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Sacred Space, Mourning and the War Dead in Protestant Germany, 1945–*

Thomas Brodie

As is now well appreciated, the 1960s constituted a period of profound socio-economic, cultural and political change in West Germany.¹ Whereas the ruinous economic conditions of the immediate postwar period partly lasted into the early 1950s, by that decade's end the 'economic miracle' was well and truly underway.² These dramatically improving financial circumstances permitted the creation of an expansive—if culturally conservative—welfare state, whose planners' ambitions embraced increasingly utopian goals by the 1960s.³ In political terms, the conservative parliamentary system cultivated by Konrad Adenauer during the 1950s slowly gave way to a more liberal, participatory democracy, in a process often characterized as a 'second foundation' of the Federal Republic.⁴

In the realm of culture also, West German society was changing fast. Whereas the 1950s had been marked by the Christian Democratic reassertion of socially conservative values following the trauma of war and 'total defeat', the 1960s witnessed a liberalization of attitudes towards gender, sex and authority among large sections of the young in particular.⁵ The 1960s furthermore radically changed the religious landscape of the Federal Republic, with sharp declines in church membership and

* I would like to thank Marlise Appel and Stephan Linck for generously allowing me to use their photographs of the redesigned war memorials in Lübeck.

¹ See A. von der Goltz, *The Other '68ers: Student Protest and Christian Democracy in West Germany* (Oxford, 2021); F. Biess, *German Angst: Fear and Democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Oxford, 2020), especially pp. 130–2; T. S. Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978* (Cambridge, 2013); M. Frese, J. Paulus and K. Teppe (eds), *Demokratisierung und gesellschaftlicher Aufbruch: die sechziger Jahre als Wendezeit der Bundesrepublik* (Paderborn, 2003); U. Herbert (ed.), *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland: Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung 1945–1980* (Göttingen, 2002); F.-W. Kersting, J. Reulecke and H.-U. Thamer (eds), *Die zweite Gründung der Bundesrepublik: Generationswechsel und intellektuelle Wortergreifungen 1955 bis 1975* (Stuttgart, 2010); K. C. Lammers, 'Glücksfall Bundesrepublik: New Germany and the 1960s', *Contemporary European History*, 17, 1 (2008), pp. 127–34.

² A. Sywotek, 'From Starvation to Excess? Trends in the Consumer Society from the 1940s to the 1970s', in H. Schissler (ed.), *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 217–27; M. Wildt, 'Plurality of Taste: Food and Consumption in West Germany during the 1950s', *History Workshop Journal*, 39, 1 (1995), pp. 23–41.

³ See W. Süß, 'Umbau am "Modell Deutschland": sozialer Wandel, ökonomische Krise und wohlfahrtsstaatliche Reformpolitik in der Bundesrepublik "nach dem Boom"', *Journal of Modern European History*, 9, 2 (2011), pp. 215–40, here pp. 217–19.

⁴ See Kersting, Reulecke and Thamer, *Die zweite Gründung der Bundesrepublik*; Lammers, 'Glücksfall Bundesrepublik'; Goltz, *Other '68ers*, pp. 10–11.

⁵ See D. Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, 2005); S. Steinbacher, *Wie der Sex nach Deutschland kam: der Kampf um Sittlichkeit und Anstand in der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Munich, 2011); J. Häberlen, 'Feeling Like a Child: Dreams and Practices of Sexuality in the West German Alternative Left during the Long 1970s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25, 2 (2016), pp. 219–45; M. E. Ruff, *The Wayward Flock: Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); Schissler, *Miracle Years*; Goltz, *Other '68ers*, pp. 110–18.

attendance undermining the privileged societal position enjoyed by both major confessions during the Adenauer era.⁶ In legislative terms, the long 1960s featured several transformative developments, such as the liberalization of access to contraception as of 1961 and the (partial) legalization of homosexuality in 1969, which collectively heralded a decisive departure from the conservative gender policies of the early postwar period.⁷

Nevertheless, it was the profoundly traditional setting of a Lutheran parish church that provided the stage for a culture war in early 1967 that gripped the attention of media and audiences across the Federal Republic. The church in question was located in Flensburg, near the Danish border, some 160 kilometres north of the cosmopolitan city of Hamburg. At the very centre of this controversy stood the parish of Sankt Marien, and specifically its memorial to the fallen of both world wars, originally constructed in 1921, which consisted primarily of the sculpture of a sleeping soldier wearing the uniform of a First World War German infantryman, including a sword and steel helmet (Fig. 1).⁸

The origins of this controversy lay in late 1966 and concerned the actions of three pastors, Gerhard Jastram (b. 1935), Wolfgang Friedrichs (b. 1922) and Dr Oswald Krause (b. 1911), who were attached to the parish of St. Marien, as well as their



Figure 1: The war memorial at St. Marien, Flensburg, early 1967.

Source: Landeskirchliches Archiv der Nordkirche, Kiel.

⁶ T. Großbölting, *Losing Heaven: Religion in Germany since 1945* (New York, 2016), pp. 105–9.

⁷ C. Griffiths, *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany* (Oxford, 2021); C. Kuller, *Familienpolitik im föderativen Sozialstaat: die Formierung eines Politikfeldes in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1975* (Munich, 2004).

⁸ See Evangelisches Zentralarchiv Berlin (henceforth EZA), 81/2174, 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967, p. 6. For the sleeping soldier motif in German war memorials of the 1920s, S. Goebel, 'Re-Membered and Re-Mobilized: The "Sleeping Dead" in Interwar Germany and Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, 4 (2004), pp. 487–501. The image in Figure 1 can be viewed at <https://www.nordkirche.de/nachrichten/nachrichten-detail/nachricht/ausstellung-erinnert-an-flensburger-denkmalstreit-vor-50-jahren> (accessed 20 Feb. 2023).

superior, Provost (*Propst*) Wilhelm Knuth (b. 1905). When asked by the representatives of a veterans' association for permission to mark the centenary of the former 86th Regiment's foundation in St. Marien, Knuth and the three pastors refused, after consulting with one another and the parish council. Knuth justified this decision by claiming that as 'reconciliation among the peoples and peace' represented the 'most urgent task' of the present, 'the centenary of a military unit is not an appropriate occasion for a religious service'.⁹ Suffice it to say, this rejection did not prove popular with the veterans in question, particularly as the 86th Regiment had strong historical connections with Flensburg and its surrounding region.¹⁰ A meeting between both parties held at the Flensburg pub the Schwarzer Walfisch (Black Whale) on 13 December 1966 ended acrimoniously.¹¹

Crucially, this disagreement formed only the start of controversies regarding memory politics at the parish. In early February 1967, Jastram, Friedrichs and Krause went on the offensive, publishing a pamphlet appealing for the removal of St. Marien's war memorial, declaring that 'War memorials do not belong in churches!'¹² The resulting controversy inflamed passions far beyond Schleswig-Holstein, with national West German newspapers and current affairs magazines such as *Die Welt* and *Der Spiegel* eagerly covering the ensuing culture war. As one conservative commentator lamented in early March 1967, 'The public discussions have encompassed the entire Federal Republic.'¹³ Such was the interest generated by the controversy across West German society that the *New York Times* ran a story about it on 19 March, much to the dismay of Holstein's Lutheran bishop, Friedrich Hübner.¹⁴ The Protestant Church ultimately engaged the University of Kiel's Theology Faculty as adjudicators of the dispute, resulting in a divided response, with senior professors denouncing the pastors' arguments and six junior colleagues supporting them in competing public statements.¹⁵

Eventually, the parish council of St. Marien concluded the dispute by deciding on a compromise, albeit one more to the taste of the three pastors than their conservative opponents. The sculpture of the sleeping soldier was removed from the church itself and reinstalled in the parsonage garden. By contrast, the renovations left in place the plaques and memorial books which had accompanied the sleeping soldier inside the church's 'hall of honour' and installed an altar where the removed monument had been located. Finally, in October 1972, the Working Group for Victims of War and Veterans Associations, under the leadership of the local notable, Prince Friedrich Ferdinand of

⁹ Landeskirchliches Archiv der Nordkirche, Kiel (henceforth LANK), 11.11/6117, letter by Wilhelm Knuth, dated 1 Oct. 1966.

¹⁰ EZA, 81/2174, Friedrich Ferdinand's letter dated 11 Mar. 1967. For the 86th, C. B. Christensen, 'National Identity and Veteran Culture in a Border Region: The Danish Minority in the German Army during the First World War', *War in History*, 27, 1 (2020), pp. 57–80.

¹¹ See LANK, 20.01, 33, 'Niederschrift über die Sitzung am 13.12.1966', dated 15 Dec. 1966.

¹² EZA, 686/8759, 'Gefallenenerehrungen haben in Kirchen keinen Platz!'

¹³ EZA, 81/2174, Friedrich Ferdinand's letter dated 11 Mar. 1967; LANK, 11.11/5832, 'Evangelischer Presseverband Nord', 14 Mar. 1967; 'Steinerne Trost', *Der Spiegel*, 19 Mar. 1967, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46437680.html>; EZA, 686/8759, press clippings in 'Berlin Presse-Rundfunk-Fernseh-Spiegel'.

¹⁴ '3 German Clerics Win Fight Against a War Memorial', *The New York Times*, 19 Mar. 1967, <https://www.nytimes.com/1967/03/19/archives/3-german-clerics-win-fight-against-a-war-memorial.html>; EZA, 686/8759, 'Zum Bischofsbericht—Sprengelkonvent 1967', dated 10 May 1967.

¹⁵ LANK, 11.11/6117, 'Votum zum Flensburger Pastorenstreit', 'Kieler Professoren erheben Votum', 6 June 1967.

Schleswig-Holstein, acquired ownership of the sleeping soldier from the parish of St. Marien. On 24 October, this group moved the monument one final time, south within Schleswig-Holstein to the village of Tackesdorf, on the North Sea-Baltic Canal. Here it was placed as a war memorial at a property belonging to the German War Graves Commission, a location which is no longer accessible to the public.¹⁶

This short-lived but fierce culture war speaks to a number of themes central to the historiography of 1960s West Germany. Most obviously, it evokes the theme of memory and the ways in which over the decade's course younger generations began to challenge the comforting myths and historical narratives of the Adenauer era.¹⁷ Generational conflict certainly played a part in the Flensburg controversy, with pastors Jastram and Friedrichs discernibly younger than both the local church leadership and many of their secular critics. The pastors concluded a speech given to their parish congregation on 27 February by explicitly appealing 'to the older generation'. They continued, 'After everything that has happened, it is difficult for you to understand us, and also for ourselves not easy to understand you.'¹⁸

It is surprising, therefore, that this striking episode has received little scholarly attention, with key works on West German Protestantism in the 1960s passing it over entirely.¹⁹ This state of affairs perhaps reflects the extensive separation of literatures regarding memory in postwar Germany, on the one hand, and religious change, on the other, with the Flensburg dispute falling into the historiographical gap between these fields.²⁰ The only dedicated study was published in 2017, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the controversy, by experts in regional church history Stephan Linck and Broder Schwensen. This short work primarily aims at engaging a wider audience within the Flensburg region itself and quite reasonably argues that the controversy stands as testimony to the increasing liberalization of West German Protestantism during the 1960s.²¹

This essay's purpose is not to dispute this eminently defensible conclusion but to build upon it, and to reflect upon the Flensburg controversy's place within a wider history of the roles that have been played by church spaces in the mourning of Germany's war dead since 1918, and since 1945 in particular. The article also breaks new ground by analysing letters submitted to church authorities regarding the Flensburg controversy,

¹⁶ For helpful chronologies of the dispute see Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Norddeutschland, 'Ausstellung erinnert an "Flensburger Denkmalstreit" vor 50 Jahren', <https://www.nordkirche.de/nachrichten/nachrichten-detail/nachricht/ausstellung-erinnert-an-flensburger-denkmalstreit-vor-50-jahren> (accessed 20 Feb. 2023); S. Linck and B. Schwensen (eds), *Bruchlinien: der Flensburger Kirchen-Streit um das Krieger-Gedenken zu St. Marien* (Flensburg, 2017).

¹⁷ Key works include R. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Los Angeles, 2003); N. Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich, 2012); N. Gregor, *Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past* (New Haven, 2008); M. Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*.

¹⁸ EZA, 81/2174, 'Bericht über einen Streit und dessen Folgen', document p. 36.

¹⁹ See K. Fitschen, S. Hermle, K. Kunter, C. Lepp and A. Roggenkamp-Kaufmann (eds), *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus: Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1960er und 70er Jahre* (Göttingen, 2011); B. Hey and V. Wittmütz (eds), *1968 und die Kirchen* (Bielefeld, 2008).

²⁰ An excellent exception is M. E. Ruff, *The Battle for the Catholic Past in Germany, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, 2017).

²¹ Linck and Schwensen, *Bruchlinien*.

as a means of accessing public perceptions of events and the emotions thereby provoked. Indeed, one of this piece's central arguments is that the war memorial's location within the parish church of St. Marien endowed the ensuing culture war with a particular emotional charge, perhaps greater than which would have accompanied decisions regarding the design or potential relocation of a memorial in secular space.²² This dynamic ensures that the 'Flensburg Memorial Controversy' functions as something of a microhistory, bringing the otherwise hidden private emotions invested in a site of remembrance to the archival surface.²³

My overall argument is that when we explore the powerful emotional reactions provoked by the controversy, new insights are provided into the difficulties of changing the spatial configurations of mourning and commemoration at the local level in the later Bonn Republic. Read against the grain, the Flensburg controversy of 1966/67 helps us understand why so few parish churches of either confession carried out changes to their war memorials in the late twentieth century, even as these spaces' symbolism became ever more out of touch with the dominant cultural sensibilities of West and, especially, reunited German society. Paradoxically, therefore, the Flensburg controversy hints at the limits to the Federal Republic's cultural liberalization during the 1960s, as well as its extent.²⁴ The article concludes by touching upon contemporary attempts within the Protestant Church of Northern Germany to grapple with this inheritance and the ongoing presence of profoundly nationalist war memorials in so many of its churches. In so doing, it ponders the relationship between sacred space and historical memory in the contemporary Berlin Republic.²⁵

I. St. Marien's War Memorial in Context, 1918–1967

The decision to create a war memorial in St. Marien was taken by regional church officials in the aftermath of Imperial Germany's defeat in November 1918. As historians of the period have noted, churches had already played prominent roles in mobilizing their congregations for war between 1914 and 1918, and Protestant parishes in particular were often hotbeds of nationalist sentiment.²⁶ The clergy of both confessions, moreover, had assumed responsibility for consoling the bereaved on Germany's home front, and they continued this pastoral function during the postwar period.²⁷

²² The contemporary emotive power of sacred spaces is noted in Meng, *Shattered Spaces*; P. Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after the Second World War* (London, 2020), pp. 165–8; G. Margalit, *Guilt, Suffering, and Memory: Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II* (Bloomington, IN, 2010), pp. 61–75.

²³ See J. Brewer, 'Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life', *Cultural and Social History*, 7, 1 (2010), pp. 87–109.

²⁴ For conservative and nationalist sentiments in the late Bonn Republic, J. Cronin, 'The Bitburg Affair and the Beginnings of Jewish Activism in 1980s West Germany', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 65 (2020), pp. 167–84, here pp. 171–4; A. Confino, 'Edgar Reitz's Heimat and German Nationhood: Film, Memory, and Understandings of the Past', *German History*, 16, 2 (1998), pp. 185–208.

²⁵ These contemporary efforts can be followed at Denk Mall, Aktivitäten, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/aktivitaeten/> (accessed 23 Feb. 2023).

²⁶ R. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–50; R. Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 320–5. The dominance of Christian iconographies is highlighted by C. Siebrecht, *The Aesthetics of Loss: German Women's Art of the First World War* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 130–48.

Ecclesiastical spaces accordingly proved highly popular as locations for war memorials during the Weimar era, in Catholic as well as Protestant regions of the Reich.²⁸ St. Marien was no exception in this regard, with the president of the region's synod, the parish council and Flensburg's mayor deciding, in May 1920, to create a memorial for the fallen of the past war, to be located in St. Marien's side chapel.²⁹ Contemporary parish memorials in Catholic Germany typically sought to endow wartime death and bereavement with meaning by employing visual imageries connected to the crucifixion, such as *pietà* motifs. In Lutheran St. Marien, such theological work was performed by a biblical quotation placed around the chapel's entrance. The verse chosen was John 15:13, 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'³⁰

From its very inception, this project represented a profoundly nationalist form of artistic expression which appealed to both religious and patriotic sentiments. The parish council's minutes of 15 May 1920 explicitly stated that the new 'outstanding memorial' would be dedicated not only 'to the memory of the fallen' but 'simultaneously' to 'the same German spirit which so splendidly prevailed in Flensburg on 14 March of this year'—a reference to the recent League of Nations plebiscite in Central Schleswig, in which the vast majority voted to remain within the Reich rather than join Denmark.³¹ Moreover, as Stefan Goebel has argued, the very aesthetic chosen, that of a sleeping soldier, carried implicitly nationalist and revanchist undertones in interwar Germany, evoking 'the dream of a triumphant return of the sleeping dead to save the Reich'.³²

Recent research has indeed begun to uncover the roles played by parish churches on the German home front during the Second World War as the most influential physical spaces for mourning the fallen.³³ In August 1942, for example, Protestant Church officials in Brandenburg released instructions for the conduct of commemorative services that seamlessly incorporated existing parish war memorials into the planned order of service. That the laying of wreaths could be normatively envisaged as taking place at the 'war memorial in the church or in front of it' hints at the ubiquity of such sites across Mark Brandenburg's parishes.³⁴ The churches' prominence within these existing local topographies of commemoration is surely one reason the Nazi regime was unable to challenge ecclesiastical pre-eminence in this area and effectively relied upon the clergy to comfort the bereaved as the war progressed.³⁵

During the early postwar period, the churches extended their influence over societal rituals of mourning and commemoration, at least in those regions occupied by the Western Allies. Following the Nazi regime's destruction in spring 1945, they possessed

²⁸ B. Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 257–62.

²⁹ EZA, 81/2174, quoted in 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967, minutes, pp. 6–7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4. For Catholic regions, Ziemann, *War Experiences*, pp. 260–2. The translation of John 15:13 is from the New International Version.

³¹ EZA, 81/2174, quoted in 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967, pp. 6–7; N. Jebens and M. Klatt, 'The Negotiation of National and Regional Identity during the Schleswig-Plebiscite following the First World War', *First World War Studies*, 5, 2 (2014), pp. 181–211.

³² Goebel, 'Re-Membered and Re-Mobilized', p. 501.

³³ See M. Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 86, 98, 273; N. Kramer, *Volksgenossinnen an der Heimatfront: Mobilisierung, Verhalten, Erinnerung* (Göttingen, 2011), p. 203; T. Brodie, *German Catholicism at War, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 161–4.

³⁴ Evangelisches Landeskirchlichesarchiv Berlin, 14-559, report of 14 Aug. 1942.

³⁵ Brodie, *German Catholicism at War*, pp. 161–4; Kramer, *Volksgenossinnen*, p. 203.

no rival in this area.³⁶ As Neil Gregor has argued regarding predominantly Lutheran Nuremberg, the Protestant Church was a key ‘site of public pronouncement’ during this initial postwar decade and, moreover, placed ‘the sufferings and anxieties of the bereaved’ at the centre of its pastoral work.³⁷ Nevertheless, this societal prominence enjoyed by the churches during the early postwar period bequeathed in and of itself no guide as to *how* the war dead should be commemorated within parish communities. As the Protestant Church leadership in Westphalia argued in September 1954, questions regarding the design of parish war memorials ‘will only lead to an appropriate solution if all those involved, representatives of the parish and commissioned artists, understand the meaning of installing a church memorial’. This article observed that ‘in the first years after the war many parishes found provisional solutions, such as placing wreaths and name plaques in church spaces. These solutions have, meanwhile, revealed themselves to be inadequate and unsatisfactory.’³⁸ As this vignette implies, after 1945 clergymen were confronted with the daunting task of representing within sacred space a conflict in which Germany had irrefutably perpetrated genocidal war crimes, and whose end witnessed not only the Reich’s ‘total defeat’ but also ‘destruction and human loss on an immense scale’.³⁹

The Protestant Church of Schleswig-Holstein attempted to meet this theological challenge by issuing instructions regarding the design of new war memorials to its parishes—including St. Marien—as early as 24 January 1951. The guidance encapsulated the latent tensions within the church’s emerging cultures of commemoration during the early postwar period. On the one hand, the clerical leadership was keen to signal a departure from the overtly nationalist aesthetic so many parishes had embraced in their war memorials of the Weimar era. Its instructions stressed that new designs should be ‘plainer and humbler in expression than many memorials for the victims of the First World War’. A ‘simple perpetuation’ of existing commemorative aesthetics was rejected as impossible. The instructions asked parishes to avoid inscriptions and imageries evoking ‘heroic patriotic glory’ regarding the fallen of the Second World War, describing the ‘emotive and dramatic’ tone struck by ‘many old war memorials’ as henceforth inappropriate. The church leadership insisted that the war was to be interpreted as ‘divine judgement’ upon a sinful humanity, and memorials should focus ‘more decisively than before’ on ‘biblical word and image, calling observers to atonement, faith and hope’.⁴⁰

Such arguments certainly support Reinhart Koselleck’s argument that 1945 marked a caesura within the history of European war memorials and the end of a particular iconography, glorifying patriotic sacrifice.⁴¹ Regarding aesthetics, the Protestant Church

³⁶ See Black, *Death in Berlin*, pp. 163–4; Brodie, *German Catholicism at War*, pp. 161–4, 224–42.

³⁷ N. Gregor, ‘“Is He Still Alive, or Long Since Dead?”: Loss, Absence and Remembrance in Nuremberg, 1945–1956’, *German History*, 21, 2 (2003), pp. 183–203, here pp. 184–5.

³⁸ EZA, 2/3561, ‘Amtsblatt der Evangelischen Kirche in Westfalen Nr. 12 1954’, ‘Errichtung von Gedenkmalen für die Toten des letzten Weltkrieges’, 11 Sept. 1954.

³⁹ I. Kershaw, *The End: Germany 1944–45* (London, 2011), p. xiv.

⁴⁰ LANK, 20.01/33, ‘Gefallenengedächtnisstätten’, 24 Jan. 1951.

⁴¹ R. Koselleck, ‘Sluices of Memory and Sediments of Experience: The Influence of the Two World Wars on Social Consciousness’, in R. Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. S. Franzel and S.-L. Hoffmann (Stanford, 2018), pp. 217–23.

leadership were indeed keen to draw a line under past practices: the instructions of 1951 requested that memorials not be placed in the main sanctuary of churches, and certainly not near the altar. Rather, best practice would be to consider relocating existing war memorials to a 'special room' within the church, such as a side chapel. Another approved suggestion was to provide a book of remembrance displaying the names of the fallen.⁴² Crucially, the church leadership sought to exert control over unfolding commemorative practices regarding the Second World War by ordering that all plans for future memorials be presented to its building committee for approval.⁴³

Certainly, these instructions represented a conscious attempt on the clerical hierarchy's part to tailor sacred spaces for the commemorative exigencies of the post-1945 era. In hindsight, however, what strikes the reader is how firmly these guidelines remained grounded within a particular nationalist sensibility, even if this was now to be expressed in a more reserved fashion than had been the case before 1945. After all, as Stephan Linck highlights, the Protestant Church in Schleswig-Holstein had overwhelmingly supported the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945 and continued to represent a bastion of national-conservative sentiment during the early postwar period.⁴⁴ Given the NSDAP's popularity in Schleswig-Holstein even prior to 1933, this should not, perhaps, be surprising. As Monica Black has recently observed, Schleswig-Holstein's population featured a higher proportion of former Nazi party members than present in any other West German state.⁴⁵ Permitted by the British occupiers to administer denazification in house, the Protestant hierarchy ensured that only a tiny minority of clergymen suffered consequences for their actions during the Third Reich.⁴⁶ For their part, during the later 1940s, clergymen used their influence to lobby for the release of former Nazi officials and party members from British captivity.⁴⁷ Revealingly, when, in November 1945, Schleswig-Holstein's church hierarchy published a response to the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt, it avoided any mention of the suffering Germany had inflicted on other peoples.⁴⁸

In 1951, such sentiments continued to pervade the guidelines concerning the design of war memorials. The church hierarchy avoided any notion of German complicity for the Second World War, which was viewed as God's universal punishment on 'a world which had rejected him' and 'not simply as a political-historical event'. Instead, the guidance provided to parishes articulated an axiomatic sense of the German people's victimhood, lamenting its 'thousand-fold sufferings' incurred during 'the lost war'. The document revealingly invoked the 'special catastrophe of 1945', hinting at an understanding of the conflict centring not only on the vast human losses incurred by Germany during the war's final months, but also on a palpable desire to infuse the

⁴² LANK, 20.01/33, 'Gefallenengedächtnisstätten', 24 Jan. 1951.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ S. Linck, *Neue Anfänge? Der Umgang der Evangelischen Kirche mit der NS-Vergangenheit und ihr Verhältnis zum Judentum. Die Landeskirchen in Nordelbien*, vol. 1: 1945–1965 (Kiel, 2013).

⁴⁵ M. Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (New York, 2020), p. 177.

⁴⁶ Linck, *Neue Anfänge?*, pp. 63–5, 94–8.

⁴⁷ A. H. Beattie, 'Lobby for the Nazi Elite? The Protestant Churches and Civilian Internment in the British Zone of Occupied Germany, 1945–1948', *German History*, 35, 1 (2017), pp. 43–70.

⁴⁸ Linck, *Neue Anfänge?*, pp. 102–3.

Reich's defeat with a sense of pathos.⁴⁹ As Gregor notes, during this very period, the Lutheran Church in Nuremberg represented 'an institution which projected an essentially national-conservative memory of the war'.⁵⁰

Over the following years, the parish of St. Marien unremarkably followed the instructions it received in January 1951, in marked contrast to the controversies of 1966/67. As we have already seen, its war memorial was already located away from the main sanctuary in a side chapel. In 1956, a book of remembrance was placed near the sleeping soldier, inscribed with the names of those parish members who had lost their lives during the Second World War, along with those whose relatives now belonged to St. Marien, having come to the area as expellees after 1945.⁵¹ Pastors Jastram, Krause and Friedrichs themselves conceded that the commemorative practices which accompanied the memorial primarily represented acts of familial mourning. In 1967, they noted that 'at the end of religious services, including during the week and especially on days marking the memory of the dead, relatives of the fallen come to this place. Sometimes flowers or wreaths are placed.'⁵² Even the parish's decision to incorporate the memorial to the Second World War within the same space as that for the First was a commonplace practice across the Federal Republic, albeit one which complicated the church hierarchy's stated desire to establish a new commemorative aesthetic for the post-1945 era.⁵³

II. A Theology of Space: The Pastors' Critique

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a certain generational shift within the parish of St. Marien, with the arrival of pastors Oswald Krause, in 1957, Gerhard Jastram, in 1964, and Wolfgang Friedrichs, in 1965.⁵⁴ An early indication of changing times at the parish was provided by the renovation of its interior carried out in 1958, designed to bring it more into line with the Modernist principles outlined by Paul Betts in this Special Issue. As part of this reform, the memorial plaque to the German dead of the Herero and Nama War of 1904–1906 was removed, although this decision was seemingly driven by aesthetic rather than political considerations.⁵⁵ That the removal of war memorials from the long nineteenth century lacked the political charge attached to those for the two world wars is highlighted by a letter of November 1962 written by a church official in Hamburg. This individual noted that many parish communities were simply removing memorials to the German–Danish War of 1848–1851, as their 'stylistically

⁴⁹ LANK, 20.01/33, 'Gefallenengedächtnisstätten', 24 Jan. 1951. For the centrality of German suffering in 1945 to early West German consciousness, N. Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939–1945* (London, 2015), pp. 547–8; R. Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (London, 2009), pp. 365–8; Gregor, *Haunted City*. For the public visibility of German losses in 1945, Black, *Death in Berlin*, pp. 145–8.

⁵⁰ Gregor, "'Is He Still Alive, or Long Since Dead?'"', p. 184.

⁵¹ EZA, 81/2174, 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967, report, p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, report p. 4.

⁵³ See Gregor, *Haunted City*.

⁵⁴ S. Linck, *Als im Kirchenamt 'die Hölle los' war: Wolfgang Grell—ein Pastorenleben zwischen Rotariern und RAF* (Kiel, 2017), p. 20.

⁵⁵ EZA, 686/8759, article from the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16 Mar. 1967; P. Betts, 'Sacred Rubble and Humble Shelters: German Church Building after the Second World War', *German History*, 42, 2 (2024).

unbearable' aesthetic clashed with the Modernist styles of newly renovated churches.⁵⁶ As the forthcoming Flensburg scandal would reveal, changing memorials to the First and Second World Wars was a different proposition altogether.

However much Krause, Jastram and Friedrichs represented a fresh pastoral team within the parish, it would nevertheless be a mistake to reductively see them as 68ers. Krause had been born as far back as 1911, and Friedrichs in 1923. Even Jastram, the youngest of the three men, was thirty years old in 1966.⁵⁷ As he stated in a sermon of January 2017, delivered at St. Marien to mark the controversy's fiftieth anniversary, 'The three pastors at this church who half a century ago presented the five theses regarding the question of war memorials were no 68ers.' What joined them instead was a common grounding in 'postwar theology, which was above all else biblical theology'.⁵⁸ Instead of sixties radicals, it makes sense to view Krause, Jastram and Friedrichs as representatives of that growing minority of left-leaning Protestant clergymen which had developed in West Germany during the later Adenauer era, a tendency eased by the SPD's increasingly conciliatory stance towards the churches by the 1960s.⁵⁹

Indeed, the arguments they articulated to justify the removal of St. Marien's war memorial were theological in nature and focused primarily on sacred space and its appropriate use. The pastors' first argument was that 'church buildings have the ultimate purpose of providing space for the congregation gathered around word and sacrament. Everything which in terms of furnishing and design does not serve this purpose, or hinders it, must be removed.'⁶⁰ They proceeded to state that there was no appropriate theological distinction between death in war and death in peace and to dispute the religious significance of physical mourning sites.⁶¹ Jastram, Krause and Friedrichs also stated, appealing to one of the Lutheran Confession's oldest theological principles, 'The peace of God and reconciliation among the peoples are only communicated through the living word in the sermon.'⁶² Their final argument embraced a more overtly political tone, claiming that 'As the people of God live in every nation [...] it therefore contradicts the church's calling if it provides space for sites honouring conflicts between nations in its assembly rooms.'⁶³

The pastors proceeded to flesh out these punchy arguments in a lengthy lecture given to the parish congregation of St. Marien on the evening of 27 February 1967. As the most senior of the three, Dr Krause opened proceedings, invoking the Reformation and the very foundation of the Lutheran Confession as justification for the intended reform of St. Marien's spatial configuration. Stating that it pertained to the 'tasks of a

⁵⁶ LANK, 11.11/6117, letter of 17 Nov. 1962.

⁵⁷ Linck, *Als im Kirchenamt 'die Hölle los' war*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Dr Gerhard Jastram, 'Der theologische Hintergrund des Flensburger Denkmalstreits 1967', https://www.nordkirche-nach45.de/fileadmin/user_upload/baukaesten/Baukasten_Neue_Anfaenge/NA_Flensburg_Vortrag_Jastram_27-01-2017.pdf.

⁵⁹ For this trend, W.-D. Hauschild, 'Kontinuität im Wandel: die Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland und die sog. 68er Bewegung', in Hey and Wittmütz, *1968 und die Kirchen*, pp. 43–5; Fitschen et al., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus*, p. 17; Großbölting, *Losing Heaven*, p. 142.

⁶⁰ EZA, 686/8759, 'Gefallenenehrungen haben in Kirchen keinen Platz!'.
⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

responsible parish leadership’ to ensure that the church’s configuration served to facilitate the ‘gathering of the congregation around word and sacrament’, Krause observed that ‘only so can it be understood that the Reformation of the Christian Confession in the sixteenth century among other things led to the revision of the use and layout of churches’.⁶⁴

Pivoting off this evocation of Lutheranism’s rebellious origins, Krause continued by applying these arguments to the spatial environment of contemporary churches and the ethical challenge of adapting their aesthetics for the postwar era. He argued,

How little of a *metanoia*, a change of mind, regarding this question has occurred, is repeatedly and always made clear to me, when I—above all in village churches—find undisturbed the ‘Plaques of Honour’ commemorating the great wars of the past, upon which not only the names of the fallen are displayed, but also those of all participating soldiers, including their ranks and honours, and sometimes epigraphs which contradict the holy book [...] this is a glorification, yes, a sanctification of war.⁶⁵

Krause appealed for the ‘cleanout’ of ‘such blasphemous abominations’.⁶⁶ This argument formed part of a broader rejection of military symbolism within church spaces. The pastors furthermore stated that their refusal to hold a centenary service for the 86th Regiment reflected their conviction that ‘regimental banners and traditions have no place in churches’.⁶⁷

These arguments formed part of a wider historical critique of German military culture and a rejection of the notion of ‘an unbroken tradition of German soldiering’ from 1870/71 to the Bundeswehr, embracing the armed forces of both world wars.⁶⁸ The pastors stated that ‘as members of this democracy’, they had been opposed to holding the centenary service for the 86th Regiment as the unit possessed close historical links to the Prussian monarchy.⁶⁹ Suffice it to say, their lecture featured a critique of the ‘close’ connection between ‘throne and altar’ during the *Kaiserreich*, and an observation that ‘today we no longer think in these terms’. By contrast, the pastors affirmed their commitment to a *Volkskirche* (people’s church)—this concept having by the 1960s acquired democratic and pluralistic connotations among West German theologians.⁷⁰

Throughout the lecture, the pastors underpinned their arguments with a decisive rejection of nationalism and an assertion of Christianity’s status as a transnational, global faith. Krause and Friedrichs had themselves been members of the Confessing Church during the Nazi era, and they stated that this formative experience informed their conviction that the ‘enthralment of the church to the national idea’ must be ‘thrown away’ and replaced with an acknowledgment of its ‘international greatness’.⁷¹ Referring to the circumstances of the war memorial’s establishment in 1921 and the parish council’s intention to celebrate the ‘German sensibility’ displayed by Flensburg in the Schleswig plebiscites of 1920, the pastors argued, ‘the church today is not permitted to think in

⁶⁴ EZA, 81/2174, ‘Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien’, 27 Feb. 1967, document, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, document, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, document, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, document, p. 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, document, pp. 18–22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, document, p. 33.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, document, pp. 7–8; B. Brunner, *Volkskirche: zur Geschichte eines Evangelischen Grundbegriffs (1918–1960)* (Göttingen, 2020).

⁷¹ EZA, 81/2174, ‘Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien’, 27 Feb. 1967, document, p. 32.

these terms'.⁷² They asserted their understanding of St. Marien parish as belonging 'to the Lord, like all his churches around the world'.⁷³

As this last quote implies, the pastors' internationalism extended beyond a desire for regional reconciliation with neighbouring—and Lutheran—Denmark. Krause, Friedrichs and Jastram articulated special criticism of the wish voiced by local veterans' associations to reinstall the removed memorial marking the Herero and Nama 'War' of 1904–1906. Arguing that 'we are more closely connected to the Christians in Africa than to the unbelievers in our own *Volk*', they refused to accept that sacred space could be used to house visual representations of a period 'in which Germans and Africans were as masters and slaves to one another'.⁷⁴ In so doing, the pastors' arguments not only formed part of the wider leftist confrontation with the symbols and legacies of Wilhelmine colonialism present in the West German 1960s, but also anticipated the anti-apartheid activism which would become a salient feature of many Protestant congregations in the Federal Republic over the following decades.⁷⁵ They also serve as testimony to the fraying of ties between Protestantism and German nationalism during the long 1960s.⁷⁶

III. What Is Church Space For?

The pastors' arguments proved incendiary. Tremendous interest and disagreement were sparked across West German society by the question articulated in a headline of the *Flensburger Tagesblatt*, 'What Is Space in Church For?'.⁷⁷ Their position certainly proved controversial within the Protestant Church itself, with the hierarchy overwhelmingly critical of the proposed changes to the memorial. Bishop Hübner's comment on the events at St. Marien explicitly affirmed that it was morally appropriate that

the names of those who lost their lives prematurely and whose graves are mostly unreachable or even unknown are attached to special memorials upon which the message of the overcoming of death is declared.⁷⁸

He moreover stated, 'Love also forbids judging the church-historical past and the attitudes of previous generations who sought in their own time's expressive forms to preserve the memory of the dead'.⁷⁹ This statement explicitly argued that it was also inappropriate 'to hurt the feelings of those who lost their nearest relatives or who themselves experienced the terrors of war'.⁸⁰ Bishop Hübner's pastoral letter for Lent 1967 explicitly argued that attempts to 'banish the memory of our war dead' from churches would

⁷² *Ibid.*, document, pp. 5–7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, document, p. 7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, document, p. 33.

⁷⁵ See S. Conrad, *German Colonialism: A Short History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 195–6; B. Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 133–47; for anti-apartheid activism during the 1970s and 1980s, S. Tripp, *Fromm und politisch: christliche Anti-Apartheid-Gruppen und die Transformation des westdeutschen Protestantismus 1970–1990* (Göttingen, 2015).

⁷⁶ See M. Gailus and H. Lehmann (eds), *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten in Deutschland (1870–1970): Konturen, Entwicklungslinien und Umbrüche eines Weltbilds* (Göttingen, 2005).

⁷⁷ LANK, 20.01/33, newspaper headline of 9 Mar. 1967, 'Wofür ist Raum in der Kirche?'.

⁷⁸ LANK, 11.11/6117, statement of 20 Mar. 1967.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

merely serve to hinder people's 'way to atonement and forgiveness'.⁸¹ Neighbouring Schleswig's bishop, Reinhard Wester, similarly argued in favour of maintaining 'memorial sites in the tower rooms or side chapels of churches', to 'give space to the understandable longing of relatives to remember their dead at a particular site'.⁸²

Beyond Schleswig-Holstein's church leadership, military associations and veterans predictably played a prominent role in denouncing Krause, Jastram and Friedrichs. As Wolfram Wette has noted, the Bundeswehr's officer corps continued to form a bastion of conservative political and cultural sensibilities during the early Federal Republic, its membership largely continuing 'to orientate itself around pre-1945 traditions'.⁸³ Writing in his capacity as leader of local veterans' groups, Prince Friedrich Ferdinand of Schleswig-Holstein argued in a letter of 11 March 1967 that the 'three pastors have taken it upon themselves to not only judge but to condemn the commemoration of the dead of recent wars by old soldiers and members of the Bundeswehr'.⁸⁴ A veterans' group from Pinneberg, near Hamburg, wrote in spring 1967 to express its commitment to preserving the memory of 'our fallen comrades of both world wars'. The resolution continued, 'They are our fathers, brothers and sons. Showing respect for their deaths and comforting the bereaved is the task of a true Christian clergy'.⁸⁵ In May, one Second World War veteran wrote to the Protestant Church's West German leadership 'in the name of my fallen comrades' to argue regarding St. Marien, 'Is it not the height of pitilessness if the names are removed, and a grieving wife or mother does not have the opportunity to lay flowers on the memorial as she cannot visit the grave?'.⁸⁶ Another veteran of the conflict wrote from Swabia comparing the actions of St. Marien's pastors to those of the Nazi regime in removing the works of the Expressionist anti-war artist Ernst Barlach from the cathedrals of Güstrow and Magdeburg as well as from Kiel's University Church.⁸⁷ That such sentiments remained commonplace and influential at this juncture is underlined by recent research concerning the German War Graves Commission which stresses the profundity of its national-conservatism 'well into the 1960s'.⁸⁸

It was certainly embarrassing for the church hierarchy that members of the social establishment—such as Prince Friedrich Ferdinand—were prominent in their criticism of developments at St. Marien. The Protestant Church had traditionally been closely linked to conservative political elites—that these connections were now in peril clearly worried senior churchmen.⁸⁹ This trend is highlighted by Graf Waldersee's involvement and a letter he sent to Bishop Wester on 12 April 1967. As Waldersee's name suggests, he was related to Alfred von Waldersee, his famous great uncle who had served as chief

⁸¹ EZA, 686/8759, 'In der Fastenzeit 1967', letter, final page.

⁸² LANK, 20.01/33, 'Gefallenehungen und Kirche', statement, p. 2.

⁸³ W. Wette, *Militarismus in Deutschland: Geschichte einer kriegerischen Kultur* (Frankfurt/Main, 2011), p. 225.

⁸⁴ EZA, 81/2174, letter of 11 Mar. 1967, p. 2.

⁸⁵ LANK, 11.11/6117, resolution of 16 Mar. 1967.

⁸⁶ EZA, 2/3565, Alexander Catterfeld's letter of 20 May 1967.

⁸⁷ LANK, 20.01/33, letter of 7 Mar. 1967. For Barlach's treatment by the Nazi regime, S. Oelze, 'Ernst Barlach, Hero of the Downtrodden', 8 Aug. 2020, DW, Arts/Global Issues, <https://www.dw.com/en/ernst-barlach-with-an-eye-for-the-downtrodden/a-54495397>.

⁸⁸ B. Ulrich, C. Fuhrmeister, M. Hettling and W. Kruse (eds), *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge. Entwicklungslinien und Probleme* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 289–90.

⁸⁹ For local examples: Gregor, "'Is He Still Alive, or Long Since Dead?'" (Nuremberg), and Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life* (Freiburg).

of the German General Staff from 1888 to 1891 and had commanded the international forces despatched to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China from 1899 to 1901.⁹⁰

Citing his family's strong connections to the Protestant Church, Waldersee expressed his profound upset with the way the St. Marien controversy had unfolded over previous months. He argued that 'I myself and with me many, many friends with whom I have recently spoken' were appalled by the 'raw and brutal' way the pastors had treated the 'relatives of fallen soldiers'. The count's letter openly asked, 'Should one leave the church? Can one stand by and continue to provide the state with taxes in order to provide for such representatives of the church?'⁹¹ The local church leadership certainly responded swiftly to Waldersee's letter, apologetically asking him for 'understanding' regarding recent events in Flensburg.⁹²

Letters sent to church officials by ordinary members of the laity nevertheless provide the clearest indication of the powerful emotions unleashed by the memorial controversy. The archival record implies that the majority of these messages were critical of the pastors and their plans for the war memorial. One woman from Kiel wrote on 13 March that the decision represented 'a singular insult for those of us who had to sacrifice our relatives in the war'.⁹³ An 83-year-old woman berated 'the rejection of every tradition, the breaking away from the family [...] an absence of piety, now also applied to church questions'. She lamented how 'old symbols are repressed; in the end that includes Christ himself, the Eucharist, the cross, the commemoration of the dead, and not only those who were soldiers'. In berating the pastors, this woman turned to Nazi-era languages of patriotism and military heroism, arguing, 'that is deficient love of the fatherland. They know no *Volksstum* [ethnicity], no *Opferbereitschaft* [willingness to sacrifice]'.⁹⁴

Another female writer, from Munich, argued in similar terms on 28 March, asserting, like the woman above, the depth of her connection with the Protestant Church. Noting that she had been born into a 'deeply religious family' and was married to the son of a Protestant pastor, this woman expressed profound 'fury' with recent developments in Flensburg. She lamented,

that three pastors in Flensburg could dare to hinder the commemoration of our dearly loved relatives who fell in the war by removing the visible memorials to the fallen from their church and branding the honouring of the dead within the church as idolatry.⁹⁵

This letter, addressed to Bishop Kurt Scharf of Berlin-Brandenburg concluded by claiming that 'you and your colleagues in Flensburg have done our dear Protestant Church, which you are called to lead, a poor service with your words and deeds'.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ A. Mombauer, 'Wilhelm, Waldersee, and the Boxer Rebellion', in A. Mombauer and W. Deist (eds), *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 91–118.

⁹¹ LANK, 20.01/33, letter of 12 Apr. 1967.

⁹² LANK, 20.01/33, letter of 20 Apr. 1967.

⁹³ EZA, 81/2174, letter by Vera Kirschnick.

⁹⁴ EZA, 81/2174, letter of 13 Mar. 1967 within Hellmuth Rathke's letter of 15 Mar. For *Opferbereitschaft's* war-time meanings, Stargardt, *German War*, p. 357. For *Volk's* place within Nazi ideology, M. Steber and B. Gotto, 'Volksgemeinschaft: Writing the Social History of the Nazi Regime', in M. Steber and B. Gotto (eds), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 1–26. For the roles played by generational profile, Gregor, '"Is He Still Alive, or Long Since Dead?"', p. 200.

⁹⁵ EZA, 81/2174, letter of 28 Mar. 1967.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Worryingly for the church leadership, criticism of the position it had taken in the dispute was also articulated in letters addressed to it by supporters of Jastram, Friedrichs and Krause. One writer stated, ‘We have also lost dearly loved relatives in the war and are of the opinion that one best honours these victims by working to help avoid the occurrence of another war.’⁹⁷ Another letter to Bishop Wester boldly affirmed that ‘the church does not have the duty to clothe nationalist ideas in a Christian cloak. Christ lived and died for all peoples, including the French, Russians, Danes and Herreros who were also slain by our fallen.’ This writer proceeded to attack the theological basis of the church’s memory culture regarding the Nazi past and its primary sense of duty to the German people as a ‘stricken people’ (*heimgesuchtes Volk*). Instead, she described Germany as having ‘brought endless suffering upon other peoples’. In a rebuke of the church’s leadership, she argued.

You characterize the events of the Second World War as a divine visitation, as if we were simply handed over to God’s pitilessness [...] You deny God if you do not want to admit that it was our own fault that suffering and misery came over us. It was not God who sent us Adolf Hitler as Führer.⁹⁸

The letter’s ultimate argument was that ‘our war dead are no martyrs who gave their lives to God. No, their lives were simply taken because we followed criminals’. Rather, ‘we especially mourn them precisely because their deaths were so senseless’. The author concluded by expressing her intention to leave the church.⁹⁹

Suffice it to say, these sharp divisions in Protestant opinion rendered the memorial controversy at St. Marien something of an embarrassment for the church’s hierarchy. In late March 1967, national church leadership in West Germany wrote to its member churches appealing for information regarding their commemorative practices in order that it could gain ‘an overview’ of them. This request was justified with reference to ‘the differences of opinion which broke into the open in Flensburg concerning the legitimacy of memorials within church buildings for the war dead and the victims of violence and injustice’.¹⁰⁰ At the controversy’s height in mid-March 1967, a senior local clergyman in Flensburg wrote to the minister of justice—the SPD’s Gustav Heinemann—lamenting a public letter Heinemann had penned that had struck a conciliatory tone towards Jastram, Friedrichs and Krause. The clergyman in question accused Heinemann of inappropriate interference in church affairs.¹⁰¹

IV. Church Space and the War Dead in Contemporary Germany

Given the intense public controversy that engulfed the redesign of St. Marien’s war memorial, it is perhaps understandable that very few parishes across West Germany followed its lead. Neighbouring Sankt Petri in Flensburg certainly did not do so. Its pastor released a statement to his congregation on 8 March 1967 noting that he had been showered over the past week with ‘worried questions’ regarding developments at St. Marien. The pastor expressed his compassion with ‘those who lost one or several relatives in the world wars’ and lacked a ‘place for their commemoration of the dead’. His statement affirmed

⁹⁷ LANK, 20.01/33, Eva Hoffmann’s letter of 12 Mar. 1967.

⁹⁸ LANK, 20.01/33, Helga Hertrampf’s letter of 16 Mar. 1967.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ LANK, 11.11/6117, ‘Gedenkstätten innerhalb kirchlicher Gebäude’, 29 Mar. 1967.

¹⁰¹ LANK, 20.01/33, Karl Hauschildt’s letter of 16 Mar. 1967.

regarding St. Petri's war memorial, 'I hear again and again that this place of remembrance gives comfort and help to the relatives.' He reassured his congregation that the church's memorial would be kept 'unchanged'.¹⁰² As far as can be told, Weimar-era war memorials were overwhelmingly left in place throughout the remaining history of West Germany and into the Berlin Republic.¹⁰³ Indeed, there are examples of early twentieth-century parish and other war memorials being actively *restored* in areas of the former GDR after 1989, such as in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, these having previously been removed in Communist times or, sometimes, destroyed by invading Soviet troops in 1945.¹⁰⁴

It has only been in the immediate past that significant efforts have been made within the Protestant Church to contemplate changes to the aesthetics of commemoration present within its parish churches. In 2014, to mark the centenary of the First World War's outbreak, the Protestant Church of Northern Germany began a new project as part of its 'memory culture' wing, entitled 'Denk Mal!' (a play on words in the German language, meaning both 'think!' and 'memorial!'). Its stated mission is to 'bring the meaning of the war memorials and the rituals associated with them into public consciousness'.¹⁰⁵ Led since 2015 by Stephan Linck, this initiative aims to confront the militarist aesthetics present in so many war memorials and to inform contemporary debates regarding national belonging and racism.¹⁰⁶ Whereas in 1967 the church establishment objected to the proposed commemorative changes at St. Marien, in the present their successors support similar initiatives. This shift hints at not only the ongoing liberalization of German Protestantism in recent decades, but also the declining emotional charge carried by First World War memorials at the turn of the twenty-first century, as their function as active sites of mourning ebbs away.¹⁰⁷

The transformation of sacred space stands at the very centre of Denk Mal! initiatives, and the project has played a key role in changing the presentation and configuration of several parish war memorials across northern Germany. An especially striking example of this work is provided by the parish of Sankt Jakobi in Lübeck, which redesigned its Weimar-era war memorial in 2017 (Fig. 2).¹⁰⁸ The original memorial, 'The Mourning Infantryman', was created in 1919 to honour the fallen of the First World War by the nationalist artist and sculptor Fritz Behn (1878–1970), who was a member of the parish.¹⁰⁹ Behn's politics were firmly of the right: having travelled

¹⁰² EZA, 81/2174, Pastor Niemeyer's letter of 8 Mar. 1967.

¹⁰³ See the evidence gathered at the website of Denk Mal!, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/kriegerdenkmaeler/>.

¹⁰⁴ See Denk Mal!, Tradition, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/tradition/> (accessed 6 Mar. 2023). For individual examples see the parishes of Stolpe and Muess, accessed from the index at Denk Mal!, 'Neue Sicht auf alte Helden?', <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/kriegerdenkmaeler/mecklenburg-vorpommern-a-bl/> (accessed 6 Mar. 2023); M. Käthow and J. P. Wurm (eds), *Das Kriegsende 1945 in der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Landeskirche Mecklenburgs: Lageberichte aus den Kirchengemeinden*, part 1: *Kirchenkreise Malchin, Stargard und Waren* (Lübeck, 2020), pp. 166, 174, 230. See also L.-H. Thümmel, 'Der Wandel im Umgang mit den Kriegerdenkmälern in den östlichen Bundesländern Deutschlands seit 1990', in *Jahrbuch für Pädagogik*, 1 (2003), pp. 221–43.

¹⁰⁵ Denk Mal!, About, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/about-kontakt> (accessed 7 Mar. 2023).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ M. Connelly and S. Goebel, 'Forgetting the Great War? The Langemarck Myth between Cultural Oblivion and Critical Memory in (West) Germany, 1945–2014', *Journal of Modern History*, 94, 1 (2022), pp. 1–41, here p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ For details of this memorial see 'Lübeck, St. Jakobi' accessed at Denk Mal!, Kriegerdenkmäler, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/kriegerdenkmaeler/schleswig-holstein-l/> (accessed 14 Dec. 2023).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*



Figure 2: The redesigned war memorial at St. Jakobi, Lübeck.
Source: Marlise Appel and Stephan Linck, by permission.

within German East Africa in 1907/8 and 1909/10, he joined the German Colonial Society in 1911. Suffice it to say, his African landscapes reflected these ideological commitments, as would his design for Bremen's Elephant, the Imperial-Colonial Memorial (*Reichskolonialehrendenkmal*), during the late Weimar Republic. He would go on to support the Nazi regime and receive many state honours during its rule.¹¹⁰

The memorial's redesign in 2017 was conceptualized and carried out by the Austrian artist Maria Moser and involved placing an 8-metre-tall cross-shaped screen in front of the original statue of the infantryman without obscuring it. This ensures that 'The commemoration of the dead takes place in the sight of the cross. The soldier stands

¹¹⁰ For Behn, see *ibid.* and S. Wilke, 'Romantic Images of Africa: Paradigms of German Colonial Paintings', *German Studies Review*, 29, 2 (2006), pp. 285–98.

behind the light-filled cross as a sign of the absurdity of violence and war.’ The original monument remains visible around the cross to ensure that ‘history is not removed’.¹¹¹ This redesign is one of several similar initiatives underway across northern Germany. A pioneering example was provided as early as 2009 by the Lutheran parish of Schlutup in Lübeck, which created in its cemetery an anti-war memorial entitled ‘The Ways of Despair’ (Fig. 3).¹¹² It features the Kollwitzian figure of a grieving woman, surrounded by the intentionally haphazardly positioned memorial plaques of young soldiers killed during the Second World War. The memorial was unveiled at an ecumenical service on Sunday of the Dead (*Totensonntag*) in 2009, during which the pastor, Dr Christina Kayales, stressed that it should stand as testimony to the horrors of war.¹¹³ While these transformed commemorative spaces may permit the contemplation of Germany’s own war dead as victims, they do also represent an attempt to reshape sacred spaces around pacifist principles and are a conscious rejection of the militarist aesthetics present in memorials from the early to mid-twentieth century. It is striking that initiatives comparable to the Denk Mal! project have no equivalent within the Anglican Church’s commemoration of the First World War, hinting at a greater dissolution of the bonds between Protestantism and the nation within contemporary Germany than in Great Britain.¹¹⁴



Figure 3: The redesigned war memorial in Schlutup.
Source: Marlise Appel and Stephan Linck, by permission.

¹¹¹ ‘Lübeck, St. Jakobi’ at Denk Mal!.

¹¹² See ‘Schlutup’ accessed at Denk Mal!, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/kriegerdenkmaeler/schleswig-holstein-s-ul> (accessed 6 Mar. 2023).

¹¹³ ‘Ein Mahnmal für den Schlutuper Friedhof’, <https://www.denk-mal-gegen-krieg.de/assets/Uploads/SH-Schlutup-Artikel-15-11-2009.pdf> (accessed 7 Mar. 2023).

¹¹⁴ The Church of England, ‘We Will Remember Them: First World War Centenary 2018’, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/church-england-world-war-one/first-world-war> (accessed 6 Mar. 2023). For similar arguments comparing British and German commemorations of the First World War, see Connelly and Goebel, ‘Forgetting the Great War?’, pp. 39–40.

V. Conclusion

Which wider conclusions might we draw from this story? Most fundamentally, the Flensburg controversy stands as testimony to the emotive power commanded by sacred space during the 1960s. As recent historiography has argued, that decade did not simply represent a moment of religious collapse in West German or European society, but rather witnessed transformative developments *within* the Christian churches, their pastoral teachings and their understandings of the divine.¹¹⁵ The passionate responses elicited by the Flensburg controversy in 1967 highlight the extent to which churches operated as key sites of societal mourning for the fallen of both world wars well into the late twentieth century. If anything, the scandal's challenge to the Protestant Church's leadership reflected the very *strength* of popular emotions involved: it was all but impossible to reconcile the religious sensibilities of the disputing parties. On one side stood an often older generation whose patriotic and spiritual commitments were axiomatically entwined, and on the other, a growing minority for whom the religious should be uncoupled from the national, in a manner which anticipated the development of anti-apartheid activism within Protestant parishes during the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁶ In this sense, the dynamics of memory politics, sacred space and religious change were entangled during the Flensburg controversy, a theme in need of greater reflection within the period's historiography.

The episode equally admonishes us to rethink other assumptions about the West German 1960s. Neither Jastram, Friedrichs nor Krause neatly fits the generational profile of a 68er, a label that Jastram explicitly rejected in a sermon of 2017.¹¹⁷ Their arguments regarding the appropriate use of sacred space grounded them in an understanding of Lutheranism's own theological traditions, dating back to the sixteenth century.¹¹⁸ The Flensburg controversy thereby encourages us to contemplate the West German 1960s as not simply the manifestation of generational conflict between a rising transnational youth culture and an ageing political establishment. Rather, cultural change in the era could result from shifts of sensibility within traditionally conservative institutions themselves, such as the Protestant Church.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Flensburg memorial controversy highlights not only the extent of cultural change in the West German 1960s, but also its limits. Reflecting on the 1967 debates, it is striking how little the Nazi period—or the Holocaust specifically—were mentioned in either side's arguments.¹²⁰ As Wolfram Wette has highlighted, the majority of West German society continued to believe in the myth of the 'clean' Wehrmacht during the 1960s, and would do so until the Wehrmacht exhibition of 1995.¹²¹ By contrast, the Flensburg memorial controversy turned upon

¹¹⁵ For example, Großbölting, *Losing Heaven*, pp. 167–202.

¹¹⁶ See Tripp, *Fromm und politisch*.

¹¹⁷ Jastram, 'Der theologische Hintergrund'.

¹¹⁸ EZA, 81/2174, 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967.

¹¹⁹ See T. Grady, '"They Died for Germany": Jewish Soldiers, the German Army and Conservative Debates about the Nazi Past in the 1960s', *European History Quarterly*, 39, 1 (2009), pp. 27–46, here pp. 40–2.

¹²⁰ The limits of Holocaust consciousness in the 1970s are highlighted by J. Eder, *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory since the 1970s* (Oxford, 2016).

¹²¹ W. Wette, 'Hitlers Wehrmacht: Etappen der Auseinandersetzung mit einer Legende', *Osteuropa*, 55, 4/6 (2005), pp. 127–33, here p. 129.

quite abstract discussions of war and military service, as articulated in the pastors' manifesto of February 1967.¹²² If an individual period of German history was invoked during the controversy, it was typically the *Kaiserreich*, whose conflation of Protestant religiosity with nationalism had so clearly inspired the original design of St. Marien's war memorial in the early 1920s.¹²³ Crucially, the weight of popular opinion seems to have arrayed itself against Jastram, Krause and Friedrichs, who endured a torrent of abuse and criticism for their troubles. The arguments they voiced in 1967 would only gain support from the institutional church half a century later, as of 2014, the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. This time lag highlights that we should perhaps view the 1960s not in terms of 'fundamental liberalization' (Jürgen Habermas) but as initiating a gradual shift in the cultural sensibilities of West German society.¹²⁴

Abstract

Using the Flensburg Memorial Dispute of 1967 as a microstudy, this article explores how Germany's twentieth-century war dead have been represented within Protestant sacred space since 1945. It highlights the central role played by church spaces in the mourning and commemoration of Germany's war dead and the tremendous difficulties accompanying attempts to redesign these iconographies in the later twentieth century in the face of popular sentiment.

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¹²² EZA, 686/8759, 'Gefallenenehrungen haben in Kirchen keinen Platz!'

¹²³ EZA, 81/2174, 'Die Ehrenhalle in St. Marien', 27 Feb. 1967, pp. 7–8.

¹²⁴ For similar arguments see Goltz, *Other '68ers*, pp. 10–11.