2003, said, however, that "history is not pleasant. People have a fantasy that they want to walk down the street and not feel hurt by the things around them. This is to my mind a misplaced desire to take action against what has been happening since the election of [Donald] Trump, and to use monuments as the fall guy in the absence of the ability to make change at a politically meaningful level.

“You attack these inert monuments and inject all your feelings into those monuments. Many of the people involved are the so-called eminent scholars who wanted Columbus and [Theodore] Roosevelt’s statues removed. They are part of the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter groups — academics and social activists who are for race and social justice. They are now trying to use monuments as a vehicle for righting social wrongs that are structural in nature. Why not put their energy into getting rid of Trump? It’s a waste of intellectual energy and is culturally destructive.”

Hasia Diner, a professor of American Jewish history at New York University, said she believes the commission’s recommendations were “perfectly reasonable.”

“If we go through the entire Canyon of Heroes, I’m sure we could find something revolting about all of them,” she said of the 206 individuals and groups that have been feted. “People in one generation are heroes and yet [may] have feet of clay. For those who find it troublesome, it is an opportunity for historical projects that could be done with skill and nuance and raise important questions. ... One’s generations heroes could be another’s villains.”

Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, said he and many other historians find it anathema to destroy statues “in the same way I would not advocate destroying records and archival papers of people we do not like. Many of us were horrified when the Taliban destroyed ancient statues because they disagreed with them.”

In its report, the commission focused on one of the two Frenchmen memorialized in the Canyon of Heroes, Marshal Philippe Pétain, who served as premier of France’s Vichy government and who ordered the arrest and deportation of 77,000 Jews to Auschwitz. The commission made no mention of the other Frenchman, Pierre Laval, who served as Petain’s deputy head of state and who in 1942 stripped French Jews of their rights and helped the Nazis capture and deport non-French Jews.

A commission member, **Harriet Senie**, a professor of art history at the City University of New York, said the commission decided to leave the Petain and Laval plaques because they are historically correct. But it did suggest that the name Canyon of Heroes be changed.

“I think that name is potentially inflammatory,” she said. “It implies that all those honored are still heroes. ... To say he [Petain] was a hero I’m Jewish and have a Holocaust history; I’m

very sensitive to it.”

De Blasio rejected the suggestion.

Gil Kahn, a political science professor at Kean University, praised the recommendation to commission a new monument to commemorate “indigenous peoples” at a site yet to be determined.

Senie said she believes it is important “we acknowledge our history and understand the value systems of different periods and different times. We have to respect them even though we don’t share them.”

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