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Memorialization of Perpetrator Sites in Bavaria

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Today when speaking about authentic places connected with the National Socialist dictatorship, a clear distinction tends to be made between memorial and perpetrator sites. The former refers to places where the regime’s victims suffered and died; the latter includes locations where crimes were ideologically prepared, plans were developed, or orders were issued. Not all scholars agree with this distinction; it could be objected, for instance, that at a site now commemorating victims, perpetrators were also present, and indeed in many cases we find evidence for both types of classification. Furthermore, Ernst Piper has argued that, technically, a third category should be added, designating places of National Socialist self-representation. The former Party Rally Grounds (Reichsparteitagsgelände) in Nuremberg or the Wewelsburg near Paderborn (analysed in this volume by Caroline Pearce) would fit into this third category.

The entire discussion, however, is relatively new and few scholars have engaged with it, perhaps because most view the existing distinctions as a pragmatic compromise, however flawed. During the early post-war period, the approach to memorial and perpetrator sites in Germany showed many more similarities than differences. Generally, the early reactions of local authorities and the majority of the population were dominated by a similar set of emotions and strategies, usually including shame, neglect, and attempts to stress German suffering and to remove the visible remnants of National Socialism. This resulted in the building of monuments and putting up of plaques with the intention of blurring the definition of ‘victim’ beyond recognition. The last and probably best-known example of this evasion of history can be found at Berlin’s New Guardhouse (Neue Wache). Following strong personal support by Helmut Kohl, a model of a Käthe Kollwitz sculpture was installed in the Neue Wache and the building rededicated in 1993 ‘to the victims of war and the rule of violence’. Because of this ill-fated tradition of silently including the perpetrators when commemorating ‘victims’, a broad consensus now exists in favour of the separation of memorial and perpetrator sites. For the same reason it is widely accepted that each of the two requires a different, specific approach to their memorialization.

This is especially obvious in the state of Bavaria, where for historic reasons the highest concentration of Nazi sites outside Berlin can be found. In this chapter
I want to demonstrate that, compared to many other German regions, perpetrator memory took a significantly longer time to establish itself in Bavaria. I also show that memory of perpetrator sites was largely led from the periphery, while political rivalries between the state level (dominated by the conservative Christian Social Union or CSU) and the local level (where the left-wing Social Democratic Party or SPD was often in power) slowed the pace of development.

My analysis of the respective perpetrator sites is set against the background of Bavaria’s unique place in the history of National Socialism. Bavaria was the site of Hitler’s rise to prominence after the First World War. It was here that the judiciary played a shameful role in Hitler’s trial and imprisonment following the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. After 1933, special honours were accorded to the region, despite the fact that Bavaria had tolerated rather than actively supported Hitler after 1924, and despite the fact that the centre of power shifted to Berlin. These honours included choosing Nuremberg as the location for the Party rallies, granting Munich the honorary titles ‘Capital of the Movement’ and ‘Capital of Art’, and deciding to establish Obersalzberg as Hitler’s second headquarters. A more negative distinction held by Bavaria is that it was the location for the building of two major concentration camps, at Dachau and Flossenbürg.

Covering up the past in Nuremberg up to the 1970s

If, as Gavriel Rosenfeld states, in post-war Munich the ‘traditionalists’, who promoted a quick and authentic rebuilding of the bombed city, won the upper hand – thereby denying any responsibility for the destruction of the war – the same can be said about Nuremberg. Ninety per cent of the old town (Altstadt) was destroyed during the war; after 1945, Nuremberg was largely reconstructed as the medieval gem it had been. Of course Nuremberg, under Hitler, had also been the City of the Party Rallies (Stadt der Reichsparteitage). But the huge Party Rally Ground area, covering 11 square kilometres south east of the city, had survived Allied bombing raids almost untouched. Nevertheless, the area was largely covered in rubble because many oversized building projects such as the enormous Congress Hall (Kongresshalle) and Albert Speer’s March Field (Märzfeld) – designed to show off military manoeuvres – had not been finished in time. Only a small lake, an unexpected result of the first excavation, remained of the megalomaniacal German Stadium (Deutsches Stadion), which was to hold 405,000 spectators.

The way in which the city dealt with the unfinished Congress Hall, the largest Nazi remnant in Nuremberg, illustrates the earliest attempts to obscure the historic traces. Until the late 1950s, it was officially called the ‘Round Exhibition Hall’. Obviously it was hoped that this clumsy name change would disassociate the building from the tradition of mass events during the Third Reich, helping to neutralize it ideologically. Starting in 1949, large-scale trade fairs, for instance of the German construction industry, found a home here for a limited time. This served to integrate the Congress Hall into Nuremberg’s post-war economic upswing.

While in this case the attempt to obscure the past happened merely on a linguistic and symbolic level, other buildings on the Party Rally Grounds were partially