

The Importance of Remembering Nazi Perpetrators

Written by Natalie Bormann

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NATALIE BORMANN, SEP 14 2016

I spent most of my adolescent years growing up in a small German town in North-Rhine-Westphalia; 16,000 inhabitants, at a push. An idyllic, and wonderfully sleepy, place. Not much happens in this town by way of controversies – political or otherwise. That is, until recently, when a new, unexpected ‘addition’ to the local cemetery caught the community’s attention (Wiegand, 2016). A new gravestone reads: ‘Joachim von Ribbentrop, 30. April 1893 – 16 Oktober 1946’. 1946? The date is no accident, of course: Joachim von Ribbentrop was the first to be sentenced to death by hanging at the notorious Nuremberg Trials on that very day in October, 70 years ago. The Allies’ International Military Tribunal convicted him – alongside 23 other high-ranking Nazi officials – on four counts that included crimes against peace, deliberately planning a war of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

To put it bluntly: Ribbentrop was on trial for playing a key role, nothing less, in starting WWII and contributing to the planning and organizing of the Holocaust in his position as the Reich’s Minister of Foreign Affairs under Hitler’s Nazi Regime.

As one would expect, the gravestone has somewhat perplexed the local community. What does one make of the fact that a leading Nazi war criminal is put to rest here – 70 years later? Led by this question, I will chronicle the debate that ensued over Ribbentrop’s gravestone before illustrating how the responses are symptomatic of much broader tensions between forgetting and remembering that continue to define Germany’s memorial culture today.

The main local newspaper takes the lead in reporting on the outrage felt by the leadership of the town’s opposition party, the democratic socialist ‘Left Party’ (*Die Linke*), asserting that ‘The Left Party is up in arms!’, and calling on the town’s mayor to intervene and remove the gravestone. Citizens are perplexed, with especially the elderly community being heard commenting ‘that this just cannot be true’ (Neukirchen, 2016).

Sure enough, the town released an official statement (more on its content below) – *after* persistent queries by concerned individuals – confirming the Ribbentrop family’s request to include Joachim von Ribbentrop as part of a communal burial ground (Wiegand, 2016); one cannot help but presume that town administrators had hoped that this ‘incident’ would go unnoticed. Understandably so, perhaps, if one recalls the controversy not too long ago, in 2013, during the burial of another, unrepentant, Nazi war criminal, Erich Priebke. Priebke, a leading former SS captain, was at the center of what has been described as ‘the most contentious Nazi war-crimes prosecution of the 1990s’ that resulted in life imprisonment for his role in the massacre of hundreds of civilians in Italy (Smale, 2013). Perhaps even more contentious was that, after his death, no one wanted his corpse. I, for one, remember the catchy headline in Germany’s *Der Spiegel* magazine all too vividly, exclaiming, ‘What to do with Priebke’s corpse?’. Back then, local authorities of Priebke’s birthplace in Germany succeeded in refusing to take back the perpetrator’s corpse for burial, as Priebke had died in Italy, and ultimately he had to be buried there (under great protest by the Italians) (*Der Spiegel*, 2013).

As for the content of the press release, it offers a detailed legal explanation in defense of Ribbentrop’s gravestone, which is anchored in two, related, pieces of German law: One has to do with the general right to a burial; here, it matters that said cemetery is a municipal one (*Kommunalfriedhof*) as opposed to denominational one, and with that comes the town’s obligation to execute one’s – anyone’s – right to be buried. Accordingly, and as the press release

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stresses, the town neither had the authority to deny Ribbentrop, nor does it have the right to remove him now (Pressemitteilung, 2016). The upshot: Members of the Ribbentrop family have made use of their legal right to a communal burial space that includes Joachim von Ribbentrop, and which had to be granted.

The other piece of law is deeply rooted in the history of the specific rights of perpetrators to a burial (Pressemitteilung, 2016). That is to say – and perhaps regardless of one's gut feeling about this – there is in fact no legal prohibition for burial rites for war criminals in Germany. Most notoriously, Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess was buried in an equally sleepy town in Southern Germany in the 1980s. Hess had wanted to be buried there with his parents; a wish he was granted, legally, after he had committed suicide in a prison in Germany (Przybilla, 2011).

Ribbentrop's gravestone, therefore, stays.

Against Forgetting

Why should we care? After all, there are in fact no bodily remains to be found at Ribbentrop's new resting place; it is a burial 'by name only': As is often the case in executions of highly controversial political figures, the executioners at Nuremberg, too, made sure to leave no bodies behind. Those hanged, after having been found guilty, were cremated and the ashes scattered – in Ribbentrop's case, all over the Isar river. The purpose was apparent: to ensure that there was no opportunity for graves to become shrines for supporters, and to frustrate any attempts by sympathizers to commemorate and worship the deceased.

Bodily remains or not – the main call for removing Ribbentrop's gravestone has to do with the concern that the town may indeed become a place of pilgrimage for (neo)Nazis. While there have not been reports of these kinds of activities at his gravestone as of now, such a concern is not completely unfounded. The grave of aforementioned Nazi Rudolf Hess had turned into such a space for gathering and recruiting of extremist followers, which is why the town finally decided to go as far as to exhume his body from the site (BBC News, 2011). With that possibility in mind, those critical of the town's decision insist: Officials have failed their citizens 'politically and morally' in granting Ribbentrop some kind of immortality and potentially creating a recruiting tool for future extremists (Wiegand, 2016).

For others, the problem is more of a personal one and has to do with a sense of dignity of final resting places; besides the fact that Ribbentrop is granted such a place to begin with, his gravestone happens to be in close, and visible, proximity to an existing WWII memorial. Associating Ribbentrop with WWII veterans is said to be disrespectful, disgraceful, if not offensive. Again, another recent and more striking example is that of Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller whose remains, according to research, are buried – of all places – on the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin (Kopietz, 2013).

Back to *Die Linke*, the left-wing opposition party, whose local leader declared that, 'it cannot be that a man – this man – who has not even died here, can be commemorated here after 70 years' (Neukirchen, 2016). Most of us would whole-heartedly agree; as citizens of this small North-Rhine Westphalian town, there is an obligation felt not to allow a perpetrator of the Holocaust to be *commemorated*, let alone worshipped. At the same time, however, those citizens also have an obligation to continue to *remember* this, and all other, perpetrators of the Holocaust. Especially when considering, as recent polls show, that every fifth German under 30 does not know what Auschwitz was or is (Die Zeit, 2012).

I argue, therefore, that the significance of Ribbentrop's 'return' lies elsewhere; or rather, that the reasons for denying Ribbentrop his final burial ritual are indicative of an often unacknowledged sentiment: It is symptomatic of a nation's willingness, perhaps even longing, to forget. A recent poll suggests that over half of those interviewed claimed to be in favor of 'putting history to rest' and of striving toward finding a more 'positive national identity' to associate with (Hagemann and Nathanson, 2015). Let's be clear, there is no doubt that on a national level Germany has done an extraordinary amount to confront, remember, and narrate aspects of the horrors of its past. So much so, as Jewish Historian Marianne Awerbruch puts it succinctly, that 'the whole country is a monument!' Awerbruch's statement depicts Germany as 'littered' with spaces of trauma and violence, 'reaching from the former concentration camps to the destroyed synagogues and various apartments from which Jewish citizens were forcibly deported to be murdered' (Awerbruch quoted in Assman, 2011).

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Yet, even as many places in Germany showcase a plethora of museums and memorials that may suggest a growing tendency to confront the past, others continue to exhibit some difficulty in doing so (Rosenfeld, 2015). This is perhaps best illustrated by the following two, recent, examples: The first one is the decade-long tussle against building a Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism in Munich, which sets out to be 'a place of education and remembrance, documenting and addressing the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship' (Munich Documentation Center). Proponents of the center, which is built on the site of the former 'Brown House' *Braunes Haus*) which used to serve as the headquarters of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), were adamant about its importance and pointing here to Munich's central role in the rise of National Socialism. However, and in spite of Munich's legacy as the 'capitol of the [Nazi] movement', opponents insist(ed) that the center was 'unnecessary' (Eddy, 2015). Commentators were quick to frame this dispute as part of a larger phenomenon of effacing, if not denying, traces of Germany's (here: Munich's) perpetrator role. This is especially convincing when one considers, for instance, that most of Munich's (plethora of) memorial sites characterize its role as the city of resistance to the Nazi regime (referring here specifically to the White Rose Resistance Movement). The result of this trend in memorialization has been aptly described as producing 'an image of a city without perpetrators, only victims' (Moulin, 2016).

The other example that illustrates the complexity of the German memorial landscape takes us back to my hometown and the practice of placing 'stumbling stones' (*Stolpersteine*). Stumbling stones are small brass blocks that are inscribed with the names and fates of victims of the Nazi regimes, and are placed into the sidewalks, in front of their last address, the place from which they were deported. While the use of stumbling stones across German cities is widely supported not only for un-, and re-covering forgotten victims but also for bringing memories of deportations into the everyday social sphere, some cities – including mine – have long resisted this path of confronting history. Alongside the ethical concerns that are associated with stepping onto, or defacing, a commemorative plate, the installation of stumbling stones was also pushed back against, for what has been described as a 'fear of a confrontation with homeowners' who had to be asked for permission before installing the stones (Windhövel, 2014).

Against the backdrop of these existing tensions, Ribbentrop's grave may, therefore, serve as a site to *ensure* that a confrontation with history cannot be evaded, covered up, or shunned. Initially, making his gravestone visible to the community can introduce back into the social consciousness what may have been forgotten. His gravestone, just like Munich's Documentation Center, prevents attempts to deny that perpetrators like Ribbentrop ever existed. The gravestone can also become part of a more transformative memorial landscape: Graves, or sites, of perpetrators must not be reduced to becoming possible rallying points for (neo)Nazis; an example for this is Priebe's – the corpse that no one wanted – house which was visited, on the occasion of his 100th birthday, by members of Jewish groups and other protesters who gathered to read out publically the names of victims in Italy (Smale, 2013).

Finally, placing Ribbentrop's gravestone in a municipal cemetery, what is perceived as the ordinary burial place of honorable citizens, veterans, and neighbors, may be felt to be offensive by some, or out of place by others – however, I would argue, the uncomfortable truth is that it is exactly where and how he should be remembered. In the same way as the stumbling stones in front of houses remind us that the Jews who lived here were neighbors, his gravestone serves as an important reminder that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were neither 'different', extraordinary, nor on the margins of society. Ideas of 'the individual as madman'-theory of history and 'perpetrators-as-monsters', allows us to disassociate ourselves too easily from their crimes, and takes away the complexities of the process that leads to mass atrocity of which ordinary people were part. Ribbentrop and others were amongst all of us, with personal lives, and regular families of their own. Just in the same way as their victims were amongst us, too.

With that in mind, Ribbentrop's gravestone should stay.

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