

German Culture Workshop

Monuments and Memorials in Contemporary Germany

Useful vocabulary:

das Denkmal
an etw denken
das Mal

das Mahnmal
jdn mahnen

das Ehrenmal
jdn/etw ehren

die Erinnerung
sich an jdn/etw erinnern

das Gedächtnis
etwas im Gedächtnis behalten

Quotations:

Robert Musil (Austrian writer, 1880-1942):

‘...das Auffallendste an Denkmälern ist nämlich, dass man sie nicht bemerkt. Es gibt nichts auf der Welt, was so unsichtbar wäre wie Denkmäler.’

Albert Schweitzer (German/French theologian, philosopher, physician, 1875-1965):

‘Das schönste Denkmal, das ein Mensch bekommen kann, steht in den Herzen seiner Mitmenschen.’

Uli Löchner (contemporary German writer):

‘Denkmäler verkörpern fast ausnahmslos historische Lügen.’

Erhard Blanck (contemporary German writer and painter):

‘Denkmäler sind die fragwürdigen Fragezeichen der Geschichte. Schließlich fragen die meisten: "Wer war das überhaupt?"’

Group 1: Memorial to the victims of the Allied bombings of Dresden in 1945

Task:

Design a memorial to the victims of the Allied bombings in Dresden in 1945, taking into account the below information. Decide on a location for the memorial and a suitable design to reflect the historical details (but consider how the design might tackle any potential difficulties that such a memorial might throw up). Sketch out your design to present to the rest of the group.

Historical background:

During the last few months of the Second World War, US and UK bombers undertook heavy bombing raids on Dresden, destroying over 90% of the city centre and causing thousands of deaths (ca. 25,000). The Allies justified this action by claiming that Dresden was an important military and industrial target. However, critics of the bombings claim that Dresden did not hold such strategic significance, and that the bombing campaign caused an unnecessary loss of life and the destruction of many irreplaceable cultural treasures (Dresden was known as ‘Florence on the Elbe’ due to its cultural significance).

Who wants the memorial?

A group of Dresden citizens who lived through the bombing raids, and who lost family members in the raids.

Where should it be located?

Choose between three possible locations in Dresden:

- 1) In the Friedrichstadt district, to the west of the city centre – a commercial and residential area which suffered massive destruction and loss of life.
- 2) In the Hauptbahnhof, which was one of the targets of the bombing, and which is where many visitors to Dresden start their tour of the city.
- 3) Outside the Frauenkirche, an eighteenth-century church which was destroyed in 1945. After unification, it was re-built using some of the original stones, as a sign of reconciliation between the wartime enemies.

Why might the memorial be problematic?

- 1) There is no doubt that a large number of the victims of the Allied bombings were German civilian who lost their lives indiscriminately. However, the concept of German victimhood is still a contentious one – to what extent should German victims of the war be remembered today, when the German nation was responsible for the Holocaust and the deaths of millions? Can Germans who died in the bombing raids be both victims and perpetrators? Is there a clear distinction between these terms?
- 2) There are also concerns that such a memorial might become a pilgrimage site for extreme right-wing parties. Some such groups have used the term ‘Bombenholocaust’ to refer to the bombing of Dresden, which has angered many locals, in particular the Jewish community.
- 3) Many people already regard the Frauenkirche to represent an appropriate monument to this period in history. Some citizens argue that a further memorial is unnecessary.

Group 2: Memorial to the victims of the Soviet ‘special camp’ at Buchenwald

Task:

Design a memorial to the victims of the Soviet ‘special camp’ (‘Speziallager’) at Buchenwald, taking into account the below information. Decide on a location for the memorial and a suitable design to reflect the historical details (but consider how the design might tackle any potential difficulties that such a memorial might throw up). Sketch out your design to present to the rest of the group.

Historical background:

After the end of the Second World War, the former Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald (just outside Weimar) was used by the Soviets to imprison Germans from 1945 to 1950 who were largely accused of involvement in the Nazi regime; however, very few were allowed a trial, and many were forced to make false testimonies and/or sign declarations in Russian that they did not understand. A significant number of prisoners were also arrested for opposing the new Soviet regime, and had no links to the Nazi party. The conditions in the camp were horrendous, and over 7,000 prisoners died due to disease and malnutrition (ca. one quarter of all prisoners) and were buried anonymously in mass graves. During the GDR, there was no official memory of this camp and former prisoners were not allowed to talk about their experiences, as this would have undermined the communist regime. Although the concentration camp at Buchenwald became a national memorial site, the history of the special camp was forgotten.

Who wants a memorial?

Survivors of the special camp and relatives of prisoners who died in the camp.

Where should it be located?

Choose between three possible locations:

- 1) On the grounds of the former camp itself, which is now a memorial site dedicated to both the Nazi concentration camp and the Soviet special camp (with distinct museums for each).
- 2) On the site of the mass graves, which are located in the forest just outside the camp grounds.
- 3) On a central square in the nearby town of Weimar, which is where most visitors begin their visit to Buchenwald.

Why might the memorial be problematic?

- 1) Research has shown that 80% of prisoners in the special camp held a function in the Nazi party or its organisations. However, many of the positions they held were low-ranking, and not particularly influential – and were sometimes held by teenagers as young as 14.
- 2) Survivors of the Nazi concentration camp do not wish to see a memorial to the special camp, as they claim that prisoners of the special camp were the perpetrators of the Holocaust and the murderers of their friends and families.
- 3) There are fears that it could become a pilgrimage site for right-wing extremists, who attempt to downplay the severity of the Holocaust.

Group 3: Monument to the 17 June 1953 uprisings

Task:

Design a monument to those who took part in the uprisings of 17 June 1953, taking into account the below information. Decide on a location for the memorial and a suitable design to reflect the historical details (but consider how the design might tackle any potential difficulties that such a memorial might throw up). Sketch out your design to present to the rest of the group.

Historical background:

On 17 June 1953, approximately 500,000 workers went on strike in the GDR (in Berlin and other towns and cities) in the first and only mass uprising against the government until 1989. They were demonstrating against a 10% rise in work norms (meaning that they had to work 10% more for no extra pay). While their initial aim was to reverse this policy, their demands escalated to include calls for free elections and the resignation of the government. However, the uprising was quashed by Soviet tanks, and it is estimated that between 50 and 250 people lost their lives; a number were sentenced to death and thousands were imprisoned. The uprisings were never officially remembered in the GDR, as the government interpreted them to be the work of Western agents and provocateurs.

Who wants a memorial?

A group of veterans who demonstrated on 17 June 1953 wish to see the demonstrations remembered in the public sphere before living memory of this event dies out.

Where should it be located?

Choose between three possible locations in Berlin:

- 1) On the former Stalinallee (now Karl-Marx-Allee) – the starting point of the demonstration, where building workers were the first to lay down their tools.
- 2) Outside the former House of Ministers (now the Bundesfinanzministerium), the building where workers placed their demands to ministers.
- 3) Leipziger Platz, a busy square where the uprising was brutally quashed, symbolising the totalitarian nature of the GDR regime.

Why might the monument be problematic?

- 1) Due to different historical interpretations of 17 June 1953, it is difficult to decide what should be remembered: a spontaneous workers' strike, a mass revolt, a demonstration for a new democratic regime in the GDR, or an uprising for German unity? In West Germany, 17 June used to be remembered as a demonstration of the East German population against the communist regime and as a call for German unity. In reality, however, only a minority of the population actually demonstrated.
- 2) There is often a temptation to interpret 17 June 1953 as a precursor to the demonstrations of 1989 and German unity – and thus to view it in heroic terms. In reality, however, it was a failed uprising, as many people lost their lives and the GDR continued to exist for another 36 years. Can one monument encapsulate these mixed emotions?

Group 4: Monument to Helmut Kohl

Task:

Design a monument to former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, taking into account the below information. Decide on a location for the memorial and a suitable design to reflect the historical details (but consider how the design might tackle any potential difficulties that such a memorial might throw up). Sketch out your design to present to the rest of the group.

Historical background:

Helmut Kohl was Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1982 to 1998 (i.e. West Germany from 1982 to 1990 and united Germany from 1990 to 1998), and a politician of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). He was the longest-serving Chancellor since Otto von Bismarck (1871-1890), and is widely regarded to be one of the central players in the unification of Germany and a key political personality of twentieth-century Germany.

Who wants a memorial?

A group of CDU politicians and supporters wish to see a monument to Helmut Kohl in a central location in Berlin.

Where should it be located?

Choose between three possible locations in Berlin:

- 1) Outside the Bundestag, the German parliament building of united Germany
- 2) At the Brandenburg Gate, one of the central symbols of unified Germany
- 3) Outside the CDU party headquarters (located in central Berlin, but not in a major tourist area)

Why might the monument be problematic?

- 1) Prior to unification, Helmut Kohl promised 'blühende Landschaften' to the East German population. In the years immediately following unification, however, the eastern German *Länder* suffered many economic problems, particularly high unemployment and the closure of many factories and local businesses. Although he is celebrated as the 'Kanzler der Einheit' by many, Kohl is associated largely with West German values and policies, which were resented by many east Germans during the years after unification.
- 2) Helmut Kohl is still alive. Monuments are usually erected to people after they have passed away – and often decades or centuries afterwards. Is it appropriate to heroise Kohl so soon after his chancellorship?
- 3) A CDU party finance scandal became public in 1999, in which it was discovered that the party received illegal donations during Kohl's leadership. This somewhat marred his reputation in the years immediately following his chancellorship.