



Chiseling off history. How testimonies of the recent past are dealt with in Nuremberg



The façade at *Platz der Opfer des Faschismus* before (left) and after (right) its ‘cleansing’
(Photos: Susanne Rieger)

Unnoticed by the Nuremberg public, in the summer of 2009 a unique manifestation of post-war German zeitgeist was destroyed irretrievably: Three vivid and colorful murals painted in 1953 on the bay of a façade at *Platz der Opfer des Faschismus*, the square dedicated to the victims of fascism, symbolizing peace, war and reconstruction were removed without a trace. This insensitive action opposed crassly that year’s steady commemoration of the *Wiederaufbau* following the devastations of World War 2 in Germany such as in an extensive exhibition organized by the State of Bavaria in Würzburg.



The mural’s message: peaceful & innocent Germans ...
(Photo: Susanne Rieger)

We asked Neil Gregor, Professor of Modern European History at the University of Southampton (UK) specialized in 20th century German history and an expert in Nuremberg's culture of remembrance for his opinion on the matter. In his recently published book "Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past" (Yale University Press, 2008) he discusses the significance of this and other such murals in the city as examples for the problems the locals had with their immediate shared past of waging an aggressive war and genocide, air raids, destruction and the expulsion of Germans from central and eastern Europe. In March 2009 he lectured on the topic in the Nuremberg Documentation Center at the former Nazi party rally grounds. Could this event have been the incentive for the owner of the building to erase the paintings?



... were raided indistinctively by allied bombers ...

(Photo: Susanne Rieger)

Here comes what Prof. Gregor has to say about this act of unhistorical vandalism:

The deeply unfortunate decision to remove the mural on the Platz der Opfer des Faschismus was, most probably, a thoughtless act on the part of individuals unaware of its historical significance rather than an act of intentional, politically-loaded erasure. However, its loss raises profound questions concerning the historical consciousness of the city, its emphases and its blind spots. The mural, which depicted the arrival of the allied bombers, the destruction of the city and the fruits of reconstruction, would doubtless not have been created in that form nowadays: the emphasis in the images on the civilian innocence of the victims of the air raids reflected perfectly the tendency of that era to focus on German suffering in the war but not on German responsibility for it - one might even go further, and suggest that the defenselessness of the civilians depicted in the mural contained echoes of the Nazis' own language of "terror raids", and thus indicates the presence of residual Nazi mentalities in German society into the 1950s. The placing of the mural on the Platz der Opfer des Faschismus was meanwhile, an incredible provocation in itself - evidence of the unwillingness of many to accept the obli-

gation to acknowledge and commemorate the victims of Nazi racism and political violence without contradiction, contestation or relativisation. For all these reasons, the mural would jar with our contemporary sensibilities concerning Nazism and the Holocaust.



... but rebuilt their country and houses since 1945

(Photo: Susanne Rieger)

And yet the mural was, in its own way, a profoundly significant and telling historical document, one which bore wonderful witness to the mentalities of the early postwar years, and which testified powerfully to the incredible difficulties ordinary Germans faced in the postwar era in trying to comprehend what had happened to them and to others. Its presence was a reminder that the process of “coming to terms with the past” in this city always involved more than simply reflecting on the triad of themes embodied in the mantra “Nuremberg Rallies - Nuremberg Laws - Nuremberg Trials”, but embraced instead the often much harder problem of trying to make sense of the multitude of appalling experiences of extreme, massive violence which Nazism and the war brought with them. Its presence was also a reminder that such experiences and their legacies cannot be confined to museums, but are - still - etched onto the urban landscape and part of the fabric of the city and its rich culture. My great hope would be that this unfortunate - and sadly irreversible - act of vandalism encourages people to ponder the presence in Nuremberg of the many other highly significant - perhaps unique - cultural objects which may similarly languish unnoticed and be in threat of inadvertent destruction, and to embrace them as an integral part of the stimulating and historically fascinating heritage of the city.

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