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Monuments for deserters: A particularity of German memory culture

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing face of deserters in Germany and the gradual entry of monuments dedicated to them into German memorial culture. The multiple changes in the perception of the Wehrmacht (united armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935-1945) deserters during the last 70 years from cowards and traitors to (anti-)heroes to victims is the result of generational shifts and changed political contexts. Deserters from the Wehrmacht were a taboo subject for a long time. Over the course of the past thirty years, their story has been reappraised. It now has a visual presence in the form of counter monuments which challenge notions of traditional heroic military virtues and the place of resistance in modern political German culture. Counter-monuments, which had their origins in Germany in the 1980s, were always intended to be provocative, for they sought to disrupt a discourse that had become anachronistic, even unbearable in the eyes of many. Whether they will continue to have a presence, whether further deserter monuments will be built, or whether a future retrospective evaluation will show these monuments to have been an ephemeral and singular phenomenon, is still uncertain.

Keywords

Counter memorials, Deserter memorials, Deserters, Germany, Memory culture, Nazi Germany, War, Wehrmacht

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German war memorials before 1945

War memorials, or Kriegerdenkmäler (literally 'warrior monuments' in German) have existed in Germany since 1813. Previously, they were reserved for rulers and generals, yet the transition from mercenaries to a militia-based 'people's army' saw the simple soldier elevated to the point that he was now considered worthy of memorialisation. The characteristics of the war memorial, that is, the heroic transfiguration of war and death and the representation of the soldier's death as a necessary sacrifice for the fatherland, became the norm from the middle of the nineteenth century until well after the end of the Second World War. In the few cases where new war monuments were created for the fallen of the Second World War, figurative representations were not used; instead there was a preference for abstract architectural solutions which often employed Christian symbolism such as a cross, a pietà, a palm branch or a quote from the Bible. These monuments omitted any reference to the cause of the war and refrained from engaging with issues of fault or sorrow. Given the millions of victims of National Socialism, it was difficult to characterise the soldiers in the heroic terms used in traditional monuments. This did not equate to a criticism of war or the sacrifice of the individual soldiers, let alone position the monuments as anti-war. This was especially true where there were additions to already existing structures. Furthermore, the iconography and military rituals of commemorative events were often at odds with a call for peace or a foregrounding of individual grief. The formal language of war monuments remained essentially unchanged.

The emergence of counter-memorials

Noting a preference for abstraction, a lack of a clear message, and an abandonment of positive meaning-making in favour of reflection, art historians began to speak of 'monument fatigue' as early as the 1960s. By the 1970s, they proclaimed the 'end of the monument', yet within a few short years there was a veritable monument boom. National Socialism and the complicity of the German people in its crimes were increasingly subject to interrogation through an alteration in commemorative practices. In addition to the large state sponsored memorials, there was agitation at a local and national level for the construction of counter-monuments for the 'forgotten victims' of National Socialism like homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, or people who suffered from forced sterilisation. In many cases, and in the face of considerable resistance, these monuments were slowly integrated into German memory culture. This was almost inevitably going to attract a considerable divergence of views, for anyone who "installs a monument privileges a certain view of the past and furthers, in some measure, his or her prerogative of interpretation regarding the past, present and future" (Hardtwig, 2011, p. 25). Instead of ascribing a clear meaning to death and suffering, this new type of monument encouraged the viewer to reflect and to interrogate rather than just passively receive a state sanctioned interpretation of the past. This alteration in approach, which reached its apogee in Berlin's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, reflected the widespread belief that traditional approaches to commemoration were ill-suited to ambiguity and competing narratives, hence the preference for abstraction (Endlich, 2003).

These counter-monuments began to emerge in Germany in the 1980s in response to concerns over what events and people connected to the Second World War were worthy of memorialisation, and indeed what was the most appropriate artistic form for this commemoration. The monuments were intended to be provocative, for they sought to disrupt a discourse that had "become anachronistic, even unbearable in the eyes of some members of society, and – now disarmed – integrating it into the present" (Hausmann, 1997, p. 96). As a rule, they were, and are, created not synchronically but diachronically with more traditional monuments because attitudes, values, conceptions of history and interpretations of the past change over time. Tomberger (2007) recognised the didactic value of this fluidity, for monuments are "both interpretations of the history that is being remembered and statements about how it relates to the present and which consequences, which lessons or resolutions for the future are derived from it" (p. 27). A monument and the ideology it espouses must therefore first age and obsolesce before it requires

a counter-monument. The supporters of counter-monuments are not iconoclasts, for they remain convinced of the fundamental effectiveness of monuments. They are, after all, a prerequisite for the articulation of contrary interpretive schemes and new creations of meaning. Though it is simplistic, there is considerable value in seeing their acceptance as beating monuments at their own game.

The political significance of counter-monuments as they emerged in the 1980s was grounded in their capacity to show that alongside the dominant understanding of history, other currents existed. In doing so, their supporters took advantage of the fact that the limits on what could be uttered publicly had shifted, as had the aesthetic language deemed appropriate to challenge traditional monumental practices. This involved a rejection of the formal language, meaning-making and appeal of traditional monuments, as well as a renunciation of their uniform, clear and unambiguous message. Instead, the preference was for a recognition of grief and suffering, one that encouraged reflection and critical engagement. This brought new life to the medium, reviving and rehabilitating it just as it appeared ready to slip into irrelevance. The early examples were constructed on a small, local scale before emerging on the national stage in the 1990s and 2000s (Tomberger, 2007). Notable examples include the rededicated Neue Wache (lit. New Guard) building (1993) and Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005), both in Berlin. While there is now a preponderance of counter-monuments in Germany due to the particularities of German history, this type of monument is not an exclusively German phenomenon. Similar monuments are also found in Austria, France, Australia, the UK and the US (Wijsenbeek, 2010). They are a phenomenon that is linked not so much to a place but to a time in the postmodern Western world, where affirmative historical meaning-making has given way to a critical construction of meaning.

Deserter memorials

The "stone provocation" of a traditional heroic war memorial in Germany is now regularly confronted by a counter-monument, usually a deserter monument that acknowledges a dialogical engagement. It invites the observer to reflect on and compare the two interpretations of history presented. This "didactic constellation" generates insight rather than nostalgia. The counter-monument wants to make visible an interpretation that its counterpart withholds, and ideally it serves as a catalyst for a shift in the public awareness of history and in the collective memory by offering an alternative and critical view of the past by disrupting and "correcting" the mono-perspectival proposition of its counterpart (Wijsenbeek, 2010, pp. 258-259). Deserter monuments constitute a "particular variety of war memorial" (Müller, 2007, p. 267), though at first they attracted only limited academic attention (Welch, 2012; Dräger, 2014, Dräger, 2017a; Dräger, 2017b; Dräger, 2017b). Indeed, until the late 1970s, desertion from the Wehrmacht (united armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935-1945) remained a taboo subject in the Federal Republic of Germany (Dräger, 2014). After first emerging during the 1980s at the peak of the German peace movement, there are now approximately fifty deserter monuments across the country. Their proliferation is an indicator of the waning importance of everything military in German society and a seismic shift in public opinion. The major turning point was what became known as the Filbinger affair in 1978. The minister-president of Baden-Württemberg, Hans Filbinger (1913–2007, reg. 1966–1978), served as a naval judge during the Second World War during which time he had been involved in the passing of a number of death sentences. It was not his initial denials, however, that attracted the most criticism. Rather it was his inability more than three decades later to express a word of regret to the relatives of those he had prosecuted. The public was outraged over Filbinger's obstinacy much more than over his collaboration in passing death sentences. Though Filbinger was far from being a Nazi, this was a major early step in removing whatever remained of the Wehrmacht legal system's credibility.

The influence of the peace movement of the 1980s played a pivotal role in moving public opinion in favour of Wehrmacht deserters. As a reaction to the NATO double-track decision in

1979 which offered the Warsaw Pact a mutual limitation of medium-range ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, an eclectic group of anti-militarists made up of reservists who refused to do military service, groups associated with the German peace association Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft – Verband der Kriegsdienstverweigerer (DFG-VK) and green/alternative initiatives, rejected outright any anachronistic notions of soldiers dying heroically in the anticipated nuclear war. They discovered a rich source of inspiration in the example set by Second World War deserters. They demanded monuments for them to act as counterpoints to the traditional war monuments, a move that constituted a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the soldierly principle of command and obedience and the tradition of 'honouring heroes.' Beyond the abstract notions of soldierly virtue, this drive to recognise deserters was also at odds with the perceived national interests of the Federal Republic of Germany, hence the vehemence of some of the opposition. As desertion began to be celebrated as a moral choice rather than a criminal act, the war generation was confronted with questions about their own behaviour, their own responsibility, and indeed their own direct and indirect complicity in Nazi crimes.

In numerous cities there was agitation for the construction of monuments. This in turn positioned conscientious objection and desertion as more worthy of validation than the principle – obsolete, in their view – of command and obedience. Desertion could thereby be construed as an act of 'self-defence', an emancipated act against external military constraints. The supporters of the monuments hoped that this process of reflection and re-evaluation would lead to a more critical evaluation of state goals and state sanctioned violence. Although there was little chance of consensus, the push for deserter monuments did spur some academic interest. Early examples include Norbert Haase's *Deutsche Deserteure* (German Deserters) as well as Manfred Messerschmidt and Fritz Wüllner's publication *Die Wehrmachtjustiz im Dienste des Nationalsozialismus. Zerstörung einer Legende* (The Military Justice System in the Service of National Socialism. Destruction of a Legend) (Haase, 1987; Messerschmidt & Wüllner, 1987). Nevertheless, the drive to build deserter monuments hindered efforts to understand that desertion could have any number of motivations driving it. This lack of nuance found its best expression in the widespread use of a quote from Andersch's *Kirschen der Freiheit* (1952): 'Mein ganz kleiner privater 20. Juli [1944, MD] fand bereits am 6. Juni statt. (*The Cherries of Freedom*: 'My own very small 20th of July had already taken place on the 6th of June' [1944, MD].) The response to Andersch's book was until then marked either by indifference or criticism. It has now experienced a revival, proof in print that desertion was a form of resistance. Elements of his account, namely isolation of the individual, rejection of military or militant violence, and the individual's freedom of choice, lent themselves to appropriation by the peace movement decades after it was first published:

> Here young pacifists and members of today's peace movement recognized motives to which they had an affinity. And they found the outline of a provocative, politically-emotionally charismatic antitype who had both elements: the radical rejection of a criminal regime of the past and at the same time a rejection of the machinery of war and defence of today. What becomes linked in the orientation toward this antitype are historical sensitization and the sense of an existential threat in the present. (Kammler, 1990, p. 158)

The drive to understand what motivated deserters became more objective as time went on. Eventually the focus shifted to the historical phenomenon of desertion (Dräger 2017b), a development that allowed for more nuance in popular conceptions of Wehrmacht deserters. In light of the studies conducted since the 1990s, the assumption that deserters were pacifists and/or resistance fighters has been the subject of significant re-evaluation. Indeed, only 20 to 25 percent of desertions were motivated by political or religious reasons (Dräger, 2017b). Any unease about the more 'private' motives for desertion has either faded or been integrated into the new narrative by virtue of two insights: one, that under the National Socialist regime, 'private' decisions were always highly political – in the eyes of the Nazi system of criminal prosecution in any case; and two, that deserters were – regardless of their subjective motives – in an objective

sense removing themselves from a criminal war of aggression and extermination. Indeed, historical studies on the Nazi military justice system have ascribed to it a "terrorist character" when it came to the persecution of deserters, characterising it as a "typical act of National Socialist violence" (Paul, 2003, p. 173). This allowed for a balancing of views that found room for deserters as both an historical phenomenon and as individuals with unique motivations.

A side effect of this shift in public perception was that for the first time surviving deserters spoke up, be it as contemporary witnesses engaging in interviews or in the form of autobiographies. The addition of their perspectives served to add a further layer of nuance. Having finally gained a voice, in 1990 they founded the Federal Association of the Victims of the National Socialist Military Judiciary (Bundesvereinigung Opfer der NS-Militärjustiz e. V.), which subsequently played a central role in their political rehabilitation. Their primary aim was to gain recognition of their experience rather than to obtain financial compensation for historical injustices or the prosecution of the few surviving Wehrmacht judges who sentenced them. Nearing the end of their lives, they wanted to see their dignity and reputation restored. Ludwig Baumann, the chairman of the Federal Association of the Victims of the National Socialist Military Judiciary, put it this way:

> We were called 'traitors' and 'cowards' [...], we were financially discriminated, convicted, socially excluded and had to experience, how in Germany and Austria the legend of a so-called 'clean' Wehrmacht was disseminated until everybody thought it was true. [...] But the struggle of the Wehrmacht deserters for late recognition can be regarded as a parable of so-called civil society to change for the better. (Baumann, 2007, pp. 10-11)

This process was in part a generational conflict, as the younger activists of the peace movement, with their own role models, moral concepts and ideas of how to preserve peace, confronted the ideas of the War/ Hitler Youth-generation. They no longer believed that peace could be guaranteed through military service, as the monuments to past wars proclaimed. Toward the end of the 1980s, the many local discussions shifted or rather were actively spread to the federal level. Unlike the West German student movement's protests in 1968, this generational conflict was not only about how to deal reasonably with the past, but how to commemorate that past in light of the present political situation and hopes for the future.

The commemoration and rehabilitation of Wehrmacht deserters in the 1990s

The end of the Cold War and German re-unification shifted discussions to the Federal level, paving the way for a complete political and legal rehabilitation. In 1991, the Federal Social Court (Bundessozialgericht) permitted damages to be paid to the widow of an executed deserter for the first time. The ruling explicitly noted that an individual's motives for deserting must not be a factor in assessing the case under compensation law. Instead, the legal prosecution by the Wehrmacht military courts, instrumentalised by the Nazis, gave to deserters the status of a victim which in turn justified appropriate compensation. This ruling transformed the image of the deserter yet again. Deserters were now seen neither as cowards or traitors, nor were they positioned as resistance fighters and heroes. Like millions of other people, they were victims of Nazi persecution. In 1995, the German Federal Supreme Court of Justice (Bundesgerichtshof) likewise distanced itself from Nazi military justice and suggested a reversal of rulings against deserters. In 1997, the German Lower House of Parliament (Deutscher Bundestag) formulated a resolution that in 1998 was passed into law which allowed for the rehabilitation of deserters predicated on the examination of each individual case. Two amendments to this act in 2002 and 2009 abolished the practice of examining individual cases and the outcome was a blanket rehabilitation of deserters.

Commemoration returns to the local level

When the legal rehabilitation of deserters was concluded, the subject returned to the local level. This was evident in the continued construction of monuments and the travelling exhibition entitled *Was damals Recht war… – Soldaten und Zivilisten vor Gerichten der Wehrmacht* (What was deemed fully legal at the time... – Soldiers and civilians tried before the courts of the military) (Baumann, & Koch, 2008). The exhibition opened in 2007 and has since visited more than 50 cities. It further disseminated the legal rejection of the Wehrmacht judiciary and its decisions. There are now more than 50 monuments, plaques, commemorative stones, names of streets and town squares, Stolpersteine (lit. stumbling blocks) or information boards at cemeteries that mark deserters' graves. The existence of these types of monuments and their continued construction is an indicator of a social change that would have appeared unthinkable in 1945. In the 1980s, these counter monuments were controversial, but their provocations generated parliamentary debate and a political, legal, and popular debate about memory practices and the nation's understanding of its own history. The fact that construction continues is indicative of the extent to which the experience of deserters is now anchored in commemorative culture. In contrast to the controversies of the 1980s, the construction of monuments is no longer initiated by groups of individuals who seek popular support and the advocacy of political parties. The political parties themselves are now beginning to take the initiative. Members of the extra-parliamentary groups active in the 1980s have moved through the political system and are now in positions of influence and power. The increased political and societal acceptance of deserters and deserter monuments ensures that initiatives are less controversial than they were even twenty-five years ago.

Conclusion: Deserters and their place in the German collective memory

Although it has been 20 years since the legal judgement against deserters was set aside, this process of reconciliation and understanding is still incomplete. It has not been embraced by all sections of society, and if one compares the approximately 50 deserter monuments to the tens of thousands of traditional war monuments, it becomes clear that while the counter monuments have challenged the status quo, they have not established for themselves a pre-eminent place in commemorative practices. This is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, with the exception of some stray voices, the monuments meet with broad social acceptance. The fierce debates of the past have abated and deserter monuments are no longer provocative. Their potential for triggering a broad social debate has, however, also subsided, although this is partly the result of a lack of information and indifference. On the other hand, the monuments erected so far, like any other monument, suffer from a lack of attention, despite their gradual entry in memory culture. They are 'invisible' according to the characterisation of the famous Austrian author Robert Musil (1978) and the public response to them is minimal. They merely play a "sun and holiday role", with at best a sporadic or dutiful renewing of its validity and memory; they do not hold a living "everyday role" (pp. 506-509). The lively debates that were part of a practice of communicative memory leading up to their construction have been buried in the process of their cultural framing. Indeed, the topic of deserters now struggles to move beyond specialised academic circles. To ensure that not only a small, educated élite engages in discussions, further educational efforts are required in order to emphasise the potential this type of counter monument has in generating societal debate (Dräger, 2017b).

The impact of the deserter monuments is still open to debate. They remain dependent on the historical context and social frame of reference. Every period decides anew whether or not particular historical matters are worthy of being remembered and whether the related monuments will remain in the active cultural memory or will become a passive memory. Apart from this basic historical contingence of perspective, evaluations of, and the socio-cultural discourse about, the term 'treason' is of course also subject to ideological and historical-political instrumentalisation. In light of current armed conflicts and future military challenges, there is considerable value in reinvigorating the debate that saw their initial acceptance and transfer it to other contexts. They were characterised in the 1980s as a means of coping with the past as much as with the present and the future. Today as well, they can act as provocateurs, thereby ensuring

that their historical re-collective function is not limited to the German context. There is, however, some reappraisal occurring in pop culture and memory culture at the level of public history. The latest example of this is the film *Im Labyrinth des Schweigens* (lit. In the Labyrinth of Silence, Germany 2014), whose English title, *Labyrinth of Lies,* is equally apt. The most spectacular and impressive example of the transient nature of the social frame of reference is the posthumous publication of Siegfried Lenz's (1926–2014) novel *Der Überläufer* (The Defector), which was to have been published in 1952, but was withheld as it did not conform to the political climate of the time. The response of present-day literary critics, who fully embrace the work, has helped bring it significant public attention, thereby renewing, as it were, the subject of desertion and public discourse about it.

The debate in Germany also had consequences internationally. It triggered similar debates in other countries and sparked comparable initiatives. In June 2001 a monument at the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, Staffordshire, UK, was erected to commemorate 306 soldiers from Great Britain and the Commonwealth who were executed during the First World War for desertion and cowardice. In Austria since the turn of the millennium, the rehabilitation of deserters from the Second World War and the associated issue of monuments for deserters has attracted debate. In 2005 and 2009 respectively, two laws were passed: the Recognition Act (Anerkennungsgesetz) and the Reversal- and Rehabilitation Act (Aufhebungs- und Rehabilitationsgesetz). In October 2012, the decision was made to install a deserter monument on the Ballhausplatz in Vienna, which was inaugurated in the autumn of 2014. There is still the question of whether the German, British and Austrian debates will lead to similar discussions in other countries. This would seem possible, for example in the US, where the treatment of deserters and 'draft dodgers' from the Vietnam War remain problematic; in the states of the former Yugoslavia, whose deserters have also contributed to the change of opinion in Germany and in Europe at large; in Syria, and in the Ukraine. If deserter monuments have so far been considered something specifically German, if not thought of as a special case in history or even as a *Sonderweg* (a theory in German historiography that posits that Germany's course from aristocracy to democracy was a unique phenomenon), they do offer ample material for discussion at an international level.

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About the Author

Marco Dräger studied history and Latin at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen and received his doctorate with a study about the changing face of Wehrmacht deserters in Germany and their gradual entry into Germany's memory culture in the form of monuments. Currently he works as a teacher in Lower-Saxony and also is a teaching officer at the universities of Hanover, Lüneburg and Göttingen. His foci of research are history didactics and culture of memory.

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