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Kott, Sandrine; Wieder, Thomas

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ROUNDTABLE

The (Re-)construction of Monuments in Germany: New Historical Narratives in a Time of Nation-building

Sandrine Kott  and Thomas Wieder

Histoire générale, University of Geneva, Geneva 1211, Switzerland

Sandrine.Kott@unige.ch

Le Monde, Paris, France

wieder@lemonde.fr

In the slipstream of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, there has been a global mobilisation around monuments and statues of famous figures involved in the slave trade and European colonial conquest. In former colonial states – such as France and Britain – and states shaped by the legacies of slavery – such as the United States – activists have defaced, damaged or torn down monuments associated with these contested pasts. This is hardly a novelty. The destruction of physical symbols is often a response to regime change. But, in this case, the mobilisation has taken a different form. Instead of legitimising a new regime and new elites, the destruction of monuments is part of a demand for justice from historically marginalised groups who are seeking to reclaim their heritage. The deconstruction of these monuments automatically entails the deconstruction of dominant national narratives that have contributed to such marginalisation.

Given this omnipresent global context, it is striking that exactly the opposite process is taking place in Germany, where monuments are being rebuilt as part of a project of national reconstruction. This may have something to do with the unusual regime change that took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall. German unification has generally been called ‘re-unification’ (*Wiedervereinigung*). The prefix ‘re’ suggests a restoration. It places the ‘second unification’ on a spectrum that starts with the first unification in 1871. Over the years, this connection has been reinforced by various political symbols. In 1991, the Bundestag voted – by a very narrow majority – to move the main German ministries to Berlin, the former capital of the *Kaiserreich*. And, since 1999, the parliament has been sitting in the Reichstag, the building of the imperial parliament inaugurated in 1894.¹ The Berlin Republic (*Berliner Republik*) made a clear break with the truncated West German Bonn Republic (*Bonner Republik*) as well as with the weak Weimar Republic, a short democratic experiment brutally interrupted by Hitler’s rise to power in 1933.

These crucial decisions rested on a specific interpretation of German history, which has been made especially visible in discussions surrounding the ‘re’-building of monuments or statues that were damaged during the Second World War and/or destroyed in its immediate aftermath. These destructions, often ordered by the communist leadership, were intended to break symbolically with a tragic Prussian legacy that many believed had led to Nazism. However, the reconstruction of these monuments after unification also served to systematically erase traces of East Germany – which was ‘absorbed’ by West Germany rather than unified with it in 1990. Without necessarily being new ‘sites of memory’,² these reconstructed monuments are the ‘sites of a new memory’. They highlight a narrative that abandons the fixation on Nazism and reevaluates Germany’s Prussian heritage at

¹ On the Reichstag see Michael S. Cullen, *Der Reichstag. Symbol deutscher Geschichte* (Bonn: BPB, 2016).

² Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 3 volumes, 1984). In the German context Etienne François and Hagen Schulze, eds., *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (Munich: Beck, 2009).

the expense of the Weimar Republic and the democratic labour movement that gave birth to it. While this narrative has been widely criticised, it has nevertheless persisted and, in some cases, has served the nationalistic agenda of the extreme right. Historians have been vital actors in this debate, and it has rekindled old historiographical disagreements about Prussian authoritarianism and the responsibilities of the Prussian elites in the rise of Nazism. The controversy that has accompanied the reconstruction of monuments also raises important questions about the place to be reserved for East Germany in the history of modern Germany.

A Castle or a Palace? The Histories of the Humboldtforum

The reconstruction of the Hohenzollern palace in the heart of Berlin is perhaps the most powerful symbol of the laborious elaboration of a new national narrative for a unified Germany. It is hardly surprising, then, that it took nearly thirty years for the Humboldt Forum to replace the Palace of the Republic, the emblematic monument of the former GDR.³ The Palast der Republik was built on the ruins of the Prussian Hohenzollern castle damaged by Allied bombing in 1945 and whose destruction had been ordered by the East German leader Walter Ulbricht in 1950. Inaugurated in 1976, it was a prestigious place in a small socialist German state of sixteen million inhabitants. It housed a parliament that played almost no role in everyday politics, and it functioned as a large 'palace of culture'. Between 1976 and 1990, the restaurants and concert halls of the Palast der Republik were visited by seventy million people. For citizens of East Germany, it was a place where stages of life were celebrated like the Youth Consecration (*Jugendweihe*), a secular communion whose origins lie in the history of nineteenth-century Germany. It was therefore a popular site of remembrance.⁴

The Palast was closed for security reasons in 1990. The decision to demolish it was taken by the German parliament in July 2002 on the grounds that it contained asbestos. The inhabitants of East Germany, especially those of East Berlin, even when they were hostile to the communist regime, interpreted it as a destruction of their world, a sign that they had become foreigners in their own country.⁵ In 1993–4 the palace was concealed by a large canvas, financed by the Thyssen-Hünnebeck company, depicting the Baroque facade of Hohenzollern Castle. In 1992, the Hamburg industrialist Wilhelm von Boddien founded an association (Förderverein Berliner Schloss e.V.) to raise funds to rebuild this Prussian castle. Thanks to a skilful campaign, he was able to win the support of important politicians, and the 'reconstruction' was finally approved by the Bundestag in July 2002 by 384 votes to 133. Renowned architects, such as Renzo Piano, defended the palace against the castle on aesthetic grounds. The Greens and the left-wing party *Die Linke* campaigned against a project that was rehabilitating Prussian elites. The controversies and resistance explain why the demolition work only began in 2006 and was completed at the end of 2008. The Förderverein wanted an identical reconstruction of the Hohenzollern Castle, but the new Humboldtforum became something different. It comprises a modern aisle overlooking the river Spree, which offsets the three Baroque facades copied from the original castle.

The political tensions surrounding the reconstruction of the palace resurfaced with the decision to 're'-install the cross that once topped the imposing dome built in 1845 by the renowned architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Citizens' associations, as well as leaders of *Die Linke* and the Greens, expressed their hostility to this idea, pointing out that the Christian symbol was in contradiction with the proclaimed cultural openness of a forum that presents itself as 'a (cosmopolitan) place for culture and science, for exchange and debate'.⁶ By contrast, the Foundation (*Förderverein*), the representatives of the Christian churches, the conservative right and even many social democratic politicians emphasised that the cross carried a universal message of peace and reconciliation. Ultimately, it was the latter

³ Viola König and Andrea Schölz, eds., *Humboldt-Forum. Der lange Weg 1999–2012* (Berlin: Baessler Archiv, 2012).

⁴ Moritz Hofelder, *Palast der Republik, Aufstieg und Fall eines symbolischen Gebäudes* (Berlin: CH Links Verlag, 2008).

⁵ On the vanishing of East Germany see Agnes Arp and Annette Leo, eds., *Mein Land verschwand so schnell...16 Lebensgeschichten und die Wende 1989–1990* (Weimar: WtV Campus, 2009).

⁶ The debates: <https://berliner-schloss.de/die-schlossdebatte/der-grundsatzbeschluss-des-bundestags-2002/>. A self-depiction of the Humboldt forum <https://www.humboldtforum.org/de/>.

group that prevailed. In May 2020, the ‘Cross of Reconciliation’ was placed on top of a building that houses the African and Oceanic art collections.

Beyond the problems related to its status as a religious symbol, the cross raised the question of Germany and Europe’s colonial memory. After all, Berlin played host in 1885 to the conference during which Africa was divided among the European powers under the authority of the German Chancellor of the new Reich and Prussian Junker, Otto von Bismarck.⁷ Art historians have pointed to the fact that many of the objects exhibited in the forum were acquired in a colonial context. Historians have explained in detail the violence that underpinned the Kaiser Wilhelm I (1871–88) and Wilhelm II’s (1888–1918) projects for conquest and domination. The latter culminated in 1904–8 with the genocide of the Herero and Nama, perpetrated by soldiers of the Prussian army under the command of General Lothar von Trotha.⁸ Opponents of the forum’s museographic choices see the installation of objects acquired during the colonial period inside the replica of a castle built by a dynasty that was at the origin of this violent conquest as a political and cultural provocation. This is in addition to the already thorny historiographical controversy over the impact of the Prussian military and authoritarian tradition on twentieth-century German politics.

Germany’s Prussian Heritage and the Garrison Church in Potsdam

As most historians of Germany know, Prussian history is plural and cannot be reduced to militarism alone. Frederick II, known as the Great, the first king of Prussia and no longer ‘in Prussia’ (from 1740 to 1786), was a great military leader, but also a patron of the arts and a friend of Voltaire.⁹ However, this legacy of Prussian militarism has long been interpreted as a major explanation for the peculiarities of Germany’s path to modernity (the so-called *Sonderweg*).¹⁰ After the end of the Second World War, the *Sonderweg* thesis was widely considered to be a central explanation for the crimes of Nazism and it was a central justification for Allied policies that aimed to ‘de-Prussianise’ Germany. The actual territory of Prussia – like all the former Länder – had already disappeared under Nazi rule, but the final blow came in February 1947, when it was legally dismantled. In the east of the country, occupied by the Red Army, the property of the Prussian elites and the Hohenzollerns was expropriated; in the west, their collections were taken over by a cultural foundation: the Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage (*Stiftung preussischer Kulturbesitz*).

In recent years, the debate about Prussia and the Hohenzollerns has taken on a new relevance with the demand for compensation and restitution by representatives of the former royal family. Legally the claim is only admissible if the heirs can establish that the confiscations were not justified by collaboration with the Nazis. This relaunched the discussion about the role of the Hohenzollerns – and more broadly of the German and Prussian conservative elites – in Hitler’s rise to power. All historians agree that there was an objective ‘negative alliance’ between the Nazis and the Hohenzollerns, based on a common hatred of the Republic and liberal values, as well as shared xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. But not all historians agree about their involvement with the Nazi regime. While it is an indisputable fact that Crown Prince William of Prussia gave unwavering support to the Nazis in the hope of restoring the monarchy, the latest research shows that the entire family, never dispossessed of its property by the Nazis, was closely tied to the murderous regime.

⁷ Andreas Eckert, ‘Die Berliner Afrika-Konferenz’, in Jürgen Zimmerer, ed., *Kein Platz an der Sonne: Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013), 137–49.

⁸ For the renewal on German colonial history see Sebastian Conrad, *Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2019). Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller, *Völkermord in Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Der Kolonialkrieg (1904–1908) in Namibia und seine Folgen* (Berlin: CH Links Verlag, 2003). On the colonial legacy in the HF: <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/newsroom/dossiers-und-nachrichten/dossiers/dossier-humboldt-forum.html>.

⁹ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Helga Grebing, *Der ‘deutsche Sonderweg’ in Europa 1806–1945: Eine Kritik* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986).

Moreover, as Stephan Malinowski has argued, the royal lineage of the Hohenzollern family played an important role in legitimising Nazism in the eyes of the conservative part of the population.¹¹

One of the most powerful symbols of the collaboration between the Hohenzollerns and the Nazis was the presence of William of Prussia at Hitler's side in the Garrison Church (*Garrisonkirche*) at the opening of parliament on Potsdam Day (*Tag von Potsdam*) on 21 March 1933. Only a few weeks before, on 27 February, the Berlin Reichstag had been set on fire, an event that gave extra meaning to the opening of Hitler's first parliamentary session, exactly 62 years to the day since the first session of the Reichstag. The Garrison Church was carefully chosen by the new Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, in agreement, it seems, with the Hohenzollern themselves. Inaugurated in 1732, the church contained the tomb of the first Prussian king, Frederick II, of whom Hitler was an ardent admirer. By choosing this site, Hitler and the Nazis wanted to stress the continuity between the new regime and Prussian tradition.¹² It thus became a powerful symbol of the alliance between Hitler and the conservatives, without which the Nazis could not have come to power.

This historical context is essential to understanding the controversy over the reconstruction of the Garrison Church, which is designed to be the final element of a large-scale restoration of the royal city of Potsdam and the systematic destruction of buildings erected during the East German period. The reconstruction project dates back to the early 1980s. In 1984, Max Klaar, an officer of the Parachute Battalion 271, based in West Germany, founded an association to raise funds to rebuild the carillon of the Garrison Church, which, like the rest of the building, was destroyed in the bombings of April 1945: 500,000 deutschmarks were collected, and the replica of the carillon was inaugurated in the barracks of the West German army in 1987. After unification, it was offered to the municipality of Potsdam and Max Klaar undertook an intense lobbying effort to convince the authorities to rebuild the Garrison Church. Initially welcomed, the initiative met with growing hostility because Max Klaar himself displayed ultra-right-wing positions and did not hesitate to recommend the reading of clearly 'revisionist' historians. In 2005, the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) publicly opposed the former officer, who declared that he did not wish the Garrison Church to organise blessings for homosexual couples or promote 'feminist' theology.

In 2008, a new foundation was created whose board included representatives of the EKD, the state of Brandenburg and the city of Potsdam. As in the case of the Humboldt Forum, these actors claimed that they wanted to make the new Garrison Church a place of reconciliation and peace. But, in order to rebuild the church, they needed to tear down the Computer Centre (*Rechenzentrum*), a research centre built at the end of the 1960s and converted in the 2010s into a cultural centre. This added a new layer to the process of reconstruction. For critics of the Garrison Church project, it was no longer simply a case of opposing the resurrection of a monument associated with Germany's nationalist and Nazi past, but also of saving a building inherited from East Germany and occupied by artists. This was the argument put forward by politicians from *Die Linke* and the Greens, as well as anti-fascist activists and members of pacifist associations such as the Martin-Niemöller Foundation, named after a Protestant pastor who became a great figure of the resistance to Nazism.

In December 2021, a way out of the crisis was emerging. The mayor of Potsdam, Mike Schubert (SPD), announced that the *Rechenzentrum* would not be destroyed but would instead undergo extensive renovation. As for the church, only the bell tower would be rebuilt. In the few dozen square meters between the *Rechenzentrum* and the future bell tower, a new space was to be created – a 'House of Democracy' that would be used, among other things, for the meetings of the city council. This solution was welcomed by the Federal President Steinmeier, who saw this compromise as a way to 'build a place of memory combining historical reflection, democratic debate and cultural creativity'. The CDU and the AfD opposed the plan, arguing that the Protestant Church had compromised itself by making common cause with the defenders of the *Rechenzentrum*, a physical legacy of the hated East

¹¹ Lothar Machtan, *Der Kronprinz und die Nazis. Hohenzollerns blinder Fleck* (Berlin: Duncker and Humboldt, 2001) and Stephan Malinowski, *Die Hohenzollern und die Nazis Geschichte einer Kollaboration* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 2021).

¹² Sandrine Kott, *Bismarck* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003), 109–41.

German regime.¹³ This clash went beyond the realm of party politics. It represented two divergent conceptions of German history: one dominated by a nostalgia for Prussian authoritarianism; the other offering a 'liberal' interpretation of the nation's history.

Historians in a Time of Nation-building

Whereas in many Western countries monuments and statues have been challenged on anti-racist or decolonial grounds, the main debate in Germany is underpinned by questions about the constructed (dis)continuities of national history in an ongoing period of post-unification nation-building. In many cases, projects for the (re)construction of monuments raise the question of the legacy of Germany's Prussian heritage, the Empire (*Kaiserreich*) and the first German unification. They highlight – by accident or by design – Germany's military and authoritarian heritage, as well as the colonial massacres, Germanisation campaigns, repression of Catholics and socialists, and extreme forms of anti-Semitism and racism that marked the history of the first united Germany. After the Second World War, this justified the destruction of monuments by both the Allies and the communist regime. But the citizens who have initiated many reconstruction projects have done so in order to build a new national narrative, one which erases the defeat, the division of Germany and the traces of East Germany. This creates the impression of a smooth continuity between the first and second unification, a historical interpretation that elides the issue of guilt for the Nazi regime and obliterates the democratic and social heritage of the Weimar Republic. Those pushing this kind of interpretation are generally on the right, often on the extreme right of the political spectrum. Nevertheless, these projects can and have been supported by a wide range of political and cultural actors. They see in reconstruction a way of seizing the German past and building a 'positive' identity of the kind that is inherent in the logic of what has been widely presented as a German re-unification.

What role did historians play in these debates about the German past? In fact, they have been as divided as ordinary citizens, especially about the Prussian legacy and the *Kaiserreich*. In the 1970s, in the context of the revolt against the silence about Nazism and the obvious failures of denazification, historians re-emphasised the long continuities between Bismarck and Hitler and re-evaluated the legacy of the Weimar Republic, which had been condemned by the traditional German elites. In the following decades, the revival of this *Sonderweg* thesis fueled meticulous work on the period of founding and consolidation of the nation between 1871 and 1918 in both Germanys. This research showed that authoritarian political structures and measures could not stifle either social democracy or forms of political democratisation during the *Kaiserreich*. Historians also revealed that neither anti-Semitism, nor colonial brutality, nor authoritarianism were, at the time, specific to Germany. Beyond the academy, these new findings have been mis-used to rehabilitate Germany's Prussian heritage and the *Kaiserreich*, occasionally actively supported by historians.¹⁴ The fact remains that Nazism cannot be reduced to an 'accident' of history.¹⁵ Without necessarily reverting to the *Sonderweg* thesis, which has largely been abandoned since the 1990s, recent studies have re-emphasised the role of traditional Prussian elites in Hitler's rise to power. All these historical debates had a real influence on projects of reconstruction and formed the basis for the 'compromise' projects in Berlin and Potsdam.

But there is another debate embedded in the one about the *Kaiserreich*: what to do about the memory of East Germany? This 'other Germany' has been often reduced in the West German dominated historiography to a 'dictatorship' imposed by the Soviets and cut off from any German tradition. In doing so, the majority of German historians have, like it or not, legitimised the disappearance of traces of East Germany from the German landscape and contributed to the weakening of the anti-fascist

¹³ <https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb06/institute/architektur/fachgebiete/architekturtheorie-und-entwerfen/interventionen/garnisonkirche/-rz-potsdam>.

¹⁴ See a balanced summary of the 'Streit' in Gabriele Metzler: 'Eine deutsche Affäre? Notizen zur öffentlichen Geschichte', *Public History Weekly*, 15 Apr. 2021. <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/9-2021-3/demokratie-hedwig-richter-debatte/>.

¹⁵ Heinrich August Winkler, 'War Hitler doch ein Betriebsunfall?', *Die Zeit*, 7 Feb. 2021, 15.

discourse, interpreted as little more than a form of East German state propaganda. In so doing, they have closed the door to alternative national narratives on the pretext that they have been misused by the East German communists.

In this case, as in many others, historians have been able to contribute elements to the discussion, but they did not decide the outcome of the debate. They do not control the way their work is interpreted and used for political purposes, and they are often themselves stakeholders in the memorial debates on which they are called as experts. It is only by being fully aware of these limits that historians can engage in public debates about which monuments should be destroyed, modified, or rebuilt, in Germany or elsewhere.

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