

The New Documentation Center on National Socialism Opens in Munich (April 2015)

Abstract

In an interview the director of the new Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism in Munich explains the importance of establishing a permanent exhibition on the perpetrators in what was once called “the capital of the National Socialist movement.”

Source

“We Are at a ‘Perpetrator Site,’ that’s Important“

The Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism opens on April 30. Director Winfried Nerdinger on architecture as a statement, the idea behind the building and the German problem with perpetrators.

No, the history of the Documentation Centre does not reflect especially well on Munich. Not only have cities like Nuremberg or Berlin had such educational centers for many years already, but the opening was postponed four times. And before the first visitor could even set foot in the building, the Centre has already changed directors. The countdown has started for director Winfried Nerdinger. The invitations for the ceremonial opening on April 30 have been sent out. From May 1, the building will be open to the general public.

Welt am Sonntag: Did you deliberately choose April 30?

Winfried Nerdinger: Certainly. Seventy years ago, on April 30, 1945, the Americans occupied Munich City Hall, one day after liberating Dachau concentration camp. It was an occupation and a liberation from Nazism. This was the beginning of denazification and re-education in Munich. The return to democracy.

Welt am Sonntag: April 30 also marks the seventieth anniversary of Hitler’s death. That is why some people aren’t so happy about the choice of date.

Nerdinger: Of course, one can construct an inappropriate death date for any day in the calendar. But I would find it quite strange if we weren’t allowed to commemorate something anymore just because somebody feels they have to connect it to Hitler.

Welt am Sonntag: People are very sensitive. There were heated debates about the name of the documentation center because the acronym NS comes from the “perpetrators’ language.”

Nerdinger: I also find that quite artificial. For one thing, there are already several NS documentation centers in Germany. For another, we also speak of NS writings, NS crimes and the NS regime. It is standard terminology, among scholars as well.

Welt am Sonntag: The federal government didn’t want to participate in funding the Documentation Centre because, and I quote, it prefers to support “Victim Sites” rather than “Perpetrator Sites.”

Nerdinger: That was a temporary political trend. The one-third system, according to which federal, state and municipal governments share the costs of 30 million euros equally is long since enshrined in agreements. But it is correct that we are at a “perpetrator site” here. And that is also important.

Welt am Sonntag: What do you mean?

Nerdinger: The German culture of memory has long concentrated solely on the victims and thus left perpetrators out of the picture. The focus on the victims, however, does not explain why they became victims, why people were killed or tortured. In order to understand that, we must confront the perpetrators: Where they came from, from which environments, their biographies, the social and societal contexts that facilitated their criminal careers. Ultimately, we need to examine the entire so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* or national community that supported the Nazi regime and whose racism ensured that it functioned. This only happened in the 1990s.

Welt am Sonntag: This is a historic site?

Nerdinger: Yes, we're on historic ground. Where the Documentation Centre now stands was once the "Brown Building": the first prestigious party headquarters of the National Socialists, a noble, classicist townhouse of the Klenze period. The Nazis bought it in the midst of the Depression, after their first big electoral victories. They had it ostentatiously remodeled and naturally also made a statement in the distinguished Maxvorstadt: Namely that the Nazi Party, which had emerged if not wholly but largely from the fumes of the beer cellars, had finally arrived in the upper middle class.

Welt am Sonntag: The NS Documentation Centre instead of the bombed-out Brown Building is also intended to make a statement. What is the Documentation Centre and what is it not?

Nerdinger: It is not a museum in the sense that it presents original objects from the Nazi period. It is a site of learning and memory, which means that it provides all the facts on the history of Nazism in Munich. And the permanent exhibition is didactic, structured according to educational objectives: There is an auditorium, four seminar rooms, we have four full-time educators and a large program for continuing education, seminars and youth groups of all ages. What people should take away with them is that the topic is a current one. It still matters to us today.

Welt am Sonntag: An entire floor of the building is devoted to the period from 1945 to the present.

Nerdinger: That was controversial at first. Some documentation centers only deal with the period up to 1945. It was part of our idea to look at continuities in personnel, that is, the postwar careers of Nazis in the bureaucracy, the judicial system and public life. Or at the persistence of Nazi ideas, of anti-Semitism and right-wing radicalism. The exhibition ends in the present, for example with the NSU trial.

Welt am Sonntag: Sites of memory always have an aesthetic dimension as well. The Munich NS Documentation Center has not been well received by critics in this respect. They miss an "eloquent architectural stance."

Nerdinger: One can always argue about architecture, for example about whether white, the color of innocence, is right for a documentation center about Nazism. But the building does not simply blend into the background. On the contrary: It stands out like a sore thumb. It is clearly a symbol of modernism situated confidently in the (neo)-Classicist surroundings of Königsplatz: Concrete versus natural stone, asymmetry versus symmetry. One can see that Munich has confronted its past. That is what matters.

Winfried Nerdinger, 70, is considered difficult. For two decades, the Technical University professor and son of a member of the anti-Nazi resistance tried the nerves of official Munich with his call for a documentation center on the history of Nazism. He referred to the "Capital of the Movement" as the "Capital of Suppression." It has been clear since his time as head of the Munich Technical University's architectural museum that he is a good exhibition organizer. When the city dissolved its contract with the designated founding director by mutual agreement in 2011, Nerdinger jumped in—the first idea for the documentation center had been his anyway.

Source: Hermann Weiß, "Wir sind an einem 'Täter-Ort' Das ist wichtig," *Die Welt*, April 18, 2015.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

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