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### A Damnation of Memory - Opinion

Timothy W. Ryback and Florian M. Beierl Feb. 12, 2010

BERCHTESGADEN, GERMANY — Earlier this month, the Bavarian Monument Protection Agency reported that the Bavarian government had used stones from Adolf Hitler’s alpine retreat on the Obersalzberg to construct a small, roadside chapel, Wegmacher Kapelle, near the town of Berchtesgaden.

Richard Nemeč, the agency spokesman, said the stones had been preserved despite government orders to obliterate remaining vestiges of the Nazi presence in the area. He spoke of a “damnatio memoriae” — a damnation of memory. Since 1945, the Germans have become masters of dealing with the Nazi-era victim sites, or Opferorte, such as Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. They restore them with accuracy and sensitivity: watchtowers, barbed wire and crematory ovens, along with historical exhibitions and places for meditation and prayer.

But perpetrator sites, or Täterorte — places where the crimes were conceived but not necessarily perpetrated — have presented a more complex set of challenges. How should they be preserved, if at all? Who should visit them? For what reason?

The responses have varied. In the 1980s, when the basement rooms of the former Gestapo headquarters in Berlin were uncovered, they were used to accommodate a powerful exhibition on Nazi atrocity called Topography of Terror. When the murals of an underground Nazi facility in Berlin were discovered, they were documented by experts, sealed over and left to decay. The Führerbunker in which Hitler committed suicide was excavated and demolished to a stone.

The Bavarian government faced similar challenges in 1995 when the American military closed its rest and recreation center on the Obersalzberg: How to deal with the place where Hitler claimed to have passed his “most pleasant times” and conceived his “great plans.”

The Bavarians decided on a felicitous solution: Revive the local economy through high-end tourism while erasing the region’s Nazi past.

Between 1995 and 2008, Bavaria and its Bayerische Landesbank invested close to 100 million euros in “redefining” the Obersalzberg as a center for “rest and beauty,” constructing a five-star luxury hotel, leveling Nazi-era structures, and, as a “political pressure valve” (in the words of one official), establishing a documentation center on the Nazi past.

In his announcement, Nemeč criticized Bavaria's mismanagement of historical objects on the Obersalzberg and spoke about the surreptitious incorporation of Hitler stones into structures like the roadside chapel.

In defense, the chapel's architect, Matthias Ferwagner, said that his design explicitly addressed the use of the Hitler-era masonry. Ferwagner said he arranged the flagstones in the shape of a cross on the assumption that they had been quarried by Jewish slave laborers and would be "redeemed" through this symbol of suffering and salvation. He also installed a glass ceiling designed to "float" over the stones like the Holy Ghost.

"The idea was that the stones somehow needed to be cleansed, blessed," Ferwagner said. He said he envisioned the roadside chapel as a place where people with "evil intentions" could stop and purge their minds.

Standing in the Wegmacher Kapelle, whose blue stained-glass ceiling indeed washes the interior in an azure luminosity, one is struck less by the discrete cross in the flagstone floor than by a shoulder-high marble pillar in the center of the chapel on which rests a large, translucent mountain quartz. The effect is more pagan than Christian, leading one to wonder whether public knowledge about the chapel's origins could in fact reverse Ferwagner's intent, attracting individuals seeking destructive rather than purgative inspiration.

For decades, the Obersalzberg has seen a steady stream of "Hitler pilgrims" from across Europe as well as the United States. They light candles, erect shrines and carve symbols into surrounding trees amid the ruins of Hitler's former residence, the Berghof, on the Obersalzberg. Local officials claim that the frequency of this lurid tourism has diminished.

With the new revelations, the Bavarian Monumental Protection Agency has taken an important step in bringing transparency to one of Germany's most consequential perpetrator sites. Beyond the mea culpa for the wanton destruction of historical structures, Nemeč announced the agency's intention to evaluate which surviving Nazi-era structures should be placed under monument protection. Their prime candidate should be the Berghof ruins.

Despite the wholesale destruction of historical objects on the Obersalzberg, the central site, the ruins of Hitler's alpine residence have been left virtually untouched. The Berghof's original retaining wall, a 15-foot high structure overgrown with moss and lichen, traces the outline of his vanished residence and smaller structures protrude through the forest floor.

One solution would be to expose the space to public view. Historicizing the ruins will help leach them of the current cultish aura that surrounds the property. A more ambitious intrusion would be to permit access to the remnants of the Berghof interior. As with the Topography of Terror in Berlin, they could provide an appropriate and emotive context for an exhibition.

By taking responsibility for the ruins, the Bavarian government could make an important contribution to historical preservation while reclaiming the site from Hitler pilgrims — with the full understanding, of course, that they can always worship in ethereal isolation in the Wegmacher Kapelle.

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