

ZBIGNIEW MAZUR

Poznań

### NEUE WACHE (1818-1993)

Since 1993 in the Federal Republic of Germany the Berlin Neue Wache has served as a central memorial commemorating the victims of war and tyranny, that is to say it represents in a synthetic gist the binding German canon of collective memory in the most sensitive area concerning the infamous history of the Third Reich. The interior decor of Neue Wache, the sculpture placed inside and the commemorative plaques speak a lot about the official historical policy of the German government. Also the symbolism of the place itself is of significance, and a plaque positioned to the left of the entrance contains information about its history. Indeed, the history of Neue Wache was extraordinary, starting as a utility building, though equipped with readable symbolic features, and ending up as a place for a national memorial which has been redesigned three times. Consequently, the process itself created a symbolic palimpsest with some layers completely obliterated and others remaining visible to the eye, and with new layers added which still retain a scent of freshness. The first layer is very strongly connected with the victorious war of “liberation” against Napoleonic France, which played the role of a myth that laid the foundations for the great power of Prussia and then of the later German Empire. The second layer was a reflection of the glorifying worship of the fallen soldiers which developed after World War I in European countries and also in Germany. The third one was an expression of the historical policy of the communist-run German Democratic Republic which emphasized the victims of class struggle with “militarism” and “fascism”. And then there is the latest layer which is the result of a lengthy debate in the Federal Republic of Germany concerning the central memorial place to the German victims of World War II.

\*

The war with Napoleonic France was the first modern war to have been commemorated in Germany, and primarily in Prussia, on a mass scale not encountered before. Especially the victorious Battle of Leipzig (18 October 1813) was granted the halo of a great triumph. A year after the “Battle of the Nations” Napoleon’s defeat was celebrated with bell ringing, parades, performances and with bonfires lit in celebration of the victory. For several years the gymnastics association formed by

Friedrich Jahn would organize pilgrimages for the youth to the battlefields. A great demonstration was organized on 18 October 1817 in Wartburg to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig, and of the famous 95 theses announced by Martin Luther in Wittenberg (30 October 1517). The celebration of the fight against Rome and Paris was conducted mainly under the slogan of “liberation”, but also of “liberty” which was demanded by the national-liberal forces which were still in their infancy. The Wartburg demonstration was organized by the people and it soon developed into a protest against the foundations of the feudal system. “Liberty” then meant freedom from the restrictions of a class society, equality in the eyes of law, freedom of thought, the possibility of creating unions and of public gatherings, and also the right to create a national representation with minor and major rights. It is hardly surprising that the demonstration in Wartburg with incidents of burning books, including the Napoleonic Code was not received with enthusiasm not only by the Prussian authorities. The Concert of Europe established eventually in 1815 was supposed not only to safeguard the balance among the international powers but it was also meant to guard the internal order in European countries. There were equal fears of both, a new Napoleon and a new Robespierre. The Prussian monarchy approved of celebrating “liberation” but not “liberty”.

In the official Prussian commemorative policy the merits of the ruling dynasty were glorified first of all. Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed *via Triumphalis* stretching from the Brandenburg Gate to the Royal Castle which was to serve for the glory of the dynasty during impressive military parades. The Brandenburg Gate (1789-1791) acquired a new role. It was erected as an ordinary functional construction equipped with a typically monarchist ideological scheme. It divided the city from its peripheries along the line of the city walls marking the tariff boundary. It thus distinguished the representative part of the city without cutting out the view onto the nice space around the exit route. The Gate was designed by distinguished artists, Carl Gotthard Langhans (the entire structure) and Johann Gottfried Schadow (Quadriga with Victoria, 1793). The design was based on the Greek propylaea (gate, columns, uneven number of passageways) although the Quadriga on top of the gate rushing towards the city was taken from Roman tradition. The Quadriga gained additional symbolic importance after 1806 when it was taken down on Napoleon’s orders and sent to France. In 1814 it was brought back with celebrations to its place in Berlin. Its triumphant return gave the Brandenburg Gate a new role of a memorial commemorating the victory over the French, more so that it was topped with the Iron Cross, the Prussian eagle and a wreath of oak leaves symbolizing power, glory and bravery. Peter Reichel rightly noticed that the symbolism was internally not very coherent: “a crowned eagle as a symbol of monarchy, an Iron Cross as a bourgeois-egalitarian feature and an oak wreath referring to the German-Germanic nation”<sup>1</sup>. However, it

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Reichel, *Schwarz-Rot-Gold. Kleine Geschichte deutscher Nationalsymbole nach 1945*, München 2005, p. 102.

was precisely these contradictions which reflected very well the changes occurring in the Prussian ideological programmes of commemoration.

A combination of elements pertaining to the monarchist tradition with elements of the national programme can be seen in the monument designed by Schinkel and unveiled in 1821 at Tempelhofer Berg (later Kreuzberg). The idea for the monument was conceived by Christian Rauch with the thought of commemorating the fallen soldiers in the war with France. Friedrich Wilhelm III approved of the idea itself but he imposed on it the message of a monarchist artwork. The inscription it carried said that it was dedicated by the king to the nation, the people, who on his command sacrificed their blood and wealth for their homeland („Der König dem Volke, das auf seinen Ruf hochherzig Gut und Blut dem Vaterland darbrachte, den Gefallenen zum Gedächtnis, den Lebenden zur Anerkennung, den künftigen Geschlechtern zur Nacheiferung“). In the twelve niches statues of members of the Prussian and Russian dynasty and distinguished generals were placed but a distinct symbolic reference to the nation was missing. Thus, it was not in its pure form a monument of the “nation”, and more so not of “liberty”. Nevertheless, the inscription maintained in the tone of a monarchist message to the faithful subjects spoke of blood that was shed for the “homeland”. Although it did not meet the expectations of the liberals who dreamt about constitution and national unification, in comparison with the earlier commemorative practices it was still a small step forward. The national accent can be detected in the monument being styled as a Gothic tower, since Gothic was then considered the style that was utmost German, and able to express the spirit of the German nation in the best and fullest way. Making references to Gothic was synonymous with referring to the deepest Germanic heritage.

The second outstanding work by Schinkel, *Neue Wache*, that is the New Guard House, was also created in the air of triumph after Napoleon’s defeat<sup>2</sup>. It was designed not as a monument but as a strictly functional building to be used as a guardhouse for the royal guard regiment, as the name indicated. The king Friedrich Wilhelm III resided not in the castle but in the Palace of the Crown Prince (Kronprinzipalais), at Unter den Linden. The Guard House was erected between 1816-1818 more or less opposite the palace, and until today is located between the armouries (Zeughaus), the present seat of the German Historical Museum and the university complex, which for years was named Friedrich Wilhelm Universität, and in 1948 renamed as Humboldt Universität. The New Guard House was unable and unwilling to compete with the nearby monumental buildings. In its conception it was supposed to be a building relatively modest in size but still in architectural harmony with the armoury, the university and the Palace of the Crown Prince. Initially, Schinkel planned to have three Renaissance style open arcades in the front. He also thought about having the two stylized side towers topped by a crenelage. Eventually, he resorted to the classical

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Tietz, *Schinkels Neue Wache Unter den Linden. Baugeschichte 1816-1993*, in: Ch. Stölzl (hg.), *Die Neue Wache Unter den Linden. Ein deutsches Denkmal im Wandel der Geschichte*, Berlin 1993, p. 9-94.

design and decorated the front with a portico of Doric columns. The entablature of the portico shows ten scenes of the goddess of victory, the winged Victoria, sculpted by Gottfried Schadow. In the tympanum Schinkel designed a relief, which caused some reservations from Friedrich Wilhelm III, and it was completed as late as 1846 at the order of Friedrich Wilhelm IV. It shows Victoria controlling a battle and deciding about the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. The winners are triumphant but full of grief at the death of the fallen heroes; the defeated are in distress after having lost and having abandoned the battlefield, their families are suffering after the loss of their nearest.

Although the reliefs on the fronton of Neue Wache only symbolically referred to the war of “liberation” and the Prussian victory over Napoleonic France, the symbolism and especially the multiple statuary of Victoria were then clear and readable to everybody. Schinkel however, also planned something in the form of the materialization of the symbolism by having two statues of Prussian generals placed on both frontal sides of Neue Wache adjacent to Unter den Linden. In 1822 Neue Wache was flanked with the slightly protruding statues of generals, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, who gained fame as a reformer of the Prussian army, and Friedrich Wilhelm von Bülow. Both statues were designed by Christian Daniel Rauch and they were both a monarchist “offering”. The inscription on both monuments maintained the same tone, “Friedrich Wilhelm III dem gen. von Scharnhorst im Jahre 1822”. The reliefs were again motifs of Victoria with other classical features. A bit later in 1826 a statue of the field marshal Gebhard Blücher was added with a broadsword in his hand, and incredibly richly embellished in reliefs with classical and realistic motifs referring to the events of the period. Almost thirty years later (1855) two additional statues of generals, August Neithardt Gneisenau and Ludwig von Wartenburg Yorck were added on both sides of the statue of Blücher. They were all generals or field marshals who had contributed to the victory over Napoleonic France. Their statues constituted an inseparable part of the place broadly understood as Neue Wache. When talking about Neue Wache it should be kept in mind that it is not only the guard house itself which has a functional purpose but it is a larger symbolic facility strongly connected with the myth of the war of “liberation”.

Since Neue Wache was a military construction it is difficult to expect that it should be surrounded by statues of writers and philosophers. The figures of Prussian generals and field marshals famed during the war against Napoleon’s army, by themselves did add to the facility an aura of a commemorative place with very defined meaning connected with the triumphs of the Prussian army. This was additionally signified by the French cannons from the war of “liberation” positioned nearby, and later supplemented by the French cannons captured after the great victory of Prussia over France (1870). This continuity in the choice of “attributes” placed around Neue Wache was not incidental and carried a clearly anti-French message. This had a strong impact on the place itself, although it did not undergo any changes as such and remained a functional building. Until the fall of the German Empire (1918) it

served as the house for the regiment guarding the vast area around the Royal Castle. The building also served as a temporary prison. In 1900 a military telegraph exchange was located in the guard house. The interior as well as the exterior remained mostly unchanged. Still however, Neue Wache was used as an important place of state celebrations of a military nature. In front of the building magnificent military parades would take place and they were generally very popular among the Berliners. The ceremonial changing of the guard would always attract a crowd of spectators, and the chestnut tree park which surrounded the building on three sides was a popular place to relax. Although it is true that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the new commemorative era moved Neue Wache into the background, it did not take away its symbolic character. The work of Schinkel found itself very well in the company of the new generation of monuments.

\*\*\*

On 3 August 1924 that is on the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I president Friedrich Ebert and chancellor Joseph Wirth suggested that a memorial should be built in which the Reich would commemorate the fallen soldiers, though they did not specify where it should be located. The suggestion caused debates as to where in the Reich it should be located, including whether it should be placed in the city or far away from the city hustle and close to nature. It was also debated whether the memorial could be of a functional nature, or whether it should be only of a symbolic nature adapted to ceremonial events. Among other things it was considered how the area around the memorial should look to be appropriate for military parades and national demonstrations. It was then that attention was turned towards Neue Wache, which after the collapse of the empire and the proclamation of a republic (9 November 1918) stood empty while still retaining together with its surroundings untouched symbolic qualities. The future of the building was uncertain; it was undecided whether it should become a cafe, or whether it should be used as bank premises, or something else. In 1924 Frida Schmottmüller came up with a proposal of converting Neue Wache into a war memorial. Her suggestion to clear the interior, place a sarcophagus inside surrounded by a group of figures mourning the dead soldiers would give the place an air of a graveyard chapel. The veteran unions protested against the proposal demanding a national memorial placed in open space, close to nature and far from the busy Unter den Linden. President Paul von Hindenburg reminded that the memorial to the fallen needed to glorify the heroic deeds of soldiers.

Since however, it was impossible to reach agreement as to a common German memorial, the Prussian prime minister Otto Braun (SPD) made a decision in the spring of 1929 to redesign Neue Wache as a Prussian war memorial. In October 1929 Volksbund Kriegsgräberfürsorge organised in Neue Wache a small exhibition depicting the ten years of the organisation's activity, which was a gentle herald of having the building converted into a war memorial. It was of course clear that a Prussian memorial situated in the centre of Berlin would soon become a memorial of central

significance. As a result the Reich's governments joined the Prussian initiative and in 1930 a competition was announced for the conversion and adaptation of Neue Wache as a memorial to the fallen soldiers. Indeed outstanding artists entered the competition including Peter Behrens, Erich Blunck, Hans Grube, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Hanz Poelzig and Heinrich Tessenow. Finally, the design which was accepted was by Heinrich Tessenow (1876-1950), who since 1926 had been teaching in Technische Hochschule in Charlottenburg (Berlin). The interesting thing was that his classes attracted students with national-socialist orientation whereas the left-wing students attended seminars by Hans Poelzig. One of Tessenow's students was Albert Speer, later on Hitler's architect and dignitary who in his memoirs underlined his master's hostile attitude towards the Nazi movement but he nevertheless drew attention to the parallels between his teaching and Nazi ideology. Tessenow believed that architectural style grows out of the nation's spirit and that there is no such thing as culture outside nations. Also the dreams about a great leader were not unknown to him, a leader who would not be corrupted but able to communicate simple ideals to a confused society<sup>3</sup>. His designs were dictated by his dislike of modernism and eclecticism and he preferred simple and austere forms. It was in such a style that he planned the conversion of Neue Wache while drawing his general inspiration from the ideas voiced by Erika Schottmüller.

The exterior of Neue Wache did not require a specific conversion and neither did the nearest surroundings. In architectural terms the neoclassical style was rather in line with the then abiding taste which remained very critical towards pompous and the overloaded embellishments of the Wilhelmian Baroque. The style of a national memorial patterned on monuments of that period was totally unfit for application in the Weimar Republic whereas the new designs were a subject of heated disputes which made reaching any consensus practically impossible. In that situation the simplest solution was to accept an already existing facility which is not controversial, and which additionally enjoys the esteem of the outstanding work of Schinkel. The place had another great quality. Namely, it reminded about the changeability of the Prussian fate, first marked by a humiliating defeat in the war against Napoleon (1806), and later by a great reformatory movement crowned with the victorious war of "liberation" (1813-1814) which was the cornerstone of Prussian power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was possible to notice in this an analogy to the situation of Germany after World War I. The Weimar Republic was convinced about the great wrongdoing it suffered from the victorious powers which imposed the "Versailles dictate" upon the defeated Germany. All the political parties from the Left to the Right rejected the peace treaty and dreamt about getting rid of the burden it laid. The Prussian past as testified by Neue Wache advised that one should not lose hope for reciprocation and restoration of German power<sup>4</sup>. The symbolic appeal of Neue Wache could be easily updated and this in itself was not insignificant.

---

<sup>3</sup> A. Speer, *Erinnerungen*, Frankfurt a. M., Berlin (West), 1969, p.31-32.

<sup>4</sup> J. Tietz, *op.cit.*, p. 23-25.

Tessenow entirely converted only the interior of the building and the exterior remained more or less unchanged. The side towers were topped with bowls in which fires were lit during special events; the windows were sealed, the entrance from the colonnade was altered with the Iron Cross positioned over the middle passageway. Initially, Tessenow wanted to permanently seal this entrance with bars which could possibly be opened only on special occasions while on other days it would remain closed protecting the interior from crowds of visitors. However, the solution was rightly considered impractical and the interior was made available to the public. The interior was cleared so that a large empty space was created. There was also a proposal to convert the building into an atrium but it was later on rejected. Instead a large oculus was made in the ceiling which acted as a skylight in the day and at night dark sky could be seen from inside. A block of black Swedish granite was placed inside the empty space. It was initially stylized as a sarcophagus, and later on as an altar, rectangular in shape and two metres high it was lit by the circular skylight from the oculus. If at all, it resembled a cenotaph rather than a classic tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A large wreath made of 235 silver-coated oak leaves symbolising victory (work by Ludwig Gies) was placed atop the block and by making reference to the Prussian tradition it symbolized victory. A bronze plaque was placed in front of the block with the simple inscription "1914-1918". Two massive but slender looking candelabra flanked the block. There was an air of simplicity and restraint in everything. The conversion by Tessenow was generally received with positive assessment, and the high artistic qualities were especially underlined. Yet, the significance of the entire place could evoke some doubts whether the artist did not too much succumb to the temptation to glorify the act of war at the service of the imperialist policy of the Wilhelmine Germany.

The monument functioned under the name of "The Memorial to the Fallen of the World War" (Gedächtnisstätte für die Gefallenen des Weltkrieges). The celebration of the rededication took place on 2 June 1931 in a quiet religious atmosphere. The participants did not include representatives of Stahlhelm, the aggressive right-wing veteran organisation but it gathered representatives of the social-democratic Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold and the Jewish veteran union, Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten. President Hindenburg was present at the event. The speeches delivered during the event spoke of the need for national unity, which however was practically unattainable in the Weimar Republic. Neue Wache converted into a memorial could not help much in this respect though it tried to reconcile various traditions and even different tastes. This is how Peter Reichel evaluated the situation, "One more time in the course of public commemoration of the fallen an inborn but with far-reaching consequences fault of the Weimar Republic was revealed. On the one hand, it had to consign to oblivion the empire which was authoritarian on the inside and aggressive on the outside, while on the other hand, it tried to sustain social continuity and obtain authorization and reconciliation through commemorating the war dead. Yet, precisely this did not succeed, it could not have succeeded. The society of the Weimar Republic was in deep argument over the past history, the blame for the war,

over the consequences of the war and the revolution. Republican forces made a lot of effort to symbolically honour the German fallen soldiers but in the dominant at the time belief the soldiers who died in the world war gave their lives for the homeland, the emperor but not for the republic”<sup>5</sup>.

The Weimar Republic did not manage to solve the problem of worship of the fallen soldiers, which because of the vast war damage constituted a living ingredient of collective memory skilfully used by the nationalist Right. Not completely without reason though, Wolfgang Kruse engaged in polemics with the sharply formulated accusation towards the Weimar elites that they were unable to cope with the war memory and passed the reverence of the dead into the hands of the right-wing parties. He admitted that the overpowering nationalist trend to create a mythology of war and glorify heroic death was not halted but he pointed to the incredibly complicated interrelatedness of the German memory of World War I, the lost war remembered in the context of heated arguments about the German blame for starting the war, and the responsibility for the defeat suffered by the empire. Soldiers fought and died on the frontline but also during the revolution, which after all started with the mutiny of the Cologne sailors. Kruse emphasized that the example of Neue Wache showed that efforts were made to honour the dead soldiers in an integrative manner and not to polarize that is to refer to death, suffering, and the valour of soldiers. However, the problem was that this had to logically lead to the entanglement in the acceptance of the war policy of the empire. “This form of commemoration was unable to integrate either the radical Left or the radical Right with the reservation that it did open widely towards the Right. It was incapable of making a symbolic breakthrough between the militarist monarchy and peaceful republic, and it made a close connection with the nationalist reverence of the fallen soldiers, its topoi and symbols, which eventually won in the fight for cultural hegemony”<sup>6</sup>. In fact the Weimar Republic faced a task which was unsolvable: how to reconcile the remembrance of the individual fallen soldiers with remembering about the very doubtful cause they gave their life for. This turned out to be even more difficult after World War II.

\*\*\*

Neue Wache did not cause major objections from the Nazis. In 1933 after Hitler came to power the interior was slightly changed but generally Tessenow’s design remained unspoiled and untouched. The only change included a large oak cross placed in the back behind the block-altar. Its shape was similar to the cross inside the monument in Tannenberg (1927) as well as to the one next to the statue of Leo Schlageter (1931). This was a salute for the churches aimed at stressing the special symbiosis between Christianity and the German nation. Additionally, two large oak wreaths were fastened on the frontal walls of the towers. However, Neue Wache as

---

<sup>5</sup> P. Reichel, *op.cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> W. Kruse, *Schinkels Neue Wache in Berlin. Zur Geschichte des modernen politischen Totenkultes in Deutschland*, „Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft“, 2002, No. 5, p. 423

a whole was very much rededicated. Until then it had functioned as a commemorative place (Gedächtnisstätte), after 1933 it became a Memorial in Honour of the Fallen (Ehrendenkmal), and later after 1936 as a Memorial in Honour of the Fallen in World War (Ehrendenkmal für die Gefallenen des Weltkrieges). That is to say it was not a place of grieving after the dead but a place of hero worship. During the Weimar period the memorial was guarded by two plain clothes policemen and there were no military parades staged around it. In March 1933 soldiers appeared in front of Neue Wache. Since 1935 a ceremonial change of the guard again became an attraction. During national holidays military parades were again staged in front of Neue Wache. On the Heroes' Memorial Day (Heldengedenktage) a military parade would be organized and wreaths were laid on the granite block inside. Regularly on that day Hitler used to lay a wreath there. During World War II coffins with fallen generals would lie in state inside Neue Wache before the funeral ceremony.

Altogether, it turned out that Neue Wache did not require any special adaptation in the Nazi era and it could very well serve during celebrations organized by the new regime. The rededication of the memorial for a place of hero worship was done not by changes to the interior or its symbolism but due to the events organized by the Nazis both inside and outside the building.

\*\*\*

As a result of the bombing by the allied forces the building of Neue Wache was quite badly damaged, especially its ceiling and the right side of the façade but it was still fit for restoration. The interior was in a pitiful condition. The altar plinth in the middle was misshapen and the oak wreath laid upon it was stolen in 1948; it was later, in 1960 recovered in pieces in West Berlin. For some time Neue Wache was endangered by the prospect of sharing the fate of the Royal Castle and being completely demolished. In 1949 young activists from the Berlin organisation, FDJ (a youth faction of SED) demanded that the building permeated with the Prussian "military spirit" should be destroyed. However, due to some influential defenders who as arguments used its architectural qualities Neue Wache was spared. Still, the problem of what to do with the building and how to utilize it remained. Tessenow suggested that the guard house should be left as a permanent ruin warning against war atrocities saying, "If I could decide I would not give any other form to the building. Damaged as it now is, it speaks about history. Just clean it and polish it a bit and leave it standing"<sup>7</sup>. There were suggestions to use the building as a museum of Schinkel, university bookshop or a commemorative place to Goethe. For a few years it did look as if Neue Wache would gradually become an eternal ruin. Until the mid fifties the building was falling into ruin with its frontal part collapsing. Finally, an idea emerged to use the building for the same purposes as in the interwar period, obviously with some significant changes in the message communicated by the entire

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 425-426.

place. The restoration work was carried out between 1957-1960 as commissioned by the GDR authorities. The interior was restored to its design by Tessenow and with the renovation work completed Neue Wache was unveiled on 8 May 1960 as a central Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism.

The Memorial in Admonition to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism (Mahnmal für die Opfer des Faschismus und Militarismus) was completed in two stages. The first stage focused on renovation work and restoring order to the building. The misshapen granite block was left inside and the cross on the back wall was replaced with a grand inscription: To the Victims of Fascism and Militarism (Den Opfern des Faschismus und Militarismus). Earlier on the statues of the Prussian generals and field marshals had been removed. In the second stage more substantial alterations in the socialist spirit (design by Lothar Kwasnitz) were introduced. The mosaic floor by Tessenow disappeared as well as the granite block, replaced by a glass hexahedron with an eternal flame lit inside. The oculus was covered with a glass dome since below it the eternal flame was lit. The inscription on the back wall was moved to the side wall and the emblem of the GDR (a hammer and a compass surrounded by a ring of rye: a symbol of the union between workers-farmers-and intelligentsia) was fitted on the back wall. In 1969 the soil from nine battlefields and nine concentration camps was brought to Neue Wache, and two urns were brought with the ashes of the unknown soldier and unknown concentration camp prisoner. Two separate plaques carried inscriptions: "Unknown Fighter of the Resistance" (Unbekannter Widerstandskämpfer) and "Unknown Soldier" (Unbekannter Soldat). This was a very significant change since in 1969 Neue Wache assumed a character similar to the traditional tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This was additionally emphasized by the permanent guard (from 1 May 1962 to 2 October 1990) kept by soldiers from a special regiment called "Friedrich Engels". Berliners and tourists were attracted by the colourful ceremony of the change of the guard as well as by the parade organized on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, on the anniversary of the "liberation of the German nation from fascism" (8 May 1945 when the Third Reich surrendered).

Neue Wache became the first central memorial commemorating in an all-inclusive manner the specifically perceived German victims of World War II. The memorial made no reference to non-German victims; it had the character of a typical tomb of the Unknown Soldier with the difference being that it also commemorated the "resistance fighter". It was an incredibly brave idea to honour the soldier of the system and the prisoner of the system under the same roof. The "unknown soldier" of Hitler's army was reduced to the role of a victim used by the regime, possibly lured by Nazi ideology. It was difficult to assume that he was killed in glorious action. Thus, a question would arise, 'what kind of the soldier's action was honoured?' Conquering Europe? Additionally, the ashes of the unknown soldier were laid next to the ashes of a concentration camp prisoner, who was in a very narrow way defined as a "resistance fighter". The concentration camp prisoner was promoted to the rank of an anti-fascist fighter (sacrificium), and a regular German soldier was reduced to the role of a victim of the Nazi regime (victima?). In a way then the prisoner and the

soldier were supposed to be united by the fraternity of fate since they were jointly commemorated. This was pure absurd. Despite the solemnity of the place there was something of a surreal grotesque in it all. Ironically it was brought to attention that in fact the soldier could have killed the resistance fighter and the fighter could have fought against the soldier, as the policy of mass extermination would have been unthinkable without Hitler's army. W. Kruse wrote about the east German interior design on Neue Wache in the following way, "In fact the problematic relations between two groups of 'victims', the soldier could have been the murderer of the resistance movement fighter, were not topicalized and neither were the crimes and suffering brought upon European nations by German soldiers"<sup>8</sup>.

In the East German edition Neue Wache not only mixed and homogenized extremely different categories of human losses suffered by the Germans in World War II but, in reality it additionally victimized in a summative manner a sizable part of the German nation, which apparently had fallen victim to the imposed from outside fascist regime. This was in fact the cornerstone of the entire GDR conception of "liberation" of the German nation in 1945. The German soldier and the German prisoner-fighter were shown as victims of the anonymous impersonal "fascism" and "militarism". Yet, the remains of the unknown Wehrmacht soldier were brought from Görlitz, where after all he did not fight either with "militarism" or with "fascism" but with the Red Army. The remains of the concentration camp prisoner were taken from the area of Buchenwald, a German camp which cannot be hidden under the word "fascism" and "militarism". In brief, the evil forces were pushed out in the sphere of "fascism" and "militarism", which occurred both in the past (the Third Reich) and in the present (West Germany). It was all done in an undefined and unexplained abstract manner and therefore by itself more dangerous and threatening. Searching for any traces of an honest attempt to face up to the nation's past would be in vain. However, it would be difficult to deny that in political terms the decision to rededicate Neue Wache as a tomb of the "Unknown Soldier" and "Resistance Fighter" was an exceptionally skilful move. What is more, although the place was marked by the Prussian traditions, politically they were not as touchy as it reminded about the war of "liberation" waged arm in arm with tsarist Russia. The building was finely located on the axis leading to the border crossing at the Brandenburg Gate and it had no equivalent either in West Berlin or in the whole of West Germany.

It was much more difficult to create an analogous commemorative place in the Federal Republic of Germany. While East Germany had the readymade Neue Wache, which only required some adaptation to fit the political needs, in West Germany there was no readymade facility that could be appropriate to be adapted in a similar style. The preserved ruin of the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche in West Berlin was of a special character and could not function as a nation's central commemorative place. There was no adequate facility in Bonn, which anyway was a city treated

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 429.

for many years as a makeshift capital. It was only in 1961, after the Berlin wall was erected and the hope for a relatively soon unification died down that plans were made to convert Bonn into a city that would meet all the requirements for a modern seat of the state authorities. It was also not incidental that in the 1960s voices were raised that there should be a memorial built in Bonn to honour the fallen soldiers in World War II. Some pressure was exerted by the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge as well as by the war veterans organisations. The federal authorities were also interested at least because they needed a place that would be appropriately designed so that delegations of foreign guests could lay wreaths and do their honours. This was something more than the question of protocol as it could symbolically improve the status of the Federal Republic in the international arena. Politicians while visiting Paris or London would lay wreaths at the tombs of the Unknown Soldier enshrouded in historical tradition whereas there was no such place in Bonn and the Federal Republic wanted to be treated like any other country. However, the problem was that German history was quite specific and erecting a memorial of the Unknown Soldier of Hitler's army would be an odd creation. Who, apart from the Germans themselves, would like to lay a wreath there?

In 1964 a grand bronze plaque was installed in the centre of Bonn (Hofgarten), nearby the university right in front of the Kunstmuseum, on the border between the old part of the city and the newly emerging government quarter. The inscription said, "To the victims of war and tyranny" (Den Opfern der Kriege und Gewaltherrschaft). On 16 June 1964 during the unveiling ceremony president Heinrich Lübke (CDU) laid a wreath with a sash saying, "Gedenken an die Opfer des Volksaufstandes am 17. Juni 1953". It would be difficult to find a more straightforward definition of what the Germans understood under the term "victims of tyranny". However, Hofgarten in the years of the revolt of the youth was constantly a place of demonstrations and it was not fit for protocol ceremonies. Consequently, in 1980 president Karl Carstens (CDU) had the plaque moved to the cemetery in the northern part of the city (Nordfriedhof) where truly better conditions were created for wreath laying ceremonies. It was a war cemetery. In 1933 a tall cross was erected to commemorate the fallen in World War I. Altogether 2,186 people had been buried there including the fallen in both world wars (17 soldiers of the Waffen-SS) and civilians (also 96 forced labourers). It was the place where since the 1950s wreaths were laid on the National Day of Mourning (Volkstrauertag). The plaque was installed on a plinth at some distance from the cross which gave enough room for official ceremonies but the whole place looked rather modest. In 1977 plans to erect a memorial to the fallen in both wars which would be located in a more representative place than the Bonn cemetery revived yet again. In 1981 the idea received support from chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) who suggested that not only the fallen soldiers should be commemorated but also German people murdered in concentration camps or killed during air raids<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> B. Schulz, *Kein Konsens im Land der Menschlichkeit. Zur Vorgeschichte einer Gedenkstätte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, w: Ch. Stölzl (hg.), op.cit., p. 176-177.

In 1982 the President of the Bundestag, Richard Stücklen submitted the conception of a memorial and admonition to commemorate millions of German soldiers buried in unknown places in the east or elsewhere. On 8 May 1983 Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge submitted a memorandum which demanded that “a national memorial should be erected to commemorate the fallen of the German nation” (soldiers killed and those who died from wounds, those who died in prisoner-of-war camps, people killed during flight and “expulsion”, German victims of the Nazi aggression). The memorial was to be dedicated exclusively to the German victims, and also those of Jewish origin. Volksbund’s suggestion that a crown of thorns should be a part of the memorial was rejected by the Jewish community who were hostile towards Christian symbols. Finally, by the end of 1983 it was decided that the government would erect a joint memorial to all German victims of war and dictatorship<sup>10</sup>. Still the Right demanded a memorial for the fallen soldiers, while the Jews, Sinti and Roma did not want a shared memorial with German soldiers. Temporarily the whole idea collapsed only to be revived in 1985 during the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the Third Reich’s capitulation. Volksbund again demanded a memorial and received full support from chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU), who was dreaming about a beautiful place suitable for the wreath laying ceremonies during visits paid by foreign presidents and prime ministers. On 26 March 1985 the federal government made a decision to create a House of the History of the Federal Republic (Bonn), German Historical Museum (Berlin) and a war memorial to the fallen in the government quarter of Bonn.

The issue of the memorial was moved to the Bundestag. On 21 November 1985 the parliamentary faction SPD came with an initiative that the Bundestag should open a big public debate concerning the admonition memorial in Bonn and the construction of the Commemorative House (Denkhaus) showing terror and violation of human rights. At the same time SPD called for a broad action of commemorating all the places of the Nazi crimes in the entire republic<sup>11</sup>. Shortly after on 11 December 1985 the faction Die Grünen submitted a motion including a protest against the memorial for the fallen being built. The motion read that the Federal Republic does not need a National Admonition Memorial on the Rhine and that foreign guests can lay wreaths as they had done so far at the Bonn cemetery. “The foreign state guests, who wish to honour the fallen soldiers in Bonn by laying a wreath or other gesture will show understanding, in the manner they have done in the past 36 years, for the fact that in the Federal Republic an attempt to erect a national admonition memorial has to clash with the unsolvable problem, namely the danger of equating in death the perpetrators and the victims of the national-socialist crimes against humanity”<sup>12</sup>. In

---

<sup>10</sup> W. Kruse, *op.cit.*, p.431; B. Schulz, *op.cit.*, p. 177-178.

<sup>11</sup> Antrag der Fraktion der SPD. Geplantes Mahnmal in Bonn. Deutscher Bundestag. 10. Wahlperiode. Drucksache 10/4293. 21.11.85.

<sup>12</sup> Antrag der Fraktion Die Grünen. Geplante zentrale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte im Regierungsviertel in Bonn. Deutscher Bundestag. 10. Wahlperiode. Drucksache 10/4521, 11.12.85.

response on 4 February 1986 the factions CDU/CSU and FDP submitted a motion in which they supported the government's initiative to create a new commemorative place in the capital. The motion said that Nordfriedhof does not fulfil the function of a central commemorative place, while such a place is needed in every nation because it "gives the opportunity to the representatives of foreign countries to show reverence for the fallen of the guest country"<sup>13</sup>. The memorial should be erected, as suggested by the government, in Gronau close to the centre of Bonn, in the parliamentary and government quarter of the city. On 25 April 1986 a two-hour debate on the memorial took place in the Bundestag which ended up with postponing the whole issue until sometime in the future<sup>14</sup>.

The Christian Democrat faction in their motion unanimously demanded that a central commemorative place should be created and dedicated "to the victims of war and tyranny, especially to the fallen of our nation". The Minister for Construction, Oscar Schneider representing the government in the debate stressed, "We can no longer linger with erecting a memorial to the fallen of our nation, the victims of war and dictatorship in our federal capital". Alfred Dregger (CDU) with great engagement defended the rights of Germans to commemorate their victims. He replied to the dilemmas as to who was a victim and who was the perpetrator with a straightforward answer saying that the entire nation was the victim.

"Let us test it against the horrendous balance of the losses suffered by our nation since 1914; since then 300,000 Germans died due to racial, religious and political persecutions; 500,000 Germans died as victims of war air raids against civilians; 2.2 million German people died as victims of flight and expulsion; 2 million German soldiers died during World War I; 3.1 million German soldiers died in World War II, and besides that 1.2 million German soldiers were pronounced missing. This mounts up to almost 10 million members of our nation who since 1914 had been by force deprived of life. As we know there is no family in our nation which has not lost some family members in one way or another. So I ask you, Who would want to take on the role of a judge of the dead who are silent and cannot defend themselves? Who will dare to divide them into the categories of victims and perpetrators? At least I, myself am not ready to do it. I do not exclude anybody from nearly 10 million people. I hold them all without exception in my prayers. I want to be only their defender and advocate while at the same time being an advocate of the martyred and decimated nation they came from".

Dregger demanded the commemoration of "the especially close" victims, that is Germans while at the same time fighting down the idea put forward by president Richard von Weizsäcker in his speech delivered on 8 May 1985 on the occasion of the anniversary of the capitulation of the Third Reich, in which a suggestion was made that the inscription on the memorial should take into account a catalogue of German and non-German victims. Dregger clearly demanded to honour the German

---

<sup>13</sup> Antrag der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU und FDP. Zentrale Gedenkstätte in der Bundeshauptstadt. Deutscher Bundestag. 10. Wahlperiode. Drucksache 10/4998, 4 2. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Deutscher Bundestag. 10. Wahlperiode. 214 Sitzung. Bonn Freitag den 25. April 1986, p. 16460-16477.

soldiers fallen on the frontlines of World War I and II, German prisoners murdered in concentration camps, Germans killed during their flight and “expulsion” and during the allied air raids. He strongly emphasized that all Germans had to be included without dividing the dead into “the right and the wrong ones”. He in particular defended commemorating the soldiers of Hitler’s Wehrmacht, who although had been used by the regime but they still deserved gratitude for having done their duty in an exemplary manner and for bravery on the battlefield (“Die Tatsache, daß unsere Soldaten von einem Unrechtsregime in einem sinnlosen Krieg mißbraucht worden sind, mindert nicht unsere Dankbarkeit für ihr Pflichtgefühl und ihre Tapferkeit”). He underlined several times that in death they are all equal and that they can only stand before God’s tribunal (“Im Tode sind wir alle gleich, und unsere Seelen – das glauben Christen, Moslems und Juden – sind in der Gerechtigkeit Gottes, die die unsere bei weitem übersteigt“). Although Dregger was known for his nationalist views, the fact that such words were spoken in the Bundestag forty years after WWII, must anyway call for reflection. One has the right to surmise that he was not at all in his own in such views. The image he presented was ghastly: brave soldiers in Hitler’s army, poor German civilians touched by war, the most wronged nation in European history. In death everybody is indeed equal at the moment of burial but death does not equate in terms of what has been before it (and in what name life was given) and what will happen afterwards (the place and the manner of commemoration). It seemed that Dregger had not decided as yet to take off his uniform of a Wehrmacht officer.

The Social Democrats in their motion drew attention to the fact that when commemorating the fallen one has to take into account both “the causes and consequences of World War II”, “political responsibility” and “moral guilt”. They rejected the idea of a “national memorial to the fallen” that is they did not agree to have a memorial which would obliterate the responsibility and the blame as well as being limited to the German victims and the German fallen. Horst Ehmke noticed that the Nazi past still had not been sufficiently accounted for and that erecting a “normal” memorial for German soldiers would mean relativizing crimes committed by the Third Reich. Therefore a potential memorial should include all the victims of war and tyranny without closing oneself in the circle of German victims. The inscription should name all the categories of victims from the speech delivered by president Weizsäcker that is both German and non-German. Thus the memorial should differentiate and not obliterate the differences between the victims. He also reminded that the Jewish circles decisively objected to commemorating in one memorial the victims and the perpetrators. Peter Conradi strongly emphasized that it is not about the graves, the right to burial and Antigone’s gesture but about the message to the living that would be sent by the memorial. “It is not about the cemetery and the rights of the dead but about a sign for the living. A memorial in admonition is something different from Antigone’s legacy towards her dead brother”. The SPD faction was not only against the memorial to the fallen soldiers but it placed in sharp focus the problem of commemorating the non-German victims.

Die Grünen followed in the same direction and in their motion they very firmly and straightforwardly opposed the idea of erecting a national memorial at the same time demanding that all the places of Nazi crimes should be adequately commemorated. The Green party believed that under no circumstances the victims should be put together with the perpetrators and that the problem of the blame should not be passed over in silence. In simple terms they regarded that combining in a single memorial various commemorative issues was impossible and undesired; thus instead of erecting one central memorial local memorials should be created to commemorate specific instances of Nazi crimes. The party's representative, Ströbe reiterated this in a parliamentary debate saying that the idea of a central memorial should be rejected, the murderers and the murdered cannot be commemorated in one place, the responsibility for the murders has to be acknowledged and it is a must to commemorate the people murdered in concentration camps. He said, "We reject the idea of a national admonition memorial on the Rhine. The state guests of the Federal Republic will certainly understand that honouring the fallen and laying wreaths is not a simple matter in the Federal Republic as it is in other countries". The attitude represented by the Greens and also by the social democrats reflected the growing sensitivity in the 1980s to the problem of the extermination of Jewish people. The problem could not be entirely ignored by the conservative Right. The Greens and the social democrats seemed to be saying that first the extermination of the Jews has to be thoroughly accounted for and the places where the crimes were committed have to be adequately commemorated, and there is no way that the German and non-German victims should be collectively homogenized. In the mid 1980s there was no chance for a consensus concerning the national memorial to be reached between the major political forces. The Minister for Construction, Oscar Schneider rightly noticed that "a national admonition memorial, a commemorative place for the entire German nation, for all the fallen because of war and tyranny required a national consensus". Waiting for such a consensus ended up only with the reunification of Germany.

The situation after the reunification was made easier by the fact that the central memorial was there in the form of Neue Wache. On 31 May 1990 that is already before the formal reunification East Germany's parliament passed a motion about having the GDR's emblem removed from Neue Wache while the guard was withdrawn on the day of the reunification (3 October 1990). The rest was left unchanged with the eternal flame still burning. According to the reunification act, Neue Wache as a central memorial to the victims of "militarism" and "fascism" was to be protected by the state authorities, which did not exclude changes to its decor. A discussion started over the future of the place. However, it did not involve considering a change in the functioning of the building but it focused on the nature of changes that should be introduced to the so far East German memorial. The course of events was speeded up by the decision about the seat of the government. Following the act from 31 August 1990, Berlin became the capital of the reunified Germany which, however did not mean that it would also be the seat of the central authorities. In June 1991 the Bundestag made a decision that the government will have its seat in Berlin. Im-

mediately, the issue of the future of Neue Wache was brought to attention. Between 1991-1993 a heated debate took place concerning changes to the interior decor but the final decision was left in the hands of politicians, and more specifically chancellor Helmut Kohl, who from the very beginning saw in Neue Wache a dream place for a representative memorial deserving wreath laying ceremonies by foreign delegations. What is more, Kohl had his own conception of redesigning the interior and was able in general to carry his point against the many reservations and doubts which were publicly raised. As recalled by Christian Stötzl, the then director of the German Historical Museum in Berlin, "It was quite rare that the national memorial would be so daringly planned and the plan implemented by the people responsible for political life almost independently from the multiple voices of criticism from cultural circles, which were incapable of changing anything in the course of events"<sup>15</sup>.

Generally speaking there were three conceptions of redesigning Neue Wache. The first was the simplest and meant that the building should be left unchanged as a kind of history's testimony. It was difficult to accept because, anyway the old inscription about victims of "militarism" and "fascism", as well as the plaque referring to the "Unknown Soldier" and the "Unknown Resistance Fighter" needed be changed. Besides, the glass hexahedron with an eternal flame inside caused serious reservations as it looked too tacky. The second conception involved restoration of the interior as designed by Tessenow, which had always been considered as flawless in aesthetic terms. Wolf Jobst Siedler and Julius Posener were, among others, advocates of this idea. However, in this way Neue Wache would again assume the character of a military memorial akin to a tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and if a wreath was added it would send a message glorifying soldiers' deeds. This solution would cause numerous objections not only in the Federal Republic but most likely also abroad. And finally, there was the third conception of restoring Tessenow's interior but replacing the plinth-altar with a sculpture, more specifically with an enlarged sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz. This was the idea advocated by chancellor Kohl in a consistent and incredibly perseverant way. In early 1992 he discussed the idea with experts from the German Historical Museum, then with the representatives of the parliamentary factions who agreed to make Neue Wache a national memorial but did not agree on their position as to the changes to its interior. On 8 October 1992 a model of the conversion in Tessenow's style was presented in the German Historical Museum, and in December 1992 Tessenow's interior with the sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz inside was initially accepted. On 27 January 1993 and under pressure by the chancellor the government made a decision to redesign Neue Wache. The fact came out in March 1993 during the proceedings of the budget committee in the Bundestag and it caused nearly unanimous discontent from the parliamentary factions, which felt offended by having been ignored in the debate about the central national memorial for the unified country. The idea itself however was not questioned. On 10

---

<sup>15</sup> Ch. Stötzl, *Die Neue Wache*, in: M. Sabrow (hg.), *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, München 2009, p. 170.

March 1993 the SPD faction from the opposition submitted a motion regarding Bundestag's support for the governmental project concerning the creation of a central memorial with a designation that the issue is not exclusively a matter of executive authorities, and that parliament should also formulate its opinion and the whole issue should be submitted for a public debate. The Social Democrats demanded from the government a detailed justification for the project of converting Neue Wache into a national memorial, with a presentation in the Bundestag of different versions for the interior design, and a debate on how to represent all the categories of victims with an unambiguous suggestion of adopting the formula from the speech by president Weizsäcker<sup>16</sup>. An hour-long debate was held in the Bundestag on 14 May 1993<sup>17</sup>. The question of the main inscription and whether or not additional plaques should be installed and with what inscriptions was not decided. In the summer and autumn disputes continued around the question while at the same time the reconstruction work on the interior of the building was carried on. Neue Wache was unveiled on 14 November, that is on the National Day of Mourning (Volkstrauertag)<sup>18</sup> and since then it has been functioning under the name of central national memorial to the victims of war and tyranny (Zentrale Gedenkstätte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland für die Opfer von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft).

Eventually in 1993 nobody questioned the creation of the central memorial to the victims and using for this purpose the building in Unter den Linden. There was a general consensus that a memorial was needed and that Neue Wache was perfectly suitable for that purpose. In the 1980s such a memorial in Bonn caused substantial doubts, there was even a dose of mockery that the chancellor just wanted to find a place for wreath laying ceremonies. Now this was absent. If so the biggest cause for discontent was the procedure applied by Kohl, who took the matter in his own hands by skipping the competition for the interior design, making quick decisions and indeed presenting others with the accomplished fact. The political parties felt offended, the intellectuals even more so but essentially it was the only method for an effective implementation of the project. The project itself did not require a lot of work. On the outside it looked the same as during the GDR times. Only the army guard disappeared because there were fears of military associations contradictory to the pacifist message of the interior. This requirement was also issued by the family of Käthe Kollwitz, whom chancellor Kohl himself asked for permission to use the sculpture. In the parliamentary debate Konrad Weiß (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) strongly rejected the army guard referring to the views held by the sculptress and there were no objections. For the same reason the statues of Scharnhorst and Bülow which originally flanked the front of Neue Wache were not reinstated. They were located on the other side of Unter den Linden, what looks slightly peculiar and still

---

<sup>16</sup> Antrag der Fraktion der SPD. Zentrale Gedenkstätte des Bundes, Deutscher Bundestag. 12. Wahlperiode. Drucksache 12/4536. 10.03.93.

<sup>17</sup> Deutscher Bundestag. 12. Wahlperiode. 159. Sitzung. 14 May 1993, p. 13445-13457.

<sup>18</sup> E. Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1990-1994*, München 2007, p. 529-530.

voices are heard to return to the old design by Schinkel. Behind the statues at some distance the statues of Blücher, York and Gneisenau were situated in a square among trees and invisible from the street. All the statues returned to places not too far away from Neue Wache but they are divided from it by the wide thoroughfare of Unter den Linden and they no longer create a commemorative wholeness.

The restoration of Tessenow's features in the interior did not cause reservations. The glass dome over the oculus was taken down, the mosaic floor was restored as well as the side walls and the glass block with the eternal flame was removed. From the GDR design the urns with ashes of the "unknown soldier" and "unknown resistance fighter" were retained but their location was not marked. The altar-like block by Tessenow was not restored, although it had its defenders who were for its restoration. Reinhard Koselleck claimed that the form of a block (obviously without the wreath) was ideally consonant with the unimaginable human losses during World War II<sup>19</sup>. Anyway, there is a quite widespread opinion that in case of commemorating victims of genocide reaching for more abstract forms rather than realistic sculptures seems more appropriate. After all, Neue Wache was to commemorate war victims and not a fallen soldier. Thus, everything appeared to provide arguments for the choice of an abstract form, however as observed by Christoph Stötzl, the restored block by Tessenow could cause in a contemporary viewer undesired associations with the old worship of the fallen. During the parliamentary debate on the matter Peter Conradi, a social democrat and Wolfgang Lüder, a liberal objected to the idea of restoring the block. Chancellor Kohl shared their views and anyway, he had his own idea of designing the interior. When in 1988 he was visiting an exhibition in the German Historical Museum he was enchanted by a small sculpture by Kollwitz portraying a mother holding in her arms her dead son. It reminded him of his mother's grief at the news of his older brother's death on the frontline. He was determined to have an enlarged replica of the sculpture placed inside Neue Wache. And he did it.

\*\*\*

Although nobody questioned the high artistic quality of the sculpture by Kollwitz, not everybody was convinced that its enlarged replica should be placed in Neue Wache. During the debate in the Bundestag Kohl made a speech carefully prepared in defence of his conception. First of all, he reassured that the sculpture did not have a religious character and that this was confirmed by some notes from the artist's diary. Though the denial of the obvious motif of the Pietà seemed strange as the aim was to get as far as possible from Christian symbolism. The problem was that the Jewish circles had reservations towards the sculpture and that the chancellor obtained the consent to install the sculpture from Ignatz Bubis, the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community only in return for a solemn promise to build a memorial of the Holocaust in Berlin. Kohl also claimed that the pain and grief, which were very

---

<sup>19</sup> R. Koselleck, *Bildverbot. Welches Totengedenken?* in: G. Stötzl (hg.), op.cit., p. 200-203.

well expressed in the sculpture, became a starting point for reflecting in an individual manner on the victims of war and tyranny. The work of art speaks of an individual fate and thus it approaches the problem of victims in the most modern way. Kollwitz depicted the greatest tragedy of the century in a manner understandable to all contemporary Germans through the prism of one person's fate.

“I think that the mother's grief is an expression of something more than pain. It reminds us that in the face of barbarity and systematic extermination of people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is our duty to raise awareness of the personal human dignity of an individual. The faith in the integrity of an individual constitutes the cornerstone of all religious and philosophical traditions that our western culture makes references to”. Speaking on behalf of the opposition, Peter Conradi (SPD) praised the chancellor's choice saying, “Everybody will understand the Pietà. A tension will be created between the cool, dignified, reserved space by Tessenow and the reflective silent mother by Kollwitz”.

Reinhart Koselleck was one of the most fervent opponents of placing the sculpture in Neue Wache and he firmly demanded to have the decision reconsidered<sup>20</sup>. Koselleck argued that the sculpture in the symbolic (Christian) sense represents the Mother of God with Christ's body, which on the one hand communicates pain and grief, and on the other hand consolation and hope for resurrection and salvation. When the sculpture is interpreted in a realistic way it shows only the pain and grief of a mother after the loss of her son fallen at war. As he claimed, both interpretations were unacceptable for the Jewish community which does not accept Christian symbols and does not agree to have the memory about extermination reduced to the grief of a mother after the death of her son. He went on to point out that in the case of World War II “the relationship between mother and son does not constitute a dominant theme of grieving, as it was after World War I when about two million (German) soldiers lost their lives”. It was equally likely that a father would grieve over his daughter killed during an air raid, and that children would be in distress having lost their parents. As it is, a realistic interpretation of the sculpture does not deliver what had happened, that mothers were being killed as well as the children. No matter how the sculpture is interpreted it does not encompass the memory of mass murders, and having the choice, a sculpture by Kollwitz (1932) of parents kneeling and overcome by grief but without the reference to the dead body would be better. This kind of argumentation keeps appearing even today. It is still reminded that the Pietà as a Christian symbol is not appropriate to commemorate the Holocaust of the Jewish people and that it automatically excludes non-Christian victims. Very recently, Peter Reichel returned to this issue and questioned the justness of the decision to place the sculpture by Kollwitz inside Neue Wache<sup>21</sup>.

The matter of the inscription was possibly even more controversial. Chancellor Kohl during the parliamentary debate supported the idea of a short inscription placed

<sup>20</sup> R. Koselleck, *op.cit.*, p. 200-203.

<sup>21</sup> P. Reichel, *op.cit.*, p.154.

inside the building which would be closely connected with the tradition of the National Day of Mourning, namely, "To the victims of war and tyranny" (Den Opfern der Kriege und der Gewaltherrschaft"). Peter Conradi (SPD) responded that if so the "victims of tyranny" should be placed first and then "of war". The Christian Democrats found it difficult to accept as they wanted to emphasize that first there was "war" and only later "tyranny". In this way the Nazi "dictatorship" was somehow overshadowed with the communist "dictatorship" taking first place. Conradi, making a reference to the huge differences in the number of victims suggested that the inscription should be divided into two parts, "Den Opfern der Gewaltherrschaft und den Opfern der Kriege". Irrespective of this, the social democrats demanded a separate plaque to be installed with a fragment of the speech by president Weizsäcker, in which he in a detailed way enumerated various categories of the victims. The situation developed into a paradox with the social democrats wanting a text from a speech by a Christian democratic president and the Christian Democrats were strongly against it. Ilja Seifert (PDS/Die Linke) altogether rejected the inscription about the victims of war and tyranny saying,

"In this non-binding formula, Mr Chancellor, a participant of a conference in Wannsee, who was later incidentally blown up by an air raid bomb would be equated with six million Jews who had been systematically exterminated. The communists and social democrats, Ernst Thälmann and Rudolf Breitscheid, murdered in the Buchenwald concentration camp would be on the same level with Goebbels and Göring, who were the victims of their own dictatorship. This thought is as absurd as commemorating the fallen from an SS division as well in Yad Vashem".

The problem was that the Christian Democrats precisely wanted to use the ambiguity of the word "victim" (sacrificium and victima) and to blur the fundamental differences between the quite different categories of the fallen, murdered and persecuted. Ilja Seifert's proposal to commemorate all who resisted tyranny caused strong associations with the East German commemoration and had no chance of gaining support in the Bundestag. Anyway, in the past of Neue Wache not only the "unknown resistance fighter" was commemorated but also the "unknown soldier", though with separate plaques. However, in 1993 the tendency to homogenize victims did not meet with such fulmination as it was during the debate in 1986 on the central memorial. It did not help much that Reinhardt Koselleck openly wrote about the hypocrisy preserved in the formula about the victims of "war" and "tyranny". Wolfgang Kruse assessed that in Neue Wache the glorifying worship of the fallen heroes was replaced by a foggy worship of victims which obliterated everything much more than the GDR worship of victims of "militarism" and "fascism"<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, Peter Reichel drew attention to the fact that although the inscription placed inside Neue Wache ("Den Opfern der Kriege und der Gewaltherrschaft") does level the differences between different categories of victims, this is at least partially clarified

---

<sup>22</sup> W. Kruse, *op.cit.*, p. 431.

by the plaque positioned outside to the right of the entrance to the building<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, despite the initial defiance of Kohl and the right-wing parties, the outside plaque carried a text which seemed to make reference to the catalogue of victims enumerated in president Weizsäcker's speech. A visitor to Neue Wache when entering the building first encounters that register of victims, then inside sees the inscription about the victims of "war" and "tyranny", and finally the standing behind the inscription sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz.

The text of the inscription on the plaque outside the entrance only partially drew upon Weizsäcker's speech, and in fact it constituted a step backwards in the process of reckoning with the past<sup>24</sup>. Weizsäcker said that the calamities started in 1933 and not only after 1945 following the unconditional surrender of Germany, and he did not hesitate to use the phrase "German concentration camp". Yet, the perpetrators were not indicated in the plaque. One can infer who they were from the word "war" and "tyranny", though this is made difficult by the lack of a chronological frame (no dates). The culprit is more legible only when the "totalitarian dictatorship after 1945" is mentioned (the only date on the plaque). Even the word "Nazism" does not occur and only communism was almost named. Something wrong has happened but it is not known when and on whose initiative. The empty space for the culprit has to be filled out by imagination since one cannot count on factual knowledge. However, what will happen in several years? The victims seem to say more about it although it is not so certain. They were enumerated in the following order: nations which suffered because of war, the fallen in the two world wars, the innocent who lost their lives as a result of war in their homeland, in prisoner-of-war camps and during "expulsion", millions of murdered Jews, murdered Sinti and Roma, those killed because of their background, homosexuality or illness, those who had to die because of their religion or views, women and men who were persecuted and murdered because they objected to dictatorship after 1945. The victims became completely and systematically mixed; the Jews, Sinti and Roma found themselves next to the victims (of course German) of "expulsion" and the "fallen" that is as one can suppose

<sup>23</sup> P. Reichel, *op.cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> The text on the plaque in German reads with the following words (lines are divided by a slash): "Die Neue Wache ist der Ort der Erinnerung/und des Gedenkens an die Opfer / von Krieg und Gwalt-herrschaft . / Wir gedenken / der Völker, die durch Krieg gelitten haben / Wir gedenken ihrer Bürger, die verfolgt wurden / und ihr Leben verloren / Wir gedenken der Gefallenen der Weltkriege / Wir Gedenken der Unschuldigen / die durch Krieg und Folgen des Krieges / in der Heimat, die in Gefangenschaft und / bei der Vertreibung ums Leben gekommen sind / Wir gedenken aller, die umgebracht wurden / wegen ihrer Abstammung, ihrer Homosexualität / oder wegen Krankheit und Schwäche / Wir gedenken aller ermordeten, deren Recht auf / Leben geleugnet wurde / Wir gedenken der Menschen / die sterben mus-ten um ihrer religiösen oder / politischen Überzeugungen willen / Wir gedenken aller / die Opfer der Gewaltherrschaft wurden / und unschuldig den Tod fanden / Wir gedenken der Frauen und Männer/die im Widerstand gegen die Gewaltherrschaft / ihr Leben opferten / Wir ehren alle, die eher den Tod hin-nahmen / als ihr Gewissen zu beugen / Wir gedenken der Frauen und Männer / die verfolgt und ermordet wurden / weil sie sich totalitärer Diktatur nach 1945 / widersetzt haben".

the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. Weizsäcker also mentioned the Poles and the Soviet citizens but there was not enough space on the plaque for them.

From the plaque and the inscription placed in front of the sculpture, as well as from the sculpture itself an intriguing image of the past emerges. On the one hand, we have the “war” and “tyranny” that we have no information about (apart from the “totalitarian dictatorship after 1945), and on the other hand, we have the vast category of victims in which the doubtless culprits are hidden (e.g., Wehrmacht soldiers). On the one hand, we have the anonymous forces and, on the other hand the individual fate over which a mother is grieving holding in her arms her killed son. One can identify the victims, as well as the perpetrators according to one’s own estimation because universal victim worship opens a wide scope for imagination. However, it all blurs and obliterates the historical reality and constitutes a construct meant to be utilized by the German collective memory. According to Bill Niven, chancellor Kohl primarily wanted to abate the moral dimension of German-Jewish relations and weaken their perception through the prism of the victim-culprit relations, as well as to mark the presence of Germans as “innocent” victims comparable to Jewish victims. As pointed out by Niven, from the memorial emerges an outline of a new canon of the German collective memory which encompasses the experience of Nazism and communism, including also the human losses suffered during the war especially due to air raids and relocation. The canon aims at integrating German society freshly including two different communities the West and East German. “Considering the conflicts between East and West Germans after the reunification, this commemorative policy obviously aimed at the reconciliation of Germans not only with their own history but also with one another. In brief it was the commemorative policy meant to serve the purpose of national reconciliation” (B. Niven)<sup>25</sup>.

The present Neue Wache can indeed evoke mixed feelings. For certain it is not exclusively a memorial to fallen German soldiers, victims of “expulsion” and killed in allied air raids, as it was demanded in the 1980s. It is also not a memorial exclusively to German victims. It does not contain any kind of symbolism connected with the fallen worship and more so with the glorification of soldiers’ deeds. The sculpture by Käthe Kollwitz irrespective of how it is interpreted, for certain has nothing in common with the worship of the fallen. Anyway, from the aesthetic point of view neither the building of Neue Wache, nor its interior decor causes reservation. There is nothing tacky about it and everything is done in good taste. Still, it is also not a memorial that is clear and unambiguous accounting for the Nazi, as well as for the communist past. It is more a memorial which represents escaping in the realm of universal victim worship, which in many respects breaks any correspondences with historical reality but which provides a cover for commemorating variously understood German victims. Naturally, all the understatements and concealments can

---

<sup>25</sup> B.Niven, *Introduction: German Victimhood at the Turn of the Millenium*, in: B.Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in the Contemporary Germany*, New York 2006, p. 6.

seem striking and cause justified objections. However, one has to objectively admit that after World War II, the German nation had to face the much more difficult problem of commemorating their human losses than after World War I. The desire to commemorate these losses is completely understandable but how is it possible to avoid relativising the German responsibility and putting the blame on all the people who fought against the Third Reich? Despite everything, this kind of commemoration should not result in blurring the historical context and evading a clear answer to the question, who made the soldiers to be killed, civilians die under air raid bombs and who is responsible for the mass relocation of German people.